The Transnationalization of Social Inequality: Conceptualizing Social Positions on a World Scale

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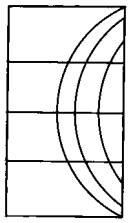

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The Transnationalization of Social Inequality: Conceptualizing Social Positions on a World Scale

When we talk to highly skilled migrants, we quickly notice that quite a few of them do not want to see themselves as 'migrants'. This may be attributed to the negative connotation of the word. It could also be seen as an attempt to defend their personal identity against common procedures that turn people into migrants. Let us take Mr Mares as an example. He used to be an engineer, a husband, the owner of a flat. In these roles, he is a topic of interest for many specialities in sociology. Then he moved from Prague to a small town in Germany and the focus of sociological interest shifted. Research on Mr Mares' profession concentrates on questions like: are IT engineers asked for in the German labour market? The fact that he is married results in research about his wife's knowledge of German or her ability to be elected as a parents' representative in the local kindergarten. Owning a flat in Prague is an indicator for Mr Mares' continuing attachment to his home country, and so on. At the same time, Mr Mares' chances of being included in representative panels have decreased to almost zero. Czech researchers will not consider him, because he lives in Germany. German research will avoid potential language problems or explicitly exclude 'sojourners'. At this point, the example of Mr Mares is interesting for sociological self-reflection. While there is no need to doubt the valid and important role of migration research in sociology, we should consider more thoroughly why almost every other field of sociology fails to deal adequately with migrant populations.

This is especially true for the sociology of social inequality. Values of equality have developed at the same time as the nation-state. The sociology of inequality has focused on inequality inside nation-states. Of course, the body of international comparative studies is growing (Lemel and Noll, 2002), but these scholars use nation-states' averages and refrain from a direct

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comparison of individuals across national borders. The first part of the article thus shows that methodological nationalism is increasingly inadequate in a globalizing world. Migrant populations cannot be located in only one nation-state. Labour markets, cultural capital and reciprocal relations have become transnational. Both issues can be integrated into a theory of social inequality, if spatial relations are given adequate consideration. The opportunities of most actors and the value of resources should thus be determined in relation to various national and transnational social spaces. Social positions in a world system cannot only be characterized by resource values. They are also structured by spatial autonomy and the quality of the spaces to which (migrant) populations have access. This argument is exemplified by a discussion of highly skilled migrants who possess cultural capital that is transnationally recognized. They can be seen as the prototype of a social position that is autonomous from space. An analysis of their cultural capital shows how transnational and location-specific cultural capital interrelate.

Empirical research has so far focused on the nation-state frame. Consequently, migration has been seen as an anomaly or even a threat. Researching social positions on a world scale can produce a shift in perspective: we are now able to see how the nation-state structures and produces social inequality.

Methodological Nationalism in Research on Social Inequality

In German sociology, the concept of social inequality is used to characterize relations of inequality that can but need not develop into a hierarchical class structure. In short, sociology speaks of social inequality when social actors regularly receive a larger share of the valued goods of a society due to their position in social relations (Hradil, 1999: 26). Many aspects of this definition have been extensively debated. Speaking philosophically, perfect equality could contradict the higher goal of justice (Krebs, 2000). The sociology of class has been accused of generalizing a class-specific perspective (Eder, 1989). Research on the life-course has shown that an actor may inhabit several different positions during his/her life (Berger and Sopp, 1995). At least in industrializing societies, systems of stratification have become less definite (Goldthorpe and Marshall, 1992), so that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish temporal from stable inequality and to decide which dimensions of inequality are 'durable' (Tilly, 1999).

It is truly amazing that among the wealth of literature on the topic of social inequality hardly anyone deals with the spatial assumptions of the concept. Very few publications discuss whether local administrative units, the nation-state or the world system are the appropriate unit of class analysis (Bertram and Dannenbeck, 1990; Breen and Rottman, 1998; Pedersen, 2004).

Most class theorists, including Bourdieu, who wrote so extensively about globalization in his later years, identify society with the nation-state (Bourdieu, 1984). This means that a homemaker in Texas is directly compared with an unemployed person in Chicago for the sole reason that they live inside the same nation-state. It also means that a cabinet maker in Germany is not compared with the sales person who sells her products 20 miles across the border in Switzerland. Neither is a Polish domestic working illegally in Germany compared to her employer. Nor a Malaysian factory worker with the British person who buys and wears his products. Sociological research on social inequality has accepted the basic assumption of international law, which assigns individuals to nation-states instead of determining empirically to which national society they may belong.

Methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002; Beck, 2002) might be adequate for people who have always lived in the same stable nation-state. But what about migrants, who have moved from one nation-state to another? They may own or acquire assets in their country of origin. They may support and be supported by social networks 'at home' (Morokvasic-Müller et al., 2003). At the same time, they earn and spend money in the destination country. We know that they are willing to accept much lower wages because they judge the value of resources relative to their country of origin. International migrants actively preserve ties to their country of origin and they are rarely treated as equals by their country of residence.

Even so, we can assume that migrants who have once crossed national borders and have then settled down in a country of destination can be included in either of those countries. Similarly, diplomats and expatriates can be considered as socially linked to their country of origin, even if they spend their entire lives abroad. Approximations of this kind are not satisfying but possible. They become misleading when we are referring to transnational migrants who create their own status hierarchies (Goldring, 1997) in transnational social spaces (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Pries, 1999). Boes has shown for Germany that it took an average of seven border crossings in order to produce one 'remaining' immigrant (Boes, 2001: 604). With the advent of the internet, even highly skilled migrants who were used to waiting until their organization sent them, have started to move more freely in transnational migratory networks (Pethe, 2003). While offering an unsatisfactory approximation for part of the population, methodological nationalism is completely unable to integrate others. In a country such as Germany, both groups comprise together more than 13 million people, who have either personally migrated or are holding a foreign passport.[1] This means that research on social inequality lacks adequate concepts for about a sixth of the population residing in Germany.

Population movements are just a particular and relatively insignificant part of globalization processes. Across the globe, political, cultural and

economic ties have rather increased more dramatically. Nation-states unite in free trade zones or give up part of their sovereignty to supranational bodies like the EU or even corporations (Ong, 1999). Institutional structures have become more and more similar in diverse local situations (Meyer, 2000). 'Around 20 percent of world output is traded [across national borders] and a much larger proportion is potentially subject to international competition' (Held et al., 1999: 149). Situating social actors in relation to inequality presupposes that most social relations extend to the nation-state scale. Due to globalization processes, this is no longer the case. Not only migrants, but also sedentary people may find themselves situated in the world economy. A German IT specialist may live in Munich for her entire life. Yet she works in a multinational corporation. She operates in English and she competes with a global IT community. When looking for an adequate frame of analysis, we may find that her social network is localized. According to her economic situation, she is situated in a world market while her taxes and other transfers are fixed by national politics.

Theories of social inequality encounter a dual problem: it has become harder to assign social actors to a single nation-state and it has become doubtful whether durable reciprocal relations – which are at the root of norms of equality (Olson, 1997) – can congruently be limited to the nation-state.

Spatial Relations and Social Inequality

Sociology's interest in inequality is focused on those forms of inequality that are socially produced and affect the social position of the parties compared. Therefore, sociologists will not attribute an absolute value to resources, but rather argue that specific resources are necessary in order to reach desired goals in life. It follows that unequal access to these resources is socially and sociologically relevant.

If the value of resources is deducted from their contribution to goal attainment, we have to be aware of the fact, that the relationship between goals and means may be mediated by other factors. The capability approach (Sen, 1985; Nussbaum, 2000) has argued that, for example, a handicapped person may need more resources in order to reach the same mobility as a walker. Likewise, the ability to program C++ may be very valuable in a global economy. It will produce few capabilities if the programmer is restricted to an area without stable electricity and internet access. Framed by the nation-state, theories of social inequality could roughly – though misleadingly – assume that a similar amount and type of resources produce similar capabilities. In a world that is characterized by manifold spatial relations, the value of resources must be determined in relation to the

geographical, social and political environment in which they are used (Therborn, 2001).

Theories of space tend to separate into two strands. 'Container' concepts think of space as 'empty' and define it by its borders and/or dimensions. The nation-state fits the prototype of a container space. National borders separate one entity from another and they contain heterogeneous social formations. As has already been shown, the necessity of finding borders poses a conceptual problem in a globalizing world (Pries, 1999). Relational space, on the other hand, is defined by objects and their relations. Borders are insignificant for relational spaces, but the kind of relations that construct a social space must be determined. Luhmann's theory of social systems (Luhmann, 1995b) can be seen as an example of a relational concept of social spaces. The political, the economic, the religious and other systems follow specific rules of communication and serve particular functions. Geographically speaking, they may stretch across the globe. They are socially focused by a particular type of relations. Luhmann's systems theory transcends methodological nationalism and develops concepts for a transnational concept of society (Stichweh, 2000). However, not all social spaces can be considered as 'mainly social' systems. While the Catholic Church spans the world independently from geography, a city, a guild or a state are characterized by social functions as well as a specific (material) location (see Simmel, 1995).

A theory of space in times of globalization will refer to both strands of spatial theory. Currently, nation-states can best be described by container concepts, while transnational and functionally specific social systems should be viewed as relational spaces. This means that spatial relations, too, should be theorized with reference to both concepts of space. A container space tends to be all-encompassing. People are either completely part of this space or completely outside it. When migrants are physically barred from entering a specific territory, a container concept of space may apply. Similarly, legal citizenship is organized in a dichotomous manner by many nation-states. The importance of borders decreases in relational concepts of space. Social actors can be included in several different spaces at the same time. Luhmann argues that systems in a functionally differentiated society find only parts of actors relevant (Luhmann, 1995a). The religion of an actor is considered by the religious system, but not by the economic system. Whether a patient holds a job should not matter to the doctor who treats his health problems, and so on. In a similar manner, undocumented migrants can be included in an economic organization, if that organization ignores the rules of the political system. A migrant can be politically stateless, socially part of a transnational household and economically included in an informal but local business operation.

One exception to the rule is pointed out even in the systems theory of the Luhmannian type. While most social systems include only parts of actors,

the national welfare state includes and excludes the whole actor (Bommes, 1999; Bommes and Geddes, 2000). The particular mode of inclusion that is practised by the political system influences the inclusion into other systems. As a result, the educational system prefers people with national educational certificates to those with 'foreign' diplomas. Economic organizations expect nation-specific careers when they decide on job applications. Even in functionally differentiated (world) societies, the national welfare state creates a 'threshold of inequality' (Bommes and Geddes, 2000), which affects the inclusion into many different systems at the same time. Concepts of social closure (Murphy, 1988; Mackert, 1999) describe similar phenomena, but view the threshold of inequality as a result of political struggle about the monopolization of resources.

Spatial relations can best be described as a continuum ranging from container concepts of space – referring to entire bodies/actors – to relational concepts of space that affect only parts of actors. Between the extremes, various in- and exclusions[2] can be observed, if the politics of national welfare states are not creating clear-cut lines. A complete account of spatial relations will consider several interlocking dimensions:

- The relation of bodies/actors to territorial space.
- The relation of entire actors (e.g. citizens) to national welfare states.
- The relation of parts of actors (e.g. resources or aspects of citizenship) to specific social systems and their organizations.

A Polish accountant working without documents in several German households has physically overcome the border of the German nation-state. As a social actor, she is excluded from the national welfare state, i.e. she pays no taxes and receives no benefits. Despite these limitations, she participates in the economic system. Her many jobs can be viewed as a successful private enterprise in a 'world market' for domestic labour. She is included in several local and transnational interaction systems and a non-located religious system.

I have shown that a single actor and his/her resources can be positioned in relation to several spatial entities and that these entities can be viewed as absolute or relative, as territorial or non-located social spaces. Spatial relations are important for a comparison of social positions on a world scale, but they follow a different logic than class formation. What does the inclusion of spatial relations mean for an analysis of social structure on a world scale?

Social Positions in a World System

Class theory after Marx has focused with few exceptions on economic positions inside the nation-state. Bonacich's theory of split labour markets is

one of the rare examples, which treats racism as a structuring force of class formation and relates it to global competition (Bonacich, 1976). Wallerstein has shown that class conflict must be situated in the world system (Wallerstein, 1979). While he assents that a nation-state frame may be adequate for centre states in the modern world system, he also shows that class struggles in the periphery cannot be understood without taking the world system into account. Wallerstein has predicted for the periphery that one interest group would align itself with centre state interests thereby opposing the majority of the population, which has tended to organize class struggle in a nationalistic or ethnic manner. In a similar vein, Bornschier has shown that states compete in a world market for social order and protection (Bornschier, 2002: 222). Depending on the position of a state in the world system, interest groups inside the nation-state will develop diverse patterns of class conflict.

Wallerstein tends to describe classes inside the nation-state. As nation-states are positioned in centre–semi-periphery–periphery hierarchies, attachment to a nation-state is important for the political opportunities a class has. This points to the way in which spatial relations become relevant for social positions on a world scale. The position of (national) spaces in which an actor is situated structures the opportunities he/she is offered. An IT specialist with access to the USA can find a job in development, whereas a developer staying in Morocco will be reduced to servicing network solutions.

As shown earlier, people may remain socially or symbolically attached to places after they have physically left them. They may own houses abroad or care for distant family members. In a symbolical manner, black Germans are seen as Africans by many fellow citizens. The German welfare system argues that asylum seekers need only 80 percent of the welfare standard, because they are used to having lower expectations. As spaces offer opportunities and preclude options, the unequal rank of spaces to which an actor is materially, socially and symbolically attached is one important factor structuring social positions on a world scale.

Wallerstein also points out that class positions are structurally ambivalent in the world system. The nation-state may offer the frame for great parts of political actions and thus shape class consciousness, but class position in the Marxist sense is deduced from ownership and control of the means of production. Since the ability of private owners to acquire surplus value from the producers is the main determinant of class position and since 'the chain of the transfer of surplus value frequently (often? almost always?) [*sic*] traverses national boundaries' (Wallerstein, 1979: 292), centre states tend to be more 'bourgeois' while the periphery is mostly populated by the 'proletariat'. In a capitalist world system, economic relations span the globe. This would point towards a theory of class that transcends the nation-state frame.

In the first part of this article, it has been shown that quite a few actors cannot be located inside a single nation-state and that many social spaces

develop beyond and beneath the nation-state scale. Leslie Sklair has argued that 'those who own and control the most significant economic resources (principally through transnational corporations) will be in a position to further their interests to an extent and in ways not available to most other groups in society... They are a *transnational capitalist class* in that they operate across state borders to further the interests of global capital rather than of any real or imagined nation-state' (Sklair, 2001: 295). In a globalizing world, spatial autonomy becomes a second factor structuring class relations. Those who are able to choose optimal environments for themselves and their resources are in a superior position to those who are limited by a nation-state frame.

While spatial relations are without doubt diverse, their influence on positions of social inequality can be reduced to two aspects. *Spatial autonomy* constitutes an advantage in itself. If spatial autonomy is compromised, the *quality of the spaces* to which an actor is limited or gains access is an important factor shaping positions of social inequality. Considering spatial relations together with the amount of resources a person owns, we may distinguish the following three social positions in a world society.

Transnational upper classes are spatially autonomous. In a geographical manner, they can afford advanced technologies of transport and communication. Their social autonomy is ensured by the acquisition of several citizenships or a well-accepted one. They are educated in global and prestigious places and take care that their children incorporate dominant (western) habitus (Ong, 1999). In most cases, they will be white or be accepted as 'white' by their peers. Being able to move and to possibly spread different aspects of their lives across the globe is a result of wealth and enhances it at the same time.

This does not mean that the transnational upper classes are constantly on the move. On the contrary, the ability to remain in a suitable place can be seen as a privilege. It is the *option* to move to better places or to exploit differences between locations (Jain, 2000) that is an important structuring factor for transnational upper classes. The transnationalization of a social position is not congruent with a transnational lifestyle. So far the top echelons of centre corporations have shown little tendency to move across national borders or to adopt transnational lifestyles (Hartmann, 2000).[3] Business people from the semi-periphery tend to move more often and they find it advantageous to situate their business, their family and their passports at differing and strategically attractive locations (Tseng, 2000). Nevertheless, the social position of both groups is similar insofar as national borders may constitute a hassle, but not a central structuring force.

In contrast to the upper echelons of world society, *the middle layers* tend to be dependent on the national welfare state they are affiliated with. This concerns most of the populations in the centre states who profit from the

infrastructure, which is protected by their state through the closure of national borders and unequal terms of trade. In the last part of the 20th century, several German sociologists came to the conclusion that empirical data point towards a dissolution of one-dimensional class hierarchies (Beck, 1983; Berger and Hradil, 1990). From the perspective of a transnational sociology of social inequality, the empirical results are not amazing while the theoretical conclusions would attract dissent. In a world economy, even a welfare recipient living in a centre welfare state profits indirectly from the surplus value gained by unequal terms of trade. Though he/she is relatively poor in a national context, it may be difficult to distinguish clear-cut class differences between him/her and others who collectively profit from surplus and centre state transfers.

Again, middle positions associated with the (semi-)periphery are in a slightly different situation. Local elites can sometimes use the political hegemony that they exercise in (semi-)peripheral 'cunning states' (Randeria, 2003) in order to extract aid and bribes from centre state governments. The social position of most migrants is strongly influenced by the national welfare state. But in contrast to sedentary citizens of national welfare states and local elites in the (semi-)periphery, national border regulation tends to worsen the social position of those migrants who are assigned to (semi-) peripheral states. A Polish accountant may find work in Germany. By moving across borders, she is more or less spatially autonomous. If she finds a job paid in centre currency, her position will have improved. At the same time, her spatial autonomy is compromised by the exclusion from the national welfare state. She is restricted to informal labour and ends up working as a domestic. Thereby, she remains socially 'attached' to a state that offers little opportunity. As mentioned earlier, the affiliation of migrant populations to their country of origin can become increasingly symbolic. Their children may only lack the proper passport and their grandchildren may just 'look different', but they are still treated as 'belonging elsewhere' (Weiss, in press). The nation-state continues to be an important regulator of social inequality for most citizens of national welfare states, for a few peripheral elites and for most migrants. They either depend on national protectionism or their capabilities are reduced by national border regulation.

The *lower positions* on a world scale are part of nation-states only by name. Weak states (Migdal, 1988) have little to offer, least of all protection from the effects of a global economy. Ong (1999) uses the term 'graduated sovereignty' for states that withdraw sovereignty from part of their population. Young rural women working in free trade zones are often prone to the privatized violence of global corporations. Refugees in war zones, labourers in the informal economy, squatters who cannot gain access to state institutions are directly exposed to the consequences of a globalized economic

system, while remaining geographically restricted to socially and geographically peripheral regions. Glocalization is 'globalisation for some, localization for some others' (Bauman, 1998). While the upper and some middle layers of world society extend their life-worlds to the globe, the lowest positions are affected by global dynamics, but reduced to their immediate surroundings in their opportunities for action.

The proposed typology agrees with Wallerstein that class positions on a world scale are often structured by the nation-state and its position in centre–periphery hierarchies. Most of the centre state populations depend on the national welfare state. (Semi-)peripheral elites use 'their' state to increase their bargaining power. The argument diverges from Wallerstein in two respects. Many actors cannot be assigned to only one nation-state. The social position of most migrants is strongly influenced by the existence of nation-states, but it is situated between a formal and symbolical affiliation with a (semi-)peripheral state and an (in)formal exclusion from the state in which they live. Second, the importance of the state is restricted to the middle positions on a world scale. At the top and the bottom of the world society, the nation-state and especially the national welfare state cease to be a relevant structuring force for social positions. Transnational upper classes can choose from a variety of places and they can privately pay for the infrastructure that a well-equipped state offers. The lower echelons of world society tend to be 'fixed' to disadvantaged locations and are lacking state protection from a globalizing economy.

The Cultural Capital of Highly Skilled Migrants

Debates about class formation have focused on the interior side of states. Further research should focus on groups who are situated beyond the nation-state. This could concern migrants, who lead transnational lives, or the upper and lower echelons of the world, whose social positions can be seen as structurally trans- or non-national.

My empirical work has focused on a group who shares both aspects to some extent. Highly skilled migrants can be seen as the prototype of a social group that is socially and structurally transnational. As migrants, they have overcome personal ties to a specific nation-state as well as political barriers to migration. Some highly skilled migrants possess transnationally valid forms of cultural capital, such as IT experience, medical expertise or esteemed MBAs, which are asked for in global labour markets. Highly skilled migrants of this type change countries according to the demand. Nation-states tend to reduce barriers to free movement for those wanted experts. In contrast to other educated migrants, they experience little depreciation of their cultural capital when they cross national borders. I suggest thus that living as

migrants *and* being highly skilled should maximize spatial autonomy. At the same time, the position of highly skilled migrants is not as elite as that of Sklair's transnational capitalist class. They are still subject to migration controls and we may find differences depending on the country of origin and their migration trajectory. We would expect the social position of highly skilled migrants to oscillate between spatial autonomy and the control of the nation-state.

The following discussion refers to 17 one- to four-hour interviews and supplementary questionnaires with highly skilled migrants. In-depth qualitative research can offer a lot of information about the interviewees' economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1999). Apart from the objective aspects of their capital portfolio, habitus and explicit assessments of their social position can be analysed. Practices of distinction, access, social closure and strategies to overcome social barriers are further points of interest.

Most aspects of social positions are in one way or another spatial. It has been argued earlier that at least two versions of spatial relations should be distinguished. Social actors can be situated geographically and socially in spaces, of which the national container is the most prominent one. One part of the research focuses on social closure and barriers to access which concern the whole person. All of the interviewees have at least once crossed national borders. Ten of them have arrived in Germany from diverse regions of the world and work mostly with intelligent technologies (labelled 'IT professionals' from now on). Five Germans work abroad as expatriates and two interviewees arrived in Germany as migrants and have later been sent abroad as expatriates by German organizations (both groups labelled 'expatriates').[4]

As all interviewees have crossed from centre countries to the (semi-) periphery or vice versa, the situation of IT professionals and expatriates should differ strongly, if national affiliation and the position of their country of origin in the centre–periphery hierarchy were the main determinants of their social position. In contrast to this assumption, the empirical material suggests that interviewees possessing universally acknowledged cultural capital and moving in globalized labour markets share a lot of similarities. An objectively similar inclusion in global communities and labour markets can outweigh the effects of national in- or exclusion.

The observation of similarity should not be misinterpreted as 'likeness' between all the interviewees. The sample is characterized by many differences. But while most of the variation in the sample can be attributed to diverse causes, only some of them are specific for a region, a nation or a state. For example, we can distinguish between traditional and egalitarian partnerships, but the difference cannot be explained by the origin in a 'modern' vs 'traditional' culture. Instead, the migration experience resulted in one Indian

and one German woman becoming the sole provider for their young children and their unemployed husbands. Social networks are also similar. Most of the migrants interviewed stay in touch with the social networks of their childhood and develop transnational relations during their adult lives. Very few are politically active and they shy away from party politics. Again, values differ, but they are independent from national or regional origins.

The fact that the interviewees share many similarities despite coming either from the centre or the (semi-)periphery supports the assumption that their social position is structurally independent from the nation-state. In the course of the project, comparisons with highly skilled non-migrants and with less qualified migrants serve to outline more clearly the social position of highly skilled migrants. This includes an in-depth analysis of economic capital, the variation of which appears to be related to centre–periphery hierarchies.

The second form of spatial relations discussed earlier concerns the spatial relation *of particular aspects* of actors. Spatial relations of aspects of people need not be congruent. Part of the cultural capital of the interviewees could be transnationally valid while another part is location-specific. The highly skilled migrants have been selected for their transnational cultural capital. Is their cultural capital transnational, and if not: can we observe patterns in the spatial relations of their cultural capital?

According to Gellner, one of the key functions of the modern nation-state has consisted of creating a generalized and at the same time culturally specific minimum education for a large group of people (Gellner, 1993). When crafts and manufacturing developed to industrial production, labour circulated more frequently. The parent to child transfer of highly specific skills was replaced by a basic education, which could be applied to many tasks. As standard knowledge is closely linked to language and culture, an institution like the nation-state was needed that could develop a standard culture on a given territory. The nation-state has standardized knowledge and education certificates. Cultural distinction very often refers to national as well as upper-class standards. Taking this into account, it is not amazing that the cultural capital of most migrants is depreciated when they cross the borders of the nation-state.[5]

As a contrast to highly skilled migrants, Polish domestics working illegally in Germany were interviewed. One of them, Joanna Figa,[6] describes how she lost her cultural capital when she left Poland for another country:

> You know, when I arrived here, I had just acquired the title 'accountant'. With the support of my employer, I studied three years for that. Then I arrived here, in 1989, and started to wash dishes in a pub. I was devastated, mentally and morally. I really did not know whether I wanted to do that, but it was my only chance to help my children. . . Now I am grateful that I can do something like that, because now I am very proud because my son just finishes law school and

my daughter wants to study business here, and she only has a chance, because I am here.[7]

This account is a typical migrant's story. Migrants often hold qualifications that are above average in their country of origin (Massey et al., 1998: 235). In the country of destination, the qualification is not accepted or they fail to gain access to the formal labour market in the first place. They end up losing their cultural capital and 'making money' instead. Joanna Figa is successful in that she enables her children to reach academic qualifications. In this way, at least, her family has been upwardly mobile. Other interviewees told us that their absence resulted in inadequate childcare and sometimes educational failure.

The situation is quite different for a select few among the world's migrants. They belong to global communities that have started to reduce the nation-state's monopoly on standardizing cultural capital.

I: And if [your company] was laying off people ehm, how easy would it be for you to find another job?

AB: Should be easy I mean ehm it depends even o– at the moment when I had [found] this job I had eight other offers so

I: So you must be very <u>good</u>

AB: It means I was very good. (*laughs*)

I: Yea because I mean we had the <u>recession</u>

AB: Ehm we had recession and my friends were not getting jobs, they were going back to India and making all kinds of job.

Aman Bakshi was among the top 1 percent of those born in the same year in school in India. He wanted to study at the Indian Institute of Technology, but was not admitted for the IT major. He chose the second best university of the country in order to do IT. He explained that he liked IT. His preference also was rational insofar as in India an IT education offers much better chances than any other subject major (Xiang, 2002). After he had obtained his bachelor, he had to choose between doing an MBA at the most prestigious business school in India and doing a technology masters in Germany on a scholarship awarded by a global player. He opted for the latter in order to gain international experience. When his masters course finished in September 2002, IT experienced the peak of a recession. Nevertheless, Mr Bakshi could choose from eight job offers and opted to stay with the global player who financed his scholarship. While the cultural capital of most migrants is depreciated, highly skilled migrants tend to possess a high amount of transnational cultural capital. They have usually opted for an education which is internationally accepted and valued.

The highly skilled migrants also possess cultural capital that is specific

to their country of origin. This capital is rarely recognized and must be translated into universally understood cultural currency. For example, the significance of being admitted into the Indian Institute of Technology was not understood by the German interviewer. Mr Bakshi was forced to explain that a 90 percent grade point average translates into the country's top 1 percentile. The IT professionals have to convince with their speciality or with quantitative aspects of their qualification, because the many minuscule signs that signify high-quality culture are not understood by people who do not know which universities in India belong to the top of the world.

Mr Bakshi has patiently explained the value of his cultural capital. Michael Steinlechner, a third-generation ethnic German from Latin America, is frustrated that the professional experience and cultural capital he has acquired in his country of origin is neglected by his German colleagues and that he is treated as a newcomer.

> I had already worked, I had already studied, finished my studies, worked for three years, studied again and still, many of my colleagues, they did not say it openly but I could feel it, I was seen as a newcomer fresh from university. That did hurt. [*I:* And why?] [3 second break] Shall I be completely sincere? [*I:* Yes of course!] Because they were a little – arrogant. It is strange but I still experience that. One says: 'Yes, okay, he comes from a Third World country, he doesn't know anything, he will have to learn first, when he arrives here.' If I tell you, that my studies in my home country were a lot more difficult than the masters here in Dresden, then you might not believe me. But that is the case. One is not taken seriously and therefore I believe that, despite the good qualification, one does not have the same chances.[8]

Highly skilled migrants do not escape the depreciation of their cultural capital in particular if they come from the (semi-)periphery. But if their university is not known, it will be helpful to have finished school among the top 1 percent of their country. If they do not possess an acknowledged diploma, the German state will consider them as highly skilled if they earn more than €51,000 a year as an IT professional.

The highly skilled migrants chosen for this research tend to possess cultural capital, the quantity or quality of which is so well accepted that they are able to compete successfully in globalized labour markets.

While the location-specific knowledge that migrants have acquired in their early years is rarely transferable, it is important for them to gain access to location-specific cultural capital in their country of residence. Many specialities even in the technical or medical field presume location-specific cultural knowledge. Karim Salem is an IT developer who wonders what kind of work he will do in 20 years. He expects younger people to be at the cutting edge of development then and he would like to move in order to serve customers in the long run.

> Most of the people who are working with the service, they <u>have</u> to speak the

> language the German language if they want to go to the customer. And most of my friends or my colleagues who I used to study with, who are working in the customer [department] they are speaking perfect German.

Language has many functions besides communicating facts. We may assume that service specialists do not only speak German perfectly, but also know the subtleties of native interaction. Bourdieu used the example of the petit bourgeois, who dines in an expensive restaurant and completely adheres to the rules of proper behaviour. It is this perfectionism that distinguishes the upwardly mobile from those who have been born into an upper-class habitus and thus handle themselves more easily. In a similar manner, migrants or ethnic minorities can perfectly assimilate to the rules and still be 'recognized' as different (Bentley, 1987; Sartre, 1965). As most business organizations are still steered from culturally national headquarters (Hartmann, 2000), international experts find it difficult to move into management functions, even if they come from the same culture. Georg Meier has worked as a marketing director for a global player. He has latterly been responsible for 17 Asian countries. Lacking access to vital social networks, he has remained excluded from the top careers in the company's German headquarters. Lacking family connections and location-specific cultural capital, he has remained excluded from the Asian business community.

Highly skilled migrants remain limited to specialities that function independently from location-specific capital. They find it difficult to gain access to occupations that presume local cultural knowledge. The location-specific capital they have acquired in their home countries is secondary to their social position. Nevertheless, it can become important if it is used as a supplement to international versatility.

> In the long run, may be I would like to go back to India. . . Since I've worked in Germany, I would get a better position in India. May be into management or something. So thinking in the long term, it would be that, ok I spend some years here, get experience and I try to take up management position here in Germany related with India . . . because India would be a future market for everything. As you know, not just Germany but US, Canada, every country is nowadays trying to outsource org[anizations] . . . So you [his company], or any other company would require a professional who knows India qui– very well and who knows Germany too. So I fit exactly in that area.

Aman Bakshi feels that his experience with a German global player will translate into a better position if he returns to India. He may not be aware, that to be a specialist on specific locations can lead to a dead-end. Lv Zhimin has been hired by a German company who wants to send her back to China as an expatriate. She insists that her speciality is *global* key account management, because that implies a more general responsibility and strategic thinking in contrast to local key account managers who do the more routine jobs.

The main contrast between the IT professionals working in Germany and the expatriates concerns the use of location-specific cultural capital. It is a supplement for IT professionals and they have to be careful if they do not want to become a little fish in small – and peripheral – ponds. The national cultural capital of the expatriates can become transnationally acknowledged due to the centre states' economic and cultural hegemony.

I: Why do they have to send someone German? Couldn't they find someone local?

SB: Up until now, the Germans or the Europeans know of course better, what German customers want, what quality is asked for. Especially concerning standards of quality, there are vastly differing opinions. What does an Asian know about a winter jacket for example or a skiing outfit? They cannot know that and they are – if I generalize – they are rather easy going about many things that are just not important to them. If a German customer complains if the seam is uneven, they do not see that. And in order to guarantee that standard, Europeans are sent.[9]

The qualification of many expatriates consists in transnational cultural capital *and* national cultural capital, which is associated with high standards worldwide. Susanne Borg ensures German quality in textile manufacturing. An engineer builds 'German' power plants. And an expert in constructive conflict resolution disseminates the latest research and practice from the centre to the periphery.

As a result, the quantity and the quality of the transnational cultural capital among the expatriates are slightly lower than those of the IT professionals. Not all IT professionals are as outstanding as Aman Bakshi, but several of them have received an elite education and top-grade point averages. No German expatriate was outstanding in his/her educational achievements. Instead, several had become very successful in the course of their professional career. This difference can be seen as a result of centre–periphery hierarchies.

The social position of highly skilled migrants is in many respects – though not entirely – situated beyond the framework of the nation-state. A preliminary comparison between expatriates sent by German organizations into developing countries and IT specialists who are recruited to Germany from different regions of the world shows that highly skilled migrants share a similar social position even though they come from largely divergent national cultures and institutional systems. This is not to say that highly skilled migrants can be seen as a social class in the Marxist sense of the word. But they can be seen as a 'theoretical class', i.e. a group of people with objective affinities in a social space (Bourdieu, 1990) that extends beyond the limits of the nation-state. Compared to other migrants, their social position is distinguished through their high amount of transnational cultural capital. Their cultural capital being mainly transnational, they often lack the local

knowledge and networks that may be important for social mobility in the centres. The location-specific cultural capital they have acquired in the course of their childhood is secondary to their social position, but it can become important in combination with their transnational cultural capital. The main difference between expatriates and IT professionals consists in the first group possessing culturally dominant location-specific capital, whereas the latter possesses cultural capital that improves their (company's) access to the niches of the world market.

Conclusion

Inequalities between locals and cosmopolitans (Merton, 1968), between established and outsiders (Elias, 1994) have been discussed for many years in sociology. Hoffmann-Nowotny has argued that migration responds to structural anomie and that it could alleviate inequality in the world system (Hoffmann-Nowotny, 1970). Most of these arguments accept the nation-state as a given frame, which is modified and sometimes threatened by (uncontrolled) migration.

My argument has taken a different slant. I have not asked whether a nation-state wins or loses through migration, or whether migration decreases or increases inequality between nations. My interest has focused on social inequality on a world scale and I have argued that geographical, social and structural autonomy from the nation-state can be an important aspect of upward social mobility in the world. A migratory life-course may be characterized by social autonomy. And it can structurally be defined as a portfolio of resources that are globally acknowledged and asked for. A specific subgroup of highly skilled migrants combines both features to some extent. As their cultural capital is transnationally accepted and asked for, barriers to migration are reduced, which permits them to move with few restrictions in globalized labour markets. The majority of migrants are in a less desirable position. Migration results in a depreciation of their location-specific capital. Nevertheless, migrants are able to improve their social position with spatial change.

Considering that spatial autonomy is desirable for many people, grievances concerning migration appear in a different light. Very often, they represent interests of particular social positions in a world system even though they are phrased as if they are representing entire nation-states. Wallerstein has argued that 'one of the key elements in analyzing a class or a status-group is not only the state of its self-consciousness but the geographical scope of its self-definition' (Wallerstein, 1974: 351). This argument should not only refer to the self-definition of classes, but also to spatial relations that objectively structure social positions on a world scale. Very often 'nation-states' in the

centre who claim that migration threatens their systems of redistribution could also be seen as majorities who respond to a loss of national privileges in a globalizing world. Minorities in the centre state have profited from migration and/or are already included in world markets. Talking of nation-states veils the cleavages inside their populations that have grown as a result of globalization processes.

The topic of inequality has become one of the main issues of the nation-state. Only national solidarity ensures that social actors recognize each other as equals and only the state is able to organize redistribution. As a result of globalization processes, we can now see changing patterns of inequality, which are influenced by the national welfare-state – but also by its absence.

Notes

1 This figure is calculated from the sum of 7,300,000 aliens (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2001), the 4,300,000 ethnic Germans who have immigrated since 1950 (Bundesverwaltungsamt), the 1,300,000 persons who have been naturalized since 1981 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2003) and the approximately 100,000–1,000,000 illegal aliens (Bade, 2001: 68). This amounts to 16 percent of people living in Germany.

2 See Soysal's argument that migrants may hold many aspects of citizenship despite their being politically excluded (Soysal, 1994).

3 This may be attributed to top elites belonging to the elder generation. Research in elite business schools has shown a tendency towards internationalization (Marceau, 1989).

4 Other characteristics such as gender, family situation and size of work organization are highly diverse.

5 Devaluation of cultural capital is of course not *only* due to differences between nations. Practices of social closure also exclude people with an accepted and needed form of cultural capital.

6 Names and other personal details have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

7 Translation by the author. Language mistakes and ambiguities have been changed in order to make the English version more accessible to the reader.

> Wissen Sie wenn ich bin gekommen hier, ich gerade habe bekommen eine Titel dass bin ich bunt . . . äh Bul. . . Buchhalter, Finanzbuchhalter, . . . da habe ich durch meine Arbeit, und habe ich drei Jahre studiert dafür. Dann bin ich her gekommen, 89, und dann habe ich angefangen in eine Kneipe Teller zu waschen. Da . . . war ich kaputt, seelisch, und moralisch. Wusste ich wirklich nicht, ob ich das will machen, aber das war einzige Chance, meine Kinder zu helfen. . . . und dann bin ich dankbar dass konnte ich sowas machen, weil jetzt ich bin sehr stolz weil mein Sohn gerade macht die Abschluss mit die Jura und meine Tochter wollte hier studieren, Wirtschaft, und das ist nur die Chance dass ich, dass ich bin hier.

8 Ich hatte schon gearbeitet, ich hatte schon studiert, . . . fertig studiert, drei Jahre gearbeitet, noch mal studiert, und wurde trotzdem von – vielen meiner Arbeitskollegen, die haben auch nich so offen gesagt, aber man hat's gefühlt, (1) dass man

– trotzdem wie ein Neuling aus der Universität äh eingestuft wurde. Das hat schon weh getan. . . . [*I:* Und warum?] (3) (Soll) ich ganz ehrlich sagen? [*I:* Ja, natürlich!] Weil die eben ein bisschen (1) arrogant waren. Es is äh – komisch, aber das hab ich, erleb ich immer noch, man sagt 'Ja okay der kommt aus der Dritte Welt, der kann sowieso nichts, . . . der wird erst mal lernen, wenn er hierher kommt.' . . . Wenn ich dir sage, dass mein Studium in [Herkunftsland] schw–, viel schwieriger war als das Studium hier an der TU Dresden, dann würdest du vielleicht mir nicht glauben. Aber das ist der Fall. . . . Man wird nicht ernst genommen und deswegen glaub ich aber trotzdem, trotzdem, trotz gute Qualifikation, dass man nich mehr dieselbe Chancen hat.

9 *I:* Wieso müssen die jemand deutsches da hin schicken? Könnten sie nich auch n Einheimischen finden?

SB: Na 's is immer noch so dass die Deutschen oder die Europäer die wissen natürlich eher wat wat will der deutsche Kunde, welche Qualität is gefragt und das janz besonders bei den Qualitätsstandards da gehen die Uffassungen sehr weit auseinander. Wat wat weeß n Asiate schon von ner von ner Winterjacke zum Beispiel ne oder oder von nem Schianzug. (2) Das sie das sie könnens einfach gar nich wissen und sie sind und sie sind also wenn man mal jetzt wenn ich's jetz mal so verallgemeinere sie sind recht recht lax in vielen Dingen die sind denen einfach nich nich wichtich. Dass halt n deutscher Kunde bemängelt wenn's hier blubbert oder da wellert oder. Das. Das sehn se nich und einfach um diesen Standard zu gewährleisten deswegen wern wern Europäer geschickt.

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