

'You gain nothing by stretching the term class this far'

Sociology The Social and Cultural Planning Bureau caused a stir with a new class division of the Netherlands. Not all sociologists are convinced.

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Shoppers on Amsterdam's Kalverstraat. Class differences have undeniably widened.
Photo ANP/Remko de Waal

Classes are back on the scene - but in a whole new guise.

The Netherlands seemed to fall off its chair for a moment last week with the Social and Cultural Planning Office's (SCP) report that we are in a veritable class society. In the report *Contemporary Inequality*, [the Planning Bureau distinguished](#) a hierarchy of seven "classes" with socioeconomic and cultural characteristics, down to appearance, dress and language use. The report prompted busy reflections on social inequality.

But what are classes? As recently as the turn of the century, sociology sounded the alarm that the concept of class had outlived itself. Modern society had become so complex that the concept of class was bursting at the seams. The *death of class* became a theme.

That was too soon to cheer - or lament. The thump of the 2008 credit crisis, mounting criticism of neoliberalism and market forces, stagnant social mobility and renewed attention to "systemic" racism and sexism, have once again launched class to the center of public debate.

But they are not the same classes introduced in sociology by Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx (1818-1883) defined classes by economic criteria: possession of resources and means of production, the stakes of class struggle. Max Weber (1864-1920) analyzed social stratification in three dimensions (class, status and political position). In addition to social class, he distinguished "status groups," determined by non-economic characteristics such as honor, prestige, ethnicity and religion. People from various classes could belong to the same status group. In the late twentieth century, this approach was refined with the "social" and "cultural capital" of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). Social position is also determined by taste in art, clothing or food.

Latent class analysis

This "multidimensional" approach to social stratification has long been well-established in sociology. It allows researchers to analyze complex societies more finely. Often with "latent class analysis," a statistical approach to recognize patterns to identify social classes or groups. An approach that can also be found in popularized form in numerous market research studies, such as from agency Motivaction that [divides](#) the Dutch [into lifestyle groups](#) such as "*upwardly mobile*" and "*postmodern hedonists*."

Sociologist Gijs Custers of Erasmus University Rotterdam investigated the class structure [of Rotterdam neighborhoods](#) from such a 'multidimensional Bourdieu perspective' with professor Godfried Engbersen. In *Bourdieu in de buurt* (2019), they identified eight groups, from 'established upper class' through 'contact-poor middle group' to 'fragile lower group' and, at the very bottom, the 'precariat'.

If you put all sorts of things into the concept of class, you don't theoretically gain anything.

Dick Houtman sociologist

Custers: "You get a much more differentiated picture of social reality this way than with crude divisions like those between city and country, or rich and poor." The method was able to show shifts that would otherwise have remained under the radar, such as the steady rise of

a middle class in some neighborhoods: a group with still little economic capital, but already high social and cultural capital.

But the approach also has its limitations. Custers appreciates the Planbureau's multidimensional approach, but points out that class can be "filled" with so many new variables that the concept loses, or even loses, its explanatory power. He says: "Statistical links may be established between all kinds of group characteristics, but why they are there, what they mean and how they contribute to inequality and its perpetuation remains unclear."

Collecting and clustering

Rotterdam professor of sociology Jeroen van der Waal agrees. He finds the SCP report "very disappointing." Because: "As a sociologist, you don't just want to collect and cluster all kinds of characteristics. You want to know which characteristic is relevant to which inequality, how those mechanisms work. You can no longer figure that out if you start putting all kinds of things under the hood."

He gives an example: educational attainment and inequality. "We've known for a long time that there is a relationship between the two, that's nothing new. But it can have all sorts of reasons. Wealth can play a role, giving a family a more spacious home with their own rooms for the children, where they can concentrate better on schoolwork. But parents' social and cultural capital can also play a role: being able to help with homework, having a network. Even whether parents teach children certain ways that make teachers rate them higher. If you put all that in a *black box*, you won't find out what mechanism is at work."

So what the SCP has done, says Van der Waal, is a starting point for scientific research rather than an end point. "The results now are not only scientifically unsatisfactory, but also of little use to policymakers. After all, how do you know which policy is best suited to combat which form of inequality?"

You cannot simply lump how people view themselves with other characteristics

Gijs Custers sociologist

How then? With colleague Willem de Koster, [Van der Waal advocated](#) an "analytical stratification sociology" in the journal *Sociology* in 2015, which reopens the *black box* of "class" and continues to make a testable distinction between class and status. It should clarify, for example, what role economic, cultural or social capital of parents plays in the success of children and through which mechanism that runs. Van der Waal: "Social science is about the *how*. We have often known for a long time that there are certain patterns in inequality. It makes little sense to then just map them again, using different names."

Taste-related issues

From Yale, where Professor Dick Houtman is on sabbatical, similar criticisms can be heard, but just a bit louder. The veteran sociologist, who has long worked at Erasmus University Rotterdam and is now affiliated with the University of Leuven, says, "Class has been constantly reframed over the years with all kinds of elements. Many sociologists think this is a good idea; I think somewhat differently. The big risk is that the approach becomes

tautological. You first subsume all kinds of non-economic, taste-related issues and then find that class affects taste-related issues. Theoretically, you gain nothing by stretching the notion of class that far, because you no longer understand how all those indicators are related and how it works under the surface. Then you are left with a purely descriptive analysis."

That the class universe has begun to expand in this way, Houtman attributes to gnawing doubts among sociologists as to whether the time-honored, economic version of it was still useful. For example, workers in Europe, traditionally the supporters of leftist parties, turned out to vote right en masse. Houtman: "Then the thought was: apparently there is no longer a relationship between class and voting behavior. But that is not true at all. Cultural capital pushes people to the left, economic capital to the right. The 'underclass' votes economically left and culturally right. That can be explained perfectly well without stuffing the concept of class with new variables."

We are still always a status society

Jeroen van der Waal sociologist

Houtman has another caveat. The SCP's class characteristics also include more subjective variables, such as satisfaction with one's own appearance. This threatens to dilute the difference between what Marxists call "class *an sich*," considered in isolation, and "class *für sich*," the image people have of their own position in the class hierarchy. Marxists need that difference to speak of a "false class consciousness," which prevents workers from becoming aware of their own exploitation.

This mixing of characteristics is also an issue for non-Marxists. Researcher Custers: "You can't just line up how people view themselves with other characteristics. How do those correlate?" The "vague" category of "personal capital" would therefore have been better left out by the SCP, he thinks. A sign of the times is that term, though, Houtman says from Yale. "We have started thinking about ourselves more and more in psychological terms, such as identity and self-image. That may be an effect of neoliberalism: you are first and foremost an individual, was the message. That, of course, is very naive. Sociologically, the notion of an autonomous individual is ridiculous."

And another thing. What you also have to guard against, Houtman says, is inequality becoming a catch-all term and swallowing up cultural difference. "With Bourdieu, we now recognize everywhere the urge of people and groups to distinguish themselves. Is it about oppression, backwardness or exploitation, or simply cultural difference? The latter is not an inequality you should want to do something about." In sociological research, says also Custers from Rotterdam, it is now much more about the relations between classes - what is their mutual relationship, how do they see each other - and not about yet another new typology of groups.

Is the Netherlands now a class society? "I do think that class differences have become more rather than less important," says Houtman. And Van der Waal: "The differences between classes have undeniably increased, you can see that in the labor market and the growing number of self-employed people. Social mobility has decreased, just not among migrant groups." But, he says, that does not prove "that class has become the main dimension of contemporary inequality. Very often it is about more than just economic differences. It is also

about the valuation of the status of male, female, white and non-white, low and highly educated. We are still always a status society."