

Social classes and educational assets

A transnational analysis

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Introduction

How are European social structures being restraped against the current backdrop of globalisation and the knowledge society?

One of the fundamental areas of sociological research has been precisely that of studying change in social structures. The aim of this study is to contribute, in a variety of ways, to updating our knowledge in this field, particularly with regards to Europe. The general hypothesis underlying this approach is that, far from having become ineffectual or out of date in the context of globalisation and the knowledge society, class analysis may help reveal, characterise and explain important features relating to contemporary processes of structural change.

However, before we can address the actual analysis, a few brief preliminary explanations of a theoretical, conceptual and operational nature are required, and these are provided in the initial stages of this chapter. The subsequent points then condense the main results of this research and provide an analysis of *transnational class clusters* and *class educational assets* in contemporary Europe. The conclusion examines in an integrated way these substantive analyses as well as the initial premise on the contemporary relevance of structural class analyses.

Globalisation processes and the knowledge society

The concepts of *globalisation* and the *knowledge society* have currently a somewhat paradoxical status in sociological analysis. On the one hand, they are frequently used concepts in the most varied of topics. This happens to be the case not only in sociology but also in other social sciences, as well as in academic, technical, political and media discourse. On the other hand, these concepts are systematically under critical detachment and theoretical controversy in sociological analysis. There seems to be no getting away from their

use yet, by the same token, this very use is seen as an intellectually uncomfortable matter. Whatever the case, they certainly need to be clarified.

The globalisation concept began gaining ground amongst the social sciences in the early 1990s. Certain authors see globalisation as consisting, above all, of an economic strategy carried out by large multinational capitalist enterprises in search of expanded markets and internationalised production — a strategy supported by powerful states, notably the USA, and international organisations such as the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. This interpretation can be found, for example, in Manuel Castells (1996), an author who suggests other concepts for large-scale contemporary social processes, the best known of which is *the network society*.

Economists also tend to see the concept of globalisation in the same light, even when they approach the process from a critical angle, such as that put forward by Stiglitz (2002, 2006), in calling for the establishment or strengthening of entities involved in the international governance of economic globalisation, with a view to making its mechanisms and effects fairer and more even-handed. Additionally, a number of bodies have been moving in the same direction, as is the particular case of the Comissão Mundial sobre a Dimensão Social da Globalização (2005).

Authors such as Giddens (1990), Robertson (1992), Waters (1995), Appadurai (1996), Beck (2000) and others who have helped push this concept decisively into the terminology and analytical perspectives of social science, prefer to speak of *globalisation processes* that not only encompass economic but environmental, cultural, communicational, political and military characteristics as well. They place at the very heart of globalisation the expansion and intensification of world-wide social relations, as evidenced over recent decades in diverse social dimensions and through increased interdependence mechanisms.

Notwithstanding the different nuances in the various authors' theories, according to these perspectives economic transformation, such as indicated above, is a part of the process of globalisation, but the latter cannot be reduced to the former. The other factors of processes of globalisation have their own dynamics and specific importance. They may even present inconsistent trends or contradictory aspects amongst themselves. In analysing today's society, it is of vital importance that we closely examine the combinations between those different dimensions and dynamics.

The new information and communication technologies (ICT) — with their rapid development and high-speed inclusion in economic activities and daily life — as well as the general intensification of technological and organisational innovation, arising from science-based knowledge, are also often considered to be crucial sources of contemporary social change. By the same token, the process of expanding education, rapidly improving formal

qualifications, and integrating a skilled population into social and economic activity, has greatly intensified over recent decades. This is also often considered to be one of the main drivers of present-day social change. Essentially, the expressions *information society* and *knowledge society* have been used to refer to these two sets of processes.

There is a great deal of controversy in the social sciences regarding these concepts. A now classical assessment of the main interpretations of the *information society* is to be found in Lyon (1988). Castells (1996) prefers to talk of the *information age* and the *informational mode of development*. Sociological analysis such as those of Touraine (1969) or Bell (1973) had already addressed the advent of what they called the *post-industrial society*, though via very different approaches. These studies had already addressed the issue of what would come to be known as the *knowledge society*. This was thematised explicitly according to a varied number of versions, such as those of Drucker (1993) or Stehr (1994).

Certain key publications use different terminologies and focus particularly on specific central social actors in the processes that characterise the knowledge society. Examples of this are the “symbolic analysts” in Reich (1991) and the “creative class” in Florida (2002). We are thus approaching social class analysis.

Given the central connotations that these different approaches contain, it is possible to draw a conclusion: that the concept of the knowledge society essentially relates to the deeply structuring and broadly comprehensive presence in contemporary society of formalised and codified knowledge, produced by experts in specialised institutions, by means of highly elaborated procedures. Today, this knowledge represents a core component in the organisation of society and the processes of social change.

National and transnational levels of analysis

The aforementioned contemporary social processes occur largely on a transnational scale. Globalisation processes are an obvious example. The processes of European integration are another. Moreover, globalisation and European integration are not specific processes that are mutually exclusive of each other; rather they have been reciprocally influential in different ways. Both these processes are having a decisive impact in the way Portuguese society is currently being shaped and transformed.

This is not to say that national societies and nation-states, with their structural, institutional and cultural specificities, are no longer of great importance. But we cannot ignore the fact that transformation in social structures and processes are, to a large extent, currently driven at the transnational scale.

A number of authors insist on the supposed “disintegration of society” (Touraine, 2005), more postulated than ascertained, or on the need to overcome

“methodological nationalism” (Beck, 2000), to which, in fact, nobody in sociology subscribes today. But the assertion that societies and nation-states have vanished into thin air seems a rather premature one.

More sociological analysis is required that encompasses two analytical levels — national and transnational — precisely in order to understand many contemporary social phenomena. This is the aim of this chapter, with regards to social structures and educational profiles within the current European context.

It is also important to stress in these preliminary comments that developing a transnational sociological analysis does not simply mean making international comparisons. These comparisons are undoubtedly enlightening and allow us to gain a sense of perspective in ascertaining the importance of each country’s characteristics, and then to put together explanatory hypotheses based on a systematic comparison of the similarities and differences between them. But this is not enough.

Society nowadays is also built, to a large extent, directly on transnational scales. A number of the relevant units of sociological analysis need to be redefined from both a theoretical and methodological point of view as being specifically transnational in scope. A new question therefore arises in sociological research: how can one find the pertinent transnational units of analysis?

To study a diversified set of phenomena, the pertinent boundaries are coincident with geographical contiguity and/or institutional frontiers, such as, for example, those of countries or those of the European Union. These delimitations, however, are more relevant for phenomena of an institutional or cultural nature (although this is not necessarily always the case) than for phenomena of a socio-structural character.

The end result is that, in an analysis of the social structures currently being shaped within the European context, it is important to take the delimitation of these transnational units as an aim of research in itself rather than just take for granted previously defined or a priori transnational units.

Class analysis

Will class analysis be a useful tool for sociological research on contemporary society, in the context of globalisation and the knowledge society?

It is well known that sociology has provided an ongoing forum for debates and controversies on social classes. Since its first authors, sociology has encompassed different theoretical perspectives and diversified forms of empirical research on the issue of social classes.

The problems of the relationship between structure, consciousness and action (*“structure-consciousness-action (SCA) problems”*) (Pahl, 1989; Crompton, 1998) are endemic in this area. The analytical focus has been

variable, depending on the researchers: some concentrate more on class locations, others on class conflict, others on day-to-day practices and lifestyles and their relationships with social classes, others on class origins and class trajectories, others on class dispositions, identities and ideologies. There have also been various typologies of classes or class locations used in theoretical and empirical analysis. They are often presented as alternatives, comparable among themselves only partially.

The “death of class” theses arise from time to time: as a desire and a prediction, in Marx; as a supposed accomplishment, both in the theses of the apologists of “real socialism” or of “generalised middle class capitalism” and in the apocalyptic theses of the “Frankfurtian” critical theory, in the mid twentieth century; and as an would-be recent event, in post-modernist theory, at the end of the twentieth century. Every re-appearance of the theory itself clearly invalidates the earlier versions: if classes had already disappeared beforehand, they would not be re-initiating their disappearance.

Nowadays, the agenda of the sociology of social classes includes the following main areas: a) *the rise in social inequalities*, real and perceived — which, moreover, has hampered the acceptance of the “death of class” notion (Chauvel, 2004, 2006); b) *the intersection of inequalities* of class, gender, ethnicity, education, territory, identity, etc. (Devine *et al.*, 2005); c) *the relationship between classes and citizenship*, involving questions relating to the rule of law, the welfare state, democracy and conflict (Giddens and Diamond, 2005); and d) *classes at the transnational level*.

The current analysis falls precisely within the scope of the latter area. It is part of a research programme on social classes that the authors have been carrying out for a long time. This programme has given rise to a number of research projects and publications¹; it has involved other researchers and students; it has used extensive methods (analyses of statistical sources; questionnaire surveys) and intensive methods (case studies); and it has been designing and testing a classification typology for class locations, the ACM typology (Almeida, Costa and Machado).

In operational terms, the ACM class typology consists of a socio-occupational indicator of class, based on two main variables, “employment status” and “occupation”. The latter is operationalised in accordance with the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO).² A socio-economic indicator of class in no way encompasses the full meaning of the concept of class and needs to be supplemented with other sources of information and analysis (Costa, 1999). But this does not preclude it to be a highly useful

1 Some of the milestones of this programme can be found in Almeida (1986), Costa (1987), Almeida, Costa and Machado (1988, 1994), Machado and Costa (1998), Costa (1999), Machado (2002), and Machado *et al.* (2003). In terms of a specifically transnational approach, Costa *et al.* (2000), and Almeida, Machado and Costa (2006), may be mentioned.

analytical instrument, recognised as such even by sociologists who are fairly critical of the limitations of what they call, in a somewhat simplified manner, “employment aggregates” (Crompton, 1998).

In its main version, the ACM typology includes five socio-occupational categories, and these are precisely the ones used in the following analysis. But it may also be broken down or aggregated into other versions, depending on the aim of the research, the sources of information available, the unit of analysis (the individual or the household), the scope of the population included (only the workforce or also other components of the population), and whether situations involving multiple employment are taken into consideration or not.³

The ACM typology may be compared to other standard models in this kind of analysis. The best known are: the G typology (Goldthorpe), also known as EGP typology (Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarrero) (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993), of which the ESeC typology, a prototype proposed by Rose and Harrison (2007) of a *European Socio-economic Classification*, is a new version; the W typology (Wright, 1997); the E-A typology (Esping-Andersen, 1993); and the French CSP (*catégories socioprofessionnelles*) typology, later PCS (*professions et catégories socioprofessionnelles*) typology (Desrosières and Thévenot, 1988).

A number of the comparative advantages of the ACM typology are the following: a) it operationalises a broad set of theoretical dimensions at the core of class analysis; b) it is receptive to a wide variety of empirical situations in present-day societies; c) it is highly compact, despite the two properties mentioned above, which thus facilitates statistical processing and helps integrated sociological analysis; d) it is compatible both with official statistical sources and with specific information gathered from sociological research; e) it allows multiple aggregation and disaggregation, depending on the aim of the research and available information; and f) it uses terminology that is easily recognisable in today’s world, seeking to avoid connotative anachronisms.⁴

2 The variable “employment status” is broken down into the three main categories of the usual institutional statistical indicators: employer, self-employed and employee. Other specific categories may also be taken into account, depending on their analytical relevance with regards to the aim of the research in question and the basic information available. For further details regarding operationalisation, see Costa (1999) and Machado *et al.* (2003).

3 The bibliography mentioned in footnote 1 includes other versions of the typology.

4 It is not possible, here, to further develop the arguments relating to the comparative advantages of the ACM typology. Some of these arguments may be found in Costa (1999), Costa *et al.* (2000), and Machado *et al.* (2003).

Transnational class clusters

Using the ACM typology and the data from the *European Social Survey* (ESS) of 2004 (Round 2), involving 22 countries, it is possible not only to describe the class composition of each country but, also, to advance research into transnational class structures.⁵

Table 1.1 presents in an integrated manner the results of various steps of the analysis. At the most disaggregated level, it presents the results relating to the structure of class locations (operationalised by means of the socio-occupational indicator) for every country. At the most aggregated level, it shows the class composition of the European universe under analysis, taken as a whole.

It is of greater interest, however, to look for similarities in the class composition among specific groups of countries. This was accomplished by means of cluster analysis. The table shows the transnational clusters encountered and the structure of class locations for each transnational cluster.⁶

Cluster 1 represents the majority group, in a certain way the European standard in terms of social structure. It includes the northern countries and various western and central European countries. Spain is part of this group. The larger class location in this cluster, turned out to be that of the professionals and managers (PM), i. e. salaried people with higher or middle-level qualifications and/or higher or middle positions of hierarchical authority in the organisations — essential actors in the dynamics of the knowledge society.

Cluster 2 is distinct from the above in that its structure of class locations shows a lower relative importance for the PM, along with a significantly higher proportion of routine employees (RE), workers with routine activities in administrative, trading and service activities. The relative weight of industrial workers (IW) is even lower than in the cluster above. This cluster includes the island countries of the North Atlantic (United Kingdom, Ireland and Iceland) and Austria.

In a certain sense, the opposite occurs with cluster 3. Here, the relative weight of the IW is clearly the highest. Both this aspect and the medium-high proportion of the PM are probably connected with the specific history of these countries, all of which are in a process of post-communist transition: the

5 The *European Social Survey* is an international survey periodically applied to representative samples of the population in each country, using questionnaires that contain a social characterisation module and various modules relating to values and representations, some fixed and others rotating.

6 A hierarchical cluster analysis was used; the most disaggregated partition before the appearance of isolated cases was selected, after its sociological interpretability was confirmed. The data were analysed by Rui Brites (professor in the Department of Quantitative Methods at the Lisbon University Institute), to whom the authors would like to express their thanks for his generous and very capable cooperation.

Table 1.1 Transnational class structures in Europe, 2004

Countries and clusters	(percentages)					
	Class locations					
	Entrepreneurs and Executives (EE)	Professionals and Managers (PM)	Self-employed (SE)	Routine Employees (RE)	Industrial Workers (IW)	Total
Norway	13.3	30.5	4.9	32.7	18.7	100.0
Denmark	14.4	30.7	2.7	32.9	19.2	100.0
Sweden	10.8	31.2	4.1	33.9	20.1	100.0
Switzerland	16.7	31.6	4.7	29.4	17.6	100.0
Luxembourg	12.3	29.5	1.9	31.8	24.4	100.0
Netherlands	16.7	37.2	2.8	30.0	13.4	100.0
Germany	16.6	29.4	3.2	26.6	24.1	100.0
Belgium	19.0	27.7	2.6	25.8	24.9	100.0
Finland	13.4	25.3	7.3	29.6	24.4	100.0
Spain	11.9	27.2	8.2	25.9	26.8	100.0
Cluster 1	14.5	30.0	4.2	29.9	21.4	100.0
Iceland	15.8	24.5	5.9	37.4	16.4	100.0
United Kingdom	18.5	19.7	5.6	38.9	17.2	100.0
Ireland	14.5	20.8	6.2	35.8	22.7	100.0
Austria	8.5	23.7	5.1	45.2	17.4	100.0
Cluster 2	14.3	22.2	5.7	39.3	18.4	100.0
Czech Republic	9.2	24.7	3.0	29.1	34.1	100.0
Slovenia	9.6	26.4	3.7	29.6	30.7	100.0
Slovakia	12.3	22.6	3.9	25.8	35.3	100.0
Estonia	11.9	23.8	2.0	24.4	38.0	100.0
Ukraine	10.7	24.5	1.0	22.4	41.4	100.0
Cluster 3	10.7	24.4	2.7	26.3	35.9	100.0
Poland	12.3	15.5	13.2	25.5	33.5	100.0
Portugal	11.7	14.1	7.8	35.5	31.0	100.0
Greece	13.0	9.4	24.2	31.9	21.4	100.0
Cluster 4	12.3	13.0	15.1	31.0	28.6	100.0
Total	13.3	25.0	5.7	30.8	25.2	100.0

Source: ESS (Round 2) 2004.

social structure still has the marks of big industrial units and widespread education.

Lastly, cluster 4 is remarkable for the presence, to a high degree, of self-employed workers (SE), namely in agriculture, and for the still comparatively limited fraction of professionals and managers (PM). Two countries from the south of Europe (Portugal and Greece) form a cluster here with Poland, probably the country with a larger agricultural sector among the former Communist countries included in this ESS round.

Moving down to a national level of analysis and comparing countries within the latter cluster, we can see, for example, that the weight of the SE is lowest in Portugal, or that the weight of the PM is lowest in Greece. Similar comparisons may be made within other clusters. This does not diminish the analysis carried out at the transnational level or reduce the sociological significance of the current transnational class structures. It merely corroborates what was said from the outset with regards to the need, nowadays, to undertake class analysis that combines national and the transnational levels.

The transnational class clusters open an analytical window of their own onto social structures, processes of structural change, their underlying factors and their effects, just as they are taking place in contemporary society; in particular, as in the case of the illustration presented here, in the European area.

Class educational assets

Class locations are one thing, *classes of agents* are another. Or rather, a deeper sociological perspective demands that these two dimensions can be analytically distinguished from each other (Costa *et al.*, 2000). Obviously, they are not two mutually independent social realities. But neither are they dimensions that can be reduced to one another, in contrast to what excessively fusional or conflationist approaches to the relationship between structure and agency would have us believe.⁷

Getting straight to the point, and notwithstanding the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that class locations are mainly structured by economic processes, whereas classes of agents are basically formed through socialisation processes.

Of course, collective action processes also have a part to play in both dimensions, whether it takes the form of institutional action or social movement. But, in a non-trivial sense, collective action always takes place against a pre-constituted social background, in this case pre-constituted in

⁷ Important theoretical criticism of these conceptions may be found, in particular, in Mouzelis (1995) and Archer (1995). The issue is also taken up in Costa (1999) and Pires (1999 and 2007).

Table 1.2 Class educational assets in Europe, 2004

Countries e clusters	(average years of education)					
	Class locations					Total
	Entrepreneurs and Executives (EE)	Professionals and Managers (PM)	Self-employed (SE)	Routine Employees (RE)	Industrial Workers (IW)	
Norway	14.2	15.8	10.7	11.9	11.4	13.3
Denmark	14.7	15.5	12.3	12.0	11.6	13.4
Sweden	12.7	14.5	10.3	11.2	10.5	12.2
Switzerland	11.6	12.0	9.4	9.8	9.4	10.7
Luxembourg	13.9	14.3	10.6	10.2	9.5	11.7
Netherlands	13.9	13.9	10.9	10.9	10.5	12.5
Germany	14.6	14.8	11.9	11.9	11.5	13.1
Belgium	13.7	14.6	11.1	11.4	10.6	12.5
Finland	13.8	15.6	9.6	11.7	10.0	12.4
Spain	13.3	15.4	8.0	11.2	8.8	11.7
Cluster 1	13.7	14.6	10.1	11.2	10.4	12.4
Iceland	13.5	15.8	10.4	12.2	11.7	13.1
United Kingdom	13.3	14.5	11.7	11.6	10.7	12.3
Ireland	14.0	15.2	10.8	12.4	11.1	12.8
Austria	13.6	14.0	10.7	11.6	10.7	12.1
Cluster 2	13.6	14.7	11.0	11.9	10.9	12.5
Czech Republic	14.1	14.0	12.0	11.8	11.2	12.4
Slovenia	11.4	11.4	12.6	11.7	11.6	11.6
Slovakia	13.9	14.1	11.5	11.3	11.1	12.2
Estonia	14.4	14.8	12.6	11.1	10.4	12.1
Ukraine	13.5	13.5	12.2	10.9	9.7	11.3
Cluster 3	13.7	13.7	12.1	11.4	10.6	12.0
Poland	13.7	14.9	9.9	11.4	10.4	11.7
Portugal	7.8	13.9	5.0	7.4	5.0	7.4
Greece	11.8	15.7	7.1	11.2	8.9	10.2
Cluster 4	11.2	14.8	7.5	9.9	8.1	9.8
Total	13.3	14.4	9.5	11.2	10.2	11.9

Source: ESS (Round 2) 2004.

a continuous manner, precisely by economic processes and socialisation processes.

By the same token, though at a more specific level, it may be said that class locations are predominantly structured, in immediate terms, by employment opportunities. The latter, in turn, result from complex processes involving the dynamics of markets and technologies, organisational and management models, corporate strategies and state policies.

The formation of classes of agents relates to quite distinct entities and dynamics, particularly, as mentioned, socialisation institutions and processes. The basic point to be stressed here is that, in the context of the knowledge society, socialisation processes tend to be decisively focused on formal education. In this context, it is crucially important to acquire highly codified and formalised knowledge, as well as the competences to use it, and to obtain certificates that formally recognise, make explicit and legitimise such knowledge and competences.

One of the reasons for the current development of international standards for certification is precisely the convergence between a dynamic of expanding qualifications (the knowledge society) and a dynamic of increasing potential for mobility (globalisation). This convergence calls for mechanisms that allow knowledge and skills to be recognised relatively rapidly and securely beyond the circles of close acquaintance.

Despite this general convergence, the matching of class locations by classes of agents does not always, or everywhere, lead to the same educational profiles of the social classes. Table 1.2 makes this quite clear.⁸

As can be seen, and as would be expected, those who occupy the PM (professionals and managers) class location possess the highest educational assets, followed by the EE (entrepreneurs and executives).

On the other hand, the class locations of the SE (self-employed), RE (routine employees) and IW (industrial workers) tend to be filled by classes of agents with distinctly lower educational assets. This does not mean that in present-day Europe members of these social classes are deprived of educational assets. On the contrary, their educational qualifications have become quite significant today.

One could also carry out a comparative analysis of the different countries, individually considered, which would also reveal additional, highly enlightening aspects. Table 1.2 enables this to take place.

But in this case it is important, above all, to illustrate the sociological potential offered by the use of other unit of analysis, the transnational class

8 The indicator used here is the number of years of school education. It is a fairly simple indicator but it has the advantage that measurement is reliable and allows comparisons. Other indicators of educational assets may lead to more discriminating and detailed analyses but, for the moment, the ESS does not permit use to be made of them in a sufficiently reliable way.

clusters, identified not in an a priori or indirect manner but as the result of research focused directly on class structures. Let us examine just two of the more prominent examples.

In cluster 3, it can be seen that the PM, which, as determined above, has an important relative weight in this cluster's class structure, nonetheless exposes a level of educational assets that are a little lower than in the other transnational class clusters.

In cluster 4, which includes Portugal, the IW, RE and SE register far lower average educational assets than their structural equivalents in the other clusters. Compared to their peers, they do not dispose of the same level of formalised knowledge, correlative skills and comparable certificates, which, in the context of the knowledge society and globalisation, places them in a particularly unfavourable and threatened position. This does not occur with the PM, the educational asset level of which is the same as in the other clusters. Apparently, this class of agents is already included at a larger extent into the dynamic of the knowledge society and globalisation than the other classes of agents in this cluster.

Despite the highly significant changes experienced by Portuguese society within the context of globalisation and the knowledge society, these types of dualisms or "incomplete modernity" (Machado and Costa, 1998) make up for one of its persistent structural features. This same structural pattern is currently shared by a wider, though not contiguous, transnational European space. In this case, it also involves Greece and Poland, but it does not extend in contiguity to Spain.

In Portugal and the other countries making up cluster 4, those occupying the class locations of routine employees (RE), industrial workers (IW) and self-employed workers (SE) possess significantly fewer educational assets on average than their counterparts in the other European clusters. The cognitive content that these classes of agents bring to their occupational activities does not correspond to their structural equivalents at a European level.

Accordingly, not only is *the proportion of more skilled activities lower* in this cluster (structural limitation of the class location of the PM) but *the skill level applied to the same activities is lower* as well, particularly in the classes of routine employees (RE), industrial workers (IW) and self-employed workers (SE).

The latter aspect has rarely been identified or taken into consideration, though the consequences are no less important. In fact, individual opportunities are not the same as those of members of the same classes in the other European clusters. Employability, mobility, pay and other basic aspects of the social conditions of a person's existence are structurally affected. At the societal level, quality and productivity in various areas of activity (private firms, public administration, social services, NGOs) are also structurally affected in cluster 4 countries as compared with those of the other transnational clusters.

To sum up, structural inequalities between classes are reinforced by structural inequalities between social contexts, characterised both in terms of class location structures and classes of agents formation (particularly their education and qualifications). These inequalities in turn impact on both individual opportunities and societal potentiality.

An additional note: though not developing the national level of analysis exhaustively here, we must highlight the low level of educational qualifications amongst the majority of social categories in Portugal, even when they are only compared with the other countries in the same cluster (table 1.2). If the difference is not particularly significant among the PM, the same cannot be said of RE, IW and SE workers. Moreover, the educational levels of the Portuguese EE are also very obviously lower. This is due to the weight that small and medium-size entrepreneurs have in this category and the low educational qualifications that most of them traditionally possess in the country, a structural feature that has also had highly significant consequences, in particular the difficulties in modernising the economic fabric within the context of the transition to the knowledge society.

Conclusion

This sociological analysis of the social structures in the present European area, carried out on the basis of the results of the European Social Survey, reveals a social make up whereby the lower-level salary/wage-earning classes - the industrial workers and routine employees - make up around 56% of the labour force, the self-employed workers make up less than 6%, the middle-class of salaried professionals and managers represents a quarter of the working population (25%) and the remaining class with larger assets, in the heterogeneity of its segments (entrepreneurs, top executives and self-employed professionals), amounts to around 13%.

Although the RE and IW share the status of lower-level salary/wage-earners and have many similarities in their personal relations and their daily lives, they possess very distinct structural characteristics. Examples of these differences are to be found in the content and contexts of their work, in the importance gained by the RE in the social structure in recent decades, while that of the IW has diminished, or, additionally, in the fact that the class locations of the RE are largely taken up by women whereas those of the IW are still mainly taken up by men.

Also worthy of note is the fact that the PM have become increasingly present in the social structure, which is particularly significant from the viewpoint of an analysis of social structures within the context of the knowledge society. Equally important, given the growing importance of knowledge in our societies, is the recognition of the considerable levels of educational assets attained by the different classes of agents occupying today's European social structure.

But this characterisation of the whole, with its own analytical relevance, could run the risk of presenting not much more than an arithmetic operation, that is the sum total of national data, coming down to a national average without great sociological meaning. By the same token, country-by-country analysis and international comparisons carried out one by one, though certainly useful, are also insufficient. Here there is a risk of not taking into account the social structuring processes at the transnational level, which everything indicates are actually taking place.

Can class analysis be provided with procedures that help to advance sociological knowledge of these transnational structures and the processes of change through which they are passing, with the importance that those structures and processes possess in the contemporary context of globalisation? The sociological work presented here offers positive indications in this direction, in particular through the development of the concept of *transnational class clusters* and the research results obtained for the European area.

Furthermore, can the sociology of classes provide an enlightened contribution to the analysis of social structures and the processes of social change in the context of the knowledge society? Here, the answer also seems to be positive. The concept of *class educational assets* and the substantive analytical results achieved in this domain also allow for certain advances: they clarify the differences and relationships between class locations and classes of agents; they show that agents occupying the same structural locations may possess significantly disparate educational assets in different countries or transnational clusters (which gives rise to a very important consequences); and they also clearly show from a new angle the crucial importance of formal education and certified knowledge and skills in the knowledge society.

Class structures have undergone very far-reaching changes as a result of the contemporary dynamics of globalisation and the knowledge society (Giddens, 2007). In relation to the various aspects of this transformation, examined above, the importance has been clearly established of developing, today, sociological analyses that combine national and transnational levels, rather than set them against each other as if they were mutually exclusive.

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