



LIFE CHANCES AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

HANS-PETER MÜLLER
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Germany)
hpmueller@sowi.hu-berlin.de

Abstract: The article delves into the historical trajectory of global inequality, tracing the transition from an era of relative equality to the emergence of profound disparities following the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the West. It scrutinizes the Eurocentric narrative of progress, emphasizing the pivotal role of scientific advancements, technological innovations, and capitalist expansion in shaping the Western ascendancy. Furthermore, it explores the concept of life chances as a lens through which to analyse structural inequality and the distribution of resources among individuals. The discourse extends to the revaluation of values in the context of sustainability, advocating for a shift towards a more sustainable and equitable societal framework. The paper underscores the enduring challenges posed by durable inequality and the allure of the Western lifestyle to less privileged regions. Through a multidisciplinary lens encompassing historical, sociological, and ecological perspectives, it offers insights into the complexities of global development, social stratification, and the quest for a more just and sustainable world order.

Keywords: inequality, progress, eurocentrism, life chances, sustainability.

ISSN 2283-7949
GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION
DOI: 10.54103/gjcp.2024.22749



Some rights reserved

INTRODUCTION

Wem genug zu wenig ist, dem ist nichts genug!
 For whom enough is not enough, nothing is enough!
 (Epikur)

Once upon the time in the West – Sergio Leone’s (1968) famous Western movie – expresses in an all too apt phrase what has happened with life chances and their distribution in world history. In fact, modernization brought about a disjunction of life chances in favor of the West and to the detriment of the rest. Life chances is a crucial concept to characterize constellations of structural inequality which is why we have chosen it for the Lake Como School¹. In order to present a genuine conceptualization, we take three steps. First, the concept is embedded into a wider horizon: The West and the narrative of progress. Secondly, we’ll turn to Max Weber who invented the notion of life chances and in the footsteps of him, an attempt will be made to provide an analytical frame of reference for the study of social inequality. Finally, and third, we will apply this term to problems of socio-ecological life chances. Here, we will encounter a watershed in thinking. For the West and thanks to globalization (Held et al. 1999) for most of the rest of the world this revolution comes down to what Friedrich Nietzsche called the “Umwertung der Werte” – the revaluation of values, in fact, a conversion of values. Most of the life chances follow the inner logic of “more”. More is better than less: better rich than poor, better be healthy than sick, better be educated than not, better be happy than sad. Here, in the realm of socio-ecological life chances, the logic is exactly the other way round. “Less” is better because it means a smaller ecological footprint, less pollution and a more sustainable style of life. In the Anthropocene, we have to find new models of thinking and acting more in line with the ecological capacity of mother Earth, in short: a sustainable style of life. Otherwise, climate change will be irreversible and might cause unforeseen catastrophic events of all kind in the future.

My reflections, then, are guided by two theses, paradoxical in nature. First, the equality-inequality paradox: the Great Transformation inaugurates an era of great inequality, but at the same time a discourse on radical equality begins. This is the first “Revaluation of values” (“Umwertung der Werte”, Nietzsche): from inequality to equality. The tension between the value of equality (culture) and the experience of inequality (structure) has accompanied us since then to the present day. The paradox: huge inequality collides with radical equality (human rights). This is the culture-structure clash! Second, the quantity-quality paradox: the materialistic culture of eternal growth clashes



with the limited nature of the earth. The “more and more” (quantity) is confronted with “less is more” (quality). This is the second “revaluation of values” (“Umwertung der Werte”, Nietzsche): from the quantity of more to the quality of less. In fact, the increasing wealth destroys disproportionately the natural foundations of life on earth. Quantity undermines the quality of life in the long run.

So, let us move on to our three steps: *a*) The West and the Narrative of Progress (1500-2020s); *b*) Life Chances: An Analytical Frame of Reference; *c*) The Revaluation of Values: Socio-ecological Life Chances – followed by a short conclusion.

THE WEST AND THE NARRATIVE OF PROGRESS (1500-2020s)

In the beginning the world was equal. Why? The world was equally poor in modern terms. This is a first lesson to be learnt. Equality of all and for all is easier to produce if everyone is rather poor than if there are tremendous riches to be distributed. With the production of great wealth, the era of inequality began. The economic historian, Angus Maddison (2001), showed that the world was pretty equal until 1500. But afterwards set in what has become known as the Great Transformation (Polanyi [1944] 1995; Dörre et al. 2019). Starting in the Renaissance, some historians even mention the technological revolution of the late Middle Ages (Gimpel 1980), the enlightenment and the scientific revolution of the 1700s prepared the Industrial Revolution which began around 1750 in England. The rise of the West (McNeill 1991) was made possible by four interconnected features of development: scientific discoveries, technological applications and capitalist utilization in combination with military expansion. This was the blueprint for “progress” (Alexander, Sztompka 1990) and paved the way for the European miracle (Jones [1991] 2003). Modernity (Bauman 1992; Habermas 1985; Mongardini, Maniscalco 1989; Schwinn 2006; Wagner 2008) set in and paved the way for global modernization processes (van der Loo, van Reijen 1992). The result today is that live in times of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2002). Yet, against this Eurocentric narrative of the progressive West, post colonialism (Amin 1988; Blaut 1993; Bhambra 2007) set a strong and strict antidote pointing to the achievements of non-Western cultures.

Yet, a methodical Eurocentrism (Müller 2020; 2022) like the one by Weber does not imply that other regions of the world did not make all kinds of scientific discoveries. Quite to the contrary. Take the example of China which according to many historians but also for Max



Weber (1972b) would have been apt for a great transformation. Joseph Needham et al. (1960: 6) for instance, pointed out that Su Song had already a clock in the 11th century. But the official Chinese astronomy was top secret. Subsequently, after various power changes the clock was lost and with it the art of watchmaking. When the Jesuit Matteo Ricci was summoned to the Beijing Court in 1600 to demonstrate the mechanical clockwork invented by Giovanni de Dondi, he met “no one who could have explained Chinese mathematics, astronomy or other sciences to the Jesuit missionaries”. Knowledge can be lost or even destroyed as a second example demonstrates. Gunpowder was invented in China, but there it was used for elementary weaponry and primarily as “firework”. In the West, it was able to revolutionize military technology and initiate the colonial and imperial conquest of the world. Jared Diamond (1992) called his bestselling book *Guns, Germs and Steel* to explain the distinction between rich and poor parts of the world. His book-title contains already the major answer to this puzzle. A superior metal processing and better weapon technologies in combination with the resistance against pathogenic microbes due to their intense inner-Eurasian migration finally led in the contact with other cultures which did not have this evolutionary equipment to deadly superiority. Other researchers followed Max Weber (1972a; 1923; 1927) and discussed the superior institutions of the West and their rationalism (Landes 1998; Mokyr 1990; North, Thomas 1973) which, taken together, formed the invincible superiority of the West. What followed was the European expansion and the subjugation of the world (Reinhard 2016). Since 1500 the West experienced its take-off and the modern world-system (Wallerstein 1974) of capitalism was formed.

In its wake, 500 years of economic, political, social and cultural development caused the great divergence (Pomeranz 2000) between different parts of the world. What began with basic equality in human history, culminated in an era of entrenched global inequality in the 2020s (Piketty 2014; Milanovic 2016).

LIFE CHANCES: AN ANALYTICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

Interestingly enough and almost a paradox, it was in the midst of the great transformation and the rapid growth of inequality that a discourse on radical equality in the West began. Long prepared by Christianity, Renaissance and the age of Humanism, but at the latest since Rousseau’s (1778) “discovery” of the natural equality of all human beings in his famous *Discourse on inequality among men* (1755), since



the French Revolution of 1789 and its values of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”, and since the promise of an egalitarian society by Marx and Engels in their “Communist Manifesto” ([1848] 1998), the program of equality has been on the agenda. With it, a millennia-old culture of inequality was irreversibly coming to a final end. The fact that human beings are different and, therefore, unequal by nature and should therefore be treated differently and unequally was considered the basic law of human coexistence from Antiquity to the end of the *ancien régime*. Inequality among human beings was normal, equality of all would have been regarded as a bizarre monstrosity, indeed an irritating pathology. The echoes of this traditional view of an aristocracy by nature can still be found in Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1988) philosophy and the distinction of master morality and herd morality. Democracy and equality, according to Nietzsche, have led to the exclusive domination of a herd morality.

But the modern view should prevail in the long run. After this first “Umwertung der Werte” to use Nietzsche’s term, the revaluation of values, the modern principle applied: all people are equal, deserve equal rights, an appropriate level of care, and equal treatment. This has become the normative ideal ever since. But ideals are ideals and not social reality. As Émile Durkheim lucidly observed: “D’ailleurs, un idéal pur est irréalisable, précisément par ce qu’il ne tient pas compte des nécessités du réel”. (Durkheim [1899] 1975: 434) The reality, in the form of a hierarchical “class society” that emerged in the course of industrialization and the institutionalization of capitalism became the epitome of unfreedom, inequality, and unbrotherliness. It was and is still seen as an expression of oppression, exploitation and alienation. The modern world opens up an enormous gap between the structure of social inequality, i.e. what is the social reality and the overwhelming culture of social equality, i.e. what should be the ideal. In short, then: Under modernity, the *Is* and the *Ought* are moving further and further apart. The rift between structure and culture, the gap between reality and ideal becomes chronic and an insatiable source of uneasiness. Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* or in German: “The uneasiness of culture” expresses this dissatisfaction of the gap between structure and culture ([1930] 2002).

It is no wonder that sociology should make the problem of social inequality the key question of the discipline in order to analyze this discrepancy between equality as a value and inequality as social experience. Consequently, this key question of the study of social inequality (Müller, Schmid 2003) has always been: “Who gets what, how and why?” Let us look more closely at the who, what, how and why.

The *Who* points to actors and groups like castes, estates, classes, elites, social strata and social milieus that form the unit of inequality analysis.

The *What* revolves around the key life chances that are distributed. And we will turn to the concept of life chances more closely later on. Here, distribution runs along value attributions. “Social inequalities” arise whenever social differences are valued as better or worse. In this way, difference or heterogeneity is transformed into inequality (Blau 1977). In the German language we have the fine distinction between “Ungleichartigkeit” which is heterogeneity and “Ungleichwertigkeit” (Dahrendorf 1974) which is inequality proper. Inequality is valued difference. But not every difference is inequality. Take diversity for instance, a value in high regard today. Diversity celebrates cultural differences as enrichment of a multicultural society. Yet, as soon as some cultural differences are regarded as better, higher, purer or more native, indigenous etc. social inequality enters the agenda. With regard to the color line, for example, take the struggle between “white supremacy” or “black is beautiful”, both offensive or defensive, derogatory or benevolent “racisms”. In this respect, social inequalities always result from the distribution of goods and resources that are considered valuable and therefore desirable to the members of a society. Valuable is what is scarce, cannot be increased at will and is fiercely contested due to irreducible demand, such as gold or money or position and status goods. In human history, social conflicts have regularly revolved around the technical-economic, the political-military and cultural-religious resources that create inequality. In other words, mainly over material wealth in various forms (land, live-stock, financial assets); over power and rule, including the means of violence needed to stabilize and enforce them; over education and knowledge; and over honor and prestige in the form of reputation and recognition. Possession or non-possession of these resources determines better or worse position, higher or lower position, privilege or disadvantage. Weber talks about positively and negatively privileged positions.

The *How* aims at the process of distribution itself, at its course and design. What is above all of interest are the mechanisms behind it. In sociology, there is a whole analytical school (Hedström, Swedberg 1998) that studies the mechanisms of association. Here one can distinguish a micro from a macro aspect. In the first case, it is a matter of how actors arrive at specific social positions. These processes are studied with the concept of social mobility. In the other case, the theoretical interest focuses on institutions and their contribution to the production and reproduction of distributive structures and the related effects of and on social inequality. While the “micro-how” focuses on actors and



their performance, occupational and career success, the “macro-how” refers to the institutional arrangement of society. If the first case is on individuals, the second case is about institutions.

Finally, the *Why* addresses the theoretical approaches in sociology that explore the causes and mechanisms that help explain the emergence, stabilization and change of distributional and inequality processes.

Karl Marx and Max Weber provide a theoretical foundation for this important subject of sociology. Marx establishes and Weber modifies in a decisive way what was later to be called the “paradigm of structured social inequality” (Müller 1997). It outlines a research program in social theory and covers the central fields of social analysis. It comprises five principles: first, the structural principle which gives society its shape, i.e. its social and class character. Second, the principle of group formation according to which classes with similar interests are formed from unequal social positions of people. Third, the principle of conflict because the unequal power and disposal over scarce resources draw the central lines of conflict in a society. Conflict is above all class conflict. In the last instance, at least, as Marx used to put it. Fourth, the principle of behavior which emphasizes that groups and classes are characterized by similar behavior – from political behavior to consumption, leisure and lifestyle. Fifth, the principle of development because the conflict dynamics associated with social inequality and classes say a lot about the course and direction of social change (Müller, Schmid 1995).

Born from the historical experience, the strain between the value of equality and the reality of inequality, sociology finds its very own subject with this catalogue of principles: the paradigm of structured social inequality (PSSI). The analysis of inequality forms the heart of the analysis of society and this until today. If you look at Andreas Reckwitz’s (2017) recent book *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten* (“The society of singularities”), for example, it is also a class analysis despite its individualistic title. Reckwitz shows that the principle of singularism permeates the upper-, middle- and underclass, yet each in its own way.

Even though Weber follows in the footsteps of Karl Marx, the deficient foundation of Marxian theory forces him to make considerable changes. Thus, Weber not only distinguishes between “class” and “status” but tries to present a much broader analysis of inequality with the concept of life chances. For they beckon not only in the economy but in all social spheres of life. Life chances are lying dormant everywhere.

As mentioned at the outset, Weber invented the term, but he never defined it in a proper way. He used it to study the social and

class structure on the one hand, the institutional spheres of society on the other hand.

In order to be more precise, we have to distinguish between the colloquial and the scientific meaning of the term. Life chance is an intrinsically positive notion in everyday parlance. The link between ‘life’ and ‘chance’ in the sense of opportunity sounds promising for a bright future. No surprise, then, that politicians and managers boast to improve the life chances of the people. Who would not want to have more life chances rather than less? And plenty of life chances is almost a definition of wealth. The more you have, the better you are off.

This colloquial rhetoric of life chances for a promising future has to be distinguished from the analytical mode of use. In order to throw more light on this notion let us dismantle the concept. ‘Life’ is an extremely broad category. In sum and pragmatically put, it comprises everything that is important, valuable and meaningful to human beings. ‘Chance’ means two things: statistically, it denotes the probability with which something is the case. “Tomorrow, it will be raining or not” comes along with a chance of 50 to 50 for rain or no rain. Socially, it circumscribes an opportunity or possibility. What unites both aspects is the pressure to realize. Probability has to be translated into reality. An opportunity must be seized and a possibility must be used. Sociologically relevant is the localization of life chances between individual and society. As Ralf Dahrendorf (1979: 49) put it: “Life chances are not attributes of individuals. Individuals have life chances in their social existence; their life chances can make or break them; but their lives are a response to those chances”.

Origin and meaning of ‘life chances’ has much to do with the character of German sociology. From the beginning sociology was considered as a science of life (Röcke, Sello 2021). Neither “society” nor “civilization” as in French sociology, but rather “life” and “culture” (Lichtblau 1996) were in the center of the sociological analyses of Georg Simmel and Max Weber. This predominant interest in the forms of life is expressed by the major concepts of classical German sociology: life chance, position in life (“Lebenslage”), means of life (“Lebensmittel” or food, a term by Marx) life regulation, form of life, life style, conduct of life to name but the most important Weberian concepts. It almost seems as if the German sociology of culture at least wants to contrast the fragmentation of modernity with the unity of life as an analytical and normative point of view. The relationship of the burgeoning philosophy of life in the wake of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson, however, is ambivalent. While Georg Simmel ([1918] 1999) approaches his late work as a philosophy of life, as his last book *Lebensanschauung* (“The View of Life”) makes clear, Weber rejects the philosophy of life as Romanticism as well as the



Neo-Kantian philosophies of values à la Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, which seek to convey a “Weltanschauung” (world-view). For Weber, life chance is a purely technical concept, multiply applicable and in his eyes as an economist and sociologist much better suited than the concepts of classical political economy like happiness, benefit and welfare. If one were to look for analogies, one would have probably to mention the concept of resource in contemporary economics (Samuelson, Nordhaus 2022) or the concept of capital in a sociology based on Bourdieu (1979; Müller 2014). And yet Weber’s concept is much more general because, to repeat this important insight, opportunities beckon not only in the economy, but in all areas of social life. Precisely because modern life means diversity, but also struggle, life chances are diverse and contested.

Without a definition while using it broadly, Weber did not propose a classification of life chances let alone a system of life chances. But there are always three analytical features that distinguish each life chance as such. These are structure, struggle, differential appropriation. Let us go through them in order.

a) Structure: The social structure of a society determines the nature, extent and allocation of a life chance. The nature of a life chance is decided by social context and social situation. The extent results from the state of social struggles and the respective legislative regulation of life chances as appropriation chances. The allocation is mostly a consequence of distribution decisions.

b) Struggle: Politicians and managers preach that life chances are there for everyone and by this egalitarian appeal they plead for equality. This sounds good and reminds the citizens of a society that “all men are created equal”. In some instances, this indeed holds true in a democracy. Citizenship rights are distributed equally in a population as T.H. Marshall (1950) showed. Civil rights comprise the rights of freedom and the equality before the law. Political rights entail universal suffrage and the right to participate in political processes. Social rights guarantee a modicum of social welfare. And Talcott Parsons (1977) adds a fourth right, namely cultural rights, i.e. the right to education and the provision of equal opportunities. “Bildung” or formation has become the major yardstick for social mobility but the competition is not just hard but unfair since there is no such thing as equality of opportunity (Müller, Reitz 2015). Yet upon this solid rock of the equality of citizenship rights the world of structured inequality comes into being. The chance for mass consumption, though only to a limited extent, hedges the illusion of equal life chances. Mostly, however, this appeal of politicians and managers to create life chances for all belongs to the category of illusory performance and probation rhetoric.

As a general rule, life chances are scarce. This is particularly true for the so-called “primary goods” (Rawls 1971). Primary goods do not know any limits of saturation which the marginal utility principle of economics generally assumes. “Health is not everything; but without health everything is nothing!” This law of primary goods was discovered by the chronically sick philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Instead of health one could now use all kinds of primary goods from which people do not want to be excluded in order to understand the mechanism of scarce life opportunities: Peace, freedom, money, equality, education, power, love, prestige, fame, recognition, happiness etc. All these goods follow the logic of “more is better”. One simply cannot get enough of them. There is always room for a little bit more. Basic goods represent infinity and unceasingness whereas life is finite and limited. In addition, life chances are often strongly narrowed upwards by the hierarchy of positions in the social structure. Fred Hirsch (1976) has described this phenomenon with the apt term of “positional goods”. There is only one Pope, one American President, a limited number of lakefront properties, only one top floor with a roof terrace in a New York skyscraper etc. If one does not want to let lot or lottery rule, competition and conflict, in any case, however, the fight and a tough struggle for the life chances will be the result.

c) *Differential Appropriation*: As a rule, the differential appropriation follows Matthew’s principle: “To him who has, it will be given!” (Matthew 25, 29). Georg Simmel ([1900] 1989) called this disproportionate accumulation principle the “superadditum of wealth” in his *Philosophy of Money*. The rich not only enjoy their wealth, but beyond that prestige, recognition and adoration. In addition, further life chances and options are served to them on a silver platter. All people want to please them. Rich people are “choosy” and are pleasantly spoiled for choice. If there is a god-like position in today’s society, it is occupied by the super-rich (Rothkopf 2008) and they exert amazing political power (Hägel 2020) beyond the democratic horizon.

If structure, struggle and differential appropriation constitute the typical characteristics of life chances, it also becomes clear that in capitalist, differentiated and rationalized societies (Schimank 2009) there are many life chance arenas. Following Weber, we can distinguish five major arenas: The economy, education, domination, law and religion as well as class and estates. The economy is the beacon of economic life chances. In his complex and complicated chapter on “The basic sociological categories of economic activity” in *Economy and Society* Weber pours out a plethora of quite different economic opportunities, which Dahrendorf (1979: 194), completely puzzled, calls a “salad of chances”. Weber distinguishes market chances, exchange chances, price chances, provision chances, pension chances and also in general



“Leistungsverwertungschancen” or chances for the utilization of performance and chances for the formation of capital. Already at first sight one can recognize that these economic chances do not lie on one level. Market, exchange and price chances result from the institutional constellation of a market economy. Employment, provision and pension chances belong to the category of life chances which have specific types of actors like employees, pensioners and retirees. Of particular importance for Weber are the chances for capital formation. He can show that this opportunity in Antiquity and the Middle Ages were poor. The exception from the rule that rational capitalism is a modern achievement were the upper Italian city-states which were able to accomplish capital formation from long-distance trade opportunities.

The education sector in modern societies provides the most important chances for the valorization of performance (“Leistungsverwertungschancen” is virtually untranslatable). But in contrast to the ideology of the OECD that everybody should study today Weber was fully aware that the university is an aristocratic institution of the intellect. As Weber (1972b: 568) quite frankly stated in his sociology of religion: “Barriers of education and taste are the most internal and insurmountable of all class differences”. Bourdieu (1979) gave an empirical demonstration of Weber’s thesis yet times have changed. The University has long since become an institution of socialization less education. University life pertains more to the conduct of young life than to a life chance. It resembles a prolonged period of adolescence. Yet, inequalities in access and success persist (Keil 2020; Mackert, Müller 2007).

Domination is the sphere of state and politics. Because here leadership chances beckon, i.e. chances of rule, power and influence. Weber develops an entire sociology of domination which relies on organization (“bureaucracy”) and legitimacy (the acceptability of domination). The modern state has become a powerful second distribution agency after the market.

Law is the crucial sphere of rules and regulations. Legal rules enable or restrict life chances of persons and groups. Weber (1972a: 23) distinguishes between open and closed social relations and defines: “If the participants expect from their propagation an improvement of their own opportunities by measure, kind, security or value, they are interested in openness, if vice versa in their monopolization, they are interested in closure to the outside”. Closure theory (Mackert 2004; Murphy 1988; Parkin 1979) has become an interesting approach to determine the character of social relationships. Take as an example migration: If a country is into multiculturalism and eager to fill the vacancies of its labor market, it pleads for open borders like Germany. If a country is more into nationalism and national unity, it is strictly

for closed borders like Poland or Hungary. Since life chances are always contested, actors may develop an interest in limiting the circle of competitors in such a way as to mitigate or even shut down competition. Law is a powerful lever for closing social relations. That is why Weber says: “Appropriated chances shall be called ‘rights’”.

Religion is another major area of life where the struggle over life chances takes place. This applies to God and the gods on the one hand, to the believers on the other hand. Thus Weber (1972a: 255, my translation) speaks of “the chances of a god to conquer for himself the primacy or, finally, the monopoly of divinity”. This implies the transition from polytheism (many gods) to monotheism (one God with a capital G) as accomplished by the world religions of Judaism, Islam and – with limitations – Christianity. This supremacy chance of the monotheistic God is contrasted with the interests of salvation and redemption by the believers. Based upon the paths and goals of salvation Weber has built a complex sociology of religion which corresponds to a political economy of salvation. Relevant in terms of structural inequality is the distinction between religious virtuosos and religious laymen which points to a relationship of elites and masses. Thanks to his religious knowledge and a conduct of life in accordance with religious observances, the religious virtuoso stands high above the layman who is completely dependent on religious care. In sum, then, it can be stated that the life chance for salvation and redemption quite decisively influences the believer’s conduct of life. Without an appropriate conduct of life, no religious life chance as long as not secularization and disenchantment of the religious world has set in.

As the brief outline of the institutions that offer life chances has shown, Weber used this term in all spheres of value and orders of life. If one wants to find a common denominator despite this broad usage, the following conclusion could be drawn: Weber tries to measure the opportunity potential of the social and class structure as well as of the institutional order via the plural structuring of life chances. The background is the overly simplistic model of Marx which Weber wants to counter with a complex model of class formation. At the same time, the plenitude of life chances reveals the multiple sources of social inequalities. This could be called the aspect of differentiation. But beyond that, he is also interested in the cumulative condensation of life chances, what might be called the aspect of concentration. This is because Weber seeks to allocate the relevant life chances to status groups in order to determine their styles of life. Life chances, the structural dimension, and life styles, the cultural dimension, taken together, make up the conduct of life of persons and groups.

From time to time, sociology has taken up the concept of life chance but mostly without analytical clarification. Anthony Giddens’

(1973) and Pierre Bourdieu's (1979) class theories may be considered as an exception to this rule. For Giddens, life chance is an important element of class structuration. Yet Bourdieu has replaced life chance with the concept of capital, but at the cost of lower analytical power. In German sociology, life chance has been used to show where the middle class is drifting (Mau 2012). Another laudable exception is Ralf Dahrendorf (1979: 55) who elaborated the term. He distinguishes not only options ("chances") but also ligatures ("social ties"). In this conceptualization, life chances are "opportunities for individual action that result from the interrelation of options and ligatures". Following the three welfare chances of Adam Smith ([1776] 1974) who distinguishes between subsistence, comfort and luxury, Dahrendorf suggests the differentiation between survival chances, good living and high living. One could use this tripartition to distinguish between the underclass struggling for survival, the middle class striving for good living and the upper class enjoying high life.

THE REEVALUATION OF VALUES: SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL LIFE CHANCES

Undoubtedly, as our reflection on Weber's concept showed, life chances provide the means to lead one's life. Insofar it is not only a "positive term" but follows the logic of "more is better". The more life chances you have, the better your life. Economics in combination with statistics provides the yardstick for the quantitative measurement of our welfare. It seems as if we live in a "metric society" (Mau 2019). From the key figure, the GDP, the gross domestic product, to the quality of life, we dispose of elaborated quantitative data telling us how we fare. Up to now, at least in the West, we assumed quite naturally that higher quantities translate into a better quality of life. Make as much money as you can, since money buys everything as Weber (1972a) already observed. Money is the means for extravagant consumption and a luxurious life style. Finally, wealth is the trigger to top places in the global status order and the chance to enjoy what Georg Simmel ([1900] 1989) called the "superadditum of riches". This Western model has left its impact on all parts of the world that are on a modernization trip. Brazil, Russia, India, China, the so-called BRIC-states, follow in the footsteps of the West. Other parts and regions in the world would probably like to follow suit if they only would be able to do so. Yet, the migration routes – "Go West, young man!" as Horace Greeley already recommended in mid-nineteenth century – speak a clear language. The direction of *Exodus* (Collier 2013) is one way



and clear enough: in contemporary parlance, the migration routes go from the global South to the global North.

Yet, since more than fifty years ago, the Club of Rome (Meadows et al. 1972) warned against “The Limits to Growth”. Eternal growth as the road to paradise on earth, the promise of capitalist market societies, might have seemed attractive to the underdeveloped parts of the world eager to modernize. But exponential growth on par with constant demographic growth was and is a logical as well as empirical impossibility. At that time in 1972, the global population was 3,7 billion. Today, the world inhabits over 8 billion and neither an end to demographic growth nor serious demographic restrictions are in sight. Who would be able to oblige Nigeria, for instance, to a strict birth control because without it the country will have grown larger by 2050 than rapidly ageing and shrinking China. The Club of Rome recommended voluntarily set limits to growth – economic and demographic because every new born human being produces an ecological footprint. Resources are limited and the ecological capacity of the earth is limited. What is needed, therefore, recommended the Club of Rome, is a demographic balance between births and deaths and not an uncontrolled growth of the world population we have envisaged ever since then.

These serious restrictions make socio-ecological life chances more than clear. In fact, given the ecological crisis, socio-ecological lifestyles seem to be the only way out of our demographic and economic trap. This type of life chance follows a completely different logic. Not “more is better” but “less is better”: less water and energy consumption, less mobility, less pollution and less weather catastrophes. Climate change and the warming up of the world have dramatically demonstrated that the Western model for the entire world is not viable. Technology promises more human capability, science new insights, capitalism ever more goods and services. But what for? And why?

Socio-ecological life chances embody a revaluation of values in the Nietzschean sense. It alters the term “life chance” from quantity to quality. “Less is more” – this logic has to be spelled out in every detail and should be studied seriously on all fronts for creating a “society of sustainability” (Neckel et al. 2018; Giaccardi, Magatti 2022; Lenz, Hasenfratz 2021). What is needed in the midst of a “crisis conundrum” (Magatti 2017), is new social theory in the Anthropocene (Adloff, Neckel 2020). Maybe it is time to learn from Africa combining demographic growth with an almost sustainable lifestyle. This continent inhabits 1.3 billion people but is responsible for just 12% of global carbon emission. Africa is a role-model which might be worthwhile to study in order to learn what might become durable practices in other parts of the world. It is time to conclude.

CONCLUSION

Life chances are the coins necessary to lead one's life. Without such coins, life is a drag. Poverty, depression and despair follow in its wake. Amartya Sen's (1985; Sen, Nussbaum 1993) capability approach circumscribes the attempt to define the baseline for a decent living. One of the biggest problems today is not just overpopulation although one cannot imagine how the earth will be able to host 10 to 12 billion people at century's end. It is not necessarily climate change *per se* since technological development and climate policies might be able to tame the largest increases in temperature at least. The biggest problem is the structural inequality of the world in what Charles Tilly (1998) named "Durable inequality". Structural inequalities are durable inequality hard or almost impossible to change. The world is much too highly unequal without a feasible balance. Furthermore, and unfortunately, the Western style of life has become a role model for the rest of the world. Growing rich and having an abundance of life chances is what many people in poor regions of the world still dream of and, rightly so, since it seems to show the way out of their misery. They watch Western movies, see the wealth and the easygoing of its inhabitants. And they want to become and to be part of this affluent world. The causes of large-scale migration are, of course, multifold: war, political persecution and territorial devastation. But to a large degree, migration particularly by young, basically educated men is fed by the search for better life chances. This should not come as a surprise given the degree of global structured inequality.

The overriding topic of our joint undertaking are alternative visions for the world. Unfortunately, sociologists are not too good in vision making (Erikson 1997; Wright 2010). But what we have to come to grips with is how a sustainable life style for all might become possible. And second, what the West can do to make this happen without pretending to tell the rest of the world condescendingly what they would have to do. At least, this lesson should have been learnt about the failure of modernization policies (Knöbl 2001) since the late 50ies of the 20th century. The two paradoxes, as noted at the outset, might be instructive. The first one, that as global inequality sets in to widen, Europe starts a discussion of equality as a human right. The second one that the West might have to learn from regions in the world, densely populated but negligible in terms of the ecological footprint, as a new challenge. Key here are not prohibition and pronouncement (Lepenes 2022) although it might not go without. But the question must be raised: "How much is enough?" (Skidelski, Skidelski 2012) in order to relate economy and society again to the good life. But it might become an almost aristocratic habitus and attitude to



choose freely to say no to the mostly superfluous goodies of the Western style of life. Maybe it is time to remember good old Bartleby (Haus Bartleby 2015): “I would prefer not to”. The “not to” refers to mass consumption, exaggerated mobility and a big ecological footprint as proof of one’s own high social status and importance. Not: “Free to choose” (Friedman, Friedman 1980) but “Free to do without”. This could become the slogan for sustainable living. Or simply and even shorter: “less is more”.

NOTES

¹ This paper was presented at the Lake Como Summer School “Life Chances in an (Un)Sustainable World. Structural Transformations and Alternative Socio-cultural Visions”, May 12-16, 2023.



APPENDIX

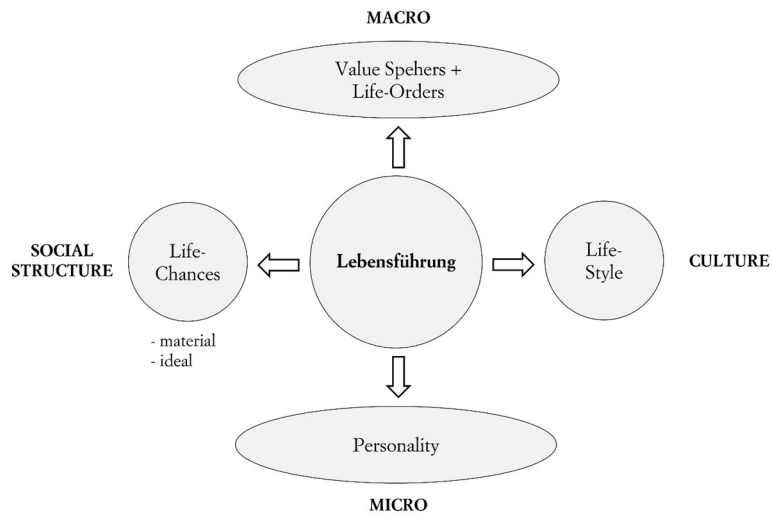


Fig. 1. Scheme of "Life" – Concepts.

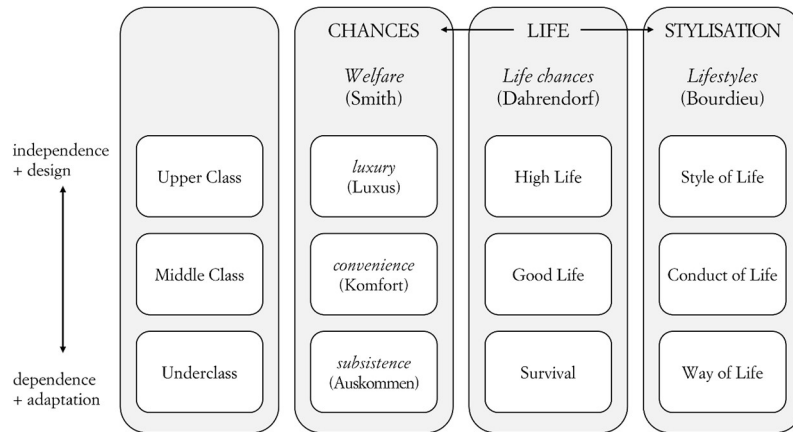


Fig. 2. Scheme Class and Lebensführung/COL.

REFERENCES

- D. Acemoglu, J. Robinson (2012), *Why Nations Fail. The Origins of Powers, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Crown Publishers).
- F. Adloff, S. Neckel (eds.) (2020), *Gesellschaftstheorie im Anthropozän* (Frankfurt a.M.-New York: Campus).
- J.C. Alexander, P. Sztompka (eds.) (1990), *Rethinking Progress. Movements, Forces, and Ideas at the End of the Twentieth Century* (London-New York: Routledge).
- S. Amin (1988), *L'Eurocentrisme. Critique d'une idéologie* (Paris: Anhropos/Economica).
- G.K. Bhambra (2007), *Rethinking Modernity. Postcolonialism and the sociological Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- P.M. Blau (1977), *Inequality and Heterogeneity. A Primitive Theory of Social Structure* (New York: The Free Press).
- J.M. Blaut (1993), *The Colonizer's Model of the World. Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press).
- P. Bourdieu (1979), *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Minuit).
- P. Collier (2013), *Exodus. Immigration and Multiculturalism in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- R. Dahrendorf (1974), *Über die Ungleichheit unter den Menschen*, in R. Dahrendorf, *Pfade aus Utopia. Zur Theorie und Methode der Soziologie* (München: Piper), pp. 352-379.
- R. Dahrendorf (1979), *Lebenschancen. Anläufe zur politischen und sozialen Theorie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- K. Dörre et al. (eds.) (2019), *Große Transformation? Zur Zukunft moderner Gesellschaften. Sonderband des „Berliner Journal für Soziologie“* (Wiesbaden: Springer).
- É. Durkheim ([1899] 1975), *Merlino, S. Formes et essences du socialisme avec une préface de G. Sorel*, in V. Karady (ed.), *Textes* (Paris: Minuit), pp. 163-172.
- S.N. Eisenstadt (ed.) (2002), *Multiple Modernities* (New York: Routledge).
- K. Erikson (1997), *Sociological Visions* (Lanham-New York-Boulder-Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield).
- S. Freud ([1930] 2002), *Civilization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin).
- M. Friedman, R.D. Friedman (1980), *Free to choose. A Personal Statement* (London-New York: Harcourt).
- C. Giaccardi, M. Magatti (2022), *Supersocietà. Ha ancora senso scommettere sulla libertà?* (Bologna: Il Mulino).
- A. Giddens (1973), *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson).
- J. Gimpel (1980), *Die industrielle Revolution des Mittelalters* (Zürich-München: Artemis).
- J. Habermas (1985), *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- P. Haegel (2020), *Billionaires in World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Haus Bartleby (2015), *Sag alles ab. Plädoyers für den lebenslangen Generalstreik* (Hamburg: Nautilus).
- P. Hedström, R. Swedberg (eds.) (1998), *Social Mechanisms. An Analytical Approach to Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- D. Held, A. McGrew, D. Goldblatt, J. Perraton (1999), *Global Transformations. Politics, Economy, Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- F. Hirsch (1976), *Social Limits to Growth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- E. Jones ([1991] 2003), *The European Miracle. Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- M. Keil (2020), *Die Ordnung des Feldes. Reproduktionsmechanismen sozialer Ungleichheit in der Wissenschaft* (Weinheim-Basel: BeltzJuventa).



- W. Knöbl (2001), *Spielräume der Modernisierung. Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit* (Weilerswist: Velbrück).
- D.S. Landes (1998), *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations. Why some are so rich and others so poor* (New York: Norton).
- S. Lenz; M. Hasenfratz (eds.) (2021), *Capitalism unbound. Ökonomie, Ökologie, Kultur*. (Frankfurt a. M.-New York: Campus).
- S. Leone (1968), *Once upon the time in the West (C'era una volta il West)*.
- P. Lepenies (2022), *Verbot und Verzicht. Politik aus dem Geiste des Unterlassens* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- J. Mackert (2004), *Die Theorie sozialer Schließung. Tradition, Analysen, Perspektiven* (Wiesbaden: VS).
- J. Mackert; H.-P. Müller (eds.) (2007), *Moderne (Staats)Bürgerschaft. Nationale Staatsbürgerschaft und die Debatten der Citizenship Studies* (Wiesbaden: VS).
- A. Maddison (2001), *The World Economy. A Millennial Perspective* (Paris: OECD).
- M. Magatti (ed.) (2017), *The Crisis Conundrum. How to Reconcile Economy and Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan).
- T.H. Marshall (1950), *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- K. Marx, F. Engels ([1848] 1998), *The Communist Manifesto. A Modern Edition*, with an introduction by E. Hobsbawm (London-New York: Verso).
- S. Mau (2012), *Lebenschancen. Wohin driftet die Mittelschicht?* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- S. Mau (2019), *The Metric Society. On the Quantification of the Social* (Cambridge: Polity).
- D. Meadows, E. Zahn, P. Milling (1972), *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Universe Books).
- W. McNeill (1991), *The Rise of the West*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press).
- B. Milanovic (2016), *Global Inequality. A New Approach for the Age of Globalization* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press).
- Mokyr, Joel (1990), *The Lever of Riches. Technological Creativity and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- C. Mongardini, M.L. Maniscalco (eds.) (1989), *Moderno e postmoderno. Crisi di identità di una cultura e ruolo della sociologia* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore).
- H.-P. Müller (1997), *Sozialstruktur und Lebensstile. Der neuere Diskurs über soziale Ungleichheit*, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- H.-P. Müller (2014), *Pierre Bourdieu* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- H.-P. Müller (2020), *Max Weber. Eine Spurensuche* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- H.-P. Müller (2021), *Krise und Kritik. Klassiker der soziologischen Zeitdiagnose* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- H.-P. Müller (2022), *Sulle tracce di Max Weber*, ed. by A. Cavalli, I. Camozzi, M. Palma (Milano: EGEA-Bocconi University Press).
- H.-P. Müller, M. Schmid (eds.) (1995), *Sozialer Wandel. Modellbildung und theoretische Ansätze* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- H.-P. Müller, M. Schmid (eds.) (2003), *Hauptwerke der Ungleichheitsforschung* (Wiesbaden: VS).
- H.-P. Müller, T. Reitz (eds.) (2015), *Bildung und Klassenbildung. Kritische Perspektiven auf eine Leitinstitution der Gegenwart* (Weinheim-Basel: BeltzJuventa).
- H.-P. Müller, T. Reitz (eds.) (2018), *Simmel Handbuch. Begriffe, Hauptwerke, Aktualität* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- H.-P. Müller, S. Sigmund (2020), *Max Weber Handbuch. Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler).
- R. Murphy (1988), *The Structure of Closure. The Theory of Monopolization and Exclusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).



- S. Neckel et al. (2018), *Die Gesellschaft der Nachhaltigkeit. Umriss eines Forschungsprogramms* (Bielefeld: Transkript).
- J. Needham, W. Ling, D.J. de Solla Price (1960), *Heavenly Clockwork. The Great Astronomical Clocks of Medieval China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- B. Nelson (1977), *Der Ursprung der Moderne* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- F. Nietzsche (1988), *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (München-Berlin: De Gruyter).
- D.C. North, R.P. Thomas (1973), *The Rise of the Western World. A New Economic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- F. Parkin (1979), *Marxism and Class Theory. A Bourgeois Critique* (London: Tavistock).
- T. Parsons (1977), *Equality and Inequality in Modern Societies, or Social Stratification Revisited in ibidem, Social Systems and the Evolution of Action Theory* (New York: The Free Press).
- T. Piketty (2014), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- K. Polanyi ([1944] 1995), *The Great Transformation. Politische und ökonomische Ursprünge von Gesellschaften und Wirtschaftssystemen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- K. Pommeranz (2000), *The Great Divergence. China, Europe and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- J. Rawls (1971), *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- A. Reckwitz (2017), *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp).
- A. Röcke, S. Sello (2021), *Lebensführung, Lebenskunst, Lebenssinn. Im Spannungsfeld von Autonomie und Heteronomie* (Weinheim-Basel: BeltzJuventa).
- D. Rothkopf (2008), *Superclass. The Global Power Elite and the World they are Making* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux).
- J.-J. Rousseau (1978), *Schriften*, ed. by H. Ritter (München: Hanser).
- P. Samuelson, W.D. Nordhaus. (2022), *Economics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill).
- U. Schimank (2009), *Die Moderne: eine funktional differenzierte kapitalistische Gesellschaft*, in *Berliner Journal für Soziologie*, vol. 19 (3), pp. 329-351.
- T. Schwinn (ed.) (2006), *Die Vielfalt und Einbeit der Moderne. Kultur- und strukturvergleichende Analysen* (Wiesbaden: VS).
- A.K. Sen (1985), *Commodities and Capabilities* (Amsterdam: North Holland).
- A.K. Sen, M. Nussbaum (eds.) (1993), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- G. Simmel ([1900] 1989), *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 6, *Die Philosophie des Geldes*, ed. by D. P. Frisby and K.C. Köhnke (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp).
- G. Simmel ([1918] 1999), *Lebensanschauung. Vier metaphysische Kapitel*, in G. Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 16, ed. by Gregor Fitzi and Otthein Rammstedt. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp), pp. 209-425.
- R. Skidelski, E. Skidelski (2012), *How much is enough? Money and the good life* (London: Penguin Random House).
- A. Smith ([1776] 1974), *Der Wohlstand der Nationen. Eine Untersuchung seiner Natur und seiner Ursachen*, translated and with an introduction by H.C. Recktenwald (München: Beck).
- C. Tilly (1998), *Durable Inequality* (Berkeley-Los Angeles: The University of California Press).
- P. Wagner (2008), *Modernity as Experience and Interpretation. A New Sociology of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press).
- I. Wallerstein (1974), *The Modern World System. Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press).
- M. Weber (1923), *Wirtschaftsgeschichte. Abriß der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot).



- M. Weber (1927), *General Economic History*, translated by Frank Knight (London: Allen & Unwin).
- M. Weber (1972a), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).
- M. Weber (1972b), *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionslehre*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck).
- E.O. Wright (2010), *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London: Verso).

ISSN 2283-7949

GLOCALISM: JOURNAL OF CULTURE, POLITICS AND INNOVATION

DOI: 10.54103/gjcp.2024.22749



Some rights reserved