

Rethinking Class

An interview with Daniel Oesch

by Nicolas Duvoux

The employment structure has changed since the 1970's. For Daniel Oesch, this means we need new models to describe today's labour markets and new class schemes to move beyond industrial-based categories. We also need to understand the political consequences of the collapse of the industrial working class in Europe.

Daniel Oesch is Professor of Sociology at the Institute of social sciences at the University of Lausanne. He previously worked at the Universities of Geneva and Zurich, and at the Carlos III University in Madrid and the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. For six years he worked as national secretary for the Swiss Confederation of Trade Unions. His research interests include social stratification and labour markets, industrial relations and class voting. He is the author of two monographs: *Occupational Change in Europe* (Oxford University Press 2013), *Redrawing the Class Map* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006). All his writings are available on [his website](#).

Books & Ideas: In some of your earlier works, you have elaborated a new class map. The general idea is that the most widely used class schema reflects the industrial employment structure of the 1970's. You propose to take two trends seriously: the rise of the service sector, on the one hand and the increasing female participation in paid employment. Could you tell us how these changes affected class?

Daniel Oesch: My starting point was that I was not satisfied with the industrial class schemes that primarily focus on men in production and are organized around the

divide between manual and non-manual work. This divide was commonly made in class sociology, most prominently so in John Goldthorpe's scheme that placed manual production workers at the bottom of the class hierarchy and contrasted blue-collar workers with white-collar employees. The expansion of the service sector and rising female employment put into question the manual/non-manual divide. Some of the poorest working conditions in Europe are found among the mostly female workers whom Gøsta Esping-Andersen called the "service proletariat":¹ sales assistants, call centre employees, waiters or nursing aides. For none of these occupations does the manual/non-manual divide make much sense, nor does the traditional contrast between worker and employee status (as in *ouvrier-employé* or *Arbeiter-Angestellte*).

Books & Ideas: Could you describe the class map you propose?

Daniel Oesch: My proposal was a class schema based on two dimensions: a vertical one and a horizontal one. The first dimension is hierarchical and distinguishes more or less advantageous employment relationships as theorised by Goldthorpe. This criterion is not controversial and strongly correlates with an occupation's skill requirements as proposed by Michael Tählin or its typical volume of economic and cultural capital as described by Pierre Bourdieu. The novelty resides in the second dimension which is horizontal and distinguishes between different work logics. Depending on whether an occupation involves the deployment of technical skills, the administration of organizational power, or face-to-face attendance to people's personal demands, the daily work logic differs in fundamental ways.

Books & Ideas: How many work logics should usefully be distinguished?

Daniel Oesch: Four work logics are a good start: (1) the independent work logic of employers and the self-employed; (2) the technical work logic of technical experts, craft workers and assemblers; (3) the organizational work logic of managers and administrators, accountants and office clerks; (4) the interpersonal service logic of professionals, semi-professionals and workers in health care, education and social work. Within each work logic, there is clear-cut hierarchy between dominant and

¹ Gøsta Esping-Andersen (ed.), *Changing Classes. Stratification and Mobility in Post-Industrial Societies*, Sage Publishing, 1993.

subordinate classes. By combining four hierarchical levels with four work logics, we obtain a schema of 16 classes which, in turn, can be merged into 8 (or less) classes. Please note that the schema's aim is not to provide a rich and ethnographic description of class differences. Rather, it is a concept that can easily be measured and thus applied in empirical research, thus helping us to shed light on class inequalities, electoral choice or health differentials.

Books & Ideas: Could you use your model to describe the new class landscape in a few broad brushstrokes?

Daniel Oesch: Schematically, we can merge the model into four large groupings. The largest is the salaried middle class that comprises around 40 per cent of the labour force in Western Europe, including socio-cultural professionals who lean towards the political left and managers who support parties of the centre-right, with technical experts in the middle. A second aggregate class comprises employers, small business owners and the self-employed. The size of this "old" middle class has gradually dwindled and they account for no more than 10 to 12 percent of Western Europe's workforce (but to up to 20 percent in Southern Europe). A third grouping comprises those 10 to 15 percent of the labour force who work as office clerks and are situated in the twilight zone between the working and middle class. Finally, the last large class is the working class, more aptly called "*classes populaires*" in French, which makes up the remaining 35 to 40 percent of the workforce. It includes craft and production workers—mostly men—whose ranks have been thinning, but also service and sales workers—mostly women—whose numbers have been constant or slightly rising. Additionally, one may want to distinguish the upper class, the top 2-3 percent of large employers, corporate lawyers, banking directors and top managers who hold disproportionate power and receive widely disproportionate shares of national income.

Books & Ideas: When economists and sociologists talk about the changes that occurred in recent decades on the front of the employment structure, they often talk about job polarization. You disagree and consider job polarization a "myth." Which facts lead you to such a conclusion?

Daniel Oesch: This is an Anglo-American debate that has been adopted uncritically by economists to Europe. Studies for the US and UK indeed show that employment growth in the 1990s and 2000s has been stronger in high-wage and low-wage occupations than in mid-wage occupations. However, the trajectory of these two labour markets are difficult to transfer to Western Europe, given the differences in the institutional setting. Polarisation in the US and the UK is closely related to the education system (weak supply at intermediate qualification levels), wage-setting institutions (low statutory minimum wages and few collective agreements) and migration policy (polarised immigration of low- and high-skilled workers).

Our research on European countries such as Denmark, Germany, Spain, Sweden or Switzerland shows no polarization—although we would have loved to find results for polarization: It makes for a much more spectacular story than occupational upgrading. However, occupational upgrading is what we found. Western European labour markets created a disproportionate amount of jobs at the occupational upper-end, among professionals and managers. In contrast, employment decreased at the labour market's bottom end, among plant operators, assemblers and builders as well as office clerks and sales assistants. As a result, job growth was strongest in well-paid and high-skilled occupations and weakest in low-paid and low-skilled occupations—and trend that has been observed since the post-war decades. The same finding of job growth in highly skilled and job loss in lowly skilled occupations has also been made for France in a careful empirical study by Dominique Goux and Éric Maurin. The two authors criticize the anxiety-provoking thesis of a future without middle classes where the upper and lower classes stare at each other from a great distance.

Books & Ideas: What does this change in job growth? And what are the implications in terms of class structure?

Daniel Oesch: Nothing in the surveys and register data that we analysed supports the thesis of middle-class erosion. If anything, the job opportunities expanded for the salaried middle class. Erosion takes place elsewhere: It is the core of the traditional working class, as well as subordinate white-collar employees, that lost ground. European labour markets continue to be most successful in the automation and offshoring of low-paid, low-skilled, and low-status occupations such as farmworkers and machine operators, data-entry clerks and sales assistants. At the same time, job

growth is strongest among managers and professionals. So instead of worrying about the fate of the middle class—a category that is in great shape—, it is the decline of the working class that could give rise to worries.

Books & Ideas: With respect to this topic, many discussions are going on about the political consequences of the changes in the employment structure and especially the move of the working class to the far-right and the difficulties of social democratic parties. From your perspective, how are the changes in the employment structure and the political dynamics at play in Europe related?

Daniel Oesch: Most fundamental has been the erosion of the *industrial* working class. It accounted for over a third of Europe's population in 1990, but only makes up twenty percent today. Together with service and sales workers, the working class represented the majority of Europe's electorate in up to 1990. Today, this is no longer the case. Of course, party strategists took note of these changes in the employment structure. As the working class continued to shrink, parties to the left began to court the salaried middle classes, the best example being the Labour party under Tony Blair with its Third Way program that consisted in moderating economic policy. Labour would no longer be a working-class party, but a middle-class party supporters to join his shift from "the old establishment to a new, larger, more meritocratic middle class." The working class did not only become less visible in public discourse. Moreover, as leftist parties moved towards the centre on economic issues, political conflict on economic issues between the left and the right diminished. As a consequence, political differences over cultural issues of community and identity—notably migration, religion and European integration—have become much more salient.

The radical right has been successful in exploiting this growing cultural conflict. In the Scandinavian countries and in Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands or Switzerland, the radical right succeeded in attracting the vote of many workers—workers who were politically orphaned by the move of leftist parties towards the middle classes and economic centre. As a consequence, today's electoral competition in Europe is becoming tripolar, as the two dominant party poles of the twentieth century—the left and the centre-right—are now challenged by a third pole of the

radical right in a growing number of countries. The radical right competes with the centre-right for the votes of small business owners, and it challenges the left over its working-class stronghold. Contrary to a widely held idea, the workers' support for the radical right is not primarily motivated by economic grievances, but by cultural worries about their identity and place in community. This explains why the radical right has also been able to thrive in the richest regions of the richest countries of Europe, notably in Austria, Denmark, Norway, German-speaking Switzerland or Northern Italy.

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