Changing Structures of Inequality
A Comparative Perspective

Edited by
Yannick Lemel and Heinz-Herbert Noll

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The international sociological community has engaged recently in a controversial discussion on social inequality. There is a vigorous debate on whether the traditional concepts of social class and social stratification are still useful. Some researchers argue that social classes still offer a key explanation to social inequalities while others challenge the long-standing tradition of class analysis. New approaches have been proposed to describe recent social changes in the stratification system: vanishing middle class, two-thirds societies, cosmographic inequality, and classless society, among others.

Changing Structures of Inequality examines these questions in a new comparative perspective, covering five national societies - Canada, France, Germany, Spain, and the United States. The authors offer a profound analysis of country-specific research traditions in the fields of class analysis and social stratification, revealing important conceptual differences which have consequences for the diagnoses. They present the results of substantial comparative studies on different aspects of inequality in developed societies - the inequality of income and wealth; educational inequalities; status crystallization; migration and inequality; gender inequality and the structuring effect of social class - highlighting similarities as well as substantial differences between the societies under examination.

The editors offer a nuanced conclusion that puts in perspective the different topics of this contemporary debate. Developed societies are now characterized by more dynamic and pluralistic structures of inequalities, where classes have lost some of their previous importance, but to some extent still have a place.


Yannick Lemel is a sociologist and director of the Laboratoire de sociologie quantitative, INSEE (Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques), Paris.

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