# Social Classes, Sociocultures and Habitus in the US

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**Abstract:**

The historical arc of many Western capitalist societies like the United States is riddled with exclusionary political decisions and discriminatory policies that have shaped subsequent social structures and their transformations. Many of these early transformations remain embedded within contemporary US society through salient indicators and within the inconspicuous characteristics of social class. Considering that the transition to a capitalist democracy fails to address the structures of social inequality suggests that these structures are more fundamental than the market, democracy, and capitalism. Therefore, by examining the essential characteristics of social classes, sociocultures, and habitus in the US from a global perspective, this research identifies how contemporary American society continues to be plagued by the legacies and traditions of preceding structures of inequality. The empirical data collection for this research relied on qualitative representative interviews to identify five distinct social classes, each with a unique habitus type. These social classes' hierarchy has remained unchanged, and societal transformations have been rare and ineffective since the colonial era.

## Introduction

A paper on class in the US is bound to provoke immediate contradiction. US-Americans[5]resist the idea of living in a class society. They like to believe that the "new world" opened up a level playing field for everyone. Joseph Kahl (1957, 157) remarked more than fifty years ago that Americans do not think in concepts of class, even if they do not interpret the US as a classless society but clearly see hierarchies and are able to assess their relative position in these hierarchies. Someone who cannot be suspected to hold revolutionary views, Warren Buffett, has explicitly acknowledged the existence of classes in the US: "There's been class warfare going on for the last 20 years and my class has won" (Stiglitz 2012, 180). In this paper, we argue not only that the US has a hierarchy of social classes but that this hierarchy is more pronounced and more durable than in most other societies, possibly than in any other society. Since Kahl studied class in the US, it has changed very little, and we can trace it back to the nineteenth century. As Gonzalo Saraví (2015, 27) has written about Mexico, these social classes virtually live on "different planets". Mobility between them exists but is rare. We speak of social class as a multidimensional group of everyday practice in contrast to economic, professional, or other one-dimensional concepts, which we will explain in more detail in the first section of the paper.

Based on a literature study and a final sample of 78 rather representative qualitative interviews, we found five social classes in the US, which are very similar to those that Kahl found fifty years ago. We call them the aloof, established, middle, fighters, and marginalized. They also resemble the social classes we found in Brazil and South Africa, which have many aspects of

history in common with the US. However, due to the introduction of neoliberal principles from the 1970s, the two middle classes' composition and characterization are not the same in the US today as fifty years ago.

We present our findings about the American hierarchy of social classes and their characteristics. We primarily focus on people's habitus following Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Bourdieu inspires our theoretical and methodological approach, but we modified his methodology and refined his concepts, especially that of the habitus. What sets the US apart from all the countries we have studied so far, is a strong correlation between social class and habitus. We will explain this in detail and sketch the main habitus types.

Finally, we trace the history of social classes in the US from the period of European settlement to today. The goal is not to present a full historical sketch but to identify the roots of today's social classes. It is evident, for example, that African Americans are disadvantaged in contemporary society and that this is rooted in the institutions of slavery and racial segregation. Along these lines, we study the historical formation of present inequalities. We refer to the historical structures of inequality that persist today and shape present inequalities as sociocultures.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first section briefly outlines our theoretical and methodological approach and explains the key concepts of social class, habitus and socioculture in more detail. Section two presents and characterizes the social classes we found in the contemporary US. Section three deals with the habitus types that we observed. The final section discusses the genesis of the sociocultures that are still relevant today.

## Theoretical and methodological approach

Referring to Cuber and Kenkel, Lucile Duberman (1976, 74f) has argued against the concept of class. She pointed out that researchers disagree on the number of classes, some individuals cannot be attributed to a specific class, and the entire system is in constant flux. In addition, the characteristics that define a specific class do not correlate clearly with one another. Therefore, according to Duberman, social hierarchy should be interpreted as a continuum rather than a categorical order.

Joseph Kahl (1957, 8f) tried to differentiate between different concepts of class and identified six different dimensions: prestige, profession, wealth, interaction, class consciousness, and values. In each dimension, he found a different number and structure of classes. However, he points out that even researchers who apply different concepts of class tend to agree to a large degree. For example, Hollingshead and Lloyd Warner studied the same community from different perspectives and still reached an eighty-percent agreement on categorizing people into classes (Kahl 1957, 39).

Even though Duberman's critique is important, empirical research on class seems much less arbitrary than she claims. It is even less random if a common conceptual basis can be agreed upon. As a start, we can use the definition proposed by Krech et al. (1962, 338): A social class is "a division of society, made up of persons possessing certain common social characteristics which are taken to qualify them for intimate equal-status relations with one another, and which restrict their interaction with members of other social classes."

In order to refine this proposition, we draw on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, which allows for a culturally sensitive approach and combines deductive and inductive aspects in a hermeneutical research process. However, we had to adapt it in several regards. Firstly, Bourdieu fully developed his theory only with regard to a European society. Secondly, Bourdieu's frame of reference did not yet include the transformations caused by globalization. Thirdly, he did not really operationalize his key concepts, especially that of habitus. The following paragraphs revise Bourdieu's framework against the background of these issues and the results of our research in non-European countries (Jodhka et al. 2017).

This research deals with *social inequality*, which is not only determined by the distribution of economic goods and professions but also by the distribution of other forms of *capital*, *habitus*, and the *historical* development of society. Social inequality signifies the differential access to activities, positions, and goods that are valued in society. Our research shows that the disposal of capital is not so much a result of competition but a heritage that is reproduced from one generation to the next. We discovered that in capitalist societies, this legacy is passed on largely within the boundaries of social classes. We define social class as a tradition line that reproduces itself from one generation to the next by passing on relevant capital and habitus traits as well as symbolically distinguishing itself from other classes, which is similar to E.P. Thompson's (1963) notion of class. Our concept of social class can be operationalized by establishing the relative limits of social mobility. Social mobility takes place within the limits of a social class but rarely crosses them.

However, social class only explains inequality in nation-states with a long capitalist past. In other societies, many pre-capitalist structures of inequality persist that have to be interpreted within the particular framework of history, culture, and society. In this respect, we introduce the concept of *socioculture* (Jodhka et al. 2017). Sociocultures are the predecessors and the foundations of contemporary social classes. They are social structures that configure social inequality in capitalist societies, and they partly persist even after the emergence of social classes. It is important to note that the concept of socioculture does not imply any type of modernization theory but merely reflects the fact that almost all societies on the globe have adopted some form of capitalism and that pre-capitalist structures persist and inform the structures in a capitalist society.

Bourdieu (1984) has subsumed the resources that are necessary to access valuable goods, positions, and activities in a capitalist society under the concept of capital. The social division of capital basically determines a society's social structure. Bourdieu distinguishes between economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital. Economic capital comprises wealth and other resources that can be invested economically. Bourdieu defines cultural capital mainly as institutionalized certifications, distinguishing capabilities, and valuable cultural objects. Social capital refers to influential networks and relations. Symbolic capital emerges from the institutionalized recognition of the value of these capitals. An analysis of inequality has to study not only the total amount of capital but also the relevance of each type of capital and the history of their acquisition (Bourdieu 1984, 109). Bourdieu's studies privileged economic and cultural capital, but we found social and symbolic capital to be equally important (cf. Savage 2015). Moreover, the relevance and the nature of each type of capital may vary from society to society. Our research first established the types and categories of capital that are relevant in the US and then operationalized the categories, which will be explained in the following sections.

Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* systematizes the idea that learning and repetition tend to create stable patterns of action (Bourdieu 1977). Each acquired pattern is re-activated when a situation arises that resembles the circumstances of the learning situation. If the environment is stable, a

permanent pattern of practice is acquired, incorporated, and repeated. That implies a standardization of use and a somatization of practices. The conditions of the social world inscribe patterns of action onto the body, which then produces and reproduces the social world. The concept of habitus aims at the systematic explanation of practice, which is confusingly varied and complex. Bourdieu explains an action by a reconstruction of the correlation between the production of the habitus and its application. Change arises from a lacking fit between habitus and conditions, which is common in terms of small variations but rare in terms of radical transformation.

Bourdieu never defined a scope of his concept of habitus. It makes no sense to explain highly refined and variable dispositions like the preference for a certain wine on the basis of habitus since lifestyles are rather fluid and not as relevant to the explanation of social structure as more basic elements of the habitus. Our research studies neither the individual nor humanity but social groups. Therefore, we ignore habitus traits shared by everyone or across regions as well as those that characterize individuals or subcultures. We only study the sociologically relevant or social habitus. This habitus is not confined to a particular cultural consumption or a field but cuts across contexts since it establishes general and hierarchical dividing lines in society.

Finally, we propose to study only deeply incorporated social attitudes, which are hardly accessible to conscious modification and are usually acquired in early childhood, often from the parents. This early childhood nexus is where attitudes such as self-confidence, independence, a sense of education and culture, ambition, and discipline are developed. These are dispositions that are relevant in a capitalist society since they are the resources that decide about success or failure – according to the values and assessments that prevail in this type of society. We will refer to such basic dispositions acquired early in life as *primary habitus*. Our study seeks to identify sociocultures and social classes on the basis of historical sources, an assessment of capital, and a study of habitus. As far as the habitus is concerned, we were inspired by Vester-Lange and Teiwes-Kuegler (2013), Vester et al. (2001), and Bohnsack (2014), who have developed methodologies for identifying habitus types. Their methodologies render information on capital and some elements of sociocultures as well. For the study of sociocultures, we also draw on the historical approach by Thompson (1963). It has to combine historical research with ethnographic and life-course research.

To access the primary habitus and its formation, we make use of a life-course interview. An interview is a social practice and, in many regards, resembles everyday communication. Simultaneously, the life-course interview delivers information about the emergence of the habitus in the interviewees' childhood and later life. In the interaction, the social relation between the interviewer and the interviewee plays out since categories like age, gender, education, and respect influence the way the interview partners talk to each other. Important components of the primary habitus become visible.

Our life-course interview comprises six open-ended questions: on the social origin including parents and grandparents, childhood, education, partnership and family, everyday life, and hopes for the future. The respondents are only interrupted if vital information is missing; otherwise, they are encouraged to unfold a discourse expressing their habitus. In addition to the open questions, a series of closed questions on social data and specific information focusing on capital and particular aspects of the habitus are added. The interview is recorded and transcribed, anonymizing all personal information.

Our interpretation of the interviews largely follows Ralf Bohnsack's (2014) "documentary method." It aims at inductively constructing habitus types by relying on sequence analysis. After

agreeing on each interview passage's superficial meaning, key sections are identified and interpreted in depth. In these passages, all values and patterns of action that seem to have mattered in the interviewee's life are analyzed. A list of important habitus traits emerges, which is compared to the list of other interviews. After two pre-tests, the final questionnaire is drawn up, and the final sample of interviews is collected. They are interpreted in the same way, and all habitus traits, dispositions of capital, and their combinations are compared to form types, which group similar cases. The interview sample is complete when new cases do not deliver any new types of habitus and capital. This presupposes a systematic variation of the socially relevant indicators.

We record the information about the interviewee's ancestors, family situation, childhood, education, and other aspects of his or her life and combine this information with the results of the interview interpretation. This allows us not only to check some aspects of our interpretation but also to generate hypotheses about the formation of the primary habitus and identify the types and amount of capital that was relevant in the interviewee's life course. Often, social research is limited to isolated items and their correlation. In research on social structure and inequality, this is often the correlation between education and income. We, however, look at a *combination* of habitus traits and capital categories. Only certain combinations of factors occur in reality, while others are unlikely. Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1984) concept of family resemblance describes the logic of this combination. Members of the same group share many characteristics but not all and not necessarily the same ones. Wittgenstein (1984, aphorism 67) illustrates the varying combination of changing characteristics with regard to a family: Each member of a family has some characteristic features that are typical for the family, but no two members share exactly the same features. One family member's stature was altered by his profession, another's nose through a blow, and yet another's emotions by PTSD. The characteristics embodied in the primary habitus can be understood in the same way. To identify likely combinations, construct social groups and establish habitus types, we use multiple correspondence analysis, which was also applied by Bourdieu (1984).

Social classes emerge in a historical process out of pre-capitalist hierarchies, which partly persist as sociocultures. Sociocultures are mainly theoretical constructions, even though they are rooted in historical formations. We study sociocultures in four steps. The first step comprises the study of historical sources. The second step consists of the generation of hypotheses about the persistence of sociocultures in contemporary social structures. In the third step, the sociocultures are traced in the interview material. Finally, family trees are constructed out of the interviews that exemplify the sociocultures.

For this paper, 78 interviews were interpreted. Therefore, the results have to be regarded as very preliminary and tentative. However, they are relevant enough to be published. The cases do comprise a significant variation in terms of the mentioned indicators. We tried to cover all age groups above 18 years, rural and urban areas in all regions of the US, as well as a wide variety of income, profession, wealth (up to 60 million USD), race, and education. We also included recent immigrants from different countries.

## Social Classes

In our study, we identify five social classes in the US, which we call aloof, established, middle, fighters, and marginalized. This interpretation is mainly based on our qualitative interviews and the types we constructed out of the interviews. In addition, we carried out a multiple correspon-

dence analysis (figure 1), as well as a principal component and a cluster analysis. Finally, we compared our results with some of the available literature on social class in the US.

The figure is a graphic representation of the multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). The MCA calculates correlations between all indicators. Those indicators that determine the others more than they are determined by them define the axes of the two-dimensional space depicted in the graph. However, there are as many dimensions as there are indicators. The ones beyond the two are reduced to these two dimensions. The values of the indicators that are likely to appear together in one person are depicted close to each other. Thus, one observes clusters of characteristics that determine social groups. The graph shown here includes all of the cases in our final round of interviews.

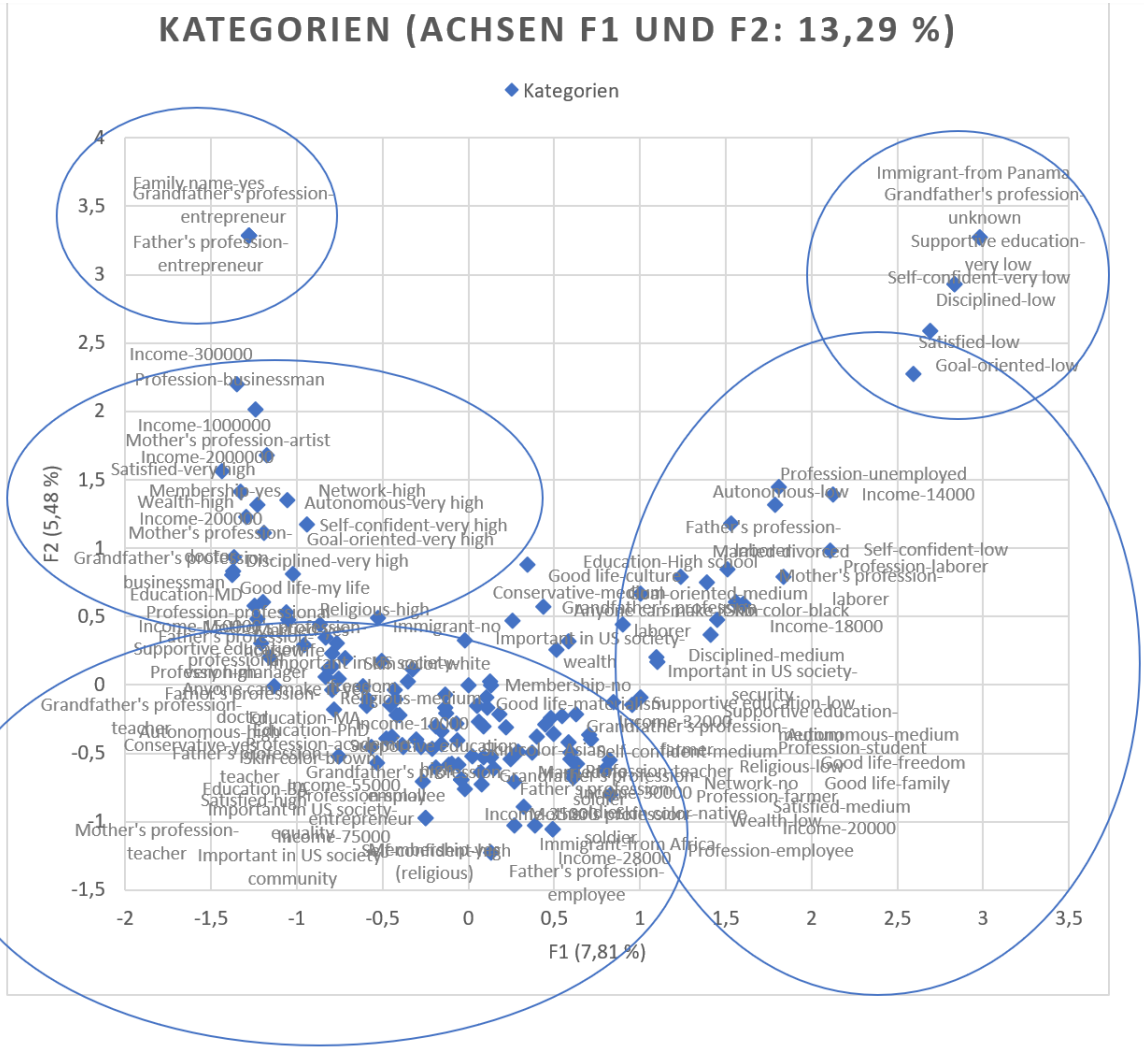


*Figure 1:* ***Multiple correspondence analysis***

The aloof occupy the upper left-hand corner. The continuum between aloof and established is due to the fact that we had only one case that was definitely aloof and that some characteristics are shared by both classes, which we will explain below. The marginalized class is located in the upper right-hand corner. The fighters are located primarily in the upper right-hand quadrant and extend into the lower right quadrant. The middle class clusters around the intersection of the axes. In the upper left-hand quadrant, away from the y-axis are the established.

We call the upper class "aloof". This term was used by one of the members of this social class, Nelson Aldrich Jr.: "More or less uninterrupted aloofness ... is just what the dominant patrician strain in Old Money wants" (Aldrich 1988, 48). This class is aloof because it is mostly invisible to and rarely interacts with the rest, mainly because society's usual criteria do not apply to its members. They do not have to prove anything, get anywhere or do anything in particular (cf. Aldrich 1988, 95). "Even a man's occupation is not tremendously important because, unlike the striving upper-middle class male, his ego is not dependent on what he *does*, but on who he *is*" (Duberman 1976, 137; cf. Aldrich 1988, 131).

Some members of the aloof class do work in business or finance (Domhoff 1983, 37), but very few have to have a job in order to make a living. These very few are the ones who have recently made it into the class. The core of the aloof class consists of old families. Our definite aloof interviewee can trace his ancestry to the "Mayflower" and nineteenth-century capitalists. "Upper-class extended families tend to be unified and their contacts (except for servants and teachers) frequently are limited to other families in the same stratum. Because of this the child generally develops a great sense of personal and social security" (Duberman 1976, 121). Everything is supposed to instill a sense of superiority into the members of this class. We can observe this in the upper classes around the world.

The characteristics our interviewee displays seem to be rather typical for the aloof (and are shared by the two additional interview partners in our pre-tests). Grandfathers' and fathers' professions were that of a capitalist, while the women were mainly housewives engaged in charity and art. He himself is a real-estate agent but spends most of his time in various creative activities – one of which he defined as his profession to emancipate himself from family history. "I have over there on the shelf a genealogy that goes back to [my ancestor] and there is a statue of him ... I own a house in [that town] that's been in the family for many generations, the land has been with us for many generations, and we can trace our ancestry back I think twelve ancestors ... My great-grandfather was a banker ... according to family history, he turned down a partnership with JP Morgan, you know, the richest man in the world ah because he said, 'Mr Morgan, while I admire your business, I don't like your sense of ethics', you know, he was a real straight arrow. And there goes another family fortune that could've been mine, you know."

Other key characteristics of this social class are a supportive education, private school education, a well-known family name, an excellent network – and, in an overwhelming majority of cases, a white skin color. The network includes membership in several influential organizations. Each of these characteristics is rather specific for this social class – but their combination only exists in the aloof class. Interestingly, a high educational title is not essential, but the attendance of an elite school is[6].

Both in the literature and in our interviews, we found the members of this class to be conservative and traditionalist (cf. Kahl 1957, 192). However, there are well-known examples of dropouts, revolutionaries, and rebels in aloof families. Nevertheless, even if one of them is a Marxist, he or she will still be rooted in the family tradition and often return to the flock sooner or later (cf.

Odendahl 1990, 220). This is supported by the fact that our interviewees from this class believe in meritocracy and the American dream that anyone can make it. The established class is the upper-middle class. In stark contrast to the aloof, the established have something to prove and to achieve. Their career is the center of their lives (Kahl 1957, 193). It defines their identity as well as their status and even the meaning of life (Duberman 1976, 150). As a consequence, one does not take any job, but the job has to be meaningful from a subjective perspective. It is part of a life project, a work of art. Therefore, education is vital, both in terms of the contents and in view of getting a good job.

Grandparents and parents usually had a liberal or white-collar profession; often, the mother had a job as well, while before the 1970s, the woman was usually a housewife. Today, the established typically work in business or a liberal profession. Most, but not all, members of this class have a white skin color. The level of education is high, typically a graduate degree from a good university. Family name, formal networks, and family connections are relevant and extensive but nowhere close to those of the aloof. The family tends to the nuclear form, and a lot is invested in children's education. A 47year-old businessman recounts: "I come from an upper-middle class family. My mother was an artist and my father was a salesperson who built his own company later ... I went to high school in New York City, it was a pretty good school ... Parents' role in upbringing their children should be to teach them and to give them the confidence that they can achieve anything in life."

All our interviewees shared a belief in meritocracy and at least some degree of appreciation for the American dream. Stereotypical American values such as wealth, competition, and individualism are relevant in the established class, especially since its members consider themselves very successful in this framework. It comes as no surprise that Joseph Kahl (1957, 201) suggested: "general American values are predominantly upper-middle-class values." The middle class includes not only white-collar employees but also highly skilled laborers with secure jobs. Kahl (1957, 202) already observed this half a century ago. He added that the main characteristic of this class was "respectability", which we found in our sample as well as in our study of other countries, such as Brazil or Germany (cf. Jodhka et al. 2017). The middle class is defined by labor, just like the established – but labor is not a career, a work of art, or part of a life project. It is both a necessary component of life and a source of pride (Duberman 1976, 151). The middle class considers itself the moral and economic backbone of society.

A university office staff says: "My dad owned his shop and my mother was helping him, which she does to this day ... School was down the road, it was nice, I liked it ... I was into legal stuff and wanted to get into law school, I was like gonna go to Harvard. Didn't happen. So went to UVA especially because a lot of people were telling me that UVA is the best school whatever." She completed her BA and started working as an administrator at a university in Georgia.

Parents and grandparents typically were employees, mothers often being housewives. The prevailing profession is that of an employee, and the prevailing skin color is white. The level of education is high, members of the middle class would often have a university or college degree or at least a specialized professional skill, but the degree rarely comes from a famous school. In contrast to the members of the two upper classes, they have no valuable networks, no resonating family name, and no membership in an important organization. Their income and wealth are significantly lower than those in the established class. The belief in meritocracy and the American dream is far less pronounced as well.

While the dividing lines between aloof, established, and middle class are very clear and pronounced, the limits between the middle class and the fighters are blurry. This indistinct boundary results from neoliberal policies and is the only significant difference between our analysis and Kahl's study in the 1950s. Kahl's "working class" has transformed into a precariat (standing), a vulnerable group of informal laborers who often work two or three jobs. Whereas each of the other social classes is clearly defined by one prevailing habitus type, we see a tension between two types or sub-types in this class. This is probably because some members of this class have their historical roots in the middle class, while most are descendants of the working class.

Grandparents would typically have been laborers or small farmers. Those with origins in the middle class have white- or blue-collar parents, a decent education level, and some wealth. They primarily reside in rural areas or small towns and are married. Those with origins in the working class have blue-collar parents, a low education level, and little wealth. They often live in cities and have fragmented families. Neither group has any significant networks, memberships, or family names. They seem to be forming one social class because their current living conditions are similar and mobility as well as interaction between the groups exist. Members of this class can have any skin color. A tendency toward religion and conservatism prevails. There are few aspirations and dreams. Work is a necessity and offers neither meaning of life nor pride (cf. Kahl 1957, 208). Not surprisingly, the belief in the American dream is not very pronounced – but meritocracy, ironically, is still accepted to some degree.

A restaurant employee tells us that her father worked at the local rapid transit company and did not allow his wife to work. The family has a solid working-class history but education and parental support for the children did not figure highly on the agenda. "I was actually voted one of the top-ten athletes in the county. I actually had a scholarship—had a track scholarship, basketball scholarship, but my dad and his side of the family was all military so I went in the military. I was in the army for fifteen years ... So I was in the Reserves, and then I was into food. And that's where I've been." With a little more education, she would have been able to secure a skilled job.

Another member of this class is an African-American bar worker, whose grandparents were farmers and whose father became a taxi driver after moving into town. After several cleaning jobs, she found the job at the bar, which she enjoys more than cleaning. Like the restaurant employee, she only completed high school without any further education. She repeats the question, "My situation in society? Surviving", and laughs. Asked about higher social classes, she replies: "You mean white people? Or rich people? They have money, they have car, they can go to good schools, buy expensive brands."

The social class seems to have been generated by neoliberal reforms. Ninety-four percent of new jobs since 2007 have been informal (Tyler 2018, 25). For the first time in American history, in 2014, as many people placed themselves below the middle class as in the middle class (ibid.). The famous decline of the middle class is actually the separation of a solid middle class from those who are dependent on the precarious, badly paid and unskilled jobs in the post-industrial segments of the economy.

We refer to the lowest social class as marginalized because it is actively excluded by the rest of society, which refers to its members as "scum" (Kahl 1957, 211) or "trash" (Isenberg 2017). These are terms we heard in interviews around the world as well, not just in the US. Members of this class are regarded as useless, lazy, incompetent, etcetera, mainly reflecting their perceived

lack of desirable traits and access to the privileges of other social classes. A marginalized person typically comes from a fragmented family. None of our interviewees from this class grew up with a mother and father up to adolescence. Parents and grandparents were either lowly skilled laborers or unemployed. Usually, members of this class do not have a regular job but are often homeless, depend on welfare, do short-term or seasonal jobs. Michael Harrington (1962) described the context of their precarious participation in the underbelly of the labor market as a clandestine 'economic underworld', where it is impossible to organize and prospects of breaking through the threshold of the limits of mobility are unlikely. Income and wealth are as low as the level and the quality of education. They have no networks, no family name, no membership in an important organization. Families are as unstable and fragmented as those of their parents. Belief in meritocracy and the American dream is weak. Even though all skin colors exist in this class, African Americans and first nations are considerably overrepresented.

A 77year-old African American explains that his parents, poor immigrants, had given him to adoption. After living with a foster mother for some time, he ended up in an orphanage and finally on the street at very young age. He had several hire-and-fire jobs over the years. "I quit when I was 55, find something else to do, 'cause social security's not gonna be enough, bring in some extra cash you know ... but couldn't find it, I'm still looking ... I'd like to say you're a useful person, I looked at time as a as a productive means of creating ... I don't like cheating anybody out of anything, I don't like anybody cheating anything out of me, you know, I'll do my best, I went to the military and all."

The marginalized class may comprise more than ten percent of the population. Time Magazine stated that more than 30 million Americans do not have access to clean, safe water (9 March 2020, 57). This group would largely coincide with the marginalized class, but the class is probably even more numerous. According to Joseph Stiglitz, 15.1 percent of all Americans lived below the threshold of poverty in 2010 – up from 12.5 percent in 2007 (Stiglitz 2012, 16).

Even though most Americans consider both wealth and income to play a vital role in US society, we found that money, surprisingly, is only one characteristic of social class. Many Americans are relatively wealthy for a period or even several periods of their life, while many remain poor for some time. Money alone does not tell us very much about social class in the US; however, when combined, the classic categories of inequality studies, namely profession, wealth, income (as an average over one's lifetime, not as a snapshot category), and education are reasonably accurate indicators of class membership. 0.5 percent of Americans own 34 percent of the net wealth in the US, and ten percent own all debt (Henwood 1998, 64) – which are pretty much the sizes of the aloof and the established classes. The owners of wealth, who live off their capital, are most likely members of the aloof class. Furthermore, the owners of wealth, who have a good education and a good job, are most likely members of the established class.

Of course, the vital role of work in American society has been pointed out by many observers. Robert Bellah et al. (1996, 65f), for example, have shown that work is not only a vital necessity but also a moral one. An American has to make his or her own living, have a career (progress), and define oneself through their profession. Already in 1779, the leather workers of Philadelphia argued against their lowly status by stating that they were "useful and necessary members of the community" (Blumin 1989, 37) due to their work. However, it is equally important to note that the role of work differs between the social classes. It is an option for the aloof, a meaningful career for the established, a respectable necessity for the middle class, an insecure necessity for

the fighters, and largely unattainable for the marginalized.

Since the US continues to be a country of immigration, the intersection of ethnicity and social class needs to be addressed. A common falsehood that many Americans believe is that recent immigrant groups enter the US at the bottom of the hierarchy. First, African Americans and first nations continue to be at the bottom of the racial hierarchy and are primarily members of the lower classes. Second, we have interviewed immigrants from Pakistan and Germany, who were members of the upper-middle class in their respective country, and became members of the established class in the US. The US is a melting pot – but not as a society, only within social classes. People from everywhere in the world immigrate into the US and form a melting pot mostly within one social class's limits, which usually corresponds to their class of origin. This has been mostly true even in colonial times.

Reproduction is a defining element of social class. A spontaneous grouping cannot be a social class. In the US, the hierarchy of social classes has changed little during the past hundred years. If we compare our findings with Kahl's "value classes", they are almost identical – except for Kahl's working class, which has been transformed into something like a precariat and now includes some descending members of the middle class. Even the percentages Kahl gives for his classes may resemble today's numbers: upper class 1 percent, upper-middle class 9 percent, lower-middle class 40 percent, working class 40 percent, underclass 10 percent (Kahl 1957, 187). Only, his estimates for the upper class may be too high and for the underclass too low.

Social class is mainly reproduced by the combination of capital and habitus, which are acquired from the preceding generation, mostly the parents. We can clearly observe different parenting styles in the social classes. While the level of support increases with class, the levels of negligence and violence decrease. Annette Lareau (2002, 748f) has compared parenting styles between "middle" and "lower" classes in a qualitative study involving extended observation. She characterizes middle class education as "concerted cultivation", a labor-intensive rearing of important skills, such as reasoning, language use, and learning. Lower-class parents, in contrast, focus on "natural growth", which includes affection, food, and security; there are few organized activities but many interactions with the extended family. Lareau specifically points out that middle class children acquire a sense of entitlement in the face of authorities, while those from the lower classes develop fear and distrust. We will explain the relevance of this observation in the following section.

The inequalities between styles of parental education continue in formal education. While children from the three upper classes (Lareau's middle classes largely refer to these) are well prepared for school, children from the lower classes have not acquired skills like focusing, reading, organization, or active learning before entering school. Furthermore, lower-class children usually grow up in poor areas with low-quality schools, with little educational help at home, little financial support, and low ambitions. It is unlikely that they make it into a good university. Stiglitz (2012, 9) claims that only nine percent of American college students come from the poorer half of the population – and those rarely attend Ivy League institutions. In later life, social class is reproduced on the level of interaction, through work, and in partnership. One primarily interacts with people from the same social class, especially in terms of friendship and leisure. Professions strongly correlate with social class. Moreover, we found that far more than half of our interviewees have a partner from the same social class. All of these factors work together to reproduce the social hierarchies. William Domhoff (1983, 36) quotes that nine of the twelve richest Detroit families of 1860 were still among the local elite in 1970; the other three had divided their wealth

among too many children. We will return to this in the final section.

Social mobility, of course, is possible and more frequent than in other societies but still very rare. Americans are very mobile. They frequently change their house, their job, their partner and even their income. However, making a lot or very little money does not necessarily mean changing your class because your profession and your habitus. If you seek to leave your track or to enter a new profession, you are essentially downwardly mobile. This becomes clear only if we look at the bigger picture. First, we have to take the entire life course into account to assess class membership. Second, money is only one characteristic of class; if the other traits stay the same (such as professional training and its associated ideology and tracking), a change in income or wealth does not affect class membership. Third, we have to consider the other family members as well. If a person's children and other relatives change class as well, we can speak of social mobility in the strong sense. Of course, such cases exist, especially in the context of the IT revolution and the rise of new billionaires into the upper class, IT specialists into the established and service providers into the middle.

We addressed the inequalities of race and ethnicity to some degree. However, we have not addressed gender inequality and our study falls short of rendering a complete picture. Our interviews show that two main points of intersectionality research hold true for the US. First, the intersection of class and gender is evident. If you are a single woman, you are likely to be in a lower class, while as a single male, you are more likely to be in an upper class. Second, each class has its specific gender configuration. This, however, also means that class tops gender – as it tops race and ethnicity.

## Habitus

It comes as no surprise that key traits of the habitus strongly correlate with social class. However, the correlation between the social classes and the habitus types we found in the US is much stronger than in any other country we have studied, even stronger than in Brazil. Habitus types are basically class types, and the variation of habitus within a social class is relatively low. In other societies, habitus types usually extend beyond class boundaries because of everyday intermingling, transformations in the class structure, and other historical factors.

Table 1 shows the six habitus types we identified and their key characteristics. Each of the six types corresponds to a social class. The defensive and the informal type divide the class of the fighters, which has been addressed in the previous section. The values for each trait range from very low (–) to very high (++), medium being 0. A variation within the type, viz. within the social class, is indicated.

We found the following characteristics to carry the most significant weight in distinguishing the habitus types from each other: self-confidence, autonomy, goal-orientation, discipline, satisfaction, and conservatism. Self-confidence refers to the trust one has in oneself and the belief that one can do whatever one considers to be right and to be successful at it. By autonomy, we understand the (subjective) liberty from external constraints, especially in terms of social control and tradition. Goal-orientation means having clear goals in life and pursuing them. Discipline refers to abiding by the rules. Satisfaction is restricted to one's own life, both in the past and the present. Conservatism signifies a clinging to the past (but does not necessarily include any

| | Aloof | Established | Disciplined | Defensive | Precarious | Marginalized |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Self-confidence | ++ | ++ | + to ++ | 0 | - | -- |
| Autonomy | ++ | ++ | + to ++ | 0 | 0 | - |
| Goal-orientation | + to ++ | ++ | + to ++ | + | + | +- to 0 |
| Discipline | + | ++ | ++ | + | 0 | -- to 0 |
| Satisfaction | ++ | ++ | + | 0 | - | 0 |
| Conservatism | 0 to ++ | -- to ++ | 0 | + | - | -- to ++ |

*Table 1:* ***Habitus types and traits***

particular political views).

The upper-class habitus of the aloof has the highest scores in self-confidence, autonomy, and satisfaction. Self-confidence is virtually a class marker found around the world. Typically, the higher the degree of self-confidence, the higher the social position. That a member of the upper class is autonomous and satisfied may not come as a surprise. In terms of discipline, the aloof score lower than the middle classes because they have less pressure – to work, to make enough money, to fit in, to be respected or to meet someone's demands. What may be somewhat surprising is the variation in the levels of goal-orientation and conservatism. It is easy to understand that not all members of the upper class are overly explicit in their goals. The variation in conservatism, in contrast, seems to indicate a tension between a more liberal and a more conservative attitude or between business and arts. We interpret this tension as one between ambition and self-realization. The emphasis of ambition is on reproducing existing structures, conservatism, while the emphasis of self-realization is on novelty and experimenting.

This opposition is more pronounced in the established habitus type, which is very uniform except in this specific dimension. The habitus type has the maximum score in all categories, but there is a high variation in terms of conservatism. This represents the stereotypical opposition of the intellectual and the businessman – and to some degree between a Democrat and a Republican. Interestingly, this opposition correlates with the importance of religion, both in the aloof and the established. It also exists in the other social classes but spells out differently.

The middle-class habitus is characterized by a focus on discipline. The other characteristics are either somewhat high or very pronounced, apart from satisfaction, which scores lower than in the upper classes. Most significantly, this habitus type does not comprise a high level of conservatism. The tension between ambition and self-realization spells out as an opposition between emphasis on the community and emphasis on the self – or rather an orientation toward complying with the demands of the community and an orientation toward realizing the individual self. This chasm is the primary horizontal differentiation in American society, which we also found in Brazil (Ferreira Rocha and Rehbein 2020). While all Americans and Brazilians are comparatively individualist, some are guided more by community values while others have fully incorporated the idea of the liberal, unfettered self. The tension between ambition and self-realization is a modification of this opposition in an environment that gives people all options. Since the middle class has limited options, focus on the community and focus on the self are the extremes of the opposition.

The American lower-middle class consists of two distinct habitus types, which we call defensive and precarious. The defensive type resembles the disciplined type and has a high level of discipline and a high level of goal-orientation. It is basically the habitus type of the 'losers of

globalization', the middle class members who lost their jobs, houses, and stability due to neoliberal measures. They reach high scores in conservatism and religiosity, in contrast, both to the lower classes and the middle class. The precarious habitus type has low to medium scores in all categories. Discipline and autonomy are much more pronounced than in the marginalized group, however. This type is not very conservative. Another interesting difference between defensive and precarious is the former's emphasis on the family contrasted with the latter's emphasis on the job.

The marginalized, unsurprisingly, score low in all categories, but, surprisingly, the values vary. The unifying characteristic is a very low level of self-confidence, which means a low level of trust in oneself, in one's abilities, and one's value. Autonomy and satisfaction are low. However, there is significant variation in terms of goal-orientation, discipline, and conservatism (including the role of religion). We observe a tension between two habitus tendencies, which we also observed in such diverse countries as Brazil and Germany. While some members of the marginalized class resign and become fatalistic, others incorporate a hedonistic attitude: nothing to live for or nothing left to lose. This tension has been noticed by Kahl (1957, 214) as well. A third group in the marginalized class resembles the precarious habitus type by emulating 'normality'. This normality is characterized by discipline.

Figure 2 summarizes the important tendencies of the habitus that we found in American society. While the level of self-confidence very much defines the vertical dimension of the hierarchy, the horizontal dimension is defined by the tension between community-orientation and self-orientation. The tension plays out as one between ambition and self-realization in the upper classes and between fatalism and hedonism in the lowest classes. At the same time, ambition and hedonism are as opposed to each other as self-realization and fatalism. Discipline is at the center of society. This characteristic defines the middle class but reaches into the upper and the lower classes.

In our principal component analysis, all indicators are distributed in one dimension, which means that they correlate with one another. The only exceptions are conservatism, religiosity, and the belief that anyone can make it, which are located in the second dimension. We interpret these characteristics of the second dimension as symptoms of the horizontal dimension in figure 2. It is the tension between community values and full-scale individualism.

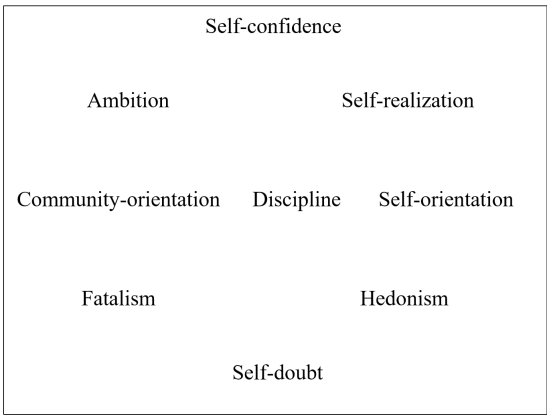


*Figure 2:* ***The space of habitus traits***

Robert Bellah et al. (1996) seem to have elaborated exactly on this horizontal dimension. They argue that American individualism was only able to survive because of a counter-weight, namely the biblical-republican orientation, which recognizes the social dimension of the human (Bellah et al. 1996: VIII). "Most of us imagine an autonomous self, existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one" (Bellah et al. 1996, 65). However, this (empty) individualism, according to Bellah et al. (1996, 228, 245), has its basis in the religious sect, more precisely in the plurality of religious sects. This remark leads us to the study of the roots of contemporary social classes and habitus.

## Sociocultures

The following sketch does not aim at summarizing American history in a couple of pages but at reconstructing the earlier hierarchies that are the foundations of the contemporary class structure and that still matter today. We refer to such hierarchies as sociocultures. We argue that the five social classes we identified are heirs of earlier social classes and ultimately of predominantly feudal ranks combined with slavery and the indigenous population's extermination. Today's inequalities are largely transformations of inequalities that were constituted with the European settlement of America.

The Europeans who settled in North America during the seventeenth century came from feudal societies and, to some degree, albeit not fully, recreated feudal hierarchies. While some of them were military commanders, colonial administrators, or feudal landlords, many new settlers were indentured servants or relatively poor people, who sought to escape feudalism and shared elements of the idea of the social contract (Landauer 1981, 5). The categories of patronage, guilds, and rank were not as pervasive as in Europe. However, it is important to note that the immigrant's social status partly determined the amount of land he was eligible to receive (Puhle 1979, 241).

In many rural areas and all cities, the social structure remained very hierarchical. Urban social structure consisted of many layered ranks (Blumin 1989, 26). The upper ranks formed an upper class already in the seventeenth century, excluded other social groups, and dominated social life (Blumin 1989, 27). Labor was despised, and the social position of craftspeople was barely above that of the poor (Blumin 1989, 36). A small layer of middle ranks existed between the upper class and the rest.

The urban upper class in the Northeast consisted of large landowners, who were manufacturers and large-scale traders, mostly with a monopoly, at the same time (Myers 1916, 24). The richest Americans of 1700 were merchants from New York: Steenwyck, Marius, and Lawrence (Myers 1916, 25). The South was dominated by large plantations that relied on the forced labor of enslaved Africans and African-American people. The indigenous population was excluded and, to a significant percentage, killed. The president of Amherst College suggested in the eighteenth century to infect all "Indians" with measles in order to get rid of them (Matthias 1964, 290). First nations were increasingly put into reservations, which kept shrinking over time (Matthias 1964, 293).

We have to distinguish between the North and the South of colonial society. Northern society was dominated by large landowners, merchants, and increasingly manufacturers and bankers. They comprised less than ten percent of the population but owned more than half of the wealth and a sizeable part of the population itself (Puhle 1979, 239f). A middle class comprising com-

mercial farmers, traders, petty entrepreneurs, professionals, and the administration was situated below this group. The layer of laborers followed, and the slaves were at the bottom, while the indigenous population was literally outcast. The largest group, however, were freeholders, comprising around 40 percent of the population (Puhle 1979, 240). The structure of the South was dominated by large landowners, who held slaves and pushed freeholders to the margins, while the urban structures resembled that of the North. This structure is almost the same as in late-colonial Brazil, especially in the South – with two exceptions: first, the upper class of colonialists in North America also comprised merchants and not only landowners; second, the bulk of the population consisted of free immigrant farmers who owned their land and had ample space for expansion. A colonial middle class existed in North America, and the roots of capitalism were already present.

Many Americans perceive the Declaration of Independence as a clean slate, severing all ties with feudal Europe and rendering everyone equal. This would have been nice. In reality, the newly independent US was a highly unequal society whose structure differed little from colonial society. In fact, some inequalities were exacerbated. We have to consider that the first presidents were among the wealthiest Americans and the largest slave-owners. Slavery persisted. Suffrage was tied to possession so that only ten percent of the population were eligible to vote (Matthias 1964, 32). Poor debtors could be imprisoned indefinitely (Myers 1916, 43). Moreover, feudal bonds were only made illegal in New York in 1846 (Myers 1916, 63).

The great transformations of the nineteenth century were the westward expansion, the Civil War with the subsequent abolition of slavery, and the age of mass immigration. They significantly changed the social and political structures but not so much the hierarchy itself, let alone each group's relative position within the hierarchy. The nineteenth century is also the period when great American fortunes were created, and an extreme socio-economic inequality emerged, which was only alleviated in the wake of Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies and the Cold War. However, these policies systematically excluded non-white Americans by institutionalizing *de jure* barriers to the accumulation of wealth while enabling middle and upper class white Americans to amass wealth (Flynn et al. 2017).

Apart from trade, land was the main source of wealth in the nineteenth century (Myers 1916, 64). Hamilton pushed through a regulation that land in the West was offered in large chunks first and small holders could purchase the land then from large investors (Landauer 1981, 38). From 1862, settlers received up to 160 acres for free if they tilled the land for five years. However, the capitalists used frontmen to acquire a multitude of land chunks (Landauer 1981, 88). Furthermore, large companies, especially mining and railway, received huge areas from the government either for free or for a nominal amount (Myers 1916, 199). In 1876, a law was passed that allowed the purchase of any area of land for cash – which large companies and capitalists took advantage of to buy vast stretches of land (Myers 1916, 214). In 1860, the government owned about half of the land in the US, but in 1900, only ten percent of that was left (Lundberg 1937, 53).

The Civil War, of course, altered the plight of the slaves, most of whom had been imported from Africa. However, the freed slaves lacked education, money, social connections, and especially recognition by the remaining population (Isenberg 2017, 174f). They started their free life at the bottom of society and were (not) expected to work their way up in a hostile environment. Until the First World War, African Americans remained rural laborers. Their job changed as little as their relative social position. After the war, they began to migrate into urban areas to find employment in factories and services (Baran and Sweezy 1973, 243). Industrialization, which picked up with the Civil War, created many new jobs and changed the professional structure. Like in

Brazil, the emerging industry jobs were filled with poor European immigrants (Landauer 1981, 116). From the early nineteenth century, the import of slaves started to decline. In 1810, 19 percent of the American population were black, in 1860 only 14 (Gallman 1977, 27). Especially after the abolition of slavery, European immigration replaced the import of Africans.

The proportion of industrial labor in the nineteenth century should not be exaggerated. Just before the Civil War, almost ninety percent of the population still lived in rural areas and 60 percent worked in agriculture. Even in 1900, almost 38 percent were employed in agriculture (Puhle 1979, 249), and in 1920, half of the population lived in rural areas (Landauer 1981, 161). While railways and related production were the big industry of the nineteenth century, the petrochemical and automotive industries only emerged in the twentieth century. The hierarchy of the nineteenth century is merely a transformation of the colonial structure. Immigrants from Europe fill the ranks of dependent laborers just above the slaves. Old middle class and independent farmers start to merge, a process that is only complete a century later. Part of the colonial elite has left, but many members of the upper class are nobility from Britain or closely linked to it, while there is significant continuity in the administration. However, the US is the country of "self-made men", many members of the upper and middle classes are recent and relatively poor immigrants. This window of opportunity closes only in the late nineteenth century.

In the early twentieth century, European immigration came to an end. At the same time, racial segregation played an increasingly important role – which differs from Brazil and is comparable to South Africa. An African American middle class emerged, which catered to the community but was excluded from white society. In 1938, during a five-year examination of race and inequality in the US, Swedish economist and sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed that this form of exclusion relied on a system of racial and social control of African-Americans (Myrdal 1944). This fundamental exclusion from society was in direct, moral conflict with the ideals of equal opportunity, fairness and justice, which the US claimed to stand upon (ibid). By the middle of the century, descendants of recent European immigrants were becoming the working class(es), descendants of slaves and immigrants from the global South were staffing the marginalized class, while the African American middle class started to join the ranks of the white middle class. This is similar to the native population that had been entirely excluded and developed a middle class, which joined the white middle class in the late twentieth century.

Table 2 tries to visualize the hierarchies of the period just before the Civil War, the age of industrialization and mass immigration, racial segregation during the Cold War and today. In principle, each of our contemporary social classes is rooted in an earlier class on the same level of the hierarchy. Each social class has a long past and forms a tradition line but has constantly received new members through abolition and immigration. The result of the policies of segregation was a small degree of social mobility by African Americans, who acquired leading functions in their community and later joined the ranks of the middle classes after the civil rights movement. First nations only began to enter US social structure to a relevant degree at this point as well, mainly as marginalized. With each transformation, some social mobility becomes possible, but otherwise, it remains scarce.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we argued that five social classes can be distinguished in the contemporary United States, which we designate as the aloof, established, middle, fighters and marginalized. Each class

| | 1850: postcolonialism | 1900: mass immigration | 1950: segregation | 2020: neoliberalism |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Upper | Capitalists/ South: landowners | Dominant | Dominant (white) | Aloof |
| Upper Middle | Administration | Established | Established (white) | Established |
| Middle | Petty farmers and business | Old middle class and white collar | Petty bourgeoisie/ Afr. capitalists | Middle class |
| Lower Middle | Workers | Industrial working class (mainly migrants) | Working class/ Afr. petty business | Fighters |
| Lower | Bonded labor (rural), poor (urban)/ South: slaves | Lower class (rural and urban) - slave migrants and immigrants | Poor whites/ majority of former slaves | Marginalized |

*Table 2:* ***Sociocultures USA***

forms a characteristic habitus type, while the lower middle class comprises two habitus types due to the different origins of these types in the middle class and the working class. The foundations of this hierarchy were basically laid with independence. Despite several deep transformations, the class hierarchy itself changed little over time, which explains its resilience and the low degree of actual social mobility. We illustrated the history of the social classes, the most important habitus traits, and the prevailing characteristics of the social classes.

The US has a more stable and pronounced hierarchy of social classes than most other nation states because of its long historical continuity. It experienced very few transformations since colonial times. Independence, the Civil War, industrializaion, the abolition of slavery, mass immigration, de-industrialization and neoliberalism seem to figure among the most important of these transformations. Except the abolition of slavery, none of these explicitly targeted inequality – and therefore, the effects on inequality were rather weak.

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# Notes

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[3]Prior to the sudden passing of Boike Rehbein in June 2022, we had been collaboratively engaged in the development of this manuscript. Our aim in finalizing it is to pay tribute to his research. Throughout the drafting process, we endeavored to remain faithful to Boike Rehbein's ideas as expressed in his earlier work. Where we have deviated from this intention, any errors or inconsistencies are solely our own responsibility

[4]Tamer Soyler presently holds a managerial role in the Global Studies Programme in Berlin and the Transcience journal, combined with teaching duties and research obligations. His primary areas of research interest include social inequality, critical thought, and societal transformations.

[5]For simplicity's sake, we will use the term "American" in the following when referring to the US.

[6]This finding supports the stereotype of "a gentleman's C" where those from a good background go to elite universities but then do not want to appear in need of high performance to maintain their status in that role. Mention of this in a verse by Robert Grant:
*The able-bodied C man! He sails swimmingly along.*
*His philosophy is rosy as a skylark's matin song.*
*The light of his ambition is respectably to pass,*
*And to hold a firm position in the middle of his class (Grant, 1909).*