

Social Inequality and Sociocultures

Desigualdad social y socioculturas

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Abstract

Inequality is usually studied with a focus on economic factors, such as income and wealth, and with reference to a brief period of time, basically the period of data collection. This article argues that this approach is misleading and does not allow us to understand inequality, let alone society at large. Inequalities and social hierarchies comprise more than economic factors but also cultural factors, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown. Bourdieu, however, neglected the historical dimension. Classes and *habitus* types are rooted in long traditions, which have to be studied over centuries, not months or years. Capitalist societies develop hierarchies of social classes, which are shaped by pre-capitalist hierarchies. These earlier hierarchies tend to persist for decades or even centuries after the capitalist transformation. I refer to these earlier hierarchies as sociocultures, since they form not only hierarchies but also cultures, which reproduce from one generation to the next. Edward P. Thompson has demonstrated this with regard to the English working class. In the article, I will introduce the concept of socioculture as it is used in studies of social inequality.

Key words: class, culture, *habitus*, inequality, socioculture.

Resumen

La desigualdad es estudiada habitualmente centrándose en factores económicos, como los ingresos y la riqueza, y con referencia a un periodo breve de tiempo, básicamente el de los datos utilizados. Este artículo argumenta que esa aproximación es errónea y que no nos permite entender la desigualdad, dejando abandonada la sociedad en general. La desigualdad y las jerarquías sociales comprenden más que los factores económicos, pues incluyen también factores culturales como mostró Pierre Bourdieu. Este autor, sin embargo, descuidó la dimensión histórica. Las clases y los tipos de *habitus* están arraigados en largas tradiciones, que han sido estudiadas durante siglos, no durante meses o años. Las sociedades capitalistas desarrollan jerarquías de clases sociales, que se encuentran conformadas por jerarquías precapitalistas. Esas jerarquías previas tienden a persistir durante décadas o incluso siglos después de la transformación al capitalismo. Me referiré a esas jerarquías previas como socioculturas, ya que no forman solo jerarquías sino culturas, que se reproducen de una generación a la siguiente. Edward P. Thompson ha demostrado esto en relación con la clase obrera inglesa. En este artículo introduzco el concepto de sociocultura, tal y como es usado en los estudios sobre desigualdad social.

Palabras clave: clase, cultura, desigualdad, *habitus*, sociocultura.

Summary

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1. Introduction

This paper introduces the concept of socioculture. The concept refers to social structures that developed in earlier historical times but partly persist in the present and partly shape present social structures. It became necessary to introduce this concept in studying inequality around the world. All societies have a history but studies of inequality rarely take this history into account. Neither does inequality research acknowledge that contemporary societies are heterogeneous, composed of fragments from different historical times and pre-structured by a complex history. It rather regards society as if had always been a capitalist nation state with a homogeneous population.

These flaws are not easily visible when studying a society with a long capitalist past. Since I had been studying social structure in Laos, I had to develop a framework, which takes into account that subsistence peasants, socialist cadres and capitalist entrepreneurs live in the same society but not in the same social structure (Rehbein, 2007). In a way, they live in different historical times – insofar as the respective structures originated in different times. However, the entire population lives in the present as well, inside one single nation state and one single society. This is what the concept of socioculture seeks to grasp.

By now, I have used the concept in studies on five continents (Jodhka et al., 2017). Several studies have adopted the term and an entire volume has been devoted to its use in relation to social ontology and the study of inequality (Baumann and Bultmann, 2020). However, I have not yet devoted a text exclusively to the concept. This paper is supposed to fill the gap and to give an introduction or an introductory general overview. It outlines theoretical framework, methodology and application of the concept.

Since I introduced the concept of socioculture with regard to Laos, the final section of the paper will briefly outline the example of Laos as a case study. The paper's first section will summarize the weaknesses of the available approaches in inequality studies that make it impossible to understand a case like Laos. In the second section, I will introduce the concept of socioculture, while the third section describes how the concept relates to the framework of inequality research that I found useful and applied in my studies. Section four is devoted to an outline of the methodology to study sociocultures.

2. Classical approaches to inequality

Classical studies of inequality suffer from a number of problems. First, they usually focus on one dimension of inequality, mostly on economic indicators. Second, they take the frame of the nation state for granted. Third, they study the particular nation state at one given point in time. Fourth, they use the same conceptual apparatus for all societies. This apparatus is almost always generated with regard to a Western nation states*.

The influential studies by the World Bank (2016) are prime examples for an approach that suffers from these problems. In fact, public discourse, political decisions and even a major part of the academic discourse rely mostly on World Bank publications and related research. This work is mostly carried out by economists but sociological research on inequality often suffers from the same limitations, except that cultural factors are increasingly included, especially as far as formal education is concerned. Even Bourdieu, who introduced the concept of cultural capital into inequality research and into the wider discourse, considered economic factors to be the key indicators in inequality studies and limited his study to a survey at one given point in time (cf. Bourdieu 1984).

Ulrich Beck has called this way of looking at society in general and inequality in particular the "container model of society" (Beck 1997). The container model perceives society as a closed entity with a clear-cut stratified social structure and an inherent law of development (or modernization). Beck has argued that this model should be replaced in the age of globalization, since more and more social phenomena transgress the borders of the nation state. I agree but would add that the container model was only convincing – to a certain degree – in the twentieth century, after the nation state was fully established around the world. In the twentyfirst century, it is beginning to erode again.

According to the container model, individuals belong to one container, the nation state. Within this society they have unequal chances and resources. As many individuals share the same structure of chances and resources, they can be grouped into classes or strata. The first classical model of social structure was

* For the sake of simplicity, I will speak of the "West" when I refer to Western Europe and North America from colonial times onward. The correlating term I mostly use in this paper is "global South".

developed by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto (Marx and Engels, 1964: 474). According to their analysis, there are only two classes in a capitalist society, the owners of the means of production (capitalists) and the workers, who own no means of production apart from their body.

In the same text, Marx and Engels also hint at a different understanding of class. They distinguish between four classes, namely capitalists and labourers plus old middle class and "lumpenproletariat" (1964: 472). They also argue that the old middle class, which includes craftsmen and petty traders, is bound to disappear. This approach to class inspires the present argument, since it is historically oriented, refers to an empirical reality and acknowledges the relevance of culture in class. Edward P. Thompson (1963) has developed this understanding of class further by studying the "English working class" as a culture, a tradition line that presents a continuity over generations, while adapting to the current conditions.

To a certain degree, Max Weber (1972) studied inequality in the same vein. On the one hand, he identifies many groups that are neither capitalists nor workers; on the other hand, he claimed that other factors apart from occupation and wealth should be looked at. However, Weber abandoned neither the container model nor modernization theory, and in his analyses he focused on economic factors, such as occupation and wealth. The same is true for Marx and Engels and mostly even for Thompson.

In the decades following Max Weber, a more sophisticated look at social structure developed, in Anglo-Saxon countries with the school of Talcott Parsons and on the European continent mainly by Theodor Geiger (1932). They developed theories of stratification that follow Weber in his critique of Marx and elaborated complex models of social structure. However, they still adhered to the container model, modernization theory and the focus on profession and wealth.

Stratification theory became especially sophisticated in Germany. One of its leading representatives, Rainer Geißler (1996), presented a model of social structure that might serve as an ideal-type of the container model. It is derived from Ralf Dahrendorf's "house model", which very explicitly uses a particular container, the house, as its frame. According to Dahrendorf and Geißler, every room in the "house" of society is inhabited by one group. The basic criterion for the distribution of groups to their rooms is their occupation (Geißler 1996: 85). Apart from that, ethnicity, mentality, life-chances, and subcultures also play a role. Looking at Geißler's model, it immediately becomes evident that he – unlike Dahrendorf – cannot fit everyone in the house. He left migrants and foreigners as well as expats outside (1996: 87). And he also linked his model explicitly to modernization theory.

The container model is rooted in the Western liberal tradition. According to this tradition, society consists of formally equal individuals, while inequality results from regulated competition between them. Therefore, any type of privilege is based on individual merit. This means that inequality between individuals supposedly results from differences in achievement. As the individuals are regarded as biologically equal and socially endowed with equal rights at birth, liberalism assumes that they have the same opportunities. This is the main assumption of liberalism from Hobbes (1668) to Locke (1690) to Friedman (1962). Whoever is poor or humiliated, has to bear at least part of the blame. Whoever is rich or respected, has achieved this as an individual. This view of inequality seems to be reconfirmed by everyday observations. Even if we deny that we are all equal from birth and before the law, we seem to be individuals, who compete against each other for economic goods and have the chance "to make it".

The liberal view focuses on economic indicators. The competition supposedly is about economic factors, especially money. This is very explicit in any theory of economics since Adam Smith and even in most sociological or philosophical theories from Marx to Geißler. Human beings are disciplined to perform a particular, increasingly individualized function in the division of labour. Thereby, they contribute to the "wealth of nations" (Smith 1998). Each job and each remuneration is subject to competition between several individuals. This competition results in inequality: some win and some lose.

I wish to argue that inequality is not the result of competition but a consequence of structures that have their roots in precapitalist society. Theories of inequality and general discourses have assumed that the transformation of society to capitalism produced a complete rupture with the past. Right at the beginning of capitalism, the population suddenly consists of free and equal citizens. This presumably brings about a shift from a fixed hierarchy to an open system of differential rewards based on individual merit. According to this view, inequality results from competition on a market. Supposedly, capitalism is the highest form of the evolution of society, either absolutely or until being replaced by a more equal society, and is embodied in Western societies. Liberal and Marxist interpretations merely disagree in their assessment of the unequal distribution of capital.

I wish to argue that competition in a capitalist society, especially at the top, is not primarily about economic factors but about domination – or the social position. Economic factors are means in this competition but not ends. Furthermore, most social activities are not competitive and in most societies until the nineteenth century, there was no competition for economic goods or social positions, either because there was little inequality, as in small peasant or nomad communities, or because inequality was explicit and fixed right from the start, such as in precapitalist states. Finally, precapitalist structures of inequality persist even after the capitalist transformation, at least to a certain degree – and so do precapitalist structures of equality.

Since precapitalist structures differ significantly between nation states and almost never coincide with the border of the capitalist nation states, a single model is unlikely to fit all contemporary societies. On the one hand, the model needs to take the variety of precapitalist structures into account, on the other hand, the local criteria of inequality (beyond economic indicators) and the organization(s) of society have to be explained. In many cases, it helps to draw on indigenous terms and possibly local literature. I will demonstrate this in the final section of the paper.

3. A multidimensional and historical approach

In order to solve the problems with classical approaches to inequality, a multidimensional and historical approach has to be adopted. Classes or strata or income groups in capitalist societies develop out of precapitalist hierarchies. Apart from this, classes cannot be understood merely on the basis of capital but have to be viewed from the perspective of social practice as well. Practices are not created spontaneously but are passed on through training from one generation to the next. Thus, the dividing lines between the classes as well as class cultures are reproduced from one generation to the next and they comprise practices and ideas that are rooted in earlier and often precapitalist times.

Social structures, cultures and practices are subject to constant change and sometimes even revolutions. New institutions and discourses appear, old ones are done away with, crises and wars produce ruptures, governments change and unforeseen innovations take place. Some of these changes are so radical that they produce a new social hierarchy. I call such changes “transformations”. Transformations are closely related to revolutions but have to be distinguished from them. Wars, changes in the social organization and political interventions are more frequent than revolutions. Even though these changes are radical, they are only transformations and not creations *ex nihilo* because they build on earlier structures.

In spite of constant change and the occasional transformation, social structures are rather persistent. The value of a PhD or the reputation of a doctor do not disappear overnight. They may be re-assessed in a new framework but they are not simply done away with. This is even more true for the institution of the PhD or the profession of a doctor in general and even more so for the entire system of education and the entire professional structure. The most basic structure is the social structure itself. Since the emergence of the state, social structures have mostly been hierarchical, since they are systems of domination (Jodhka et al., 2017). However, non-hierarchical structure have persisted to some degree as well.

The persistence of previous structures is the core idea of the concept “socioculture”. In contrast to the container model, which interprets society as a homogeneous order, the concept of socioculture points to the coexistence of multiple orders of society, which originated in different historical times. Any social structure has a long history, which influences the present and remains visible to a certain degree. Its current form blends transformed and persisting elements with new elements. This is also true for society at large. We can think of society as a mountain consisting of layers of sediments.

Any transformation creates a new layer, a new social structure. But its shape is contingent on the existing layers. And these layers persist underneath the surface. In a European society, we have institutions and structures that originated in Roman times, in the Middle Ages, during the Renaissance or early modernity. Think of legal corpora, the Church, guilds, banks, trade unions and the like. These are important institutions that even play structural roles in European societies but originated in earlier forms of society and do not fully comply with the present.

No contemporary society complies with the container model even though basically the entire world population has been divided into nation states. The most recent major transformation, the capitalist transformation, did not erase precapitalist structures of society. To the contrary, the transformation was

informed by these structures and they partly persist up to this day. This also means that precapitalist inequalities partly persist.

The capitalist transformation creates a similar surface everywhere but takes place under different historical conditions. All societies and nation states have different histories, precapitalist structures and therefore different sociocultures. This also means that they differ in their configurations of inequality. The most important factor is the role of colonialism. In this regard, we can distinguish between three types of capitalist states. The states, in which a bourgeois revolution introduced capitalism and democracy, have transformed precapitalist structures by successively integrating the lower ranks. In contrast, some of the former colonies were dominated by descendants of the former colonizers, who formed the ruling classes of the now independent states, especially in the Americas. The native peoples were partly killed and partly integrated as lower classes along with the former slaves. The third type are former colonies that transformed the precolonial and colonial structures directly into unequal democracies, especially in Asia.

After the transformation, capitalist societies in Europe only comprised a few privileged groups and successively integrated the entire population, mainly due to protests and revolutions. Capitalism does bring about a complete break with the past. New occupations and social categories come into being, but they do not necessarily erase older standards of evaluation. The old and new co-exist, and often reinforce each other. The excluded groups are integrated unequally but we do not see this unequal integration because we do not look at the continuities from precapitalist times to the present.

In many former colonies of Asia and Africa, the populations were declared equal citizens with independence. The preceding structures of inequality were immediately transformed into capitalist structures. Linked to revolutionary struggles, there was more socioeconomic mobility in the newly independent states than would have been possible at any moment in the history of Western societies. At the same time, persisting inequalities were rendered invisible much faster because underprivileged groups were formally equal right from the start. The capitalist transformation has not been completed in many societies of the global South.

The transformation does not significantly reshuffle the conditions for participating in capitalism and democracy. The distribution of resources has mostly remained the same as in precapitalist society. A few revolutionaries and entrepreneurs have moved to the top but in general, the peasants have remained poor, uneducated, despised, powerless and marginalized, while the aristocrats have kept their land, wealth and honor. Formally, these structures have been abolished in almost all capitalist societies. This has rendered their reproduction even more efficient because they are invisible.

To interpret a Lao village in the same conceptual framework as a European democracy is as misleading as interpreting France in terms of caste. This is not how these societies work. A village can be a society, just like a nationstate or a cultural space. Often, different conceptions (and limits) of society co-exist, since they belong to different sociocultures. This is exactly how we have to understand caste in India or village life in rural Laos. India consists of several sociocultures: a huge variety of village societies, integrated precolonial states (ranging from republics to kingdoms, many of which remained independent under colonialism), the caste system as re-constructed by British colonialism, the socialist postcolonial state and contemporary capitalism. All are relevant, all shape actual practices and all have different reach.

Especially in postcolonial societies, sociocultures with different and even contradictory ideas of society can co-exist. This is due to the fact that pre-capitalist sociocultures clash with capitalism and naturalism, which were imported or usually forcefully imposed from the outside. In many ways, a hierarchy of sociocultures emerges, in which capitalism is dominant. The dominant groups in a particular contemporary nation state mostly base their power on capitalist structures and institutions. Often, however, co-existence and ambiguity of sociocultures are the result. Even in early childhood, people in the global South may alternate between lifeworlds that are rooted in different sociocultures. Aspects of mutually exclusive sociocultures become thus incorporated in a single *habitus*. This has been demonstrated very clearly with regard to societies like Thailand, Laos or India (see the contributions in Baumann and Bultmann, 2020).

Language also proves this point. We have national languages, which are supposed to have clear and binding grammar. However, many of these languages are also used outside the borders and thereby the jurisdiction of the nationstate. Many linguistic practices within a state does not comply with official rules but to conventions of a smaller social unit, such as a subculture, profession, regional dialect or married couple. Such languages are often difficult to understand and to acquire for outsiders. However, they have a grammar

and a stability just like a national language. With regard to the Lao language, it has been shown that the varieties of spoken language correspond exactly to existing sociocultures (Rehbein and Sayaseng, 2004).

Varieties of language can be used as empirical indicators of sociocultures. In this regard, I strongly agree with the so-called linguistic relativism of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Benjamin Lee Whorf. These theories match my approach to sociocultures since they suppose socially constructed, subconscious, differentiated and practice-oriented character of language. Another theory that fits my notion of socioculture very well is Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of language game. Wittgenstein (1984) argues that practice rarely follows explicit rules but develops like a game, especially like a children's game. Such games do not form a coherent system either, they rather form a multitude of somewhat systematic entities, which Wittgenstein calls "life forms" (1984: aphorism 23). Language games are context-specific. Most individual actions are merely repetitions of a larger unit. The same is true for many smaller social environments. However, an individual action or a small subculture may transform a larger social unit or even all of humankind.

Wittgenstein considers the language games to be rather free creations of "playing" individuals. I would rather point to their historical path dependency. Language games do not appear out of the blue but develop out of historical structures. These earlier structures are sedimented in the present as sociocultures. The sociocultures pre-configure the possibilities of the present. However, sociocultures do not form a neat progression toward the present as in theories of modernization but they co-exist, intermingle and play out in different layers of meaning and different contexts in a complex and largely unpredictable web, very much like Wittgenstein's language games.

The multitude of language games can be traced to a small variety of sociocultures. Especially with regard to inequality, their variation within a society is limited. It is greatest with regard to small communities, such as villages. Nation states, however, have not developed radically different hierarchies. It would be a challenge to study all local sociocultures of the world, while the variety of capitalist surfaces is not very large. At the same time, local sociocultures have been influenced by more encompassing hierarchies, especially by capitalism. More encompassing structures emerge and integrate the large variety of local sociocultures. This increasingly weakens the wide variety of local structures but does not entirely erase them.

4. *Habitus* and capital

If we acknowledge that earlier social structures persist as sociocultures, we cannot understand inequality in contemporary societies by studying indicators that are only valid or even existent in capitalist society, namely income, profession and wealth. Even within the capitalist framework, this approach is a gross simplification, as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has shown. Therefore, I propose to follow Bourdieu's critique. However, we have to go beyond Bourdieu, since he restricted his approach to capitalist societies – even though he clearly pointed to the phenomenon that I call socioculture in his studies on Algeria (1979).

Even in a capitalist society, Bourdieu (1984) has argued, inequality goes beyond the distribution of economic goods and money but also by the distribution of other forms of capital and *habitus* as well as by the historical development of society and ensuing sociocultures. According to Bourdieu, capital comprises all valuable resources that are necessary to perform competitive actions in society, whereas *habitus* refers to the embodied patterns of action that are intelligible and acceptable in the society. Social inequality, as opposed to economic inequality, signifies the differential access to activities, positions and goods that are valued in society.

The disposal of capital is not so much a result of competition but a heritage that is reproduced from one generation to the next. In capitalist societies, the heritage is passed on within boundaries of social classes (Jodhka et al., 2017). Against this background, we defined social class as a tradition line with a common culture which reproduces itself from one generation to the next by passing on relevant capital and symbolically distinguishing itself from other classes (ibid.: 20). Edward P. Thompson (1963) has demonstrated the existence of a social class and its common culture. We can operationalize social class by establishing the limits of social mobility within a nation state, which are the boundaries of a social class. Mobility within a class can be high but across class lines almost non-existent (Jodhka et al., 2017).

However, social classes only exist in capitalist societies and become the most important element of stratification only after some time. In other societies, many precapitalist structures of inequality persist that have to be interpreted within the particular framework of history, culture and social configurations. This is

what the concept of socioculture refers to. Strata in earlier hierarchies are the predecessors and the foundation of contemporary social classes. It is important to note that the notions of socioculture and capitalist transformation do not imply any type of modernization theory but merely reflect the fact that almost all societies on the globe have adopted some form of capitalism.

In a capitalist society, resources are needed to access valuable goods, positions and activities. Bourdieu (1984) studied the unequal distribution of resources in a systematic and sociological way and referred to them as "capital". The distribution of capital is the main determinant of a capitalist society's social structure in terms of social classes. Bourdieu distinguished between four types of capital, namely economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. Any analysis of inequality has to consider not only the total amount of capital but also the relative strength of each type of capital and the history of their acquisition (Bourdieu, 1984: 109).

A new rich may illustrate why Bourdieu went beyond economic capital. The new rich may have more wealth than his aristocratic neighbour but he will not make many friends in the neighbourhood and not be admitted to the golf club and therefore remain an outsider. Apart from this, he lacks social capital or the socially relevant networks. He has not learnt how to behave correctly in these circles, he does not possess any old pieces of art handed down from previous generations and he did not attend one of the elite schools that all the neighbours have frequented and used to form their social networks. He lacks cultural capital or the appropriate practical skills, cultural objects and educational titles. Finally, his family name is not known to the neighbours and he does not have any honorary titles that would be appreciated in the neighbourhood. He lacks symbolic capital.

The examples to illustrate the four types of capital identified by Bourdieu obviously have a European bias. Especially cultural capital is assessed very differently in Laos than in Europe, while social and symbolic capital are constituted in a different way. However, the general categories remain surprisingly close to those in European societies. This is due to the fact that all societies have experienced the capitalist transformation to some degree. But capital is only a relevant concept with regard to capitalist societies. To claim that subsistence peasants compete for some kind of capital, is utter nonsense, and in a feudal society, people are born in a certain rank, which they supposedly cannot leave. Since there are remnants of feudal society in contemporary Europe and remnants of peasant structures in many societies around the world, capital does not explain all aspects of inequality.

Much more relevant for the study of sociocultures is Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which refers to the tendency to act in the way that one has learnt to act (Bourdieu 1990). If a form of behaviour is repeated many times, it has the tendency to become a stable pattern. This pattern acquired in a particular context is re-activated when a similar situation arises. In a mostly stable environment, a stable pattern for activity is acquired and incorporated. That implies a standardization with regards to scenarios of use and a somatization of segments of actions. *Habitus* is a psychosomatic memory.

Practices, according to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, are neither spontaneous nor predetermined; rather, they are the result of a connection between disposition and context. For Bourdieu (1984), the contexts refer mainly to the social environment. Dispositions are generated in particular social conditions and produce expectations, which are adapted to these conditions. Since the context of learning is that of a particular historical period and of a particular culture, e.g. a class culture, each *habitus* incorporates many elements of that time and culture, or of a socioculture.

According to Bourdieu (1984), all of the activities a person engages in are similar to one another. The *habitus* establishes something like a style. At the same time, the *habitus* represents a structuring of existence, an element of a life-form and a social resource. Because social structures are imprinted on the *habitus*, it tends to reproduce these structures, especially in those cases in which the present social environment and the conditions from which the *habitus* arose are identical. Conditions and *habitus* are based on similar and sometimes identical social structures. The *habitus* not only tends to reproduce earlier practices but seeks conditions which correspond to its generation – mainly because it is shaped for these conditions. The explanation of a practice is a reconstruction of the precise correlation between the conditions, under which a *habitus* was formed, and the conditions of its application. This means that the application can change the social structures but only if the *habitus* does not fully coincide with them.

The conditions for the generation and application of a *habitus* are in many ways not singular but are instead valid for various people, groups and classes. The conditions are at least to a certain extent homogeneous in a particular social environment. Within a group, homologous conditions prevail; therefore,

habitus are also homologous. Against this background, Bourdieu attempted to deduce the behavior of a social group from its social conditions of existence. In his most famous book, *Distinction* (1984), he argued that even the very subjective taste – for food, art and even manners – was rooted in the *habitus* and could thereby be explained by the study of the conditions of existence of a social group.

This line of argument presupposes a unity of the *habitus* and a relative homogeneity of the conditions of its application. The presuppositions only apply if a person acts the same way in the same situations and only if all members of the social group have a similar life course. Both presuppositions are dubious. The human is fragmented, inconsistent and diverse (Lahire, 1998). Regarding the human as a homogeneous entity with a singular identity is rooted in the liberal tradition of individualism. This view of the human being also makes it difficult to interpret sociocultures. If society comprises remnants from earlier historical times, neither the social structure nor the *habitus* is homogeneous.

This has two implications. First, there are *habitus* types in society that belong to different historical formations or sociocultures. A subsistence peasant does not compete for capital but seeks to produce enough food until the next harvest (Scott, 1976). There is no competition between the peasants of a village, since most of them would be relatives, so that family determines the social position. Second, very few *habitus* types in a capitalist society are “pure”. They rather comprise elements from earlier historical formations or sociocultures. This is very evident in rapidly transforming societies like Laos or India.

Bourdieu never explained how society is actually embodied in the *habitus*. His concept has not been operationalized. I actually consider it impossible to operationalize the *habitus* in the way that it has been used by Bourdieu. This is partly due to the fact that he never defined a scope of explanation for the concept of *habitus*. It seems that any action can be explained by the *habitus* and that the *habitus* comprises all dispositions of a person. Since it is obvious that there are deviations and conscious decisions, Bourdieu simply claimed that human beings act unconsciously and mechanically in “three quarters” of all actions (1984: 783). This imprecise use of the concept leads, on the one hand, to very weak correlations between explanation and observation in his work. On the other hand, the social person and the social group are reduced to one uniform *habitus* type.

The imprecision is compounded by the fact that Bourdieu seems to apply the concept of *habitus* to all societies and all contexts. In the end, the notions of *habitus* and person become co-extensive. However, if a society is little differentiated, such as Lao peasant villages, it makes little sense to apply the concept of *habitus* sociologically because the social conditions are pretty identical for everyone. This implies that there is only one *habitus* and no social distinction. And this, in turn, means that there is nothing for the concept of *habitus* to explain, since the description of the social conditions would render any term mediating between structures and actions superfluous when dealing with social inequality.

Therefore, the concept should be restricted to differentiated societies. I would even suggest to use it only with regard to capitalist societies, since they combine a structure of social classes with the principle of social mobility. A *habitus* is characteristic for a particular social class but can vary within it and can change, at least to some degree, over life time. The concept of *habitus* is then used to explain why behaviour can vary within a seemingly homogeneous group. The explanation would have to trace how differences arise on the basis of differences in the formation of dispositions during the life course.

In addition, I would define limits for the 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*, as Bourdieu (1984) has attempted, since life-styles are complex, partly conscious and rather fluid, while they are not as relevant to the explanation of social structure as more basic elements of the *habitus*. I suggest to only aim at deeply incorporated social attitudes, which are hardly accessible to conscious modification and are usually acquired in early childhood. These are the dispositions that are relevant for sociocultures. The social environment of early childhood is ordinarily that of the parents and it conveys attitudes such as varying degrees or lack of self-confidence, independence, a sense for education and culture, ambition and discipline. I subsume such attitudes under the term “primary *habitus*”.

5. Methodology

In terms of methodology, the study of sociocultures has to combine sociological research of the present with historical studies. More precisely, qualitative interviews are coupled with an approach that could be called

genealogical. Since Bourdieu himself never proposed a methodology to study *habitus*, we have to draw on other authors. My methodology is inspired by Vester et al. (2001), Lange-Vester and Teiwes-Kuegler (2013) and Bohnsack (2014), all of whom aimed at establishing a method of empirically studying the *habitus*. The analysis of precapitalist sociocultures makes use of the work by Geiger (1932), Thompson (1963) and Vester et al. (2001). It has to combine historical research with ethnographic and life-course research. All of these methodologies were developed for the study of Europe and had to be adapted for my studies of non-European societies.

The qualitative interview asks the interviewee for a structured narrative of his or her life course. The approach makes use of the double character of an interview as a social practice and a source of information about the emergence of the *habitus* in the interviewee's childhood and his or her family of origin. This delivers important information about the roots of the *habitus*, the tradition line and sociocultures. At the same time, 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. The categories in turn are closely related to the primary *habitus*. The interview is expected to reveal aspects of primary *habitus*, since the interviewee is performing his or her *habitus*. In addition, the interviewee presents information about his or her family of origin. Both, the *habitus* and the information, point to tradition lines and to sociocultures.

The double function of the interview as practice and source of information has been pointed out by Karl Mannheim, who distinguished between what- and how-meaning (1964: 104). Whereas the what-meaning refers to the information given in the discourse and its intentionality, the how-meaning refers to the pragmatic dimension of the way things are said – or the *habitus*. Mannheim drew the consequence of interpreting a discourse as a social practice by pointing to the fact that people might lie or misremember with reference to facts but not with reference to the action itself or the *habitus*. Sociological interpretation, according to Mannheim, could therefore use the interview or any other type of discourse as an expression of the *habitus*.

Mannheim's approach has been developed into a sophisticated methodology by Ralf Bohnsack (2014) as a procedure to study Bourdieu's *habitus*. His "documentary method" aims at the construction of *habitus* types in an inductive way, often on the basis of interviews. The interpretation of the interviews is carried out by a group performing a sequence analysis, i.e. discussing the interview sentence by sentence. This methodology is closely related to other qualitative methods, especially *habitus* hermeneutic (Vester-Lange and Teiwes Kuegler, 2013), which also draws on Bourdieu. I combine Bohnsack's inductive approach with the procedure of type formation developed by the *habitus* hermeneutic.

Sociocultures are mainly theoretical constructions, even though they are rooted in historical formations. Their study involves four steps. The first step of the research on sociocultures consists in historical study. To begin with, the most significant breaks or transformations of the recent past are to be identified along with their particular effects. This leads to hypotheses about changes in the social fabric, such as the emigration of a particular social group, the takeover of another group or a massive change in the division of labour. Each period before and after a significant transformation is a (hypothetical) socioculture. Ethnographic literature on the particular socioculture in the relevant time frames can complement the historical information.

The second step aims at generating hypotheses about the hierarchical structures in each period that persist as sociocultures in contemporary society. With regard to some societies, such as Germany, good and reliable literature about these hierarchies is available. On this basis, the German classes can be traced in their transformation from the 1920s (Geiger, 1932) to the 1980s (Vester et al., 2001) to the present (Rehbein et al., 2015). In the case of these books, the theoretical and methodological foundations of each study were similar. For most societies, this type of literature is not available, however. Therefore, hypotheses have to be generated on the basis of heterogeneous materials.

In the third step of studying sociocultures, these hypotheses have to be tested by tracing the sediments of the earlier sociocultures in contemporary *habitus*. This is possible since some aspects of the primary *habitus* were passed on from at least one earlier generation, which has incorporated the structures of earlier historical times. It may be possible to go back in time a century or more, as the oldest possible interviewees acquired their primary *habitus* up to around 90 years ago from their parents. An additional source of information is language. It has been shown that the sociocultures in Laos correspond with sociolects, especially terms of address (Rehbein, 2007, 2017). An analysis of sociolects used in the interviews

from the other nation states should reveal similar results. The analysis will focus on terms of address and other linguistic items that refer to social hierarchies and structures.

The hypotheses are to be linked, in the fourth step, to the construction of "family microcultures" (Bertaux, 1995). Bertaux starts from the same assumption as this project, namely that important aspects of the primary *habitus* are passed on from one generation to the next. The comparison of several *habitus* from the same family allows to generate a hypothesis about characteristic *habitus* traits of that particular family. Ideally, several members of the same family from different generations are interviewed. Even if this is not possible, the information given in a particular life-course interview about close family members can contribute to the identification of characteristics. Therefore, the interview has to contain as much qualitative information about earlier generations of the same family as possible. In addition, information on marriage and partnership will be processed, since a high degree of endogamy within classes and sociocultural groups could be observed in Laos as well as in Germany (Rehbein et al., 2015: 23).

The information generated by the study of sociocultures has to be connected to macro-hypotheses generated by historical research. A hypothesis on sociocultures in a particular contemporary society can be generated by linking sociocultures to *habitus* and capital in contemporary society. The hypothesis can be tested by various means. One possibility is the use of multivariate analyses, such as multiple correspondence analysis. These instruments show clusters that tend to represent sociocultures (e.g. Rehbein, 2017: 66). Another option is to study linguistic practices in order to identify language games and sociolects, which tend to correspond to sociocultures as well (e.g. Rehbein, 2007: 88-98).

6. A case study of Laos

Of course, Laos is a suitable case to demonstrate the application of the concept of socioculture. It has experienced two major transformations in the late twentieth century, which means that many people alive today witnessed at least one of them. These are the takeover of the communist party in 1975 and the gradual introduction of capitalism from 1986. Even many people who were born after 1986 grew up in social environments that corresponded more to a socialist or a peasant society than to capitalism.

Laos comprised thousands of villages from six ethno-linguistic families before many of them came under the domination of towns and, later, cities. The relationships of inequality between persons and the political structures were not territorial in nature. Neighbouring villages could belong to different structures and move back and forth between them. This structure has been referred to with the Indian term "mandala" and it can be found all over Southeast Asia (Wolters, 1982). This is an example for a structure that did not exist in the West, can be appropriately grasped with an indigenous term and reaches beyond the nation state.

In 1893, the multitude of political entities came under French colonial rule. The territory began to be called "Laos" from that time onwards. Laos experienced several declarations of independence until it finally was liberated in 1975 by a socialist movement and came under the rule of a communist party (Lao People's Revolutionary Party). It started a transition to a market economy in 1986. However, it is not the outcome of a competition between free and equal individuals on a level playing field. We rather see that the leadership of the communist party intermarries with members of the pre-socialist elites and the new capitalists, while engaging in capitalist activities itself. Many of the family names that appear in the pre-socialist elites and among the leaders of the revolution figure on the lists of the largest owners of economic capital today.

A more detailed analysis reveals that contemporary inequality is rooted in the hierarchies that existed before the revolution and under socialism. Mandala, socialism and capitalism form three distinct sociocultures today (see Table 1) even though most people have a *habitus* that comprises components of all three. The pre-socialist hierarchy was basically identical with the mandala social structure, consisting of ethnic minorities outside the structure, peasants, urban population and nobility. The socialist hierarchy is composed of (party) ranks: village cadres, administration and party leadership. The capitalist hierarchy comprises the marginalized class (unemployed, beggars, day laborers), the working class, commercial farmers and traders, the new urban middle class and the capitalists. The three types of hierarchy co-exist but they slowly merge into the capitalist structure.

The socialist revolution offered social mobility to peasants from all ethnic groups but this mobility stopped once the socialist hierarchy was established. The transition to a market economy opened up

business opportunities and thereby some social mobility but most of the new entrepreneurs were members of the old and new elites as well as businesspeople from the neighboring countries. The majority of Laotians remain in the professional group of their parents. In contemporary Laos, the fathers of most peasants today were peasants themselves, while almost half of the state employees had a father, who was a state employee (Rehbein, 2017). The same tendency to reproduce the family's social position is visible in education. If the father occupied a higher social position, his children inevitably have a high level of education. In contrast, almost all those who have primary education or less are children with a rural or lower class background. This illustrates the emergence and continuation of tradition lines, which begin to transform into social classes.

Table 1. Sociocultures in Laos. Source: Own elaboration

Dominant class		
Patrimonial elites	Party cadres	Urban middle class
	Administration	Commercial farmers
Peasants	Rural party	Labourers
Minorities		Marginalized

7. Conclusions

The paper sought to introduce and explicate the concept "socioculture". The concept refers to social structures that developed in earlier historical times but partly persist in the present and partly shape later social structures. It is relevant in understanding inequality even in capitalist societies that appear to be creations ex nihilo in the liberal tradition and in the established studies of inequality. The concept may not be as useful in studying economic inequality but certainly helps in understanding social inequality, which is always multidimensional and cannot be separated from history and culture.

Its application was demonstrated with regard to the case of Laos, which is the nation state I know best through my studies. One may argue that the concept becomes dispensable in completely "modern" or capitalist societies, since they are homogeneous. To some degree, this is true but our understanding of these societies is significantly improved as well when we introduce the historical dimension, more precisely the concept of socioculture. We have shown this with regard to Germany (Rehbein et al., 2015).

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