Do Western Sociological Concepts Apply Globally? Towards a Global Sociology

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Abstract
The post-colonial debate challenges the self-certainty of sociology and the suggested universality of its theoretical premises. This has led to calls to provincialize sociological theories and concepts and include perspectives from the South. Thus, we need to ask whether sociological concepts apply globally. Burawoy’s notion of a professional ‘global sociology’ offers a starting point for provincializing sociological concepts without giving up their global applicability. The problems involved in applying the core sociological category of class to Kenya show that classical sociological concepts may be inadequate for analysing societies outside the European and North American context. For the analysis of inequality, we need a more open and empirically founded concept in which the classical notion of class describes just a particular pattern of social structure. For the development of sociological concepts, we always require a broad empirical and intercultural basis in order not to be caught in the trap of Eurocentrism.

Keywords
class, global sociology, inequality, post-colonial critique, provincialization, social structure, sociological concepts

Introduction
In the 1980s and 1990s, the debates on ‘post-modernity’, ‘post-development’ and ‘post-colonialism’ challenged particularly cultural studies and the social sciences. From different perspectives, it was asked whether academic theories and concepts developed mainly in Europe and North America, and resulting political programmes, could claim universal applicability. While the post-development critique (Escobar, 1995; Esteva et al., 2013) reaches only certain specialists in development, the post-modern debate influenced the social sciences from the 1990s. Proponents of post-modern theories criticize that
mainstream academia bases its ideas on a specific rationality that was formed in Europe at the time of the Enlightenment, and shaped European modernity. They argue that this is to ignore the variety of human ideas, human ways of thinking and the many-faceted practices of human societies. The fundamental criticism of post-colonialism grew up at some distance from sociology, mainly in literary and historical studies (Chakrabarty, 1992; Spivak, 1988). Only much later did Bhambra (2007), Connell (2007) and others (Boatcă, 2015; Randeria, 2006) raise awareness within sociology of the fact that, like other social sciences, sociology came into existence in the context of imperialism, colonialism and slavery. According to Bhambra (2007) and Connell (2007), sociologists ignore this origin of their discipline. They have a narrow perspective which does not recognize the fundamental fact that social developments are interdependent and result in global inequalities that include social science in general, and sociology in particular. This is obvious in the dominance of Europe and North America in science and university systems. Even more important is that a classical canon of sociological theories developed in the USA dominates sociological thinking, theories in which the South seldom plays a role (Connell, 2007: ch. 1; on Africa, see Sitas, 2014: 460f). According to this view, sociology and its epistemology was, and still is, a kind of ethno-sociology of the ‘metropoles’ (Connell, 2007: 226), or, as Hildebrandt (1996: 7) puts it, a ‘“regionalist bisected rationality” that understands itself and its social conditions as the goal and climax of a world-historical process’ (my translation). This leads to the question whether concepts developed in and for Europe and North America, or what we may call ‘western concepts’, can be applied globally. The short answer given by Chakrabarty (1992), and taken up by Bhambra (2007: 146) and others (Burawoy, 2010: 24; Patel, 2014), is that we need to provincialize our theories and the underlying epistemology, and open our minds up for theories and epistemologies from the South (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012; Connell, 2007; de Sousa Santos, 2015). There are a few overlapping suggestions for ways to reconfigure sociology, epistemology and the science system, such as ‘dirty theory’ (Connell), ‘global sociology’ (Burawoy) or ‘connected sociologies’ (Bhambra). These will be briefly discussed in the following section (‘Approaches to Provincializing Sociology’). The main point of this article is a much more humble enterprise. I wish to show that sociological concepts need to be, and can be, provincialized by using empirical findings from non-metropolitan areas, and that they can be made applicable globally by considering particular social, economic, political and historical contexts, keeping in mind that sociology needs to develop analytical methods that can be applied to different contexts beyond national sociologies (Patel, 2014: 609). My example is ‘class’, one of the core categories of sociology, which, like race or gender, points to inequality. As we will see, classical class concepts, as well as the mainstream understanding of class, are not able to describe social inequality appropriately in an African country like Kenya (‘The Applicability of the Concept of Class in Africa South of the Sahara’). To capture the structures of inequality we need a much more nuanced concept (‘“Social Situations”: The Structure of Social Inequality in Kenya’). Obviously, this will not touch the basics of epistemology, or a revision of the science system, but it highlights the fact that even such a simple term as class needs to be provincialized. It shows that our sociological concepts, which generally originate from Europe or North America, always need to be critically reflected on against a wider empirical background.
Approaches to Provincializing Sociology

The radical post-modern critique of social science epistemology has fuelled the ongoing debate on modernity. Post-modernists have criticized the key sociological concept of modernity, with its deterministic programme of social and economic transformation leading to the one and only universal and rational modernity (Denzin, 1986; Lyotard, 1984). Despite its sceptical attitude towards post-modernity (Bauman, 1988), the deterministic concept of modernity has given way to new concepts such as ‘second modernity’ with a ‘cosmopolitan turn’ (Beck, 2000), ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck et al., 2003; Giddens, 1990), ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000) or ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt, 2002). They all have in common that they want to maintain the concept of modernity, but with radically different understandings of it. They abstain from a more or less naive belief in the promises of a unified modernity, and argue that modernity is an open-ended and ambivalent process of social change.

These revised understandings have also been under scrutiny by the more fundamental post-colonial critique. Bhambra (2007: 2, 66, 68) has explicitly criticized Eisenstadt’s (2002) multiple modernity as a Eurocentric cultural programme, with its ignorance of the link between enlightenment and colonialism, and also Giddens’ reference to the European roots of modernity; she also argues that Beck’s cosmopolitan turn still focuses on Europe and North America (Bhambra, 2014a: 77). Connell (2007: 34–37) shows that Giddens transcends binary dichotomies but still ignores colonization. Connell and Bhambra argue that coloniality, and the resulting entanglements between Europe, North America and the South, are missing elements in the classical canon.

Against this background there are approaches that present alternatives for sociological thinking, and promise to overcome the restrictions of the classical canon. Connell proposes a ‘dirty theory’. Taking examples from Africa, the Islamic world, India and the Aborigines in Australia, she underlines the importance of local epistemologies and local knowledge. She envisions a ‘capacity for generalisation’ leading to ‘one theory’ that needs to overcome being an ethno-sociology of the metropoles (Connell, 2007: 224–227). Her aim is not to develop a pure theory but ‘to maximise the wealth of materials that are drawn into the analysis of explanation’ (Connell, 2007: 207). De Sousa Santos (2015) follows this line with a more political focus on the epistemologies of social movements.1

Michael Burawoy (2010) also criticizes ethnocentrism in mainstream sociology. He underlines the ongoing context of inequality and domination, and the western – or in his wording ‘metropolitan’ – hegemony, and offers a pragmatic way out of the epistemological dilemma. Burawoy (2010: 6) starts from global inequalities in the science system and argues, following Connell (2007), that the metropolitan mainstream hegemony goes beyond old colonial structures and still suppresses other perspectives from the Global South, as well as from parts of Europe, Australia and other parts of the world. He proposes a ‘global sociology’. This should not lead to a homogenizing metropolitan sociology but should be understood as sociology from below, a sociology that includes voices and empirical findings from all parts of the world, and which accepts that metropolitan sociology and the sociology of the South are heterogeneous and not easy to separate. He emphasizes the diversity of approaches and perspectives. The starting point is national
sociologies. These investigate their societies not as isolated national containers, but as situated in a global society with all the existing entanglements and inequalities. These analyses provide the building blocks of a wider mosaic of global sociology (Burawoy, 2010: 4): ‘If one way to resist the false universalism of metropolitan hegemony is to build robust national sociologies throughout the South, another way is to nationalize or “provincialize” Northern sociology’ (Burawoy, 2010: 23f). According to Burawoy, the national sociologies share a common professionalism; they are ‘professional sociology’ with a critical and political self-conception (Burawoy, 2010: 20–24). There are studies that follow this proposal (Burawoy et al., 2010), and other contributions that underline the impressive diversity of social phenomena (e.g. Luthfa, 2017; Qi, 2017). While it is important to focus on empirical data from the field, we should not forget that global sociology includes comparative, regional and transnational studies (Nederveen Pieterse, 2009: 31).

With her approach based on ‘connected sociologies’, Gurminder Bhambra calls for an even more radical change within sociology, with a new epistemology reflecting the fact that the history of mainstream sociology is deeply linked to ‘colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation’ (Bhambra and de Sousa Santos, 2017: 6). This legacy is the historical connection between the North and the colonized South, which shaped the discipline of sociology and its general social theories. From this standpoint, other attempts to create a new sociology do not go far enough. She criticizes Burawoy because he does not ‘address the adequacy of sociological categories for thinking about the global’ (Bhambra, 2014a: 112).

This very brief overview shows that, despite their different focuses, these approaches reflect the main argument of the post-colonial critique: the connections between Europe, North America and the South are too often ignored. The resulting epistemology represents only perspectives from metropoles, cementing continuing inequalities, including in the science system, and ignores the fact that the South is not represented in the classical sociological canon. Whereas Bhambra is mainly concerned with the big question of sociological theory, Connell and Burawoy offer pragmatic suggestions for empirical research.

Post-colonial approaches are confronted with the tension between different theories and the underlying epistemologies. The question of the validity of theories compared to other types of knowledge has been the subject of much discussion. In the foreword of the German edition of Berger and Luckmann’s *Social Construction of Reality*, Plessner (1980: XIV) writes: ‘in sociological eyes, philosophy and ideology have at first sight no more power of conviction than the worthy occupation of rainmaking in primitive societies’ (my translation). Burawoy’s (2010) answer of a ‘professional sociology’ is reminiscent of a much earlier debate concerning the sociology of knowledge. Alfred Schütz (1967) asks how man-made science can claim to know more than people do in their daily lives. He observes that, when analysing common-sense knowledge, social science argues at a special analytical level that transcends common-sense knowledge and thus goes beyond lifeworld-specific everyday knowledge, and he develops special quality criteria for this analysis. The potential tension between local or indigenous knowledge and science is also an important topic in the reasoning of Paulin Hountondji, one of the main authors from the South (Burawoy, 2010: 13; Connell, 2007: 101–105; Patel, 2014: 605). Despite the obvious inequalities, and what he calls ‘the extraversion’ of African science,
he has a clear answer and calls for one science and one rationality, which should not be divided into different culturally based sciences, or into an African and a western science (Hountondji, 1996: ch. 3, 2007).

I will not join the ongoing discussion on the development of a new epistemology that can overcome the existing inequality between Europe and North America, on the one hand, and the South, on the other. Nor will I attempt to respond to Bhambra’s call for a radical new sociology. I simply ask – following Burawoy – how can we use empirical research to provincialize Eurocentric sociological concepts. For this task we need to widen our empirical focus beyond the European and North American bubble and use insights from other areas to expand the classical sociological canon (Connell, 2007; Sitas, 2014). In a way, this follows in the footsteps of the very early classics, like Weber and Durkheim, who used material from different parts of the world. The crucial difference is that now non-European material no longer stands for ‘tradition’ or for ‘savages’, as in colonial anthropology. Our empirical data simply come from parts of the contemporary world that have been widely ignored by sociology. With regard to Africa, Sitas mentions area studies as a kind of pioneer for this strategy. The empirical and conceptual findings of area studies have been largely ignored by mainstream sociology (Sitas, 2014: 459). Yet inclusion of these findings is absolutely necessary for a ‘global sociology’ that needs a variety of societies for the development of its concepts and theories. This has already been done by Fanon and Amin, who have further developed Marxian theories with reference to Africa (Patel, 2014: 611). In the following section, following Sitas’ advice, I will take a critical look at the applicability of the sociological core category of ‘class’ for analysing inequality, using an example from Africa: Kenya.

The Applicability of the Concept of Class in Africa South of the Sahara

For the purpose of examining the global applicability of sociological concepts, the notion of ‘class’ as the crucial category for the analysis of socio-economic inequality is a very interesting example. After a long period of neglect, the term class has become fashionable again, even among economists, partly thanks to Piketty’s book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014). In sociology and economy there are renewed debates on the middle class (Stiglitz, 2013; Therborn, 2012; for the Global South AfDB, 2011; Banerjee and Duflo, 2008). Social science scholars from African studies are at least sceptical as to whether the concept of ‘middle class’ can be applied to Africa (Darbo, 2014; Melber, 2017; Neubert, 2014). Along this path, I will show that class, in the way it is understood in sociology, is not appropriate for an analysis of inequality in Africa south of the Sahara.

Marx and Weber laid the foundation of this sociological concept by referring to control over the means of production (Marx and Engels, 1906), or ‘relative control over goods and skills’ and corresponding opportunities to earn an income (Weber, 1978: 302). Despite ongoing theoretical debates that include notions of culture (for an overview, see Grusky, 2000; Savage, 2005), most mainstream empirical studies use a socio-economic descriptive concept with a focus on income, occupation and education (Haller, 2000). If we want to take the premises of global sociology seriously, with the intention of
provincializing its concepts, we must see that the existence of classes constituted along these classical criteria is an empirical matter. I will illustrate this by considering an example from Africa. Kenya is an interesting case because, with 48 million inhabitants and a relatively diversified economy, it is large enough to show a certain differentiation within its society. In contrast to South Africa, Kenya does not face a profound post-apartheid race conflict. With its capitalist economy and striking socio-economic inequality, it seems to have the typical prerequisites for a class society. Kenya was one of the countries at the core of the 1970s debate on class in Africa, with the so-called ‘Kenyan debate’ (Beckman, 1980).

In the 1970s and 1980s, it was widely accepted that socio-economic inequalities in Africa could be described as class differences (Arrighi and Saul, 1973; Leys, 1975). There were some amendments to the class concept, such as the introduction of the term ‘state class’ or ‘bureaucratic bourgeoisie’ (Shivji, 1976): this was the class of high-ranking officials and politicians who occupy a position similar to that of capital owners due to their control over state and parastate enterprises. Other conceptual questions remained unsolved. A large part of the population depended for their survival on subsistence production that was unrelated to the capitalist economy, and workers, with their regular income, had a relatively privileged position. In the case of Kenya, this led to a few empirical studies that looked at the concrete realities of livelihood security, and revealed considerable contradictions in class analyses, which had been ignored for a long time. Very often, the livelihood of families depended, and still depends today, on a combination of different sources of income. A paid job may be combined with (middle, small or micro) business activities, typically trading, artisanal production or provision of services; in addition, most people try to have a farm. This applies to all income groups, from the poor to the rich. In biographical terms, the importance of the different components can vary considerably at different times. It is thus difficult to say whether we are talking about owners of the means of production, people who sell their labour, or farmers. Similarly, it is almost impossible to say that someone has a particular occupational position with the corresponding status. Thus, a clear definition of occupation or class position is not possible.

Another problem in connection with class analysis is that members of the same kin group may be in extremely different situations. While some siblings are well educated and successful, there might be others who have had little education and may even live in poverty. Due to the lack of formal social security, there is considerable pressure to compensate differences within the family. Moreover, income data are insufficient to define available financial means. Often considerable sums of money are given to poor relatives, for instance to enable their children to get a good education, or to help pay for medical treatment (Benda-Beckmann et al., 1988; Ferraro, 1971; Kroeker, 2020; Neubert, 2019a: chs 5, 6, 2019b; Steinwachs, 2006). In addition, occupational positions and business activities are very insecure, so that processes of repeated upward and downward mobility are common (Kroeker, 2020; Voigt, 2021). This means that we cannot talk of stability in connection with belonging to a class in the classical sociological sense. One effect of this situation is that there is hardly any such thing as ‘class consciousness’. Due to the fact that people combine various sources of income or have different statuses at the same time, their interests cannot be clearly ascribed to any particular group or class. In Kenya,
social capital, which in the Bourdieu analysis (Bourdieu, 1986) stabilizes the relations between members of a certain class, goes across different social positions, and links the poorer members of a family or group to richer members, despite the fact that they belong to different income groups. Thus, central criteria of the class concept as defined by Marx and Weber, and of the mainstream descriptive class concept with its reference to occupation, do not apply to our Kenyan example.

Despite this critique of the class concept, Kenyan capitalism goes hand in hand with extreme inequality. However, this is not structured in the way that the sociological class concept implies. We need to provincialize our analysis of social inequality. The question is how can we capture and conceptualize this inequality systematically in sociological terms?

‘Social Situations’: The Structure of Social Inequality in Kenya

For our analysis of the Kenyan example, we need criteria for determining socio-economic inequality that take into account the special features of a particular context without making any presumptions about the structure of inequality. Useful here is the open concept of ‘social situation’ (‘soziale Lage’), which was developed in Germany in the 1980s. The concept was a reaction to the changing social structure in Germany where the classical class concept was no longer capable of capturing social differences. This new concept can be understood as a radically changed definition of ‘class’. However, if we use the term ‘class’ the sociological reader will always have the original understanding of class in mind with its typical implications. Therefore, I prefer to use the English translation of the original concept – ‘social situation’ – in order to avoid confusion with the classical notion of class. Hradil (1987: 153) defines social situations as ‘typical contexts of conditions of action’ that are favourable or unfavourable ‘for the satisfaction of generally accepted needs’. What is meant by accepted needs cannot be taken for granted. It must be defined for the particular society being studied. Hradil (1987: 146) points to the programmes of political parties, government declarations, criteria for social statistics and opinion polls, as being useful in this respect. He describes these typical contexts in terms of needs that are made up of different components (Hradil, 1987: 147). For Germany he names:

- Economic needs (prosperity, success, power) with the components money, formal education, occupational prestige, formal position of power.
- Welfare needs (security, welfare, health, participation) with the components risk of unemployment and poverty, social security, working conditions, leisure conditions, environment and living conditions, democratic institutions.
- Social needs (integration, self-fulfilment, emancipation) with the components social relations, social roles and discrimination/privileges.

Corresponding to the chances of fulfilling these needs, he describes a total of 13 different social situations (Hradil, 1987: 154ff). For example:
• ‘Rich people’ with easy access to money and relatively high values in respect of formal education, prestige, formal power.
• ‘Educated elite’ with high value attached to education and relatively high values attached to money, prestige, formal power.
• ‘Average earners’ with middle-level access to money, a middle to low level of education, little formal power, with varying risks, from low to middle and high, representing different social situations.
• ‘Students’ with a relatively good formal education, relatively little money and good working and leisure conditions.5

With a focus on the satisfaction of needs, this concept is detached from occupation, and no longer suggests that people’s social situation determines their political orientation, tastes or normative preferences. The crucial point of the concept is that accepted needs should be defined for each society under study. Thus, it is open and can be transferred to different socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts beyond Germany or industrialized countries in general. When applying the concept in a different setting, it is first necessary to ask what are the accepted needs in the particular social context and whether the components identified in the original concept apply and are sufficient. This can only be determined on the basis of a good empirical knowledge of the society concerned. Besides the sources that have been named, this also requires studies of people’s lifeworlds (ethnographies, biographical studies).

Despite some overlaps, the accepted needs of Germans are not identical with those of Kenyans. In the case of Kenya, we must first underline ‘risk’, in the sense of risk management, as a need in its own right. Risk is a consequence of great economic and political uncertainty, which can lead to rapid and far-reaching changes for individuals or groups. Depending on the social situation, this results in different levels of vulnerability, and often a high risk of falling into poverty.6 With regard to the socio-economic needs of Kenyans, having access to sufficient agricultural land is an extremely important criterion, not only for subsistence farmers. Access to state resources and services is also relevant, because it often depends on patronage or other personal relations, or on having a position in the state administration. In the sphere of social welfare needs, access to health-care institutions and technical infrastructure is especially important, and can vary considerably from region to region. In the area of security, fear of burglary, robbery, armed attack or looting make physical security a much bigger issue than it is in Europe.

In a survey, Kenyan households were asked whether they had experienced major shocks in the past two years. A total of 24.8% experienced drought and famine. Other shocks experienced were increased cost of basic items (17.6%), death of a family member/relative (16.6%), high medical costs (12.8%), theft, fire or loss of house/property/business (6.5%) and loss of income of main wage earner (5.3%) (all as national average) (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2016: Table 4.1). From biographical data we know that these shocks also hit better-off families (Kroeker, 2020; Voigt, 2021). These data show the widespread vulnerability in Kenyan society. In addition to the use of savings (42.5%), help from social networks (28.8%) is the most important source of social security (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2016: Table 4.2). These are semi-formal and informal social networks (especially family and kin, but also self-help groups, rotating
saving associations and religious communities) which people cultivate, and which often have a trans-national dimension, for instance when there are relatives living abroad (for details, see Kroeker, 2018; Neubert, 2019a: 256–266; Welbourn and Ogot, 1966). People’s social situation depends essentially on the strength of their networks, which provide support even before real shocks occur, and especially when shocks last a long time and potential savings are exhausted. With regard to social roles, having a neo-traditional role, for instance being an elder or healer, and thus controlling access to important resources, contributes to a person’s social standing. Gender roles also influence social position, far more so than in Europe (e.g. ‘traditional’ inheritance laws).

This results in social situations which do not correspond to the concept of class. Below is a rough overview. The description follows the simple and insufficient criterion of income, but with decisive further nuances.

‘Poor people’ form the biggest group in Kenyan society. These people have very limited access to resources, little money and, as a rule, little education. While subsistence farmers have access to small parcels of land, which contributes to their survival, often in combination with work as day labourers, the social situation of landless farmers is more difficult. Opportunities for running a micro-business are often very limited. Especially in rural areas people suffer because they lack access to social infrastructure (health-care services, schools). In urban areas, there is a big group of underemployed people who work as day labourers and run micro-businesses. They have better access to social infrastructure, although the quality of these facilities may be poor in the part of town where they live. In towns, it is often very difficult to find adequate housing.

The social situation of poor people in rural and in urban areas depends to a large degree on the strength of their semi-formal and informal networks. If all the members of the network are in similarly difficult situations, only limited help can be expected in times of need, and there is little hope of improving one’s situation through the network. Where the network includes strong members, it is easier to cope with crises, and there may even be a chance of receiving other kinds of help, for instance with school expenses for children (fees, uniform, etc.) or with investment in a small business. Even though it might at first seem that poor people are all in the same precarious situation, having a strong network means that help is available in times of need, and that a certain degree of stability is assured.

Members of the ‘middle-income group’, those with a statistically higher income, also combine different sources of income: paid work, a (small) business and often a farm. Educational qualifications range from a simple school certificate to a university degree, with a corresponding variety of occupational positions and incomes. This opens up different opportunities for consumption and investment, linked to the size of the income. These include investing in education, in a business or a farm, in private health-care and pension schemes, and in semi-formal and informal networks. Instead of a clear gradation of social situations based on income, the strength of people’s networks plays a key role in determining their social situation. People who have risen out of poverty often have networks composed of people who are poorer than themselves and who expect to receive help. Meeting these expectations means reducing one’s available income, and thus reducing opportunities for investment and consumption. If these people fall on hard times, they cannot expect the network to stabilize their situation. Crises therefore rapidly lead
to moving down the social ladder again. At the other end of the spectrum are those who have strong networks and who may even be among the weakest members of their networks. As a rule, these people can use the whole of their income for themselves and in times of need they can rely on the network to help stabilize their position. It is also possible that members of their network will provide help with investments.

A similar pattern is displayed by the group with a ‘high level of income’. Here, too, networks are the decisive factor that determines a person’s social situation. If one’s networks are weak, savings may make it possible to cope with crises temporarily. But if the crisis continues for a long time, then a move down the social ladder will be inevitable. Only a small group of people with high incomes and very strong networks will be able to stabilize their social situation in individual and social crises.

We should not forget that there may be considerable intra-household differences. Besides gender differences, there is another case that illustrates this: children may not live with their biological parents but with relatives. In some cases, their relatives treat them in the same way as their own children, but in other cases they are treated as domestic servants (for discussions of this issue in other African countries, see Alber, 2016; Steinwachs, 2006: 114–119).

These different social situations reveal the interplay between income and security networks. In simple terms, we can divide them into five clusters. The following description represents ‘ideal types’. In reality people may be situated between the clusters, because there is no clear dividing line between them:

- ‘Poor people’ without sufficient means and with little hope of receiving help from their social networks or from other sources.
- A big, ‘unstable floating cluster’ which moves between poverty and relative prosperity. This includes people with limited means and those with a very good income. What they share are poor networks. They continually receive requests for help, which they cannot turn down out of a sense of social obligation, and because otherwise they would have no hope of being given help should they ever need it. Their position is highly volatile, even when they have a middle or high income. The greater part of the so-called ‘middle class’ belongs to this group.
- A small ‘stable middle cluster’ with a sufficient or good income, and networks of medium strength. These people are not often asked for help, and can hope to receive help if they need it. This allows them to stabilize their position or to climb further up the social ladder.
- There is a small ‘stable upper cluster’ of wealthy people with considerable means and strong networks, whose position is secure despite possible fluctuations in their income.
- At the top is an extremely small ‘political and economic top elite’ with vast means and very strong networks. Here, the networks can be used to strengthen one’s own position, to make investments and to maintain and extend one’s political influence.

These clusters show that income (not the source of income) is an important component of the social situation, but this clearly varies, depending on whether the networks are able
to stabilize it or not. The individual social situation of most people is marked by a high degree of volatility. This points to an important difference between social situation and class concepts: the strength of the networks often only becomes apparent in times of individual crisis. It is possible that in future a structural boundary will be formed between the small, stable and (fairly) well-off clusters and the larger part of society. This might lead to a new kind of class structure, mainly defined in terms of income and the strength of social networks. This is a matter for empirical research.

As I have pointed out, for most people decisions always need to be made in respect of how to spend the (little) money that is available. These decisions concern consumption, as well as the above-mentioned investments in business enterprises, education or social security. The priorities people choose are not determined directly by their social situation, but by the norms and values that shape their different ways of life. Norms and values differ between people who are in the same social situation, and they may be shared by people living in different social situations. These differences in behaviour can be analysed using the concept of ‘milieus’, understood as ‘subcultural units within a society which group together people with a similar view of life and way of life’ (Flaig et al., 1993: 55) (my translation). Of course, the concept must be adapted to fit the specific African context (for more details, see Neubert, 2019a: 358ff; Neubert and Stoll, 2018; Stoll, 2017). This means, for example, that in the unstable floating cluster people may invest in informal networks and fulfil their obligations as good members of the family, or they may distance themselves from these obligations and invest in business and in the education of their nuclear family, in order to improve their economic position. In the latter case, they take the risk of having no support in the case of a shock such as sickness, unemployment or business failure. One solution is joining a socially homogeneous (Pentecostal) church community with a certain degree of solidarity among the members. They are less stressed by requests for help and can rely on having a certain amount of support when needed. There are also differences with regard to career orientation, with regard to conservative or liberal moral values and with regard to the emphasis put on ethnicity and political commitment in general (on political commitment, see Neubert, 2019c).

We find similar patterns in many countries in Africa south of the Sahara. There are some exceptions, especially in countries with a well-functioning formal social security system, for example Mauritius and, to a certain extent, parts of South Africa. However, the social situations in any given country, wherever it is in the world, can be accurately described only after conducting empirical research there, including research on the conditions of livelihood security. The concept of social situation can thus be applied globally, but doing so requires adapting the list of needs and their components on the basis of empirical observations. Unlike class theory, there is no theoretically founded, standardized structure for social situations. The structure on which class theory is based is valid in capitalist societies only under specific conditions, such as clearly structured occupational differentiation, only one major income source or a considerable degree of individualization. A precise definition of these special conditions is still lacking.

**Conclusion**

From different perspectives, the concepts of ‘connected sociologies’, ‘dirty theory’ and ‘global sociology’ point to the need to do sociology across the existing differences
between regions, countries and localities, without falling into the trap of radical relativism. This includes examining the entanglements between different societies, as has already been done in the name of theories of imperialism or dependency, or in the current debates on globalization and post-colonial structures. Representing, analysing and conceptualizing these entanglements is the task of a global and professional sociology. This global sociology can no longer focus on countries in the Global North. We need to expand our empirical basis beyond Europe and North America. Only this will allow us to constantly provincialize our concepts and theories, and test them by adapting them to new socio-cultural contexts. This must be based on empirical knowledge of the society under study. The more thorough this adaptation, the better our knowledge of possible variations.

The example of inequality in Kenya shows that even such a basic sociological concept as ‘class’ cannot be applied as it is, but needs to be provincialized. We need different criteria to describe and understand social differentiation in Kenya. The more open concept of ‘social situation’ is a much better starting point. It includes the requirement that its main components and criteria must be adapted to fit the particular society under study, in order to be able to define the ‘typical contexts of conditions of action’ (Hradil, 1987: 153). The classical class concept is appropriate only if the social situation in a particular society matches its main criteria. Thus, we must accept that societies are much more diverse than may be supposed if one looks only at Europe and North America. The case of Kenya shows that the socio-economic descriptive concept of class, with its focus on income, occupation and education, does not apply, because people combine different sources of income and thus have several occupations at the same time. It ignores the crucial influence of social networks on the management of risk and vulnerability, and their influence on a person’s socio-economic position. Another point can be mentioned only briefly: the socio-economic position (here captured via the social situation) affects people’s options, but does not determine their decisions and actions. The diversity of norms and values that guide people’s actions need to be analysed as a separate dimension. There have already been some attempts in this direction (Hradil, 1987; Savage, 2013), but they need to be developed and adapted beyond Europe and North America (Neubert, 2019a).

Even this pragmatic path to global sociology requires wide-ranging changes in sociology. The vast majority of sociologists work with data from the Global North. Data used for cross-cultural comparisons, and even national statistics in the countries of the Global South, are based on concepts and criteria developed in the Global North. Obviously, we need more studies from the Global South. Today, most studies concerning the Global South are financed, conducted and analysed in the Global North (like this article): this is what Hountondji (1997: 11) calls ‘scientific “tourism”’. To overcome this imbalance, a first step is to provide funding for research by sociologists in the Global South working in their own countries. In a second step, sociologists from the South need opportunities to do research not only in their own countries, but also in other parts of the world, including the Global North. Only then will they be on an equal footing with sociologists from the North. With a multitude of studies conducted from different perspectives, we can leave the provincial lens behind and make an effort to overcome the inequality of the international science system.
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Notes

1. See also the recent post-development discussion (Kothari et al., 2019).
2. Gini index of 40.8 (Gini index (World Bank estimate) – Kenya). Data accessed 31 May 2021.
3. E.g. Chege (1987), Githinji (2000), Kitching (1980), Mukras et al. (1985), Oucho (1996). The following section gives more details; see Neubert (2019a: chs 3, 6). I also refer to the empirical findings of a joint project on Kenya ‘Middle class on the rise’ (part of the larger programme ‘Future Africa’), conducted by Erdmuth Alber, Dieter Neubert (project leaders), Lena Kroeker, Maike Voigt and Florian Stoll.
4. Hradil developed the concept when Germany was still divided. However, it also applies to Germany after 1989.
5. Other examples are managers, unemployed persons, power elites, experts, pensioners, poor people.
6. See Kroeker (2018, 2020), Neubert (2019a: 334–358, 2019b), Voigt (2021).

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