

*Maria Miczyńska-Kowalska, PhD, Associate Professor* 

Faculty of Agrobioengineering, Department of Industrial and Medicinal Plants,  
Institute of Rural Sociology  
University of Life Sciences in Lublin

## **Social inequalities and the development of society from a sociological perspective**

### INTRODUCTION

Numerous researchers have approached the issue of equality and inequality in society over the past centuries. Before sociology as a science emerged, the area was addressed by philosophers. Traditional philosophy revolved around the notion of freedom, which was linked to the notion of justice. The arguments were that formal justice obligated people to treat those from the same social category equally (Zachorowska-Mazurkiewicz, 2011, p. 13). In the context of current concepts on human rights, every individual is believed to be equal, which has resulted in the principle of equality before the law. In the contemporary world, the issue of inequalities lies at the centre of public debate. Society's awareness of the inequalities is also greater than it used to be, which is connected with the intensification of inequalities. The most common manifestation of inequality is the situation where individuals cannot fully enjoy certain privileges available to others. The modern world setting differs from that of a few decades ago. After World War II, the level of social inequalities decreased. However, with the omniscient transformations, much has since changed. Inequalities began to multiply and their limitation has become a challenge. While it is obviously impossible to eliminate all inequalities, it is important to reduce them since their current high level may lead to serious conflicts.

The objective of the article is to analyse the issues related to social inequalities from a sociological perspective. It presents the sociological notions, categories and concepts regarding the issue in question. It draws attention to those transformations in the development of society that took place in the phase referred to as industrial

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence address: Uniwersytet Przyrodniczy w Lublinie, ul. Akademicka 15, 20-950 Lublin; e-mail: Maria.Miczyńska@up.lublin.pl. ORCID: 0000-0003-0013-6349.

society, which made it possible to change one's pre-assigned status and base it instead on one's own achievements and thus minimise social inequalities. Social inequalities have been classified as one of the major social problems, and it has been emphasised that inequalities change over time, as society develops. Social inequalities and economic growth have been observed to be mutually intertwined. The inequalities related to social stratification have been highlighted, and it has been shown that education and one's occupation have gained significance in modern society, and that education has become one of the basic values that differentiates whole social groups. The article also presents a number of factors contributing to the reduction in social inequalities and discusses the negative consequences arising from social divisions. This has led to areas being suggested that could be addressed by social policy.

#### SOCIAL INEQUALITIES – THEORETICAL ASPECT

Communities differ from one another biologically, psychologically and socially. However, not all the differences are the subject of sociological analyses. Sociologists take a look at social differentiations and focus on those that form the underlying causes of social inequalities in respect of individuals. Sociology, as a science, deals with social inequalities implicitly, primarily by analysing such issues as: social stratification, social structure, change and social development. Since modern industrial society and postmodern society are focal points for sociology, researchers analyse the social inequalities present in formations of this type. Sociologists analyse only the social as opposed to the individual characteristics that underlie social inequalities. An individual's most important social characteristics are: the nature of the group to which they belong and the nature of their position and roles.

As contemplated from a sociological perspective, the issue of social inequalities is addressed primarily at a macrosocial level. Social divisions at a macrosocial level may be considered from two perspectives: of a society construed as a whole consisting of inter-related parts, and of a society understood as a set of diverse individuals who may be assigned to categories; such categories representing points on a scale of the specific characteristic that the individuals possesses. The former approach is referred to as structural, while the latter as gradation-based (Szacka, 2003, p. 279). The basic categories for the description of social divisions in sociology are social classes and social strata. However, various researchers representing opposing perspectives understand these terms differently. It must be added that in modern societies, the category of occupation is also of great significance in the description of social divisions and inequalities. Sociology identifies three classic types of social division, which are: Marxian class theory, the Weberian three-class system and the stratification concepts. According to Karl Marx, the basic inequalities and the related social divisions are connected with the individuals' different relations to the

means of production. Unlike Marx, Max Weber claimed that it was not possible to organise all social inequalities into one hierarchy. Social inequalities result from the fight for the division of various resources of divisible goods. According to him, these are: property, social status and power. The third concept, i.e. that of stratification, is connected with the tradition of American sociology (such as the local community research of William Lloyd Warner and the papers by Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore). Warner noticed that the position of individuals in a society was determined not only by economic factors but also by respect and moral values. Davis and Moore, on the other hand, are the creators of the functional stratification theory. They saw stratification as unequal participation in resources, primarily property and prestige. They tried to demonstrate the functional need for and usefulness of such inequalities. They claimed that they guaranteed that the most important positions were held by those who were the most qualified.

The term ‘stratification’ as meaning ‘differentiation’ differs from the term ‘social division.’ “Stratification is the differentiation of society as a whole in terms of income, education, profession, social status and prestige. Social division means differences between classes and strata, differences between large communities, differences within a society in terms of access to power, privileges and offices, differences causing tensions and social conflicts” (Dyoniziak, 1992, p. 12). In a broad sense of the term, social stratification should be understood as “all vertical aspects of social culture, which means that the term may cover all types of inequality.” Stratification may be represented by various forms of hierarchy, divisions, distances and barriers construed as objective phenomena, such as the inequalities arising from the distribution of income. Stratification is also any behaviour and attitude manifesting superiority or resulting from inferiority... “(...) Of course, it must be borne in mind that only one current of thought equates all the inequality aspects with stratification” (Domański, 2007, pp. 51–52). Domański claims that stratification is a form of inequality. However, there are inequalities that cannot be called social stratification. This depends on how broad the perspective is. In the broadest sense, definitions of stratification equate it with a system of inequalities. If we call stratification a form of inequality, we are referring to a narrower definition (Domański, 2007, p. 39). A narrower understanding of stratification equates it with one of inequality aspects. This is an axiom derived from the class division views of Marx and Weber. All forms of the hierarchy of divisions, distances and barriers understood as objective phenomena represent stratification. Stratification means structured inequalities between various categories of people. It may be compared to the geological layering of rock in the earth’s surface (Giddens, 2010, p. 305). In the history of humanity, we can identify four basic stratification systems: slavery, caste, estate and class. The class system was characteristic of sociological analyses in the industrial society era. As the social, economic and political transformations in modern society progressed, the traditional social stratification concept was no longer sufficient. In the 1990s, Terry N. Clark and Seymour Martin Lipset triggered a discussion about the death of

classes as construed by Marx. This should be understood as class losing its previous role in defining social inequalities. After all, modern societies are characterised by blurred boundaries between the classes of capitalists and workers, where in postmodern societies the ‘status groups’, as construed by Weber, gain significance. They are divisions in the cultural dimension that are based on differences in terms of the systems of values, lifestyle and consumption. Sociologists note that it is culture rather than economy that is becoming a driving force in class divisions. Social differentiation is becoming increasingly visible through education and qualifications. Social marginalisation, on the other hand, is not about lacking the rights, as in the past, but being unable to exercise them. Unemployment and poverty are the greatest marginalisation-related threats.

As a generalisation, sociology has assumed that the values that lead to social inequalities are: property, power and prestige. Nowadays, in a society described as postmodern, education is becoming increasingly a differentiating factor. From a sociological perspective, Sztompka defines social inequalities as those that “are related not to individual characteristics but to those indirect characteristics that are shared only by certain communities – social groups, or only by certain locations in the social structure – social positions, statuses. (...) Being a member of a specific group or having a specific position must entail either easier or more difficult access, or at least an unequal – smaller or larger – chance of access, to certain valued resources” (Sztompka, 2002, p. 332). Goodman, on the other hand, defines social inequalities as differences between individuals that arise from the unequal distribution of societal resources and from the fact that some individuals choose an occupation that grants more power than another (Goodman, 1988, p. 125). In Goodman’s works, the term ‘social inequalities’ is also accompanied by ‘social differentiation’ and ‘social stratification.’ According to him, social differentiation means the differences between whole social categories rather than just individuals. Social stratification, on the other hand, is such social layering where people in those social categories are placed in a certain hierarchic order that gives them varied access to societal resources (Goodman, 1988, p. 125). Generally speaking, “from a sociological point of view, social inequality means, first and foremost, the unequal distribution of income and social prestige” (Jarosz, Kozak, 2015, p. 23). For the purpose of this article, social inequalities have been assumed to mean unequal access by certain social categories to valued resources: power, wealth, prestige, education and the practice of an occupation.

#### CAUSES OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN IDEOLOGIES AND THEORIES – DEVELOPMENT OF INEQUALITIES OVER THE AGES

The roots of social inequalities may be sought in either ideologies or theories. We can identify three types of inequality ideologies (Sztompka, 2002, pp. 356–357):

1. elitist ideologies, according to which there are groups that are by nature “su-

- preme” and as such are above all other;
2. egalitarian theories developed by or on behalf of those impaired groups that most radically oppose all social privileges and inequalities and demand identical living conditions for all;
  3. meritocratic views, where inequalities are justified insofar as they result from one’s own achievements. This is about one’s own effort, work, costs and sacrifices as well as the special talent that the group contributes to society as a whole.

The justification of social inequalities is not limited to an ideological level. It also enters the areas of philosophy and social sciences. According to sociology as a science, social inequalities are primarily (Sztompka, 2002, pp. 358–359) the necessary imperatives that organise life in a community – which is the position of the functional theory of stratification. Secondly, sociologists refer to the historical origin of inequalities, seeing inequalities in dominance and power – which is the theory of cumulative advantage. Both theories differ in terms of ideological message and vision of the future. The functional theory treats social inequalities as a phenomenon that has always been present and is not only ineliminable but even required for the functioning of society. As such, it carries a conservative and apologetic message. The cumulative theory, as an origin-based one, considers social inequalities an outcome of specific historical conditions which may change in the future. According to this theory, it is not only possible but even desired to overcome inequality as it is a source of conflict, a factor disrupting the harmonious coexistence of individuals. This concept indicates what happens when an individual already gains an advantage, it describes how inequalities grow and social distances increase, but it fails to answer the question of how inequalities start and from where they originate.

These limitations are overcome by evolutionist theories. The above question is in a way answered by Friedrich Engels’ technological determinism. According to Engels, technological progress is accompanied by growing efficiency of work, which in turn leads to greater productivity. People are able to make more and more products, more and more economic goods. Those individuals who have been able to accumulate production surplus can exchange it for what others have and thus gain power, respect and prestige. The conditions described by Engels did not pertain only to individuals but to whole communities, such as due to geographical location, natural resources etc. Various communities have different resources. In every community, the progressing division of work leads to the emergence of more efficient occupations, which generate greater surplus, as well as occupations where the surplus is lower. The group or personal advantages lead to the accumulation and deepening of social inequalities and to social stratification.

In a traditional, pre-industrial society, an individual had a pre-assigned position. The place in society was inherited and depended on sex, family status, race or other distinguishing features of the individual. The opportunity for change was limited. It emerged with age and experience, in recognition of substantial achievements.

Still, these were not common channels of social mobility. The fact of being born in a specific family usually determined the individual's status for life. These inequalities were reinforced by the authorities, the law, the Church, economic institutions, the educational system, as well as by cultural norms, values, notions and patterns. The history of inequalities in Europe shows that the French Revolution was the first event to show that the future of a society may be programmable and as such depend on the ideas for that future and the will to make them come true. From this a whole system of beliefs and collective emotions, expectations, fears and hopes, other than religion, emerged – an ideology looking towards an earthly, historical and political future (Pomian, 2015, p. 47). A society where all people were equal became a goal that the humanity should pursue. “Criticism of the estate-based society challenged the determination of the individuals' social status from the outside, without any consideration given to their achievements, and protested against its dependence (...) on their ancestors, and thus on the past (...); an opposing view was advocated, according to which everybody was in a way a child of their own deeds, and the individuals' social status was determined by the capital they had accumulated or the knowledge or skill they had gained” (Pomian, 2015, p. 47).

As well as the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution also directly contributed to the transformations taking place in the social relations in Europe at that time. It increased the wealth and power of entrepreneurs, as well as the gap between them and their workers – the proletariat. The previous estate-based society was not replaced by a society where all people were equal but one with different inequalities – those between the owners of the means of production and the proletariat. In the industrial society, appropriate conditions arose for the workers to feel the burden of the exploitation and a chance to change the status that they had been assigned – the chance to have a social status based on their own achievements through education or spatial mobility. In terms of the 19th century social structure, the sociopolitical transformations taking place in Western Europe, Mikhail Bakunin claimed that the society of the future would be based on the category of qualified specialists in the area of the economy, organisation and management. The growing demand for highly qualified staff would give rise to a new middle class (Dolgoff, 1972). As can be seen, public life in the 19th century revolved around the fight against inequalities.

World War I shifted the balance of power in Europe. Many countries introduced an eight-hour working day and a social security system. Such measures resulted from the growing influence of social democratic parties in Western and Northern Europe. The objective of World War II was to exterminate Jews and create a new enslaved society based on forced labour in the conquered Central and Eastern Europe. Once it ended, the USSR forced its own political model on Central and Eastern Europe. The development of those countries was substantially impaired, both economically and as civilisations. For the countries of the Western Europe, the post-war years were marked by quick economic growth and policies aimed at reducing social inequalities. The range of social security was expan-



ded, cheap flats were built, weekly and annual working times were shortened, and higher education was opened to those social groups for which it was formerly unattainable. The post-war changes in the economy were accompanied by social and cultural transformations. In the mid-1970s, the economy of Western European countries faced recession and unemployment appeared. At that time, the gap between the privileged individuals and physical workers was relatively small. The social hierarchy did not vanish but it was flattened. From that point onwards, the situation of the lower classes stopped improving, and in time it even started to deteriorate. Holders of capital, on the other hand, discovered a new way to become rich. This came with the technological revolution, the development of the Internet and innovation-related activities.

Along with the system transformation, post-socialist countries entered the path of the market economy. The phenomenon of unemployment appeared. The adaptation of the industry to the new IT solutions in the second half of the 20th century in the countries of both the Western Europe and the Central Europe increased the levels of unemployment. The emergence of unemployment resulted in unequal access to work and thus to means of support. As long as few were unemployed, the benefits could be relatively high. However, when unemployment started to grow, the benefits dropped considerably. The free flow of capital above national borders helped employees connected with the financial sector (e.g. bankers, IT specialists) to become rich. In this way, a new social category emerged whose income was incomparably higher than that made by employees in the public sector, services or industry. Since the contribution of the financial sector to the Gross Domestic Product also grew, the newly formed social group started to apply pressure on the authorities to further their interests. In this way an economic crisis where the financial sphere dominates over manufacturing has become one of the threats for new inequalities. As Castells says, contemporary capitalism “is global, and it is structured to a large extent around a network of financial flows” (Castells, 2007, p. 269). According to Touraine, the transformations of the modern world lead to a growing dissonance between the economic system and the cultural and political life (Touraine, 2013, p. 146).

Along with the transformations taking place in society (including the transition from the industrial phase to the post-industrial phase), the increase in inequalities relates to the following trends: deterioration of the situation of blue-collar, least educated workers and poorly remunerated white-collar workers, and the accumulation of wealth by already privileged groups, individuals who have access to capital and individuals who have specific intellectual or physical qualities (e.g. beauty) which they can trade for money due to the media (Touraine, 2013, p. 69). Over the years, transformations in the economy have also accompanied changes in social conventions. Here, however, the trend is opposite to that in the economy. It is an area where inequalities are gradually eliminated. Women start to find their place in public life, the patriarchal family model is replaced by a partnership-based model and authorities start to lose their significance.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT VERSUS SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

The term 'social development' is quite common in sociology literature. It may lack a clear definition (Turnowiecki, 2008, p. 35), but it is usually brought up in connection with improvements to the living conditions of the population, cultural and scientific development and any changes in social structures. Development covers system transformations in the area of the economy, politics, culture and technology as well as in the social dimension. The concept of social development provides a general framework for various theories created by numerous thinkers (Miczynska-Kowalska, 2017). In general, we can agree that social development means increasing the scientific and cultural achievements of society, creating better living conditions for people and polishing the forms of cooperation and social co-existence (Turnowiecki, 2008, p. 35). The above approach to social development draws attention to the fact that improvement in the living conditions of individuals should be based on versatile social progress and equal access to social amenities. The term 'social development' is connected with the concept of 'economic growth.' However, development is something more than 'growth' or 'change.' For the purpose of this article, economic growth is understood as "the process of increasing the production of goods and services of a particular economy as measured by GDP, NNP or GNI. The adopted ratio records only the quantitative, measurable changes. The growth rate is a percentage increase (or drop) in GDP over a specific timespan" (Gardawski, Gilejko, Siewierski, 2006, p. 57). From a sociological point of view, economic growth should be secondary to social development objectives, which means that economic growth should not be autotelic. Economic growth should serve the whole society and its purpose should be to improve the standard of living of all individuals. Due to the accumulation of wealth and supply of consumer goods, economic growth forms a physical basis for social development. Economic growth therefore contains the physical elements that permit social development. For that reason, an analysis of the social development processes requires taking into consideration the economic growth elements. "There are numerous inter-relations between economic growth and social development. These inter-relations are usually defined as follows: economic growth provides the physical foundations for social development, while social development creates new stimuli to accelerate economic growth. This increases the chances of obtaining additional funds to boost the social development rate. In this context, we can say that social development contributes to economic growth, while accelerated economic growth provides the resources for better social development. It is a development spiral and a feedback loop" (Turnowiecki, 2008, p. 36). There are also inter-relations between social development and inequalities. In the context of the sociological tradition, inequalities have always been and will always remain a significant problem to be analysed, as is the issue of social stratification. The relevant literature notes that socioeconomic development



accompanies the development of technologies (Laver, 1989, p. 4 cf. Clague, 1997, p. 24). Other sources of change include: ideologies and the motivations of individuals and organisations (Andrain, 1974, p. 26). The importance of human capital is also emphasised in the modern world (Wassink, 1996, p. 5). The development of inequalities in a society is largely aligned with the polarisation of technical education among individuals and social groups, and with globalisation (Romero, Margolis, 2005, p. 27).

Social inequalities currently represent one of major practical problems for society. Poverty as a factor inhibiting social development is one such inequality. Generally speaking, the sociology of social inequalities is sociology in its essence. A social problem in sociology means “conditions defined by important groups within the population as a deviation from or violation of certain social standards which the group believes must be preserved if human life – or the order of actions and events that determines and sustains the essence of life – is to continue” (Frysztacki, 2009, p. 17). Social inequalities and poverty, in the context of the quoted definition, threaten the interests of the whole society (its social development), both for functional reasons connected with the protection of the interests of the system, and for axiological reasons related to economic and social justice. Privation and poverty have always existed and have always been a challenge for governments. In practice, there are certain discrepancies in the results of poverty-related studies which imply the existence of discrepancies as to the concepts of fighting poverty. This is because there is not a generally acceptable definition of the phenomenon. The category is highly variable over time and differs across territories. In the definitions provided in the literature, poverty is “connected with a failure to satisfy certain needs at the desired level (...) Reports on global social development prepared at the request of the United Nations Development Programme recommend going beyond the basic needs approach in poverty analyses” (Panek, 2011, pp. 12, 14). Poverty should also be associated with the inability to make various choices that are of fundamental significance for the development of the individual – as regards good health, a high-standard active lifestyle, respect from other individuals, and freedom. In contemporary society with its advanced technologies and a high level of consumption, which promotes a democratic and fair model of the economy, the concurrent problem of work and poverty is a contradiction that needs to be resolved. It is a completely new challenge for the governments of modern societies. Many young people, women, people with worse education, disabled and migrants either struggle with unemployment or work for a low pay that does not allow them to live with dignity. A new term ‘precariat’ has appeared in the modern world. It is a new social class that has emerged as a result of mega trends in the trends of dematerialisation and minimisation of labour costs. It is connected with flexible forms of employment and with globalisation – in a sense that large-industry labour is exported from the richest countries to the poorest ones and that education improves worldwide (Wierzbicki, 2015, pp. 54–55). The precariat is

a class-in-the-making, not yet a class-for-itself, in the Marxian sense of that term. Precariat means “people who lack the seven forms of labour-related security, that social democrats, labour parties and trades unions pursued as their “industrial citizenship” agenda after the Second World War, for the working class or industrial proletariat” (Standing, 2014, p. 49). These forms of security are: labour market security, employment security, job security, work security, skill reproduction security, income security, and representation security. Precariat is not just “poor working people” or working people uncertain of their jobs (even though these phenomena are mutually related). After all, employees with low incomes may create their own careers. Precariat also entails a lack of a lasting job-based identity. It is the essence of precariat that “the stratifying character of the globalising labour process has produced a decline in upward social mobility” (Standing, 2014, p. 134). As the range of the new class expands, its dysfunctional aspects grow as well. Arising in contemporary society are also inequalities within the same employee sector or similar education. The traditional sociological ‘working class’ category is losing its useful function (Romero, Margolis, 2005, p. 33). As a result, inequalities are now captured by sociologists in new categories. The traditional, structural categories (connected for instance with the hierarchy of income) are expanded, thus triggering the emergence of new inequalities – which are dynamic and result from consideration given to the differences within groups that were until recently treated as homogeneous. They are the outcome of the evolution and dynamics of the system (Fitoussi, Rosanvallon, 2000, pp. 53, 55). As a result, rather than losing its old inequalities through social development, post-industrial society has gained new ones. They are numerous and they keep changing. Some disappear while others emerge. They are considerably related to education level and place of living. However, they cannot be analysed traditionally, from a static perspective. After all, dynamic and variable, modernity demands the analysis of social inequalities as “a social process rather than a phenomenon existing today” (Jarosz, Kozak, 2015, p. 11). So it is a completely new challenge for modern sociologists.

#### SOCIAL INEQUALITIES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES: PREVENTION ATTEMPTS – FURTHER IMPLICATIONS

An egalitarian society with perfect equality in terms of access to wealth, power, prestige and education obviously does not exist. Some differences as to economic gratification may be justified (Atkinson, 2017, p. 23). A certain level of social inequality is a continual element of social order. Inequalities in various areas are inevitable. They are also stimuli for social development and for the pursuit of prosperity. Still, the situation when the inequalities are too great is undesirable because they may inhibit development. Nowadays, societies face new threats connected with the negative consequences of social inequalities. The development

of modern societies encounters a number of restrictions connected with the end of work as such (a term introduced by Jeremy Rifkin in *The End of Work*, 1995), and thus with an excessive growth in inequalities. To put it simply, the growth in inequalities and the end of work in post-industrial society is caused by technical development (informatisation and automation) and by globalisation.

Considering the increasing polarisation of society and the dynamic changes taking place in the world, finding an answer to a future threatened by divisions into poor and rich, likely to result in severe international conflicts, is becoming an urgent matter. In view of the foregoing, attempts are made to limit inequalities, both within specific societies and within society understood globally. In the area of equal opportunities, a special role is played by activities on a macro scale – to ensure equal chances at survival, such as appropriate law and an appropriate economic, educational and cultural policy (at the meso level – at the level of institutions, and at a micro level – at the level of family and the local environment). At this point, we should mention the subject of equality (which often accompanies discussions about inequalities). The term ‘equality’ appears in concepts of the natural equality of people, ideals and moral postulates. It is also present in the concepts of social programmes and applies to the status of people, to the operation of the law or to economic standards of living of individuals. Equality is understood as identicalness or fairness (Bylok, Sikora, Sztumska, 2001, pp. 61–62). The liberal and neoliberal economic model encompasses the notions of equality, fairness, responsibility and freedom. In the social market economic model, the state should guard the non-transferable human rights. A significant characteristic of a prosperous state is that it takes care of social security and guarantees social equality. The equality principle requires the authorities to provide equal life opportunities for particular social categories. Social equality and justice are consistent with the ethical standards of the adopted system of values. Universal values, rooted in natural law, have their tradition in democratic Europe. In the modern era, the EU countries adopt a development strategy that is based on the principle of equal development opportunities for specific regions and whole countries. In the 21st century, Europe is an area of growing social, educational, financial, political and ethnic inequalities. The dangers connected with the growing social and financial inequalities are indicated in the latest European programme against poverty and social exclusion. Currently, having metropolitan areas is a crucial determinant of the position of specific areas. After all, those are the most competitive places. They have the characteristics sought after by investors: a high level of education, qualifications, saturation with institutions, including the institutions of science and culture. In the modern world, the issue of education remains one of the most important elements in analysing the continuity and variation of the scale of inequalities. For a postmodern society, knowledge and education growth is one of the major factors limiting inequalities (as has already been pointed out by Bakunin, and later by Drucker, by referring to the privileged position of knowledge workers). However,

not everyone has the same opportunities to access education. Even in Poland the chances of going to prestigious universities and pursuing specialities that offer job opportunities and good incomes are reserved primarily for the youths of the best families. The chances of university education increase not so much by skills but by the level of cultural and social preparation that can be provided by an educated family. Belonging to a specific professional category determines the financial and social status of both individuals and whole social groups. Unfortunately, as stated by Domański, the example of Poland shows that despite the growth in the number of students, the “mechanisms of inheriting educational inequalities are a lasting link in the social structure” (Domański, 2009, p. 60). The lack of education, poverty, impoverishment, region of living, having many children, access to modern technologies – all these are factors of a structural nature. The current trends in the progressing stratification show that these will be mostly the conditions for social exclusion (Wierzbicki, 2015, p. 64). Many inequality measures have been developed, the majority of them pertaining to the inequalities arising from the distribution of resources. The Gini coefficient is one of the most popular measures, as a synthetic description of inequality in access to resources.

The article is based on the assumption that social policy may, and should, represent a specific type of response to the social problems of modern society and be a way of providing equal opportunities. “Social policy is connected with the instrumental use of power in a country in order to achieve versatile prosperity for all citizens, also addressing the socioeconomic inequalities and the power-related inequalities between particular groups of citizens. The areas covered by social policy include the issues of jobs and employment, social security, health, education and upbringing, housing and culture. Welfare policy is a type of social policy that focuses on social security and welfare transfer payments” (Panek, 2011, p. 183). Social policy is not limited to financial benefits; it also includes services, such as healthcare, training etc. Relevant literature lists numerous arguments in favour of the hypothesis that social inequalities, or one of their types, have negative effects on society (for example they exacerbate the phenomena considered to be problems) and that social policy may effectively reduce social inequalities (Szarfenberg, 2014, p. 57). There is scientific evidence that social policy in developed capitalist countries reduces poverty and income inequalities, even though research encounters various methodology-related problems (Szarfenberg, 2014, p. 70). Scandinavian countries are the most successful in limiting such phenomena. They combine contribution-based social policy solutions (high social security contributions) with the development of high-quality social services – healthcare, education, housing services and childcare. Economists claim that “the descriptions of frustrating inequalities and of activating inequalities should serve as determinants of the tasks of the state in the shaping of income distribution and of the tax and social policy” (Woźniak, 2014, p. 23). In economics, income transfer from the rich to the poor is often assumed to contribute to modernisation of the economy

and foster the accumulation of capital. In the above situation, the difference between individuals as to income and the standard of living are justified from the perspective of the economy. However, what fails to be considered is the exclusion of whole social groups from the modernisation process, which may adversely affect long-term GDP growth. When social inequalities continue to accumulate, the government should strive to eliminate the 'frustrating' inequalities and activate the positive ones. After all, social inequalities motivate people to upskill and take entrepreneurial actions, and they contribute to the accumulation of capital. But if the inequalities are too large, they are discouraging and make it difficult for the lower social strata to improve their financial status and professional qualifications, and as such they prevent optimum accumulation of capital. The growth of inequalities also leads to social conflicts and increased political instability (Malinowski, 2016, p. 166).

A contemporary factor that limits social inequalities is innovation of the economy, which should become a developmental priority. Innovation in a broad sense of the term means the ability to create new products and services. This goal requires institutional solutions and the development of a social policy that would support the responsibility of individuals for themselves and their professional activity. Innovation is inseparably connected with the use of modern IT and communication technologies, in both professional and private life. In modern times, social inequalities may be caused by globalisation. This considered, major developmental goals should include competitiveness and minimisation of developmental differences.

The discussed issues also require addressing the problem of a fair wage and a minimum wage, the development of human capital and the related programmes of adapting universities and education in general to the need of the market and to the development processes. Nowadays, having an education that is desired in the labour market makes it easier to find a job. Education and investing in human capital helps reduce social inequalities. Then there is social capital, suggesting the presence of interpersonal skills and cooperative skills, which are definitely positive for social development. Another challenge for social policy is the growing distance between the small group whose income is increasing and the expanding sphere of poverty. This results in the modernisation of some social groups and the exclusion of members from the sphere of poverty. Another task of modern social policy should be to help families, because large families are at the greatest risk of poverty.

The next major problem is unemployment, which means, from the perspective of a sociologist, the failure to utilise the potential of employees for social development. Due to its importance, social inequalities also represent a central issue for the field of ethics and for deliberations on morality and justice. New inequalities, the deepening divisions in a globalised world, privation and poverty of increasing numbers of social groups may lead to the manifestation of dissatisfaction by their members and to social conflicts.

## CONCLUSION

Modern society requires profound examination. After all, much has changed since the industrial society development phase. The changes are accelerating and multiplying. Just a few decades ago, social classes, social groups and occupations were still clear points of reference for social analyses. No longer. Inequalities still exist and they are still substantial, even if not as glaring as they used to be. Contemporary times are facing “an unprecedented transformation of differentiation and hierarchisation methods. The methods are no longer solely collective, but are becoming more individualised and variable instead” (Fitoussi, Rosanvallon, 2000, p. 19). The socio-occupational categories that used to serve as traditional points of reference for sociologists no longer apply to any rigid hierarchies. There are no stable differences in the modern world. Everything becomes non-transparent and dispersed. The growing difficulties in understanding the social structure have many consequences. Inequalities can only be counteracted if the problems are precisely defined. Otherwise, society and its problems become elusive. This unstable situation endangers the function of social sciences, which involves specifying remedies.

In the modern era, the past has a greater impact on social differentiation that it had until recently. The starting conditions have a decisive influence on the fate of individuals (Fitoussi, Rosanvallon, 2000, p. 23). Today, if someone wants to climb the social ladder, they must already have the capital at the start. Social respect is based on possessions. Contemporary society has both structural and “dynamic” inequalities (Fitoussi, Rosanvallon, 2000, p. 55). The latter means that employees from the same occupation category may have different job and employment situations. Such inequalities result from social evolution and the dynamics of society. The economy keeps changing. For those changes to be accepted, everyone must ultimately be able to find a job. There are plenty of inequalities in the modern world. They are actually connected with the description of social changes (Fitoussi, Rosanvallon, 2000, p. 55). They are related to the blurring of lines in the paid employment model, women’s labour, geographic inequalities, inter-generation inequalities, unequal access to welfare benefits, the complexity of tax systems, local benefits, unequal access to the financial system, and inequalities in daily life (e.g. regarding healthcare).

The presented analysis of social inequalities in the development of society is of sociological nature. It does not take into account the economic or psychological aspects. Nor is it comprehensive, as the addressed problem is extremely broad and complex. The article presents the terms, categories and sociological concepts regarding social inequalities and social development. Attempts were made to answer the questions: what are the reasons for inequalities throughout history, what are the reasons for inequalities in the modern post-industrial society, and can the growing inequalities be prevented? The conclusion arising from the work is that



social inequalities are generated by resources, and in particular by: power, money and prestige (which are too scarce to be distributed between individuals). Various types of inequalities have functioned in the development of society. In European society, inequalities have been changing over time. In this context, it must be emphasised that social inequalities and social development have always been intertwined. Social inequalities are currently one of major social problems. The analysis of the issues in question shows that the role of education and occupation in the modern world is increasing and that education is currently one of the basic resources that differentiates whole social groups and is a factor reducing the extreme inequalities. In modern society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, unemployment and precariat are major social problems. Inequalities still exist and new ones keep emerging. From the perspective of sociological theory, they lead to difficulties in the development of society.

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### Summary

The aim of the article is to attempt to answer the questions: what are the causes of inequality throughout history, what are the causes of inequality in today's post-industrial society and how can the growing inequalities be counteracted. The analysis of the social inequalities in the development of society employs a sociological approach. The values that lead to the social inequalities: power, money and prestige, can be demonstrated as being part of the history of the inequalities taking place in European society and its development since the 19th century. The article focuses on the concept of social stratification becoming one with progressive social development. It introduces theories explaining social inequalities. Social inequality is classified as one of the most important

social problems. It stresses that inequality in life time is changing. It is noted that social inequality and economic development are reciprocal. It is pointed out that today's post-industrial society has increased the role of education and profession, and that education is today one of the essential goods that diversifies whole social groups; it is also a factor in the reduction of marginal inequality. It was considered that unemployment and precariat constitute an important social problem of the 21st century. It is shown that inequality continues to grow, leading to difficulties in the development of society. It presents a number of factors (in practice) which cause the reduction in social inequalities, as well as the negative consequences of social divisions.

*Keywords:* social inequalities, social stratification, society, social development, economic development, work, education, precaria, social policy.

### **Nierówności społeczne a rozwój społeczeństwa w perspektywie socjologicznej**

#### *Streszczenie*

Celem podjętego w artykule tematu jest próba odpowiedzi na pytanie: jakie są przyczyny powstawania nierówności na przestrzeni dziejów i jakie są przyczyny nierówności w współczesnym społeczeństwie postindustrialnym oraz jak przeciwdziałać narastającym nierównościom. Przedstawiona analiza nierówności społecznych w rozwoju społeczeństwa ma charakter socjologiczny. W artykule wskazano dobra generujące nierówności społeczne: władzę, pieniądze, prestiż; przedstawiono historię nierówności zachodzących w społeczeństwie europejskim wraz z jego rozwojem od XIX wieku. Zaprezentowano ideę stratyfikacji społecznej wraz z postępującym rozwojem społecznym. Ukazano teorie wyjaśniające nierówności społeczne. Nierówności społeczne zakwalifikowano jako jeden z najważniejszych problemów społecznych. Podkreślono, że nierówności w czasie ulegają zmianom. Zwrócono uwagę, że nierówności społeczne i rozwój ekonomiczny są wzajemnie sprzężone. Wskazano, że we współczesnym społeczeństwie postindustrialnym wzrosła rola wykształcenia i wykonywanego zawodu oraz, że to właśnie wykształcenie jest współcześnie jednym z podstawowych dóbr, które różnicuje całe grupy społeczne; jest także czynnikiem redukcji krańcowych nierówności. Uznano, że bezrobocie i prekariat stanowią ważny problem społeczny XXI wieku. Uwypuklono, że nierówności wciąż rosną prowadząc do pojawienia się trudności w rozwoju społeczeństwa. Zaprezentowano szereg czynników (w praktyce) wpływających na zmniejszenie nierówności społecznych, jak i negatywne konsekwencje wynikające z podziałów społecznych.

*Słowa kluczowe:* nierówności społeczne, stratyfikacja społeczna, społeczeństwo, rozwój społeczny, rozwój gospodarczy, praca, wykształcenie, prekaria, polityka społeczna.

JEL: D14.