It is one of the more widely shared assumptions among sociologists that the phenomenon usually called 'social stratification', 'structured social inequality' or 'social class' can be and ought to be conceived of as multi-dimensional. If this assumption were abandoned, research topics like 'status crystallization' or 'status inconsistency' would become meaningless, and textbooks on social stratification following the tradition of Bendix and Lipset's *Class, Status and Power* would have to be completely re-written.

It is not my intention to refute the multi-dimensionality thesis as such, but I am going to argue (in part I of this paper) that its present conceptual foundations are very unsatisfactory. However, I shall not conclude from this that all the empirical results associated with these conceptual insufficiencies are insufficient as well. Rather it is my contention that the conceptual weaknesses of the multi-dimensionality thesis in its present form can be overcome (or 'superseded') without us having to reject all previous research. In part II, a brief outline of a general conceptual frame of reference — fully developed elsewhere — will be given, which is supposed to redress the balance between idealist and materialist elements in theoretical sociology as well as in the sociology of social inequality. In part III, this general conceptual framework will then be used as basis for reformulating the multi-dimensional model of social inequality. It will enable me to identify several conceptually distinct, but interrelated 'dimensions' in which unequal relationships between men are crystallized. Finally, in part IV, I shall put forward some rather open-ended considerations about how my multi-dimensional approach to structured social inequality might be fitted into an historical and critical theory of advanced industrial society.

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the meeting of the Research Committee on Social Stratification of the International Sociological Association in the University of Geneva, December 16-18, 1975.
The most widespread conceptual distinction used in multi-dimensional stratification research is the one between class, status, and power. Whoever adopts this approach implicitly (and often explicitly) rejects Marxian and Marxist analyses of social inequality as one-dimensional, over-deterministic, or otherwise unsatisfactory. This need not immediately concern us here. But what is of interest is the fact that supporters of the three-fold distinction between class, status, and power regularly call upon Max Weber, Marx's foe of many a sociological textbook, as their crucial witness. Unfortunately, they often misinterpret him. It would be easy enough to overlook this on the grounds that it does not matter very much what Weber 'really said', as long as the argument in question is theoretically sound. But the present case is not quite so simple: if the claim is made (or even worse, if it is tacitly assumed) that the major theoretical problems concerning the multi-dimensional approach to social inequality have already been solved by Weber and require no further discussion, then Weber's writings have to be critically scrutinized.

Without wishing to engage in a polemic against any particular writer on Weber, I merely want to make the following two simple points about what Weber certainly did not say. They can easily be verified by (re-) reading the few pages of Economy and Society where Weber explicitly raised theoretical issues related to structured social inequality:

1) *Weber never formulated a theory of social stratification*, neither a general, nor a historical one. Both in his earlier chapter 'The Distribution of Power Within the Political Community: Class, Status, Party' and in his later, unfinished chapter 'Status Groups and Classes' he made a number of illuminating suggestions; but they certainly do not constitute a coherent theory: 'Class, Status, Party', the more substantial of the two chapters, is not primarily concerned with social stratification at all, but with power; the other, unfinished one is hardly more than a rudimentary sketch; and there are some conspicuous inconsistencies between the two chapters. In other words, Weber has given us valuable theoretical raw material, but nothing approaching a coherent theory of social stratification.

2) But even if one were to concede that Weber's contributions might be considered as something like an 'embryonic' theory of social stratification, there still can be no doubt whatsoever about the following crucial point: the chapter 'Klassen, Stände, Parteien', supposedly the cornerstone of the multi-dimensionality thesis, is *not directly concerned with social stratification at all*. Unambiguously enough, Weber writes that 'classes', 'status groups' and 'parties' are phenomena of power within a community. That is, Weber distinguishes between three typical forms of social organization which are conceived
of as potential sources of power in society. Seen in this context, the metamorphosis from 'Classes, Status Groups, Parties' to 'Class, Status, and Power' appears somewhat surprising. The following criticisms are some of the more obvious ones:

— Class, status, and party in Weber's writings are ideal-typical distinctions, derived from the analysis of historically specific power structures. They are not intended to be used as an analytical taxonomy applicable to all forms of societies. If the German term 'Stand' had been translated more literally as 'estate' rather than 'status' or 'status group', he historical quality of this concept would probably never have been in any doubt.

— As mentioned above, the ideal types of class, status group, and party refer to different historical forms of the distribution of power. That is to say, power, not stratification, is Weber's general concept; class, status, and party are its three historical specifications. It follows from this that the logical structure of Weber's typological framework is completely upset as soon as the concept of power is 'demoted' to the same conceptual level as class and status, replacing the concept of party which is particularly unsuitable for any sociology of social stratification.

— When Weber introduced the concepts of class, status group (Stand), and party, it was certainly not with the idea in mind that entire populations should be graded on scales along any of these three dimensions. He did not want to 'measure' social inequality; he was interested in classes, status groups, and parties because he saw them as possible, though sometimes competing, modes of group formation influencing the power structure within a society.

These criticisms should be sufficient to cast strong doubts upon any attempts to legitimize the thesis of the multi-dimensionality of social inequality with reference to the authority of Max Weber alone. But once the Weberian rug has been pulled from underneath multi-dimensional stratification research, what is the consequence? To carry on with empirical reasearch as before, but without coherent theoretical justification? Or to give it up altogether? Or to try to develop a conceptual alternative? In the present paper, I want to explore this third possibility. Of the other two 'solutions', the first one can obviously be neglected within the present theoretical context; the second one, however, requires some comment as it implies a complete rejection of the ideal of multi-dimensionality which I find unsatisfactory.

As far as I can make out, uni-dimensional approaches to social inequality have been attempted on the basis of any one of the three concepts of class, status, and power:

— Sociologists close to the Marxist tradition usually understand structured social inequality as an expression of the relations of production in a given society; i.e., social inequality is perceived as a class phenomenon reducible 'in
the last analysis' to economic relations. A recent non-Marxist writer, Frank Parkin, who sees himself as a follower of Max Weber, also rejects the multi-dimensional model in favour of an economically oriented approach, at least for advanced industrial societies. According to his view it is the occupational order, which is to be seen as the 'backbone of the class structure, and indeed the entire reward system of modern Western society'.

— A very explicit version of a power-based approach to social inequality has been put forward by Ralf Dahrendorf. He writes that 'power and power structures logically precede the structures of social stratification'. A slightly less clear-cut case of a power-oriented theory of social stratification is presented by Gerhard Lenski in his *Power and Privilege*.

— Finally, there is the functionalist tradition lead by writers such as Parsons, Davis and Moore, or Warner. Their consensual image of society is the frame of reference for a sociology of social stratification focussed on the concept of social status. They depict stratification as resulting from actors' evaluations of social positions, these evaluations being rooted in a commonly shared value system.

Out of these three uni-dimensional solutions the last-mentioned has probably made the greatest impact on contemporary sociology. There can be little doubt that the status — (or prestige) dimension has largely dominated research on social mobility and stratification in the last few decades. This tendency of narrowing down the scope of research on social inequality to its most 'subjective' or 'idealist' dimension has been critically noted by many writers.

However, it would be too simple to attribute this development exclusively to the uni-dimensional model derived from the functionalist conception of society; quite obviously, there are many sociologists whose main preoccupation clearly is with the prestige-dimension, whilst at the same time they subscribe to a multi-dimensional model of social stratification. How is this apparent inconsistency between multi-dimensional theory and uni-dimensional research practice to be understood?

If one has a closer look at recent literature on structured social inequality, one becomes aware of the fact that serious attempts at theoretically developing and justifying the multi-dimensional approach are very rare. The overshadowing authority of Max Weber, mentioned above, may partly account for this. But there is one major exception: in his well-known study *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, and later in a separate paper entitled *Class, Status and Power?*, W. G. Runciman made an attempt to establish the theoretical validity of the three-dimensional approach to social stratification without exclusively relying on Weber's writings. In later publications, he maintained his original position, although in a slightly toned-down way. Runciman argues that there are three, and only three, dimensions in which
societies can be said to be stratified: 'Class' in a strictly economic sense, 'status' in the sense of social prestige, and 'power'. These three dimensions are logically autonomous concepts, they can and must be independently defined and independently investigated. He illustrates this in the following way:

'... if we imagine a hypothetical anthropologist (or sociologist or historian) approaching a society whose system of stratification is wholly unknown to him, it is difficult if not impossible to conceive of him as doing other than asking himself three separate kinds of question: first, who is more and who is less advantageously placed in the system of production, distribution and exchange? Second, who is more and who is less highly regarded by the fellow-members of his society in terms of social prestige? Third, who is and who isn’t in a position to coerce or induce other members of his society into doing what they would not otherwise do even when they are averse to doing it? The terminology in which these different questions and the more detailed enquiries deriving from them are framed is unimportant: however labelled, the dependent variables with which the sociologist (or anthropologist or historian) of stratification is concerned are of at any rate these three different kinds'.

I certainly do not wish to deny that these are sociologically important questions, and I fully accept Runciman’s arguments about the theoretical and heuristic usefulness of the distinction between class, status, and power. Nevertheless, I want to make several critical comments:

(1) In my opinion, Runciman’s reasoning against a fourth dimension of social inequality introduced by K. Svalastogna as ‘informational status’, is not fully convincing. That is to say, I wish to challenge Runciman’s claim that his three-dimensional conceptual scheme is logically exhaustive.

(2) I think that Runciman’s conception of class, status, and power as three logically independent and mutually equivalent dimensions of social inequality carries one very dangerous implication with it. It allows one to select at will any one of the three dimensions and to treat it as a completely autonomous object of empirical research whilst disregarding the other two. This means that Runciman’s model seems to be perfectly adapted to justify and even strengthen the widespread inclination of narrowing down the scope of stratification research to its most ‘subjective’ or ‘idealist’ dimension, the prestige-dimension, provided that lip-service is being paid to the other two dimensions, power and class. Thus, Runciman’s conceptual pluralism is not a theoretically sufficient counterweight against the practical survival of uni-dimensional models of social inequality.

(3) I therefore agree with Geoffrey Ingham’s criticism, that the necessary conceptual links between class, status, and power go unrecognised in Runciman’s model, which only allows for empirically contingent connections between the three dimensions. On the other hand, however, I do not want to
follow Ingham's own solution which leads straight into a uni-dimensional view of social inequality based on the concept of power. In part III of this paper I shall try to develop an alternative model which establishes a definite conceptual order between different dimensions of social inequality.

(4) A further critical point, also made by Ingham, is that Runciman conceives of stratification as of the unequal distribution of individual attributes of artificially isolated subjects, rather than of a structure of asymmetrical social relations. That is to say, according to Runciman's conception it is always theoretically meaningful and, at least in principle, empirically possible to ascertain independently and to measure unambiguously the class status, the prestige status and the power status of any single individual, group or analytical category of individuals in every form of society. Consequently, Runciman discusses only technical difficulties which impede the realisation of this aim, he raises no fundamental theoretical problems. His three dimensions must therefore be understood as three purely analytical 'cuts' going right across whole societies, disregarding all internal structural differentiations. E.g., if we try to rate coal-miners, female typists, policemen, shopkeepers, students, migrant workers, shareholders etc. on the same three continuous scales of power, wealth, and prestige, we abstract from all the specific social relations and conditions affecting their respective social positions. This was certainly not what Max Weber had in mind when he introduced his concepts of class, status group, and party. Thus, if one considers it as one major task of concept formation in the sociology of social stratification to provide conceptual distinctions which can contribute to the understanding and explanation of the 'development, maintenance or reduction of inequalities', then Runciman's model is not entirely convincing.

(5) A final critical comment I would like to make is that Runciman's three-dimensional model of social stratification is constructed in a completely a-historical way.

The five points I have just put forward are certainly no fully developed criticisms; rather they are critical claims which I have developed by using W. G. Runciman's approach as something like a sounding-board. These claims have now to be backed up by theoretical arguments.

II

In order to be able to present an alternative conception of the multi-dimensionality of structured social inequality, I shall carry my argument to a completely new level of discourse: a discussion of the concept of 'social action'. At first sight, this might appear marginal to the main concern of this paper.
But it is my contention that many of the weaknesses in stratification theory mentioned above can be traced back to an underlying 'idealist' bias in the concept of social action. Any alternative approaches therefore will have to start from there.

Again I shall begin by discussing Max Weber, who is not only noted for being the most prominent pioneer of the multi-dimensionality thesis, but also of the 'social action approach' in theoretical sociology. As is well known, Weber's concept of social action is based on the idea that the only way by which a sociologist can gain empirical access to social reality is through understanding the subjective meaning acting individuals attach to their behaviour. According to his view there is no other way of making sociological sense of the social world than by working one's way into it via the needle's eye of the individual actor's consciousness.

In connection with my present argument I only wish to highlight two problematic aspects of Weber's interpretive sociology of social action — its idealism and its individualism:

—I call Weber's concept of social action 'idealist', because it prevents material conditions of social behaviour, such as natural environment and material artefacts, from ever becoming part of a sociological argument in their own right. That is to say, Weber's interpretive sociology can only account for material aspects of social life insofar as social actors attach some subjective meaning to them. Of course, non-social circumstances of social action are taken into consideration by Weber, too; but as they are devoid of subjective meaning and therefore inaccessible for his method of interpretive understanding, by definition they cannot be analysed within the conceptual framework of sociology.

— The second point I want to make concerns Weber's conceptual individualism: the meaningfully acting individual is the only and irreducible unit of analysis in Weber's sociology. Consequently, he refused to consider value-systems, institutions or other forms of symbolic culture as 'social facts' existing independently of the individual consciousness, as Emile Durkheim, the conceptual 'collectivist', did. It is true that this individualism does not seem to have interfered very noticeably with Weber's concrete research work, for example with his sociology of religion. However, it becomes a liability as soon as one tries to develop a more systematic conceptual analysis of societal structures.

The writer who is usually credited with having finally resolved the conceptual antithesis between Weber's individualism and Durkheim's collectivism is Talcott Parsons. According to his conception, sociological analysis should be based upon three fundamental categories — the 'actor', the 'situation of action', and the 'orientation of the actor to the situation'. His concept of the actor is more or less equivalent with the Weberian one (except that Parsons
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also allows for collective actors). The concept of the situation of action, on the other hand, is new. Parsons argues that every actor performing a meaningful social act is inevitably faced with a 'situation' comprising a variety of conditions (or 'objects') of action. From the perspective of the acting individual, not only other actors, but also his own biological organism and psychic constitutions are seen as conditions of action; and, what is more important in the present context, the same holds true for the physical and cultural environment of action, too.

By conceiving of culture and particularly of symbolic culture as of a component part of the actor's situation of action rather than of his consciousness alone, Parsons certainly has found a counterbalance against Weber's conceptual individualism. But does this also apply with respect to Weber's idealism? I do not think so: Parsons' sociology is not about actors' relations to situations as such, but only about their orientations to situations. Parsons writes:

'The situation of action . . . is that part of the external world which means something to the actor whose behaviour is being analyzed. It is only part of the whole realm of objects that might be seen. Specifically, it is that part to which the actor is oriented and in which the actor acts. The situation thus consists of objects of orientation'.

In other words, Parsons' 'action frame of reference' does not provide any conceptual device to distinguish between objective aspects of situations of action and their subjective interpretations in the actors' consciousness; both aspects are inextricably welded together in the concept of the 'orientation of the actor to the situation'.

Now, I am of the opinion that the conceptual distinction between 'subjective' and 'objective', or more specifically, between 'symbolic' and 'material' aspects of social action is a vital one for any sociologist aiming at theoretically understanding the historical transformation of societies in their changing productive and exploitative relationship to nature. However, it is not possible in the present paper to give a full account of the theoretical arguments which lead to this position; I have tried to develop them elsewhere. What I shall do instead is simply to state my own alternative concept of social action (which is strongly influenced by ideas put forward by Jürgen Habermas and to defend it subsequently by trying to demonstrate its usefulness with respect to the question of the multi-dimensionality of structured social inequality.

The concept of social action I am going to present is an attempt on the one hand to preserve Talcott Parsons' successful solution of the individualism-collectivism dilemma and on the other hand to overcome its intrinsic idealism. In order to achieve this, I propose that any sociological analysis of situations of social action should take into account two analytically distinct, but empirically interwoven aspects of action, a material and a symbolic one:
The *symbolic aspect* of social action covers more or less the conceptual area in which Parsons and other predominantly 'idealistic' sociologists are interested, *i.e.* behaviour oriented by values, norms, institutions, role-expectations *etc.*, irrespective of whether these symbolic orientations are primarily attached to material or to sociocultural conditions of action. It follows that the symbolic side of social action can only be empirically investigated through the method of hermeneutic or interpretive understanding (Sinnverstehen).

On the other hand, I speak of the *material aspect* of social action whenever I refer to the action of man within his material environment, which comprises human artefacts as well as 'genuinely natural' conditions of action including the actor's own physical constitution. The distinction between material and symbolic aspects of social action is based on the assumption that all material conditions of action can be described as being governed by natural laws, independently of how they might be understood or interpreted by the actors themselves. Consequently, the empirical investigation of material aspects of social action does not directly involve the use of interpretive methods. At least in principle, it even seems possible to conceive of scientifically 'exact' empirical statements about how adequate or efficient particular forms of human behaviour are with respect to given material conditions.

One may question, of course, whether the conceptual distinction between symbolic and material aspects of social action is a sensible one for a sociologist to make. It is my contention that, among other things, considerable explanatory power can be gained from making full theoretical use of the tension between material and symbolic aspects of social life. But this point will have to be postponed to the final part of this paper. First, the following concept of social action is introduced:

Any meaningful human action directly or indirectly related to the behaviour of others and being part of a specific situation comprising material and symbolic conditions of action is to be called *social action*. Those aspects of social action which are directed towards material conditions shall be called material aspects of social action, or simply *material action*. Those aspects of social action which are oriented towards elements of symbolic culture and/or direct expectations of others shall be called symbolic aspects of social action, or simply *symbolic action*. Concrete social action always takes place in situations which comprise both material and socio-cultural (symbolic) components. Social action therefore is always to be conceived of as combination of both symbolic and material aspects, although their relative significance may vary: a typical form of social action where the material aspects tend to prevail is human labour, whereas symbolic aspects tend to be predominant, for instance, in face-to-face interactions.
If my claim is to be upheld that the above concept of social action can be used as a general conceptual frame of reference for sociology, the obvious next step is to explore how the more specific phenomenon of structured social inequality can be related to it.

To begin with it may be useful to specify the subject area of the sociology of social stratification. Sociologists of social stratification customarily specialize in what may be described as the investigation of institutionalized forms of unequal distribution of certain social goods within different societies. Or, more precisely, the sociology of social stratification is about the unequal distribution of possibilities of access to social goods. This (very Weberian) notion that stratification research is primarily about the limited accessibility of certain social goods, carries one implication, namely, that these goods are scarce. Or, to put it more accurately, in order to be of interest for the sociology of social stratification, unequally distributed social goods must be either materially scarce (e.g. farmland; food) and/or socio-culturally 'sarcified' (e.g. rights; skills). But what are 'social goods'? Generally speaking, it can safely be assumed that social goods are products. More specifically, they can be seen as products of intentional human action, especially of social action. And even more specifically, social goods can be conceived of as being products of past material and symbolic action. Accordingly, it is possible to distinguish between primarily symbolically and primarily materially produced social goods, which may or may not be unequally distributed within a society.

The above reasoning attributes considerable weight to one characteristic of social action which tends to be played down by the more 'idealistic' versions of sociological action theory (e.g. Weber, Parsons), whereas 'materialist' writers (e.g. Marx and Engels) see it as the central piece of their theory of society: social action is conceived of as being productive. This immediately leads to the insight that the material and symbolic products of social action of the past may become conditions for social action in the present and may thereby shape social life almost like natural conditions. If these man-made social goods have become sufficient permanent conditions of social life, and if access to (or exclusion from) them can be seen as significantly affecting the life-chances of the members of a society, then they are pertinent to the sociology of social stratification.

Thus, to sum up the argument, whenever the possibilities of access to scarce and/or 'sarcified' material and symbolic conditions of social action, which are produced by past and reproduced by present human action, are asymmetrically distributed within a society and thereby affect individual life-chances, we are faced with the phenomenon of structured social inequality, or more
conventionally put, with social stratification. This somewhat laborious conceptual clarification now enables me to identify two analytically distinct, but empirically interdependent dimensions of structured social inequality. I call them 'wealth' and 'knowledge'. They directly correspond to the two basic components of the concept of social action as developed above, i.e., to its material and its symbolic aspect:

(1) The material dimension of social inequality is concerned whenever a sociologist is faced with the fact that access to material products of social action is asymmetrically regulated in a society and individual life-chances are thereby affected. In other words, the material dimension of social inequality refers to the unequal distribution of socially produced *wealth*. It is obviously important to distinguish between various forms of wealth which may be distributed in more or less asymmetrical ways. In advanced industrial societies, for instance, it may be advisable to distinguish between the following types of material inequality: the unequal distribution of income which, among other things, regulates the access to consumer goods; the unequal distribution of more durable goods and possessions which may become sources of income themselves; and, in particular, the unequal distribution of control over those parts of the 'wealth of a nation' which can be put to productive use and thereby contribute to the generation of new wealth, i.e. the material means of production. However, not all socially produced wealth need be unequally distributed in an unequal society. For example, in advanced industrial societies it is usually the case that a considerable proportion of the total material wealth available takes the form of 'collective goods' which are supposed to be equally accessible to all members of society (e.g. public places, communication networks and other public facilities, welfare provisions etc.) As this 'collectivized' sector of material life typically coexists with, and is affected by, various forms of social inequality, one important empirical question for a sociologist is whether supposedly collective goods are in fact universally accessible. Another equally important empirical task is to investigate the various manifest and latent institutional devices by which the inequality of access to material goods is guaranteed and legitimized (e.g. the institutionalization of private property, of the labour market, of the sexual division of labour etc.).

(2) Just as the access to material products of social action may be asymmetrically regulated, the same holds true for symbolic products. Parallel to the dimension of wealth, and conceptually equivalent to it, I therefore introduce a second dimension which I call, for want of a better word, the *knowledge-*dimension of structured social inequality. (The term 'knowledge' is used here in the same broad sense as, for example, in 'sociology of knowledge' where it refers to strict scientific 'truths' as well as to any other forms of socially pro-
duced ideas, rules, beliefs, skills etc.). The idea behind this conceptual distinc-
tion is that man-made symbolic conditions of action, exactly like man-made 
material conditions, may be unequally distributed. But whereas the notion of 
inequality of wealth is familiar enough among sociologists of social stra-
tification, the parallel concept of inequality of knowledge is not. One reason 
for this may be that the symbolic culture of a society is often tacitly assumed 
to be something like a 'collective good', equally shared by all members of a 
society. Partly this is a correct view: the cultural heritage of a society, its 
language, customs, beliefs, techniques, laws etc. indeed are to a large extent 
learned and shared by all its members — more or less like public places or 
other 'collectivized' material goods. Another reason may be that the notion 
of scarcity of goods, for which members of a society compete in a zero-sum-
game resulting in an unequal distribution, appears fairly straightforward and 
plausible when applied to material goods, whereas it is more difficult to con-
ceive of symbolic culture as being 'scarce' in the same way. However, the ac-
ccess to symbolic goods can be institutionally restricted. That is, symbolic goods 
may be 'scarcified' by social means and thus be prevented from becoming free-
ly accessible collective goods: particular religious or legal or scientific insights 
and rituals may be monopolized; the access to specific technical skills and to 
professional qualifications or to advanced education may be limited; sub-
cultural forms of thought, speech and behaviour may be confined to certain 
positively or negatively discriminated sections of a population etc. Whenever 
life-chances are affected in an asymmetrical way by such restrictions of 
access to elements of symbolic culture, we are faced with the knowledge-
dimension of structured social inequality. It is a widely accepted assumption 
among sociologists that the dimension of knowledge tends to play an increa-
singly important role in the asymmetrical allocation of life-chances in tech-
nologically advanced societies, where science and technology are becoming 
a leading productive force in their own right.46

It should perhaps be emphasized that the distinction between inequality of 
wealth and of knowledge is purely conceptual, exactly in the same way as 
the more basic differentiation between material and symbolic aspects of social 
action. As soon as it comes to empirical investigations, both dimensions of 
social inequality are inevitably interwoven, though sometimes one, some-
times the other may deserve priority for the explanation of empirical phenom-
ena. More specifically, it is of interest to the sociologist to identify the par-
ticular forms of material and/or symbolic inequality which are crucial cha-
acteristics of the structure of inequality of a given society; the discovery of 
changes of such crucial features of inequality usually is an indicator that 
changes in the overall structure of society are taking place: e.g. control over 
capital may supersede land-ownership, or formal academic qualification may
replace sub-cultural skill or birthright as predominant factors affecting the inequality of life-chances in a society. That is to say, it is a central task for any sociology of social inequality to determine empirically which forms of inequality are the most important ones in a given society. In the same way, it is also a purely empirical matter, not to be decided a priori, whether particular forms of unequal distribution of social wealth and of social knowledge can actually be graded and quantified as attributes of individual actors in a sociologically meaningful way: in a society for instance, where the institution of private property is a universal mode of regulating access to material goods, it may be sensible to measure its unequal distribution; if, on the other hand, many other modes of exercising control over social wealth coexist which are not readily convertible, it might not be as reasonable to do so. In the same way, the measurement of the unequal distribution of formal educational achievement, for example, may or may not be useful for the understanding of the social processes leading to the asymmetrical allocation of life-chances. That is to say, wherever universalistic criteria expressing material or symbolic inequality (such as private property, money, formal education) have been unambiguously institutionalized within a society, the sociologist might as well use them as indicators. I say, as 'indicators', not as 'the real thing', for if we were just to content ourselves with those aspects of structured social inequality which can be measured according to the reified criteria provided by the investigated system of inequality itself, we might never become aware of how these quantitative distributions are socially produced and reproduced.47

(3) This leads on to the third dimension of social inequality, the dimension of power. Like the dimensions of wealth and knowledge, the power-dimension is directly related to the general concept of social action introduced above. The assumption is that all social action takes place within a situation of action comprising three analytically distinct components, namely material conditions, symbolic conditions, and behaviour of other actors. We have already seen that it is the asymmetrical regulation of access to material and symbolic conditions of social action which is at the basis of the unequal distribution of wealth and knowledge in a society. That is to say, until now I have concentrated on the asymmetrical distribution of products of past social action affecting present social action. But social action is an on-going process; actors do not only relate to objectified products of past social action, but also to 'the past, present, or expected future behaviour of others'.48 Such social relationships may occur between equals (e.g. between friends, colleagues, peers) and they may be asymmetrical (e.g. between superior and subordinate, owner and tenant, teacher and pupil). It is also possible that complimentary asymmetries cancel each other out (e.g. in a 'good' marriage or in a give-and-take com-
promise). If this is not the case and if individual life-chances are affected by asymmetrical relationships, we are faced with the power-dimension of social inequality.49 I do not want now to take up the debate about the exact definition of the concept of power. For the present purpose it is sufficient to indicate that, following the Weberian tradition,50 I use the concept of power to characterise asymmetrical social relationships in which certain actors are in a position to carry out their own will even despite resistance. If such a power-relationship is institutionalized, it is usually called domination (Herrschaf). I want to draw particular attention to the following features of this concept of power. It always refers to social relationships, not to personal characteristics or to external conditions of action. Furthermore, no matter whether power relationships manifest themselves in direct face-to-face interactions or whether they are indirect and mediated in so many ways that they appear to be 'anonymous', they can always be traced back to agents.51 Finally, they always involve an element of reciprocity of action between power holders and power subjects, however lop-sided this reciprocity may be.

In order to clarify the inter-connections between inequalities of power and inequalities in the distribution of materials and symbolic products of social action it seems sensible to have a closer look at the productive aspect of asymmetrical social relations. Two terms which have fallen somewhat into disrepute among many sociologists might be of use here, exploitation and alienation. 'Exploitation' may be said to be taking place whenever power is successfully used to make people produce more than they receive in return.52 And people may be said to be kept in a state of 'alienation' from the products of past and present productive activities to the extent to which power is being successfully applied to prevent them from gaining full participation in the use of and control over the material and symbolic goods available in their society.53 Clearly, the notions of exploitation and alienation in the present form raise more theoretical questions than they answer — which is precisely their purpose. They certainly are not concepts which can be immediately operationalized and used for measurement. Rather, they indicate in an abstract way where to look for substantial links between the power-dimension of social inequality on the one hand, and the dimensions of wealth and knowledge on the other. Generally speaking, it is safe to assume that power-relationships tend to play an important role in the genesis of inequalities of wealth and knowledge. And, what is perhaps of even greater heuristic significance for sociological research, it may also be assumed that power-relationships, especially in institutionalized form as relationships of domination, usually play a considerable part in the maintenance of existing inequalities of the distribution of wealth and knowledge. In this sense the following rule of thumb might serve as guideline for more detailed empirical research: who-
ever tries to challenge the unequal distribution of wealth and knowledge in a society by attacking the institutional regulations of access to material and symbolic conditions of action will probably have to face power in one form or another being exercised against him. Consequently, he is not likely to succeed unless he himself is able to mobilise sufficient resources of counter-power. However, it goes almost without saying that wealth and knowledge, in their capacity as material and symbolic conditions of action, are major resources of power themselves and are therefore likely to establish a vicious circle which reinforces existing inequalities. Yet, the ultimate resource of power is neither wealth nor knowledge as such, but the ability to threaten with and eventually mobilise superior physical force. In this sense I agree with writers like Dahrendorf and Lenski who follow Marx in asserting that structured social inequality is unthinkable without a power basis. Or, in a slightly more metaphorical way, one might perhaps say that structured social inequality is something like a 'social fossilization' of material and symbolic products of power-and-inequality-ridden social relationships of the past generating new power-relationships in the present.

However that may be, the conceptual relation between the three dimensions of social inequality may perhaps best illustrated by a triangle, with wealth and knowledge on the base line, and power on the vertex. Together, they make up the concept of structured social inequality, and it would be detrimental if any one of them were to be empirically investigated in complete isolation from the others. The main difference between them is that power refers to the rational, wealth and knowledge to the distributional aspects of structured social inequality. This means, among other things, that inequalities of wealth and knowledge are much more open to quantification and measurement on a societal level than inequalities of power. The reason is that material and symbolic products of past social action having become objectified into external conditions of present action may sometimes be measured and counted like 'things' belonging to particular people. On the other hand relationships of power, however ossified they might be, always involve an element of mutual interaction and reciprocity which requires qualitative analysis. In any case, the measurement of power as a phenomenon of gradual distribution of individual attributes has only rarely been attempted in connection with stratification research. Partly this may also be due to the fact that the exercise of power in highly differentiated and technologically advanced societies tends to take an increasingly de-personalized and indirect appearance, power being largely located with anonymous rules and institutions and exercised by officials rather than powerful individuals. That is why the metaphor of an 'asymmetrical' structure of power appeals to me; it conveys the idea that social actors may be involved in a manifold network of anonymous, contra-
dictory and often not understood control relationships which, taken together, define degrees of autonomy and powerlessness within a complex, but nevertheless asymmetrically arranged relational structure. Thus, if attempts at measuring the unequal 'distribution' of power were to be made at all, the quantification of degrees of powerlessness as individual attributes might perhaps be the most rewarding way to choose.

If one accepts the general concept of social action as developed in section II, it follows that wealth, knowledge and power are the three basic dimensions of structured social inequality, none of which is to be analysed in isolation. But if I were simply to conclude from this that the formula of 'class, status, and power' is to be replaced by the conceptual triangle of 'power, wealth, knowledge', one question would remain open: what happens to the status- or prestige-dimension of social inequality? My first answer is that the hierarchical distribution of prestige should not be conceived of as a primary dimension of social inequality. This can be demonstrated by a little exercise in utopian imagination: If we imagine a hypothetical society which is not characterized by structured social inequality, the three main basic dimensions of wealth, knowledge and power would still remain indispensable categories of sociological investigation, albeit in a somewhat different guise. In such a 'symmetrical' society, the sociologist would still be interested in the material products of past action as conditions of present action, as well as in the ways in which they are distributed and exchanged. But the dichotomy between wealth and poverty would have lost its meaning, as equal participation of all in the common wealth would be the predominant pattern. The same would hold true with respect to the dimension of social knowledge; it would still be worthwhile to investigate the symbolic products of the past in their relation to present action, but as all knowledge would be freely accessible, life-chances would no longer be unequally affected by it and the tension between knowledge and ignorance would lose its importance. Similarly, the opposition between power and powerlessness would become irrelevant, as such a 'symmetrical' society would, by definition, have no asymmetrical structure of institutionalized domination and subordination between men; but obviously, the ways in which people influence each other and in which their action and interaction is organized would still be of interest to the sociologist, though no longer under the name of 'power'. That is to say, whereas the investigation of material and symbolic conditions of action and of institutionalized social relationships seems to be important in all societies, categories like 'status', 'prestige' or 'deference' can only make sense when applied to unequal societies. They presuppose the existence of hierarchical differences between human actors, and to investigate 'status-equality' without making this assumption would lead nowhere. Still, status differentiations are patently a conspi-
cuous feature of structured social inequality, for instance in advanced capitalist and socialist societies. To exclude status completely from the dimensional analysis of social inequality would be a mistake. I rather suggest to treat status as a secondary dimension of structured social inequality.

(4) Making use of a term borrowed from Berger and Luckman, the status-dimension of structured social inequality may be described as a 'second-order-objectivation of meaning' which reflects and legitimates the primary inequalities institutionalized on the basis of power, wealth and knowledge; however, it does not reflect them too closely. That is to say, day-by-day interaction in unequal societies tends to proceed in the following way: superior or inferior status is granted to specific social actors or social roles as soon as they display some external characteristics or 'status symbols' which are interpreted as credentials for their 'status entitlement'. This status-entitlement does not necessarily correspond directly to the primary dimensions of structured social inequality, i.e. to the asymmetrical regulation of social relationships and of access to scarce material and 'scarified' symbolic goods. It is in this sense that Edward Shils, certainly no radical, writes about what he calls the differential allocation of deference: 'The stratification system of a society is the product of imagination working on the hard facts of unequal allocation of scarce resources and rewards. (It) . . . is imaginary but it has the effect of being 'real' since it is so widely believed in as 'real' '. In other words, the primary dimensions of social inequality, power, wealth and knowledge, are allowed to remain latent and unreferred to in most asymmetrical social relations, and they are replaced by an institutionalized system of 'prestige' or 'deference' which tends to be taken for granted by the actors and defines the situation of action for them. In this sense one may agree with Frank Parkin's diagnosis that status-systems typically give normative support and thereby legitimize structured social inequality.

This does, of course, not mean that the status-dimension is completely dependent on the other three dimensions of structured social inequality. Being institutionalized as 'second-order objectivation', whose function it is to legitimize and integrate 'first-order objectivations' such as the asymmetrical structures of wealth, knowledge and power, status-systems are bound to enjoy a fair amount of empirical autonomy vis-à-vis the three primary dimensions of inequality.

But however that may be, in its capacity as a second-order objectivation the status-dimension is even more remote from the relational basis of structured social inequality than the dimensions of wealth and knowledge. That is perhaps an additional reason why the status-dimension attracts the research interest of so many sociologists with a special commitment to quantitative methods. Yet, it should be clear from the paper so far that I am not at all
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arguing that the quantification of social status is theoretically unjustifiable as such. On the contrary, at least in advanced industrial societies as we know them, status is probably the most widely recognized 'social currency' operating in the field of social inequality. It translates complex primary inequalities (more or less accurately) into the various languages of everyday life and thereby shapes social action. Wherever a status-system is homogeneous and general enough to work as a 'social currency' or 'lingua franca' of social inequality within a complex society, it may certainly be sensible to quantify and measure it. But what I said above with respect to the empirical measurement of inequalities of wealth and of knowledge applies even more strongly to all attempts at grading social positions according to 'prestige', 'deference', 'general desirability' or similar notions of status: the results of such investigations have to be put firmly into the context of a structural analysis of the three primary dimensions of inequality. If this is not done, there is considerable danger that a status-system is uncritically described without being perceived as a legitimatory device which may contribute to the stabilization of structured social inequality by keeping its basic dimensions latent. In other words, reducing stratification to status-stratification means becoming a victim of a socially institutionalized disguise; analysing status in its interrelation with the dimensions of power, wealth and knowledge may contribute to its critical understanding.

IV

Wherever power relationships, access to wealth and knowledge, and the allocation of social prestige are institutionalized in a way which leads to an asymmetrical distribution of life-chances in a society, we are faced with the phenomenon of structured social inequality. This summary statement sounds completely a-historical. But the conceptual framework of social action adopted above also implies the possibility, and even the necessity, of an historical approach to social inequality. Clearly, no such thing as an historical study of structured social inequality can be attempted in the present paper. Instead I shall use this concluding section to put forward a few rather tentative suggestions as to how my above conceptual discussion is related to the historical and critical analysis of structured social inequality in advanced industrial societies.

I have emphasized that structured social inequality is a form of institutionalized regulation of access to conditions of social action. Institutions are not products of nature, they are the outcome of productive social action. Like all man-made and historical phenomena, institutions can change, and they can be changed. It follows that structured social inequality, being a form of
institutionalized control over conditions of social action, may also be subject to change; and under certain circumstances, it may even be transformed and reduced by purposeful human action. It is at this point that I would claim that my concept of social action introduced above, which equally covers the relationships between man and nature and between man and man, is more useful than its more 'idealist' counterparts. It opens up the possibility to make some general statements about the changing historical circumstances under which structured social inequality develops.

As Marx said in a famous formulation: 'Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted'. It is difficult to contradict this statement. But there is one additional point to be made. If we accept that the circumstances of social life are produced and changed by the social action of men, we also have to take into account that the productivity of social action itself can change; in particular, it can be increased. If such an increase of the productivity of social action is institutionalized on a societal level, this affects the circumstances of stability and change of 'inherited' structures of social inequality. This argument can be further specified.

As I have intimated above it is possible to make unambiguous empirical statements about the productivity or efficiency of material aspects of social action, at least in principle. By this I mean that a social scientist who aims at scientifically assessing levels of efficiency of material human action only has to come to terms with practical difficulties of empirical research; he is not faced with fundamental epistemological obstacles, such as the problem of historical and cultural relativism. On the other hand, if he would try to measure the efficiency of symbolic action, he would have to come to terms with this question of relativism, as he would find it hard to establish valid criteria of measurement which are independent from the participants' point of view. But my analytical distinction between material and symbolic aspects of social action allows me to leave the symbolic aspect to one side for the present purpose. Instead, I concentrate on the material aspect which is more promising, as there is an independent criterion for the evaluation of man's confrontation with nature: the better material action is adapted to the natural laws governing its material environment, the more productive it can be said to be. As is well-known, the productivity of material social action, or of the 'productive forces' available within a society, can be increased through the use of machinery, elaborate technology, an efficient organization of the social division of labour etc. That is to say, increases in the productivity of material social action are sociacally produced, of course, and institutionalized in specific systems of
industry, economy, science, education etc., but their efficiency can be assessed independently.

As it is one of the major features of socially organized forms of material action to produce material goods, i.e. wealth, it seems likely that the level of development of the productive forces is related to the amount of social wealth available for distribution in a society and thereby affects the material circumstances of social inequality.

It may be useful to confront two contradictory views on the relationship between the development of productive forces and structured social inequality, in order to locate my own position in this matter:

The well-known Marxist conception is conveniently summarized in the following quotation from Friedrich Engels: 'The separation of society into an exploiting and an exploited class, a ruling and an oppressed class, was the necessary consequence of the deficient and restricted development of production in former times (...). It will be swept away by the complete development of modern productive forces. And, in fact, the abolition of classes in society presupposes a degree of historical evolution, at which the existence, not simply of this or that particular ruling class, but of any ruling class at all, the existence of class distinction itself has become an obsolete anachronism. (...) Man's own social organization, hitherto confronting him as a necessity imposed by nature and history, now becomes the result of his own free action'.

Whereas Marx and Engels saw the rise of the productive forces as both a necessary and a sufficient precondition for the eventual abolition of class inequality, a contemporary writer, Gerhard E. Lenski, takes an opposite standpoint. According to his view, increasing productivity leads to an increase in the amount of 'surplus' goods and services available for distribution in a society. This, in turn, leads to the possibility of a continuous increase in structured social inequality. However, this general tendency is counteracted in advanced industrial societies by a variety of specific social forces.

Between these two polar views, one seeing the abolition of class inequality as a necessary consequence of the full development of productive force, the other emphasizing the possibility of a further increase of inequalities, I take a third standpoint. I do not see any convincing evidence that the abolition of structured social inequality is a necessary consequence of the institutionalization of scientific and technological progress and the accumulation of wealth in advanced societies. But the reduction of inequalities is made possible by it. Furthermore, I would claim that the amount of structured social inequality that can be established empirically as existing in such societies is to be seen as being too high compared with the extent of possible equality, given the available technical and economic means. Structured social inequality in ad-
vanced capitalist and socialist societies can therefore be analyzed from the viewpoint of its reducibility.

In this sense it may be said that structured social inequality has only become a truly 'social' phenomenon in our industrial age. It is now imposed to a lesser degree by external material constraints than in the preceding historical epochs. To a much larger extent it has become a societal phenomenon which is not only produced, but also to be changed by human activity. It is this consideration which finally puts my whole discussion of the dimensions of social inequality in an historical perspective, and it also opens the door for a critical approach: it only makes sense to adopt a critical stance towards a certain empirical state of affairs if it can be assumed that it can be changed at all. In this sense, a critical attitude towards inequalities in societies characterized by a feudal mode of production could only be a moral one, whereas criticizing excessive inequalities in advanced capitalist and socialist societies can also be based upon realistic sociological insights about the practical possibility and the likely social (and moral) costs of the transformation of structures of social inequality.

In the age of technologically imposed scarcity, social life was largely moulded by the exigencies of man's productive and exploitative relationship with nature. But the more completely material conditions were perceived and treated in an instrumental and universalistic way, as pure 'things' without any particular symbolic meaning, the more efficient the social organisation of material production tended to become. It is part of our own historical heritage that not only material objects can be, and have been, treated as 'things'. This also happened between human beings. Slaves, serfs, soldiers, wage labourers have been and are still used as instruments towards specific goal which are not their own. They are at the receiving end of unequal society.

I have described three primary and one secondary dimensions of structured social inequality, power, wealth, knowledge and status as institutionalized 'objectivations' of meaning. This expression gains an additional significance now. It is precisely through these 'objectivations' that the reified element in human interaction and social life is perpetuated. However much social actors mean to entertain purely symbolic and communicative interactions amongst each other, in asymmetrically structured societies more than just traces of the historical legacy of men being treated as things to be used, rather than as free and equal human beings, are still to be felt.

Notes

4 The most obvious inconsistency is that in the chapter 'Class, Status, Party' the term 'class' is used in a purely economic sense; furthermore, its applicability is explicitly limited to market economies, i.e. capitalist societies. In 'Status Groups and Classes', on the other hand, Weber discusses 'social classes' as well, and the examples he uses show that the range of the concept of class is now extended to non-capitalist societies. Weber's definitions of the term 'class situation' vary accordingly.


7 As an illustration, consider this quote from a textbook published in 1976: 'Weber is credited with introducing a multidimensional approach to stratification in which he places a greater emphasis than Marx on non-economic considerations. Specifically, Weber called attention to three dimensions, or hierarchies, of stratifications: class, status, and power, which he linked to the economic, the social, and the legal-political aspects of societal structure. Furthermore, Weber noted that each of these hierarchies had collective references that he termed classes, status groups, and parties'. (M. Abrahamson, E. H. Mizruchi & C. A. Hornung, *Stratification and Mobility*, New York-London 1976, p. 48).


11 F. Parkin, op. cit., p. 18.

12 R. Dahrendorf, 'On the Origins of Inequality among Men', in: A. Beteille (ed.), *Social Inequality*, London 1969, p. 37 (Dahrendorf states explicitly that this is a revision of his earlier view, published in *Class and Class Conflict*, op. cit.).


21 Id., 'Social Stratification', *op. cit.*, p. 246.

22 Cf. id., 'Class, Status and Power?', *op. cit.*, pp. 28-37.

23 Cf. id., 'Explaining Social Stratification', *op. cit.*, p. 169.

24 Cf. id., 'Class, Status and Power?', *op. cit.*, pp. 57-59.


27 This does obviously not apply to Runciman's own empirical work. In his major study *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, *op. cit.*, he is concerned with all three dimensions of inequality.


30 Id., 'Social Stratification', *op. cit.*, p. 146.


33 The ensuing discussion of the concept of social action is a very condensed summary of an argument developed at greater length in R. Kreckel, *Soziologisches Denken*, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-162.


37 T. Parsons & E. A. Shils, op. cit., p. 56.
40 For a more extensive discussion of the concept of meaning (Sinn) and the method of interpretive understanding (Sinnverstehen), cf. R. Kreckel, Soziologische Erkenntnis und Geschichte, Opladen 1972, pp. 74-77 and passim.
43 The concept of 'productive action' developed here has a wider scope than Marx's concept of 'productive labour' which is opposed by the notion of 'unproductive labour'. (Cf. K. Marx, Grundrisse, Harmondsworth 1973, pp. 304-310). My distinction between material and symbolic aspects of social action comes closer to what Marx was aiming at when he wrote about the division of material and mental labour. (Cf. K. Marx & F. Engels, The German Ideology, op. cit., pp. 51-52).
44 The term 'life-chances' is used here in the sense suggested by A. Giddens: 'Life-chances' here may be taken to mean the chances an individual has of sharing in the socially created economic and cultural 'goods' which typically exist in any given society'. (A. Giddens, Class Structure, op. cit., pp. 130f).
47 Cf. the famous formulation of Marx according to which 'the relations of distribution are themselves produced by the relations of production, and represent the latter themselves from another point of view', ibid., p. 758.
49 With this it should become clear that not all power-relationships are immediately pertinent to the study of structured social inequality. Political parties, for example, may well be phenomena of the distribution of power in a society in Weber's sense, but they are usually not directly related to the unequal distribution of life-chances within a society. The same holds true for many power-relationships occurring on the level of face-to-face interaction.
50 Cf. ibid., p. 53.
51 With this I follow the argument put forward in S. Lukes, Power. A Radical View, London 1974, pp. 52-56.
52 Cf. the slightly different concept of exploitation put forward by A. Giddens, Class Structure, op. cit., pp. 130-131.
55 Cf. Footnotes 12 & 13 above.
There are other generally recognised 'social currencies' in advanced industrial societies which translate inequalities from one social sphere into another, most notably money and law. But whereas the status-currency is clearly specialised to exercise a subsidiary function in the field of social inequality, they are not, I therefore do not consider them as further secondary dimensions.


In a preliminary way I have tackled this question in *Soziologisches Denken, op. cit.*, pp. 196-203.

