

SOCIOECONOMIC CLASS, SOCIAL STATUS AND CONSUMPTION:

STRATIFICATION, MOBILITY AND URBAN CONSUMPTION IN ATHENS

Research Proposal for the ARISTEIA (EXCELLENCE) 2011 Programme
Institute for Urban and Rural Sociology, National Centre for Social Research

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The proposed research programme aims at exploring the relationship between multiple dimensions of social stratification and social differences in the pattern of urban consumption in the case of Athens. The term urban consumption "describes how the meanings of goods and commercially oriented experiences intermingle with space, place, and social identity in ways made possible by metropolitan life and are thereby specific to it."¹ In large cities, particular fields of consumption are structured in complex ways both vertically – by various distinctions of status – and horizontally according to cultural types and relationships with lifestyles depending on the place, form of outlet, the size, frequency and character of consumption. The distribution of the urban population according to their relationship to the resulting forms/types of consumption typically shows significant differences between the various social strata. The question is: to what extent stratification, as a social structure that goes beyond simple differences in incomes and wealth, accounts for these differences and, more to the point, which dimension and concept of social stratification – or combination of dimensions - is the most appropriate for understanding the complex structure of distinctions and differences in consumption? The present project follows, in broad lines, the theoretical and methodological approach advanced in the collective research programme "Social status, lifestyle and cultural consumption: a comparative study" led by J. Goldthorpe and T.W. Chan². In that programme, the main leading hypothesis was that socio-economic class (in the Neo-Weberian model of occupational classes introduced by Erikson & Goldthorpe and typified in the EGP and subsequently the European Socio-economic Classification– ESeC) does not suffice for understanding differences in cultural consumption and must be supplemented by the additional major Weberian dimension of stratification – that of social status. Status in this context, is determined by a hierarchy of occupations according to prestige which largely defines social strata as collectivities with partial closure formed by relations among "social equals". With regard to cultural consumption, the findings across a number of countries, show that social status along with its correlates of the current cultural capital of individuals and their partners (mainly education) as well as that associated with their social origins (from social mobility data), plays an equally strong or stronger role than economic class and is essential for understanding the influence of social stratification. This determinant role is not a simple one-to-one correspondence (homology) between class/status groups and forms of cultural consumption as in much of the research inspired by Bourdieu's famous work on "distinction", but a more complex one where forms of consumption and types of consumer often cut across classes. On the other hand, there is a strong element of stratification due to both economic and leisure time constraints and status/cultural capital differences that undermines a number of "post-modern" theories that argue against the relevance of stratification and the primacy of the sphere of "production" in modern societies and in favour of the primacy and autonomy of consumption, the choice of lifestyles and identities through consumption. More generally, it undermines the argument that we moved towards the "individualisation" of lifestyles, consumption choices and conceptions of self that are free from traditional class and status schemas.³

The present research proposal differs from the aforementioned programme in a number of ways. For one, it proposes to cover fields of consumption that go beyond cultural consumption and that in many cases have a much stronger component of economic constraint and association with the stratification of wealth and, *prima facie*, a much weaker connection with differences in cultural capital. We propose to cover the following urban consumption items: housing – both primary residence and secondary/vacation housing; cars; shopping for clothing; dining out; attending public events or visiting establishments for music and the performing arts and

¹ D. T. Cook, Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology on Line

² Cf. the collective volume edited by Chan (2010)

³ Cf. especially the works of Giddens (1991), Bauman (2002) and Beck (1992). For the influence of Bauman and Baudrillard in postmodern theories of the city and urban consumption, see Clarke (2003).

going to the cinema. We believe that aside from the last set of items that clearly belong to the sphere of cultural consumption, activities such as dining out and to a lesser extent shopping for clothing also have a significant cultural component that can be approached with concepts found appropriate for cultural consumption.⁴ However, we also believe that these fields of consumption should also be approached through the lenses of economic sociology (or sociological economics) models that instead of the neoclassical individualistic rational-egoistic consumer emphasize the role of the "socialised" consumer influenced by established cultural practices, reference groups/relative preferences and status seeking that often extends into ostentatious and conspicuous consumption – or, at the other extreme, into behaviour and attitudes that are adjustments to the strains of relative deprivation.⁵ To these factors we may add the influences of globalisation in the media and in forms of consumption and the universal trends towards consumerism since the 1990's. These, in the case of a semi-peripheral country such as Greece with a large Diaspora, with many students abroad and a large tourism sector, add further issues regarding the origin of consumption standards and fissures between national/local and international/cosmopolitan cultural practices that may cut across the class structure.⁶

In the case of housing, we will focus on its more easily measured aspects that permit straightforward social ranking and comparison with group levels of household income and consumption: size and value and/or rent (paid or imputed) with tenure, building type, location and character of residential area as additional variables for further distinctions. A similar simple quantitative approach will be applied to private cars and secondary/vacation homes. In this, we follow the observation that these items, especially housing, though important for expressions of status rank and ostentatious consumption do not allow, due to high cost and rigidities of the available stock, much leeway for complex distinctions expressing cultural capital or particular lifestyles and social identities outside of a segment of the upper middle class. On the other hand, housing is situated within a complex urban spatial system of residential areas with their associated amenities and services that have distinctive class character and, at least in part, distinctive status as a separate significant dimension. Moreover, the dynamics of housing location and housing choice⁷ relate to a system of *spatial segregation* of classes and, possibly, status groups that adds a rich additional dimension to the relation between housing and social stratification.⁸ This leads us to a second significant difference from the approach of the "Status and Cultural Consumption" research programme: the additional emphasis on the socio-spatial structures of differences in consumption behaviour and the type of places of consumption. This lead will be followed, to the extent that is relevant, in all the cases of consumption studied.

The last significant difference from the approach of the "Status and Cultural Consumption" research programme has to do with our approach to the definition and operationalisation of Weberian class and status. For reasons of comparability with the slew of similar studies in the international and especially the European scene, we consider it paramount that we use the definitions and methods for occupational classification and class divisions advanced by John Goldthorpe and his associates over the years and typified in the ESeC model. His approach to

⁴ Such as "highbrow-middlebrow-lowbrow" goods (Gans, 1974) and "Omnivore-Univore" consumers (Petersen, 1992).

⁵ The classics in this field are Duesenberry (1949) and Leibenstein (1976). See also Mason (2000). For modern approaches to Veblen's theories in relation to Bourdieu, see Trigg (2001). For the increase in the role of status goods and conspicuous consumption see Frank (1999).

⁶ For such difficulties in applying the models for stratification and consumption developed in "core" European countries in the case of present-day urban Turkey see Ustuner & Holt (2010). For some of the aspects of the Athenian structure of public consumption, see Souliotis (2009, 2010). For comprehensive treatments of the recent issues in the geography of urban consumption see Goss (2004), Wynne & O'Connor (1998), Williams et al. (2001). While there are a lot of econometric studies of modern/postmodern patterns of consumption in Greece, there is a paucity of recent sociological approaches. Older studies focused on the classic contrasts of modern/traditional, urban/rural (see Karapostolis, 1983).

⁷ Measured in this case simply by current housing status, length of residence and location of previous residence at a fixed past date – say, five and ten years when applicable.

⁸ This is not the place to go over the voluminous literature on the sociology and economics of housing inequalities, residential change and spatial segregation. See, Maloutas (2007), Maloutas & Fujita (2011), Maloutas et al. (2006), Emmanuel (1996, 2008). For the specificities of Southern European housing systems, see Allen et al. (2004).

the Weberian concept of status and especially his method of distinguishing the status level of occupations implicitly by examining the occupation of close friends is not as widely accepted and adopted. It does, however, possess simplicity and theoretical merit and it will also be used in the present project.⁹ The same applies to Goldthorpe's approach to social mobility which will provide data for the role of social background in understanding differences in status and consumption as well as offer rich material for understanding the formation of the present Greek pattern of stratification after the changes experienced since the early 1990s. Both the ESeC model and the mobility approach have been used in the Greek 2004 and 2009 European Social Surveys (ESS) and these provide useful material and experience for our research. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that, even within the context of a Weberian approach to stratification, the direct application of an ESeC-based model of class hierarchy *as is* presents certain problems in the Greek case.¹⁰ Thus, alongside keeping the standard ESeC model for comparability, we will explore various revisions that appear more realistic for the Greek context and similar cases. More generally, we will explore a number of formulations and operationalisations of both class and status – staying within a broad Weberian approach – that may be more appropriate to a case with no strong historical background of either organised industrial capitalism or well-structured traditional hierarchies of prestige.¹¹ An additional rationale for this is the surprising lack of systematic studies of Greek stratification and social mobility despite the surge of such studies in Europe during the last decades.¹² Given this state of affairs, we believe that the examination of the structure of stratification should be given added attention in the present project as important in its own right rather than solely as a standardised explanatory factor for understanding urban consumption. Similarly, the inclusion of material on social mobility will serve two purposes: add to the analysis of the relationship of consumption to stratification through the "social background" and family support factors but also enrich our analysis of stratification as such by understanding the extent of fluidity in the system and the role of structural shifts that often lead to structural tensions vis. the reproduction of classes and status groups and imbalances between occupational class position and aspects of social status.¹³

The proposed research project will obviously gather empirical material that, aside from its immediate objectives, can sustain a broad long-term research programme in various aspects of stratification and social mobility.¹⁴ We singled-out three issues that deserve to be included as *addenda* to the main body of research. First, the extent and social character of ostentatious/conspicuous consumption. Second, the relationship between the social morphology of urban consumption and the current so-called major crisis of the centre of Athens. Both these issues have

⁹ It should be noted that these "relational" approaches to status stratification may not always produce consistent and robust results. Thus, in some cases the occupation of the spouse/partner is used as implicitly showing relationships among status equals. Alternatively, occupations may be ranked "objectively" according to their income and education level. Ganzeboom & Treiman (2003) have argued that the results are essentially similar to those of relational approaches and subjective rankings of occupational prestige.

¹⁰ Cf. Maloutas, (2007a). Emmanuel et al. (1996) argue for a direct economic measurement of the life chances of occupational groups as well as the inclusion of educational level distinctions (rather than mainly through the nature of the labour contract and position in the organisation of production).

¹¹ These differences may account for the especially strong influence of education and credentialism in both class and status hierarchies. For the exploration of an alternative definition of status based on the combination of the education levels of spouses/partners see Emmanuel, 2009.

¹² See Kasimati (2001) and Alexiou (2009) for reviews of field. For the stratification pattern in the 1960s and 1970s see Lambiri-Dimaki (1983). For a marxist overview see Papadopoulos (1987). While there are large numbers of orthodox or revisionist marxist articles with broad statistical sketches of the Greek class structure and discussions of its peculiarities vis. theoretical models, there are no large-scale original empirical studies of stratification.

¹³ The stability or relative decline in middle-class incomes and work-related status despite increased investment in education is a case in point. Similar issues are raised by the often frustrating results in the passage from manual working class to routine service employment. The question is, to what extent such tensions affect status-oriented consumption?

¹⁴ For example (and most notably) on the special role of education, self-employment and employment by the State— issues that have been extensively discussed in Greek sociology regarding the particularity of Greece as a "peripheral" social formation in response to the influential work of K. Tsoukalas (see the writings collected in his (1996), especially pp.13-46).

acquired some notoriety during these years of acute economic crisis¹⁵ and this research can contribute to the factual basis of the discussion. The last issue has less notoriety but is an important particularity of the social structure of Greek large urban centres that may be considered a necessary complement of this research. We refer to the extensive presence of urban dwellers in the rural communities of their origin or of their choice as places of second home or vacation home and places where many plan to or actually spend increasing amounts of time and economic resources – especially after retirement – often in ways akin to conspicuous consumption¹⁶, effectively participating in *two* systems of status stratification: an urban and a non-urban "local" one.¹⁷

2. THEMATIC STRUCTURE

1. Review of international research experience - Particularities of the Greek case – Issues of theory and method

A. Social stratification and social mobility

2. Socioeconomic class: the standard European model (ESeC) and Greek conditions
3. Social status, social relationships and cultural capital
4. Social mobility in class and status and the role of "social background" and family support

B. Distinctions and differences in urban consumption

5. The level of household consumption: variation across class and status and wealth; reference groups, ostentatious consumption, relative deprivation
6. Status, ostentation and identity in urban consumption: housing, residential areas, cars and vacation homes
7. Status, ostentation and identity in urban consumption: places and forms of dining out, shopping and cultural consumption
8. Structure and extent of socio-spatial segregation and social exclusion in urban consumption

C. Social stratification, mobility and consumption

9. Understanding the social and spatial structure of urban consumption: the role of multiple dimensions of stratification
10. The role of social mobility and social background

RESEARCH ADDENDA

- a. Extent and social character of ostentatious/conspicuous urban consumption – Impact of the economic crisis
- b. The socio-spatial morphology of urban consumption and the "crisis" of the Centre of Athens
- c. Urban status hierarchies in rural contexts: presence and consumption of urbanites in communities of origin/choice

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¹⁵ The extent of the current economic crisis will obviously necessitate various adjustments in research method more generally, e.g. the recording of the *differences* in consumption behaviour and spending levels between the present and, say, 2008.

¹⁶ On the other hand, it could be argued that significant involvement/reference to one's non-urban community of origin or choice may *lessen* status pressures and the need for status-seeking consumption. The reverse could be said for increased reference to the *European* social context and its standards of consumption – which may increase status pressures. On "belonging" in an era of globalisation, see Savage et al. (2005).

¹⁷ Aside from the material collected by the urban sample survey, this issue will be further explored with additional qualitative research in two selected rural communities in different regions around Athens.

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4. METHODS AND SOURCES

The principal research instruments of the project will be (a) a geographically stratified random sample household survey in the Athens Metropolitan Region (mainland Attica plus the island of Salamina) of about **2500 households** and (b) multivariate techniques of analysis of both occupational class and status ranking and the determinants of forms and practices of consumption (mainly by multinomial logit regressions). Similar methods will be applied to the (relatively limited) analysis of social mobility in order to ascertain the types of mobility paths and types of social background. Spatial analysis techniques for clustering and segregation will be used as needed for spatial data.

These quantitative methods will be supplemented by a limited number (about 50) of qualitative semi-structured interviews of a roughly representative social range of households that will cover, besides the core questions covered in the sample survey, more detailed data on biographies, on the role of family support, the social network and the social background of respondents as well as views and attitudes vis. alternative models of social stratification and ranking and views and practices regarding urban consumption. The special issue of the presence and consumption practices of urbanites in rural communities of origin/choice will be covered, in addition to the data collected through the urban survey, through a small-scale ethnographic research in two selected localities in two neighbouring regions. The quantitative analysis of social stratification and mobility as well as that of consumption patterns will be supplemented by the utilisation of already available data sets. These, unfortunately, are rather limited in the Greek case: the European Social Survey (ESS) for 2004, 2008 (2009) and 2011 for data on Esec and social mobility; the Household Expenditure Surveys and the Surveys on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) on household living conditions and consumption patterns; lastly, the annual Labour Force Surveys on the ranking of occupations according to education and earnings.

With regard to the main instrument of the research project, the urban sample survey, a few notes on the limitations restricting its size and scope are in order. Given the terms and conditions of the ARISTEIA call for proposals, the standard practice of designing the survey and its questionnaire and sub-contracting the fieldwork and coding to an experienced and resource-ready market research firm, is ruled out. Thus, the research team must itself organize and train a team of interviewers and directly manage the logistics and supervision of fieldwork and coding within the strict constraints of the call regarding types of personnel (post-docs, graduate students, technical support) and expenditure ceilings. As a result, the size of the sample, the scope of the questionnaire and the (necessarily extended) time spent in the field are essentially the product of compromise between the desirable and the feasible. Thus, a number of otherwise important data areas will most probably not be covered by the survey. To name a few most notable substantive areas that would otherwise be included: measures of *intra*-generational social mobility; social mobility on the side of the female spouse/partner; social attitudes regarding class and status; measures of the real wealth of respondents and their parents (aside from the value of primary and secondary residence and the use of family transfers/inheritance for their acquisition which will be covered); the composition of networks of active relationships as a factor of influence in class and status considerations and patterns of consumption (only the occupational category of the "best friend" will be covered). On the other hand, data on these substantive areas are not strictly necessary for this research which is broadly patterned along the methodological and theoretical lines suggested by the "Status and Cultural Consumption" international project (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2010).