# Talking About Social Inequality: Three Concepts of Difference

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*Abstract*

*The article analyzes the categories and classifications of social inequality by asking which linguistic possibilities are available for developing concepts of social inequality. The article builds on Koselleck's three kinds of differentiation:* above *and* below*, inner and* outer*, and* earlier *and* later*. It examines how these three kinds are used in the concepts of social inequality and demonstrates processes of shifting from one kind of differentiation to another. In conclusion, I claim that the three kinds of differentiation reach their limits in increasingly heterogeneous societies that expect differences like sexual orientation and ethnicity to be equally valued and recognized.*

*Keywords: concepts of social inequality, Koselleck, social difference, kinds of differentiation, differentiation shift*

## Introduction

The sociology of inequality describes and analyzes processes and outcomes of social stratification and thus helps objectify considerations of social inequality. However, this line of inquiry is also deeply involved in the societal discourses on social inequality. It addresses questions such as which kinds of social disadvantages and discrimination are socially legitimized, which outcomes result in social injustice, and which processes threaten the "social whole" (Simmel 1965: 122). The sociology of inequality offers categories and classifications that provide scientific validity for debating these questions (see Barlösius 2005). It is therefore a powerful actor in processes of debating and justifying factors leading to social advantages and disadvantages. Pierre Bourdieu calls this authority the "power to nominate," which allows "legitimate naming" of an "official – that is, explicit and public – imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world" (Bourdieu 1985: 731). The power of "official nomination" is backed by "all the strength of the collective, the consensus, the common sense" (Bourdieu 1985: 732).

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Bourdieu (1985) criticizes that this process's outcomes – features that are officially named and made visible as social inequality by the "power to nominate" – bear traces of past societal conflicts, victories as well as failures. In other words, nearly all categories and classifications of social inequalities are related to societal disputes. As a result, they often interfere with a distant or neutral view on the processes and outcomes of social stratification. However, such categories and classifications often meet with acceptance and approval because they are consistent with social practices and are thus experienced as evident. Another reason that they are regarded as evident is that most of them are congruent with the common ways of thinking and talking about stratification and social injustice.

Bourdieu recommends breaking away from this kind of evidence (2001: 17). He believes that the representations of social inequalities must undergo an epistemic fracture in order to reveal the societal heritage inscribed in the way they distinguish between and value social differences, inequalities, and injustice. He assigns to the sociology of inequalities the tasks of making the societal heritage explicit, demonstrating which social actors have the power to nominate social inequalities, and revealing which social discriminations and disadvantages are overlooked by the concepts, categories, and classifications. Analyzing and reflecting on these points makes it possible to improve the objectivity of concepts that represent socially different experiences of and perspectives on social inequalities.

Over the past three decades sociologists in this field have investigated how the categories and classifications that sociology has developed and popularized influence the understanding and justification of social inequalities. This particular subject has become established as an essential part of the sociology of inequalities, generally under the heading of inequality semantics (see e.g., Barlösius 2005, 2021; Berger 1988, 1989; Otto 2019, 2021). Studies on inequality semantics show how and by whom the categories and classifications are created and how much they are themselves outcomes of social inequality.

## Conceptual Possibilities for Naming Social Inequality

In this article I take a fresh approach to analyzing the concepts of social inequality. Instead of reconstructing the societal traces inscribed in the categories and classifications of social inequality, I pose a more fundamental question: Which linguistic possibilities of thinking and observing social inequalities are available for developing concepts of social inequality?[2] This question requires two ways of examining the societal heritage within the associated categories and classifications. First, it looks for concepts of social inequalities that specify how inequality is connected with or embedded in general sociological assumptions and theories. Second, it seeks out variants used to express and name differences in order to characterize the different ways inequality is socially experienced. This analysis makes it possible to specify experiences of discriminations that cannot be adequately expressed and for which new ways of naming and conceptualizing social differences must be developed.

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[2] I am building here on initial thoughts I have outlined in an article entitled *Benennungs- und Repräsentationsmacht mit Beteiligung der Soziologie* [Power to Nominate and Represent with Sociology's participation]; see Barlösius 2021.

I believe that this change in perspective on the semantics of inequality is necessary to analyze the linguistic heritage of the categories and classifications, which is, of course, also societally rooted. Such a change of viewpoint shows that some recent social phenomena, such as the perception of dissimilarities as diversities, are not adequately described by the available notional and conceptual possibilities. In order to specify the repertoire of possible nomenclature and representation of inequalities, I build on the work of Reinhard Koselleck (2006) to take a conceptual-historical perspective. This approach helps show which repertoire is usable for comprehending processes and outcomes of social differentiation and how the sociology of inequality uses it. These aspects open a space for reconstructing the generation and change of inequality semantics.

Inequality semantics predominantly identify and specify social differences that are used for categorizing and classifying individuals and social groups. Koselleck identifies three kinds of differentiation whose relation he characterizes as "formal opposition" (Koselleck 1989: 651): *above* and *below, inner* and *outer,* and *earlier* and *later*. Without these "three sets of contraries," he argues, "no history can come to be, regardless of the forms they take on in particular cases" (Koselleck 1989: 651). According to Koselleck, the three kinds of differentiation have anthropological properties, and he derives them from "metahistorical conditions" (Koselleck 1989: 651). One of these conditions is the span of time between birth and death, which "makes history possible and calls it forth" and in which "diachronic conflicts" are inherent (Koselleck 1989: 650). Another anthropological condition he considers is that boundaries must be drawn against the outside in order to define belonging to the inside. This differentiation gives rise to conflicts with the otherness. A third metahistorical condition results from the fact that humans always create a "pecking order" everywhere (Koselleck 1989: 651), and he contends that vertical hierarchy leads to serious societal struggles.

These notions are intriguing, but I think that Koselleck's three forms of differentiation assume anthropological properties that are questionable, especially because they almost unavoidably result in social conflicts and struggles. Certainly, social history is essentially characterized by these three kinds of differentiation and by the social conflicts associated with them. However, history is also marked by very different logics for such social clashes: the struggle for equal opportunities, for equal participation, and for equal resources (see Honneth 2004: 351). Although Koselleck's distinction between the three kinds of differentiation as "prelinguistic conditions of human history" (Koselleck 1989: 650) is something I find problematic, it is nevertheless an appropriate point of departure for an analysis of the historically developed possibilities for thinking about and observing social inequalities. It is actually quite remarkable that the three kinds of differentiation are frequent in everyday reflections and debates about social disadvantages and discriminations. General sociological theories, particularly concepts of social inequality and empirical analyses on processes of social stratification, also use the differentiations between *above* and *below, inner* and *outer*, and *earlier* and *later*.

### Uses of the Three Kinds of Differentiation in the Concepts of Social Inequality

In this section I show how the sociology of inequality makes use of three kinds of differentiation. For each kind I start with a presentation of Koselleck's (1989, 1997) understanding of contraries

and then illustrate their use in the sociology of inequality. To illustrate how the sociology of inequality uses these three kinds of differentiations in concepts, categories, and classifications, I review recent German textbooks on the sociology of inequality and identify the most widely read and cited works in the field. These readers mostly contain texts from the German sociology of social inequality but also texts from the American, English, and French sociology of inequality. Additionally, I included key French and American theoretical concepts such as *exclusion sociale* and *underclass*, which are not widely read or differently interpreted in German sociology.

Like Koselleck, I conceive of the differentiations as general contraries. In the first step, I identify the concepts, categories, and classifications of social inequality used in the texts. I investigate whether their explications refer to the three kinds of differentiation and, if so, which ones. I also look for descriptions of social inequalities that are unclear or do not fit one of the three differentiations. Such descriptions indicate that the three differentiations are not sufficient for expressing all social phenomena of social inequality. In the second step, I check whether the use of the three kinds of differentiation changed over time and, if so, how. I introduce the notion of a *differentiation shift [ger.: Differenzierungsverschiebung]* for analyzing such changes. Differentiation shifts can be taken as evidence of changes in the processes of social stratification, in the perception of social inequality, or in both.

### Above and Below – Naming Social Positions

According to Koselleck, the differentiation between *above* and *below* aims at creating social hierarchies, such as that of master and slave. Even conditions of inequality or freedom do not "abolish the functional existence of relations of above and below" (Koselleck 1989: 652). Sociological concepts of social inequalities use this kind of differentiation to describe and analyze hierarchical social relationships and vertically structured social conditions. Descriptions of social structure that differentiate between *above* and *below* typically categorize according to castes, status groups, or social classes. The sociology of inequality has been working with the differentiation between above and below since its inception, treating the notion as so evident that it does not require clarification or justification. Reinhard Kreckel, in his book entitled *Political Sociology of Social Inequality*, states that social inequalities are described and understood "everywhere and always […] with the help of vertical polarities," that is, the "polarity of higher and lower" (Kreckel 1992: 39, my translation). According to him, this kind of differentiation is popular because it is "easy to think and to communicate above and below" (Kreckel 1992: 39, my translation). Stefan Hradil introduces the concept of a "ready-made template of verticality" (Hradil 1987: 157, my translation) to explain the widespread use of the above-and-below distinction. The use of this kind of differentiation leads to the distinction between social positions and results in a hierarchical societal structure divided into vertically classified social positions. Another portrayal of the differentiation between *above* and *below* is that of "a hierarchical structure of the society along certain characteristics" (Solga, Berger, and Powell 2009: 25, my translation). Forty years earlier, Helmuth Schelsky described this kind of social differentiation, which, as he explains, is based on a "hierarchically structured and stratified societal constitution" (Schelsky 1965: 332, my translation). Ulrich Beck speaks of the "hierarchy model of social classes and strata" (Beck 1987: 341).

The differentiation between *above* and *below* applies to the way that individual and/or social groups are assigned to social positions. The positioning usually follows from better or inferior living conditions, which are captured mainly by available objective and subjective resources, usually income, education, paid work, and leisure time. Depending on the chosen concept of social inequality, the assigned social positions are notions associated with the estates, including social status, social class, and social stratum. Gerhard E. Lenski understands social class to mean "an aggregation of persons in a society who stand in a similar position" (Lenski 1984: 75). Martin Kronauer suggests that the social class structure and the social stratum layering are derived from the different status positions (Kronauer 1999: 8). The social structure of inequality is represented as a ranking or layering and is classified into three segments: upper, medium, and lower. Resource thresholds have to be defined for this ranking, and the individuals and social groups have to be classified into one of the segments, though the differences between the levels of resources are sometimes minimal. Sometimes the differentiation between *above* and *below* is also applied to describing racial inequalities. For instance, Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of the world-system introduces race as an "international status group category" (Wallerstein 1991: 199). According to him, "race is a blurred collective representation for an international class category, that of the proletarian nations" (Wallerstein 1991: 199).

The main reason for describing social change with the differentiation between *above* and *below* is to discover the extent to which social mobility (conceptualized as vertical mobility) occurs and which individuals and social groups are affected. Lenski uses the possibility of *upward* mobility for distinguishing caste and class. To him, "class is a caste to the degree that upward mobility into or out of it is forbidden by the mores" (Lenski 1984: 77). The upward and downward mobility of individuals and social groups from one social class or social stratum to another is studied primarily to determine whether there are changes in the vertical social structure and the proportions of social inequalities and, if so, how they are modified. Whereas upward mobility is usually described in positive terms, such as *rising aspirations*, downward mobility tends to be expressed in negative words, such as *declassification anxieties*.

When the differentiation between *above* and *below* is used to portray shifts of the whole structure of inequalities, most concepts assume that the ranking and the layering of the social positions have changed, that the distances between the social classes and social stratums have either decreased or increased. Schelsky makes this shift particularly clear with the image of *leveling* that he referres to as the "leveled middle-class society" (Schelsky 1965: 333, my translation). By contrast, Beck introduces the image of the *elevator-effect* (Beck 2007: 687) to describe situations in which the ranking and the layering remain unchanged as the whole vertical hierarchy upgrades. Both uses of the differentiation between *above* and *below* show that this kind of conceptualization tends to present a static and stable condition rather than capturing a dynamic and unstable state of society. Social inequality is thus primarily thought of as a reproduction of a hierarchical social order, not as a result of individual actions and decisions.

However, most concepts of social inequality that use this differentiation assume that massive social struggles between classes, including social revolutions, will break out if the degree of inequality becomes too great. The conceptions of inequality using this kind of differentiation cast social conflicts as struggles for superior social positions and for more and better resources.

## Inner and Outer – the Sense of Belonging

Regarding the second kind of differentiation, that between *inner* and *outer*, Koselleck says that "no unit of human social activity ever comes into being without being able to delimit itself inwardly and outwardly" (Koselleck 1989: 651). This differentiation applies the distinctions of affiliation and membership as proof of being in the inner circle of the social unit and uses marginal (peripheral) placings to represent the fringe. A French analysis of the social insertion of persons at the societal fringe describes this social relationship as follows: "It is about making a place among the others, not only 'next to' but in coherence or congruence with the others" (Commissariat 1992: 17, my translation).

The sociology of inequality draws primarily on this differentiation to identify and analyze the degree and quality of social belonging. The concept of social order also often uses the distinction between *inner* and *outer*, especially for describing the characteristics and behavior that are regarded as socially conforming and those that are stigmatized as nonconforming. The sociology of inequality makes use of the polarity of *inner* and *outer* particularly when social contexts such as the whole of society, special communities, and smaller social groups are interpreted as central integrating social unities, and when the degree and quality of being integrated into these unities determines the living conditions and the opportunities to participate in the inner circle. However, it is important to keep in mind that even marginalized individuals and groups are still regarded and treated as belonging to the social unit, albeit in a distant social relation. The differentiation between *inner* and *outer* works because it refers to a shared societal understanding of which norms, values, and behaviors should predominate in the inner circle of the social unit.

Georg Simmel speaks of a "purely social and centralist teleology" (Simmel 1965: 122) to explain why and how individuals and groups placed outside the inner circle of the social integrating units nevertheless have the right and duty to behave as members. Illustrating this specific kind of connectivity with society, he states that "[t]he poor are located in a way outside the group; but this is no more than a peculiar mode of interaction which binds them into a unity with the whole in its widest sense" (Simmel 1965: 125). A very similar approach was taken in the French debate on social exclusion, which was considered "the result of a lack of social cohesion" (Lamarque 1996: 29, my translation) and which, at the level of individuals, implies the "loss of belonging" (Autès 2000: 14, my translation) to society.

Kreckel introduces the distinction between *center* and *periphery* to describe social inequality resulting from being socially disadvantaged and discriminated against and from having no chance to participate in the inner circle of society (see Kreckel 1992). Like Simmel (1965), Kreckel emphasizes that the center and the periphery are socially interrelated but that they are divided by processes of sociostructural differentiation that place the more privileged in the center and the disadvantaged at the margin. Norbert Elias (1994) develops a very similar concept of social inequalities by creating the *established* and *outsider* figuration (see Elias 1994). He holds that the people or groups belonging to the *established* category have the power to assign the outsiders to peripheral places. Balibar uses the differentiation between *core* and *periphery* for characterizing social exclusion in terms of racism, which is based on "stigmata of otherness" (Balibar 1991: 18).

Whereas the differentiation between *above* and *below* relates to having more or fewer resources and thereby results in higher or lower social positions, the differentiation between *inner* and *outer* addresses other causes of social discrimination. It focuses on ways to partake in the social institutions and organizations that enable access to resources and opportunities for participation. It also emphasizes a certain degree of social homogeneity at the center, especially in terms of ascriptive characteristics, values, and norms of social and cultural behavior. To Elias, the established exercise of social control over and social cohesion between each other is intended to guarantee social homogeneity, which stabilizes social privileges (see Elias 1994). Unlike the distinction between *above* and *below*, the differentiation between *inner* and *outer* has only two manifestations; there are no gradations as is the case for the differentiation between *above* and *below*. Concepts of social inequality that operate with this kind of differentiation therefore tend to use categorical differences to elucidate inner and outer placement.

The differentiation between *inner* and *outer* helps identifying processes of social exclusion and inclusion and of marginalization and integration. Max Weber speaks of "the closure of the status groups" to explain what he means by "style of life" (Weber 1968: 935). He demonstrates how people with estates-based lifestyles organize social discrimination against other forms of lifestyle and claim a prestigious rank. Thomas H. Marshall points out the close connection that the inner-outer differentiation has with citizenship that extends state-guaranteed social rights to persons seen as belonging to society, whereas those individuals regarded as *other* have only very limited access to social rights that secure close affiliation with society (see Marshall 1950). Helga Krüger applies the connection between belonging and social rights to different social groups within society and to social institutions and organizations (see Krüger 1995). She shows how social institutions and organizations segregate people along categories like gender, race, and ethnicity, whereas the social units practice the differentiation between *inner* and *outer*.

The concepts of social inequality that apply the second kind of differentiation often address processes of society's polarization and division. These processes endanger and dissolve the bonds connecting marginalized individuals and groups with the center and, hence, with society as a whole (see Böhnke 2006). In studies on the distinction between *inner* and *outer*, Kronauer (1999) finds that such processes of polarization substantially threaten the societal belonging of the people on the margins. In this line of thought, a high degree of polarization and disintegration entails the risk that societal cohesion breaks down entirely. The second kind of differentiation is therefore used to elucidate hazards to "the social whole" (Simmel 1965: 122).

### Earlier and Later – Naming Changes and Phases

To Koselleck, the third kind of differentiation – that between earlier and later – and "the very notions of 'too soon' and 'too late'" are "fundamental for all history" because they are based upon the "natural givens of generativity, birth, and death" (Koselleck 1989: 651). He coins the term *temporalisation of concepts* (see Koselleck 1997) to characterize the process of regarding phenomena as time-based. In order to highlight the significance of belonging to earlier or later birth cohorts and of considering the social inequalities to which a person or group is exposed, Karl Mannheim had already introduced the concept of *generation* to supplement Marx's concept of class, which differentiates between *above* and *below* (see Karl Mannheim 1928).

Sociology uses this kind of differentiation primarily to describe and analyze processes of change, development, and transformation by distinguishing the past from the present and the present from the future. The sociology of inequality also makes use of *earlier* and *later*, namely for conceiving of changes in social disadvantages and discriminations over time. This kind of differentiation casts social inequalities as temporalized and fluid rather than stable and permanent. With the temporalization of difference, time becomes the reference point for justifying social inequality (see Luhmann 1991: 46). Koselleck (1997), too, sees temporalization as the predominant approach to coping with problems of modern societies. These societal debates focus on questions such as whether it is legitimate for some social groups to have to wait longer than others to enjoy the same resources and opportunities for participation that other social groups already have. Entitlement of all individuals and groups to the same resources and opportunities for participation is taken as a given; the question focuses on time: *When* will the disadvantaged social groups receive them?

In general, the sociology of inequalities uses three variants of time reference. The first, *earlier* and *later*, is applied for understanding differences between eras, as in comparisons between the agrarian social structure and that of an industrial society. The second variant contrasts the living conditions of older generations with those of younger ones in order to analyze changes of social inequality between cohorts. The third variant considers how social inequalities change during the life course. It thereby permits analyses of phases of social inequality. The first variant tends to be used in theoretical considerations of societal transformations, whereas empirical social structural analyses often draw on the second and third variants for describing the need to treat social inequality as (temporalized) dynamic between cohorts and within the individual life course. As Schelsky argues, "social mobility, by becoming universal, is increasingly detaching itself from laws of stratification and gaining other, probably purely dynamic criteria" (Schelsky 1965: 333, my translation). "Permanent and universal social mobility" created a "highly dynamic society" (Schelsky 1965: 334, my translation). In *Beyond Status and Class: Will There Be an Individualized Class Society*, Beck (1987) introduces the concept of *individualization* to express the highly dynamic nature of social inequalities at the individual level. The temporalization of inequality is driven by processes of individualization. Beck believes that the reason social inequalities occur within people's life courses is that individuals have become increasingly detached from nearly all social categories such as class, status, and community.

Because the differentiation between *earlier* and *later* can be used to represent chronological sequences, it is well suited to describing the contrast between being fixed in socially assigned attachments and positions, and processes of moving out of them. The concepts of social inequality based on this difference accentuate social inequality as a dynamic process, which is relatively flexible and somewhat fuzzy. The observation of transitional phases distinguishes this concept from the differentiation between *above* and *below*, which gives the impression of stability, and between *inner* and *outer*, which uses unambiguous delineations. Scholars working with this approach convert static nouns into terms of movement, as when turning *institution* into *institutionalization*, *chronology* into *chronologization*, *standard* into *standardization*. Karl Ulrich Mayer argues that the life-course sociology of social inequality is concerned with showing the "dynamic nature of the social structure" (Mayer 1998: 438, my translation) and the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous" (Mayer 1998: 439, my translation).

The use of differentiation between *earlier* and *later* to analyze social mobility within individual life courses requires the examination of short sequences as phases of social inequalities. Scholars in this field seek to show that downward or upward mobility often does not mean a permanent change of sociostructural positions but frequent moving up and down instead. This use of differentiation between *earlier* and *later* raises new questions. For example, has the nexus between social structures and linguistic differentiation, which supported each other, been broken? Are the three kinds of differentiation sufficient for identifying and describing the processes and outcomes of social inequality?

So far, I have shown how the most popular and powerful concepts of social inequality (social status and social class, social inclusion and exclusion, social integration and marginalization, and phases of inequalities within the life course and between different generations) are rooted in one of three kinds of differentiation. I did not find axiomatically different linguistic forms for expressing processes and outcomes of social differentiation in the concepts of social inequality in the texts I examined. If, unlike Koselleck, I assume that the kinds of differentiation are not anthropologically based, then to what extent are these differentiations determined by the period in which Koselleck identified and described his historical examples? I return to this question after addressing another phenomenon, the analytical shift from one kind of differentiation to another – the differentiation shift.

## Shifting Differentiation – Thinking Inequality Anew?

The differentiations between *above* and *below*, *inner* and *outer*, and *earlier* and *later* are composed in such a way that they can all be used to describe the same social inequalities. Depending on which concept of social inequalities is used, a different polar format applies, resulting in different interpretations and representations of disadvantages and social structures. When social inequalities are presented in a temporalized way, there is, at least indirectly, the assumption that the social positioning and social marginalization will change sooner or later toward a flatter hierarchy and more inclusive integration (see Barlösius 2004). The shift to using the other two differentiations has similar implications: When social inequalities, which have traditionally been analyzed with the configuration of *above* and *below*, are now examined with the polarity of *inner* and *outer*, massive disadvantages are framed as a problem of *belonging*. This shift happens when a category referring, for example, to religious, ethnic, or ascriptive characteristics is declared to be the primary difference and then interpreted as cause for deficient social integration. In that case, poor resources and low social positioning are understood as side-effects of marginalization.

This differentiation shift can be observed in studies on how individuals who are regarded and treated as too fat experience social inequality. In most investigations, the categorization of the body as fat is regarded as the leading cause for these people's social discrimination (see Barlösius 2014). Their weak social position and their low chances of upward mobility are considered to be consequences of the differentiation between physiques, closing opportunities for participation and opening the space for multiple stigmatizations.

The reverse also occurs, as when categorical differences, which normally use the differentiation between *inner* and *outer*, are represented in terms of differentiation between *above* and

*below*. Instead of treating disintegration and exclusion as a condition of *not at all*, this shift reinterprets it as a lack of resources, as *too little* of something. The concept of *underclass* aptly illustrates this shift: *Underclass* traditionally used to be a nonracial category and expressed a *much too little* in resources. However, it was redefined as "a racial term" (Gans 1995: 29) in the 1960s, which shifted a relationship of social exclusion and, hence, the differentiation between *inner* and *outer*, to one of social stratification, that is, a differentiation between *above* and *below*.

The processes of considering and naming inequalities by a kind of differentiation other than the one that is usually applied is what I call a differentiation shift. It occurs, for example, when classified inequalities are declared to be a matter of categorical diversity, when categorical diversity is proclaimed to be a temporal difference, or a temporal difference is conceived of as a vertical inequality. Differentiation shifts show that the use of one of the three kinds of differentiation by the sociology of inequality is not predefined by the social reality that they are intended to capture and describe. To which social differences and inequalities does sociology apply such differentiation shifts? This question is also societally significant because social conflicts over social disadvantages and discriminations reveal exactly which kind of differentiation has gained acceptance and popularity as an adequate way to represent them. That is where the power to nominate comes into play. It is not enough to reconstruct which concepts and kinds of differentiation are used to explain and justify social inequality. It is also necessary to ask how the concepts and kinds of differentiation achieved broad societal recognition as the legitimate way to conceive of social inequalities. This question arises specifically for differentiation shifts that challenge the common sense about how to regard and think about social disadvantages and discriminations and offer another way of considering and explaining them.

A typical example of such a differentiation shift was the *dynamic poverty research* in Germany, which became widely accepted as the appropriate way to address social deprivation in the 1990s (see Leisering/Leibfried 1999). This branch of research described poverty as temporalized, de-structured, and de-bounded and considered poverty as a temporal phenomenon. Hence, this concept rejected an understanding of poverty as serious social disadvantage or as social exclusion. Temporalization was viewed as a general phenomenon in social structures, a viewpoint that corresponded to a predominant use of differentiations between *above* and *below* and between *inner* and *outer*. It has been largely abandoned. Approaches that gained favor look for looser and more easily changeable forms of social positioning instead, such as lifestyles, and concentrate on phases of social equality, such as the life-course concept. These approaches offer a dynamic view on social inequality. Against this background, it becomes evident that the dynamic poverty research is part of this trend toward more temporal sociological concepts. A separate question, which I cannot address here, is which societal changes created the conditions for adopting temporalized concepts as evident and appropriate for explaining social inequality.

## Concepts as Preceding Acts

Does it even matter which concepts are used to identify social inequalities and which linguistic possibilities are available for differentiating them? It is more than just a language game. In his studies on the history of concepts, Koselleck repeatedly demonstrates that linguistic work precedes practical actions (see Koselleck 1989: 653). Transferring this idea to the three kinds of

differentiation implies that they have to be understood as meaning that "diagnosis put forward a prognostic, and thus also a pragmatic, intention in order to influence a future whose details may be unknown but whose historical potentials are recognizable" (Koselleck 1989: 654-55). From a sociological perspective, the word *historical* should be replaced by the word *societal*. The three kinds of differentiation predefine "structural alternatives" (Koselleck 1989: 653) for acting. The use of the three concepts therefore includes a restriction to specific "alternatives that languages had preformulated" (Koselleck 1989: 656) to shape the social world. This observation implies that concepts for differentiating social inequalities, especially in diagnoses of society today, preformulate the conceivable societal future that is, what is considered possible and what is considered impossible. Koselleck goes so far as to claim that "[t]he linguistic formulation of a uniquely grasped experience prevents it from the radical alteration" (Koselleck 1989: 657). I doubt that Koselleck is right with this claim. However, if the verb *prevents* were to be replaced by *complicates*, I would agree with his statement. Koselleck's assertion that linguistic restrictions limit thinking possibilities is very relevant for the sociology of inequality.

The three kinds of differentiation describe and analyze social inequality in an objective manner, they are societally interpreted and thereby transport normative views and imperatives. Positioning above and below has to be reasoned and justified, say, with arguments such as performance equity. The different degrees of social integration, which are illustrated by *inner* and *outer*, should not threaten the societal belonging of marginalized people and groups. The differentiation between *earlier* and *later* implies that essential social structural resources and capabilities should sooner or later be made available to all members of society. These normative views and imperatives have no general validity; they have been developed in societal debates and conflicts and express the current dominant societal understanding of social inequalities.

My sense is that the sociology of inequalities used to work quite well with the three differentiations in order to identify and describe the phenomena of interest to it, but I question whether it still does. The normative views and imperatives concur that when differences become too great – whether between above/below, inner/outer, or earlier/later – they become problematic and risky for the social whole. However, they do "not aim at equalizing the individual positions," for "extreme manifestations of social differentiation" mean that the social structure will not "continue to be based on this differentiation" (Simmel 1965: 122). The sociology of inequality tends to use the three kinds of differentiation by taking social homogeneity as a reference point for conceiving and valuating the degree of social inequality. This reference point limits the possibilities of thinking and describing social inequalities.

## Valuation and Recognition of Diverse Differences as Equal

The three kinds of differentiation reach their limit when there is an expectation that social differences – such as those of sexual orientation, ethnicity, or physique – should be equally valued as the norm. In most cases, one specification, generally the one that is considered normal, is implicitly or explicitly taken as the basis for distinguishing and categorizing social inequality. In current societies, naming such differences in a way that expresses recognition as equally valued becomes increasingly important because societies are becoming increasingly heterogeneous. These heterogeneities could not and should not be described by the distinctions of *above*

and *below*, *inner* and *outer*, and *earlier* and *later*. Those differentiations disregard the equality of categorical otherness. It is, therefore, hardly possible to use the three kinds of differentiation to denominate otherness beyond the normative views they contain. They adopt polarities and work with contrastive formats that distinguish between better and worse.

Beyond the empirical observation that social heterogeneities are increasing, there is also the normative injunction against the use of pejorative terms. To eliminate them, it is necessary to formulate otherness as equivalent difference. Diversity initially seems to be a reasonable concept that encompasses these properties, but a closer look shows that the concept seems to be reserved for heterogeneities that are already societally valued as positive. Thus, even it does not eliminate the distinction between those people and groups who are appreciated as normal and taken as the reference point and those who are separated by their otherness. An important future task for the sociology of inequality is to develop concepts that describe the specific character of these social variations in a way that makes it possible to appreciate them as equally valued.

To achieve this aim, it would not be sufficient to establish a fourth kind of differentiation, one that avoids polarities and opposition formats. Nor would it be enough to develop concepts that simply list characteristic attributes and categories. The three established kinds of differentiation are marked by their presupposition that societies are unified entities and by their assumption that the processes and outcomes of differentiation are related to those unities. In other words, the differences and inequalities are conceptualized as societal relations. If attributes and categories are only listed, they are not understood as societal relations within a unified entity. Recalling Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's notion, I wonder whether *unity in multiplicity* could serve as a common societal bond between the different attributes and categories. Perhaps such a bond could be knitted from the mutual social recognition of difference as equal. What the metaphor of a bond means could be explained with Honneth's theory of recognition, which emphasizes the normative aspects of recognition. To Honneth, "principles of recognition that regulate in a comprehensible way forms of mutual recognition" (Honneth 2004: 354) have to be societally institutionalized. Recognizing and understanding difference as equal implies establishing principles of recognition that express the appreciation of a broad variety of otherness as societally desirable diversity.

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