

# The disappearance of boundaries between social classes. On the need to seek alternative social segmentations

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## Abstract:

*A description of borderland as a space can be inspiring for an analytical presentation of other social phenomena in which coexisting borderline categories occur. An example is social stratification within which different groups of individuals referred to as layers, castes or classes can be distinguished. Their character is arbitrary, resulting from a concern for the conventional, often not very distinctive interests of some social groups. Since the 19th century, the most widespread stratification system in Western societies has been the class system. However, its analytical value has been fading due to the blurring of boundaries between particular classes. The social classes, on the one hand, are subject to strong internal differentiation and are losing their previous cohesion, and on the other hand, they are becoming similar in many respects. Therefore there is a need to create an alternative and more analytically useful way of categorizing societies in contemporary social sciences. Segmentation based on the category of lifestyle seems valuable, because lifestyle is what, in a particularly important way, differentiates in the social dimension individuals forming contemporary Western societies. At the same time, this category is so capacious and distinctive that it can be analytically useful for representatives of various social sciences. The aim of the paper is, first of all, to present the structural foundation of class systems, secondly, to identify the reasons for the loss of their analytical value, and thirdly, to discuss the scientifically useful segmentation of society relating to different lifestyles.*

## Keywords:

**social segmentation, lifestyle, social class**

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## **Introduction**

In the opinion of the author of this paper, border studies may become an inspiration for representatives of other disciplines in the field of social sciences.

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The specificity of borderness may be common to various phenomena of social character. These include, for instance, social stratification, characterized by the co-existence, usually in a hierarchical order, of different social categories. The aim of the paper is to grasp the specificity of borderness and to show features common for borderland understood politically or spatially and social stratification. The fluidity and frequently insignificant distinctiveness of borders separating areas in a geographical and political sense, but also in social life, manifested nowadays in decreasing differences between social classes, makes it necessary to look for new methods of categorizing contemporary societies. Traditional class divisions are losing their analytical value mainly due to the fact that the boundaries between the classes are becoming less and less distinct and the classes themselves are becoming more and more internally diverse. In this paper the author describes the most important symptoms of and reasons for the disappearance of this distinctiveness. Another objective of the paper is to indicate a categorization of contemporary societies alternative to class segmentation, with particular emphasis on the segmentation in which the basic criterion for division is the lifestyle of a social individual.

### **Specificity of borderlandness**

Border studies, although essentially focused on the functioning of areas separated by political borders, can be inspiring for representatives of various social science disciplines. The specificity of borderlandness (see Sadowski 2008) may be characteristic of various social situations in which different categories function in close proximity. Therefore, phenomena characterizing a borderland as an area located close to a border separating territories that differ in terms of certain features may coincide with those characterizing different social areas (Kolosso, Scott 2013). An example can be social stratification, assuming the coexistence of different social categories consisting of units characterized by a specific location in the social hierarchy. In order to demonstrate the convergence between the borderland as an area and contemporary stratification systems, it is useful to first present the universal features of all kinds of borderland areas as described by Paul Ganster and David Lorey (2008):

1. Borders are always arbitrary, which means that even when they are set on natural barriers such as mountain ranges or rivers, they are still a human product. Furthermore, borders between countries are usually not natural at all, and sometimes they are even based on specially built barriers, such as the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall or the Berlin Wall. Artificial in nature, such buildings are the result of decision-makers' arrangements aimed at limiting the influences of

foreign cultures and civilizations, and ensuring a certain “purity” for their state, nation or society.

2. There are no explicit and absolutely distinct cultural or ethnic divisions between divided categories. This is due to the fact that borderlines are often not permanent and unconditional, and borders are subject to shifts, for example, for administrative or political reasons.

3. Borderland residents ignore the existence of borders. This is directly related to the arbitrary nature of borders, which causes resistance on the part of people living in a borderland, and results, among other things, in a more or less free movement of goods, services and people, often by circumventing the law. It is symptomatic that residents of a borderland are unaware of circumventing the law. They are not aware of their illegal actions, and explain their behaviour by means of the “everyone does it” principle. A specific identity of a borderland is being formed. Social individuals living in a borderland express greater loyalty to this identity than to the centre of the country. This approach, in turn, does not accept the lifestyle, especially the pathological behaviour, characteristic of people from a borderland.

4. The cultural and social diversity of borderland residents. It manifests itself in multiculturalism, often in many alternative cultural systems, behavioural patterns, and even competing normative systems.

We can refer to all the aforementioned features in relation to the characteristics of both stratification systems in general and the class system currently in force in our socio-cultural part of the world. The first feature concerning the arbitrariness of borders indicates that among divided categories – regardless of the social system – borders are usually more or less conventional in nature and, what is more, they are often the result of either a community’s care for its own interests or an attempted isolation from external social groups. As Jerzy Kochan points out, “(...) for centuries people have been aware of inequality and conflicting social interests” (2011). These contradictory and arbitrarily outlined inequalities apply to virtually all stratification systems known in human history. This is due to their hierarchical nature. In slave systems, a minority of free people effectively separated themselves from slaves by dominating them and enjoying obvious privileges as a result of their superior social position. They usually carried this out by granting themselves the status of citizens and taking it away from slaves. The arbitrariness of social divisions was equally evident in the estate system that was clearly hierarchical in nature. Representatives of the privileged nobility (aristocracy) effectively took care of both their position ensuring their legally sanctioned exploitation of the other estates, and the genetically maintained social order allowing them to pass the social position from one generation to the next. In the caste system, the arbitrariness

of divisions is additionally supported by the religious system according to which membership in one of the castes is conditioned by spiritual purity. Hierarchical assignment to a given caste is, as in the previously mentioned systems, of a genetic character, and the position of an individual is conditioned by their birth, thus ensuring that the castes placed higher on the stratification ladder to maintain their status for subsequent generations. The class system also has an arbitrary character, because it is conditioned by the degree of wealth. However, what differentiates it from the systems described above is the fact that the position of an individual is not inherited but to a large extent independently achieved by an individual. It is also a system in which the specific position of an individual is the least likely to guarantee certain social privileges – they are in no way legally sanctioned, but rather have a customary character.

The subsequent items characterizing borderlands as a particular area perfectly show the differences between the group of systems assuming a hereditary social position (the slavery, estate and caste systems) and the class system. While in the case of the former, differences between particular social groups are strong and clear, in the case of the class system, they are, especially nowadays, becoming increasingly blurred. As it has been mentioned above, the second of the above-mentioned borderland features is the absence of unambiguous and absolutely distinct cultural or ethnic divisions between the divided categories. Similarly, in the class system characteristic of contemporary Western societies, the absence of clear boundaries between individual classes is becoming a significant issue. Individuals belonging to different classes, differentiated by their level of wealth, often pursue very similar lifestyles, and thus dress similarly, have similar interests and ways of spending their free time, eat similar food, etc. This clearly distinguishes the class system in its modern version from the earlier stratification systems (slavery and the estate system) and the caste system. In the estate system, for example, the boundaries between social categories were precisely defined: an individual was born either a nobleman or a peasant and lived his or her entire life in this natural estate. Their chances of promotion or the risk of degradation were negligible. What is more, affiliation to a given social category determined an individual's specific way of social existence, making them a person of a certain category, completely different from someone belonging to a different estate.

In item three, borderland is characterized as a space in which individuals living in a border area ignore the existence of borders. Referring to the contemporary class system, one could say that this feature is becoming an increasingly clear element of society's characterization. Social individuals, regardless of the degree of wealth, usurp the right to draw on the full repertoire of lifestyles available in the

social space, and talking about the lifestyle of a given social class is becoming less and less relevant. For example, foreign tourism is no longer a form of spending free time reserved exclusively for the upper social classes. Cheaper ways of travelling, affordable accommodation easy to find thanks to popular internet portals for renting an apartment or a room, and finally couchsurfing for free accommodation, make travelling across the continent available to the middle and lower classes as well.

In item four, borderland is described as a space characterized by cultural and social diversity. This is what contemporary post-modern societies are becoming: non-national, implementing various patterns of behaviour inspired by competing lifestyles rather than ethnic or class affiliations.

The social classes are becoming less and less distinct element of the differentiation of societies, hence the need to seek categorizing tools based on differentiation criteria other than those characteristic of the class system, i.e. above all, the level of wealth and occupation.

### **Permeating through the borders of social divisions**

Sociologists have focused on the disappearance of class divisions for at least a dozen years. Some of them believe that the weakening of class divisions, determined economically and professionally, is an irreversible trend towards replacing class inequalities with social divisions of a different nature. Although Henryk Domański notes that “this is not an indisputable empirical fact which could be stated with one hundred percent certainty and this thesis is contested by many researchers” (Domański 2015: 55), including, for instance, Kingston (2000), Pakulski and Waters (1996), and Evans (2000), there are indisputably serious arguments in favour of the thesis according to which the role of the social class as a category effectively segmenting society is waning. This thesis can be proved at least on several levels. Let us follow the course of argumentation proposed by Henryk Domański in his book entitled *Czy w Polsce istnieją klasy społeczne?* [Do social classes exist in Poland?] (2015).

Firstly, the disappearance of social classes is determined by structural changes related to the degree of wealth of different social categories. The traditional social classes, which in most European societies were constituted in the second half of the 19th century, were characterized by a specific level of wealth. The peasant class had the least access to wealth, and individual representatives of this class were characterized by the lowest position in the social hierarchy due to their level of wealth. The representatives of the working class were not much wealthier

in traditional class systems. And although a certain degree of internal differentiation was characteristic of both categories, throughout the time of the class system's existence it was possible to estimate with a high degree of probability that peasants and labourers were individuals of low material status. On the other hand, representatives of the intelligentsia class were at the opposite pole of prosperity. In the 21st century, this level of wealth traditionally assigned to the particular classes was obviously blurred, which is connected, for example, with a change in the functioning of agricultural farms that have gradually expanded in size and where the application of modern technologies has increased significantly. Both processes have thus contributed to the often considerable increase in profitability of agricultural activity. As a result, some representatives of the peasant class in the hierarchy based on the degree of prosperity were placed on the medium and high levels. Similarly, the situation has changed in the working class, which has become highly differentiated internally, mainly due to the emergence of the well-paid skilled worker.

An important area in which the “death of classes”, or at least a strong blurring of the boundaries between the classes is proved, may be changes in property relationships, the expansion of the group of shareholders being a case in point. Compared to early capitalism, the number of pension and insurance funds participants has also increased significantly. This means that present-day income from assets is also earned by representatives of lower social classes. A significant increase in the number of property owners in Western societies is also important. The fact that a vast majority of representatives of the lower middle class are owners of real property means that holding such property has ceased to be a class distinction. In affluent societies, non-possession of property in the form of a flat is becoming more and more often a choice and “privilege” of upper-class representatives.

The distribution of political preferences within particular social classes has also changed significantly. Studies from the 1950s show that workers and lower classes more often voted for left-wing parties, while middle class representatives supported right-wing parties (Hertzler 1952; Leipzig 1961). A change in this trend became apparent already in the 1980s. At that time, workers' departure from left-wing parties and their voting for right-wing parties became a clear new trend (e.g. Creve 1984, Clark and Lipset 1991). This trend was consolidated in the following years and it continues today. Suffice it to say, in the parliamentary elections in Poland in 2019, the winning right-wing Law and Justice party gained the biggest support among people with elementary, vocational and secondary education (63.3% of people with elementary education, 64% of people with basic vocational education, and 45.6% of people with secondary education voted for Law

and Justice). The only group distinguished by their education in which Law and Justice did not win were people with higher education (Pawłowska, Dudzik 2019).

The thesis about the disappearance of social classes is the most strongly supported by the growing homogenization of lifestyles within the social classes. Traditionally, lifestyles were a reflection of belonging to particular social classes and their cultural traditions, and differentiated individuals forming society in the most distinct way. For centuries, the aspects that most accurately distinguished peasants, workers, white-collar workers or the intelligentsia from one another were particularly their different lifestyles manifested in different approaches towards personal hygiene, eating habits, different leisure patterns, different levels of participation in culture. Thus, lifestyle was traditionally associated with class membership (see, for instance: Sobel 1983; Bourdieu 1986; Goldthorpe, Chan, 2007; Chan 2010). In feudal societies, one could even speak of separate estate cultures (of peasants, townsmen, and the nobility) to which a particular lifestyle was closely related (Elias 2011). The diet of representatives of particular estates was completely different, they dressed differently, usually had different views, the way they spent their free time (if they had any) was different, and finally their level of interest and participation in culture was different. To put it figuratively, one could easily and at first glance determine the estate affiliation of a feudal society representative encountered in the street. Their appearance and the type of clothing, for example, did tell a lot. With time, this situation changed significantly. It is worth asking the question whether today, after putting a teacher, a worker and a peasant in one row we could determine their state/class affiliation on the basis of their appearance. Any indication would definitely be burdened with a considerable risk of error. Everyone could have similar hairstyles, be dressed in similar clothes (maybe even exactly the same, bought in one of chain stores). So, we should look for further clues as to which class or even professional group the participants in the experiment belong. For example, asking everyone to show us their Sunday dinner. However, I am afraid that this would not be a clear indicator of belonging to a specific class or professional group, as each person taking part in the experiment could be eating a pork chop, a bowl of broth, or even a pizza on Sunday. The difficulty with determining the social position on the basis of particular lifestyle determinants is consistent with the thesis concerning the disappearance of class divisions, which has been commonly developed in sociology at least since the 1930s. The unifying influence of mass culture on lifestyles was already emphasized by Frank Raymond Leavis (1930), Walter Benjamin (1936), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1994). All of them pointed to the democratizing influence of the media on the adopted lifestyle: various social and professional groups' access to the generally accessible media results in the unification of cultural patterns of

the general public. It is also manifested in the influence of the media on the way of dressing, ideas for spending free time, or the world view.

More recently, the thought of the above-mentioned authors has been continued in George Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization (2009). It refers to the popularization of institutions and consumption patterns that determine the unification of ways of consumption. The symbolically treated fast food chain, from which the name of the described process is derived, indicates the process of gradual popularization of the principles of functioning of catering establishments, but the phenomenon described by Ritzer refers to all manifestations of consumption (in terms of spending free time, participation in culture, selection of educational paths), which according to him have an increasingly uniform shape, and thus influence the development of homogeneous lifestyles common to most representatives of Western societies. Simplifying Ritzer's reflection on the changing world, one can state that the lifestyles of contemporary people living in the so-called Western culture are becoming similar to one another, and certainly cease to be attributed inseparably to specific social categories distinguished according to criteria other than lifestyle.

### **Alternative segmentation**

Modern societies can be categorized according to different criteria. In recent decades, the most common idea in the social sciences to segment societies into separate categories has been the class system determined economically. Membership in particular hierarchically ordered classes would depend on the material status of an individual. According to Max Weber, the class system is based on the ownership category; access to resources defined by the broad term "wealth" is the main criterion for the vertical hierarchization of society. Nowadays, Anthony Giddens has introduced a significant correction to the theory of the German sociologist. He writes about "market opportunities", which include not only economic capital, but also certain professional qualifications and education. They significantly determine an individual's market power by providing specific income, increasing the chances of promotion and pursuit of a specific career, and offering other social benefits (Giddens 1973, 2002). Without going into details of the different perceptions of the social classes over at least the last century, we can conclude that "social classes are communities that are distinct from each other due to different types of ownership" (Domański 2015: 53). These different types of ownership are in fact specific resources that determine the market position of individuals because they translate into specific income, power, opportunities in life. In some theoretical concepts, additional non-economic aspects, such as stability



and flexibility of employment, are taken into account in class categorizations. These aspects have become the key reason for the formulation of a new social category of precariat proposed by Guy Standing. This is the category of people with a usually low level of affluence, characterized by precarious employment (Standing 2014).

The second method of categorizing contemporary societies is psychographic segmentation. It divides consumers into sub-groups based on two basic criteria: (a) their proclaimed values, (b) their lifestyle. The creator of a popular segmentation of this type was Arnold Mitchell, who was above all interested in the economic diversification of society and its social consequences. The segmentation proposed by him takes into account the psychological aspect (proclaimed values) and the demographic aspect because it is based on the assumption that people within the same demographic group may represent very different psychological profiles, which may consist of a set of professed values, a risk-taking tendency, or the power of motivation to act (Lawson, Todd 2002).

The third way of forming distinguishable social categories may be the communication perspective, which makes it possible to pay more attention to “the functions of lifestyles and to study the semantic complexes based on them” (janKomunikant 2012: 34). In this perspective, researchers are above all interested in how the specific use of sign elements by individuals can make it possible to assign people to selected distinguishable categories. An example of such stratification is the proposal of a group of researchers from the University of Wrocław gathered in a team called janKomunikant, who have carried out a study aimed at “discerning differences in everyday communication – in both the clothes of the people undergoing observation and the form of the surroundings designed by them, presenting their attitudes towards the environment and the effects of such communications” (janKomunikant 2012: 81). On the basis of the analysis of both the communication situations in which the observed individuals participated and the communication space, seven separate categories were distinguished, defined successively by their smart names: cataloguists, bling-bling, nationalists, greys, business style, creative, and alternative (janKomunikant 2012: 81-104). The authors of this stratification strategy segmented the society based on messages made by social individuals relating to a specific lifestyle in terms of, among other things, the ways of furnishing a flat, the type of a car owned, the ways of spending a holiday, the type of clothing worn, the attitude towards technical equipment possessed or, eventually, the kind of a pet owned.

Let me present a short description of the distinguished categories. First of all, the cataloguists’ communication code is mainly based on hierarchy and the fight for its manifestations. “The world of this lifestyle consists of hierarchically

ordered elements and relations, with the communicatively manifested goal of the lives of this code participants being to strive for the highest position in this postulated hierarchy perceived as real by the participants” (janKomunikant 2012: 83). Those who follow this lifestyle are representatives of the mainstream taste and, in their everyday choices, they try to adapt to certain common determinants defined by various types of catalogues (including literal construction and clothing catalogues, but also lifestyle magazines that create “fashionable” ways of following the lifestyle).

The second lifestyle, referred to as “bling bling”, is characterized by an excessive exposition of one’s possessions. “At the centre of this lifestyle, there is a manifestation of belonging, but it is not very important to what. Bling-blings are those who are locked in their (real or imaginary) group, who are strong in that group, while all the others are not worth their attention” (janKomunikant 2012: 86). Representatives of this category are also characterized by strong materialism and consumerism. They pursue their goals by means of using force and striving for power. The most important determinant of a person pursuing this lifestyle is possession. However, it is the group to which an individual belongs that decides what one should possess. Therefore, daily decisions made by an individual are subordinated to the validation of their belonging to the group, mainly through the manifestation of possession.

The communication code and lifestyle represented by the next category, i.e. nationalists, stem from the premise that the prevailing system, anchored in tradition, deserves to last. Tradition and aversion to change are the most important aspects determining their everyday choices. Because of their passivity, representatives of this category often adapt to the currently applicable norms, which they do not accept. The reasoning of nationalists is based on the conviction that whatever the current reality offers is not worth accepting, and deserves to be rejected as a fashionable invention, certainly worse than what used to be before. In their everyday life, they are characterized by conservatism. In communication, this lifestyle is characterized by the use of the triad: “it has to be like this, it’s always been like this, it can’t be otherwise” (janKomunikat 2012: 88).

The lifestyle communication code called “the grey” is characterized by a lack of distinctiveness. And this regardless of the background against which it is observed. “The grey are characterized by a regular lifestyle, orientation towards evolutionary rather than revolutionary changes, a lack of interest in what is new, insisting on non-insisting. The grey need this and that, although they do not know why; they do not complain because the reality is as it is for them, everything around them is as it is (...)” (janKomunikant 2012: 89). Representatives of this lifestyle

replicate patterns, perform their everyday behaviours according to established and most commonly reproduced paradigms, have no firm views, and their dreams and goals are rather “ordinary” and easy to achieve. The main determinant of their lives is their typicality; they spend their free time in a way typical of their social environment, have typical cars, dress in a typical way, etc.

The business style is primarily characterized by focusing on the desire to own. The main purpose of everyday activities is to communicate “successfulness” interpreted in accordance with social standards. A representative of this style adopts a proactive approach; however, their actions are characterized by a lack of creativity, and they fit into certain patterns. “What counts is making decisions against the background of the available and perceived repertoire of possibilities, against the background of absence of doubts, polemics or philosophizing in relation to action. Business style representatives have their own ways of dressing, thinking and acting, their own communication determinants, oriented only towards the effects of action, leading to one goal, which is to achieve success, success that is not defined by them, but accepted as given and indisputable” (janKomunikant 2012: 90). The only indicator of success is ownership, and money is the only acceptable value in this communication code. In this paradigm, there are no other values worth pursuing.

People who pursue creative lifestyles are characterized by the use of creativity, often in their professional lives, but above all in their private lives. This creativity refers to the levels of ideology, product and lifestyle. In everyday life, individuals representing this style strive to manifest the creation of something new. Therefore, “creative people are oriented towards reflection, creating new models and solutions, because change or otherness is a determinant of what is considered good, expected, and desired” (janKomunikant 2012: 92).

The last of the distinguished lifestyles is “the alternative”. It is to a certain extent similar to the model described above, because the alternative subordinate their actions to the search for new and original methods of living everyday life, just like the creative. The difference, however, lies primarily in the fact that the alternative are oriented towards simultaneously new and traditional values. “They diagnose the existing situation as essentially unsatisfactory, one that cannot be accepted, that requires reforms or even changes. The alternative look for solutions in the future, and for the values needed to make these changes – in the past” (janKomunikant 2012: 93). Believing that there used to exist an ideal (social, cultural, moral) state, they subordinate their actions to the values derived from this ideal state.

## Conclusion

The disappearance of boundaries between traditionally distinguished social classes obliges representatives of social sciences to search for alternative ways of segmenting modern societies. This is important from the perspective of the need for a full description of society in the global dimension, as well as for capturing changes taking place within it. Segmentation will have some analytical value only if the identified categories are internally coherent and distinguishable based on at least a few variables. Social classes in traditional class systems met these conditions. Nowadays, they no longer do. Therefore, the author's conviction that lifestyle-based segmentation may be a scientifically valuable alternative to the class system. Learning about social diversity through the prism of different competing lifestyles understood as a set of characteristics and everyday behaviours of individuals or groups, which are a choice resulting from personal and social motives (Golka 2007: 192), can be valuable in the context of both a description of contemporary societies and ways of communicating effectively with specific social groups, in terms of political, social or even marketing communication. A message will only be effective if its creator is aware of the specificity of the groups to which it is addressed. This specificity may refer to different variables determining the characteristics of a group, and lifestyle may be one of them.

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