

## Stability, transformation, and escalation

### Norwegian classes and class boundaries 2008–2020

Magne Flemmen 0000-0002-2273-3913, Johs. Hjellbrekke 0000-0001-8227-7270, Jan Fredrik Hovden 0000-0002-9133-5580, and Vegard Jarness 0000-0003-4749-8793

---

## 2008 and beyond: The low impact and perception of the financial crisis

---

The Scandinavian countries are generally regarded as being among the most equal societies in the world. Social mobility has been found to be comparatively high (see, e.g., [Green, 2004](#)), and welfare-state arrangements have been universal in coverage. University studies are tuition-free and publicly financed, and the Gini coefficients for income inequalities are among the lowest in advanced societies. Nonetheless, several recent studies show increasing class inequalities, both intra- and intergenerationally. In this chapter, we focus on the case of Norway and address this development by focusing on four interrelated analytical dimensions: Social mobility, inequality in education, economic inequalities, and inequalities in lifestyles. <sup>1</sup> In combination, these four dimensions reveal marked class boundaries in Norway.

Compared to other Scandinavian countries, Norway was probably the country with the best conditions for dealing with the financial crisis in 2008. Due to its oil revenues and massive financial reserves, the Norwegian government was able to pursue an aggressive strategy for dampening the crisis created by the worldwide economic meltdown. Unemployment rates remained comparatively low, and even though housing prices dropped and the banks' lending practices became stricter, no major banks or financial institutions had to declare bankruptcy.

From 2007 to 2008, the public ownership of the stocks listed at the Oslo Stock Exchange did, however, rise from 31% to 41% (i.e. to levels not seen since the crisis in the early 1990s).

Nonetheless, the financial crisis in 2008 did little to change the dominating societal perceptions (see Table 1.1). Along with Denmark (not shown in the table), Norway has consistently stood out in international comparisons. Over a period of 20 years, from 1999 to 2019, more than 50% of the Norwegian respondents perceived their society as one “in which most people are in the middle”. The results indicate a high degree of temporal stability. Ten years after the financial crisis, Norwegians remained egalitarian in the perceptions of their own society. And in 2009, the contrast with, for instance, France and neighbouring Sweden was clear.

**Table 1.1 Varieties in Societal Perceptions: Norway, Sweden, and France**

	France 2009	Sweden 2009	Norway 1999	Norway 2009	Norway 2019
An elite at the top, few in the middle, many at the bottom	16.4	7.1	3.2	2.1	2.8
A society that looks like a pyramid, with an elite at the top, more in the middle, and most at the bottom	53.6	23.3	11.3	10.8	9.7
A pyramid, but with few people at the bottom	16.3	29.8	19.9	23.6	24.7

A society where					
most people are in the	12.1	37.9	57.8	56.4	54.2
middle					
Many people					
near the top, only very	1.6	1.9	7.9	7.1	8.6
few at the bottom					
Total	100	100	100	100	100

*Scope:* Respondents aged 18–79.

*Source:* ISSP 1999, 2009, and 2019 Social Inequality III, IV, and V.

While hierarchical societal perceptions dominate in France and also among a relatively high percentage of the Swedish respondents, a clear majority of the Norwegian respondents have remained egalitarian in their views of their own country.

Against the backdrop of the increasing inequalities in the years after 2010, this result is perhaps somewhat surprising. While the Gini coefficient for income inequality in Norway is close to .25, the Gini coefficient for wealth inequality is close to a whopping .80, and among the highest in the world (Hansen & Tøft, 2021 [data from 1993–2017]; Pfeffer & Warkus, 2021 [data from the Luxembourg Wealth Study, 2010–2016]).

---

## Social mobility in Norway: General trends

---

With respect to social mobility, the situation prior to 2008 was characterised by both stability and change. The total mobility rate was substantial, but the relative strength between origin and destination categories, as measured by the EGP class scheme, displayed a high degree of inter-cohort stability (Ringdal, 2004). Despite the impact of the financial crisis, there seemed to be very little change in the social closure of the upper class from 2003 to 2012 (Flemmen et al., 2017). However, there are indications of change in the class structuration of the lower reaches of

the social space: Whereas the mobility patterns of workers and the lower-middle class were clearly distinct in 1980, they had become much more similar to one another in 2012, indicating a blurring of the boundaries between these categories (Toft & Flemmen, 2019).

As in many other western, industrialised countries, economic inequality remained historically low in Norway in the decades between 1945 and 1980. Analyses of intergenerational *income* mobility in the 1990s and 2000s found Norway to be a comparatively open society (Braiberg et al., 2007). This might lead one to believe that economic class inequalities would be of lesser importance. However, the recruitment to not only the top income categories have proven to be strongly “classed” (Hellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012). More importantly, once incomes on shares and taxable economic assets are included, the picture changes rather dramatically. The reproduction at the top of the class structure is not only strong, it has also steadily increased over more than one decade (cf. Hansen, 2014; Hansen & Wiborg, 2019). At the top, the intergenerational economic class immobility has therefore strengthened in the years following the financial crisis. Wealth accumulation is also strongly linked to class origin (Hansen & Toft, 2021). Wealth inequality is therefore not just strong; it is increasing and inherited from one generation to the next.

When it comes to educational intergenerational mobility, the situation might at first seem slightly different. The educational level of the Norwegian population has risen steadily, and the total intergenerational mobility rate is therefore high, perhaps indicating a transformation of previous class inequalities. However, once again, this goes hand in hand with a high degree of stability in the relative mobility rates. And once the mobility into the top professions is analysed more closely, the classed recruitment pattern becomes very clear. Intergenerational transmission is still present. Furthermore, the economic return on the educational “investment” is clearly linked to class and professional origins (cf. Hansen, 2014). Recent reports have also found that three out of four university students have parents who also have higher education degrees (see, e.g., Salvanes, 2017).

Although education may have been, and to a certain degree still is, a “social elevator” in the Norwegian class structure, and although educational attainment might be a “highway” to high incomes, there are clear indications of new class boundaries at work in education. We will outline this in further detail in the section below.

---

## **Class and educational inequalities**

---

The Norwegian educational system is, in European comparison, quite homogenous, and institutions are at all levels predominantly public. While the private share of the higher education market is increasing, there exists no parallel system of prestigious private elite institutions. In Norway, there has been a long-standing political consensus about the goal of social mobility through the educational system. Secondary education is free, and higher education has only minimal fees. Since the 1970s, state loans have been offered to everyone regardless of economic resources to cover living and studying expenses. As a result, the economic barriers to education are very low, and the share of students receiving financial support from their parents is among the very lowest in Europe. Due to rising housing costs, however, the economic situation has worsened for most students. Income from paid work has become more important, and more students work part-time. Children of high-income groups generally work less and are increasingly more likely to receive financial support from their parents. One effect of increasing economic inequality is thus that students from wealthy families have increasingly competitive advantages.

The advantages of parental resources, especially those related to cultural capital, are apparent at all levels of the educational system. More educated parents have higher aspirations for their children, who score better in national tests as early as in primary school (Ekren, 2014). Admittance to higher education is based on grades from secondary school, which in the last two decades has been more or less obligatory (and from 1994 a statutory right), with more than nine out of ten among those aged 16–18 attending. Approximately half of them attend a vocational

school. In secondary school, having lowly educated parents is linked to a much higher chance of choosing a vocational specialisation (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012), to lower grades (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006), and to a markedly lower probability of finishing one's studies. The latter falls from 91% of those with a parent with a university degree to 76% for parents with only secondary education and to 59% if parents have only primary education (for the period 2014–2020, SSB, 2021). In the last decades, the failure to finish secondary school has also been increasingly linked to labour market exclusion (Vogt et al., 2020). The patterns are generally stable in the period, but some aspects, like the propensity to choose a vocational specialisation, appear to have become increasingly limited to students with lower-class backgrounds (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012).

The higher educational system expanded greatly in Norway after the war, most rapidly in the 1960s and the mid-1980s. Whereas only 10% of the adult population in 1980 had some kind of higher education, this proportion rose to 22% in 2000 and to 35% in 2020. And while men and women were equal in this regard at the turn of the millennium, the growth has been stronger for women (with 40% having higher education in 2019 vs. 31% of males). This imbalance is mainly found for shorter studies, however, which are typically more vocationally oriented (e.g. teaching or nursing). Due to this expansion, the total intergenerational mobility rate is high, indicating a transformation of class inequalities. However, once again, this goes hand in hand with a high degree of stability in relative mobility rates. Studying cohorts from 1955 to 1979, (Hjellbrekke and Korsnes (2012)) find only minor differences in fluidity between the generations. In comparisons of intergenerational educational mobility, Norway scores markedly lower than the other Nordic countries (Pfeffer, 2008).

Norwegian universities are now dominated by the children of the educated. The effects of social inheritance, however, continue through the door to the university, with the greatest effects at the top and the bottom of the class structure. As a general rule, students with working-class backgrounds choose shorter and less prestigious educations than those from the upper classes (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012). One example of the former is the varying chances of attaining a

master's degree (see [Figure 1.1](#)). While the proportion of females with unskilled working-class backgrounds increased their attainment (at the age of 28) from 2% to 8% between 2000 and 2017, those with higher middle-class backgrounds increased from 11% to 25% and those with upper-class backgrounds from 21% to 40%. For men, the changes are lesser, but the relative differences are just as persistent.

**[Insert 15031-5247-PI-001-Figure-001 Here]**

The figure shows the percentages of children from the upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, and working classes (skilled and unskilled) who had attained a master's degree by the age of 28 from 1983 to 2016.

Each class background represented as a historical line. The impression given by the figure is the existence of strong, persisting inequalities between class and educational attainment, with children from the upper classes constantly having a much higher chance of obtaining a master's degree than the other classes.

[Figure 1.1](#) Attainment of a master's degree by the age of 28, by class background: Norway percentages.

*Scope:* Respondents aged 18–79.

*Source:* Adapted from [Hansen & Uvaag, 2021](#).

Students from higher social classes are much more likely to take on studies that lead to elite positions, in regard to both social status and income. In some traditional studies, like law and medicine, direct reproduction has been relatively high ([Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012](#)). While this appears to be lessening, indirect reproduction—where students tend to end up at study programmes that lead to occupations comparable to their parents' vertical and horizontal class position—can be readily observed in the Norwegian education system. Working-class students are persistently more likely to choose vocational studies, especially at university colleges, than to study at a traditional university.<sup>2</sup> Children of parents rich in cultural capital are, for example,

much more likely to take on studies in art or the humanities, while children of economic elites are more likely to study law or business (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006).

Students from the cultural fraction of the dominant class are also more likely to receive the highest grades at both the BA and the MA levels, and the role of social origin increases at the top levels (Hansen & Uvaag, 2021). This trend is salient across both the humanities and the natural sciences (e.g. some of the highest differences between upper and lower classes are found in subjects ranging from literature, philosophy, psychology, physics, and mathematics), with lesser differences found in technical vocation-oriented courses (e.g. most engineering subjects), which are typically dominated by students from lower social origins (Hansen & Mastekaasa, 2006).

Furthermore, the economic return on educational “investment” is clearly linked to class and professional origins (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2012). Those with upper-class backgrounds (in particular from the economic fractions) are also much more likely to reach upper-class positions without going through the educational system, demonstrating that elites are less dependent on success in the education system for their reproduction. Lower-class students take higher risks, as their chances for graduating are far more uncertain. Eight out of ten students whose parents have had more years of higher education successfully graduate from shorter university courses but only half of those whose parents had only primary education. For longer courses, only one in ten of the latter group graduates. Failing also adds an extra financial burden for the unfortunate, as state loans to students are automatically reduced by 40% for those who graduate.

The effects of parental capital thus appear to be increasing along both dimensions of the social space. Firstly, inherited capital (or lack of it) increasingly matters at the top and bottom of the class structure and, secondly, parental cultural and economic capital appear to increasingly steer the students’ careers towards educations that will lead to an accumulation of the same resources. Coupled with the increasing economic hardships for students without high economic backgrounds, and the rise of private educational institutions, this indicates that the Norwegian education system has increasingly had a role in social segmentation.



---

## Class and economic inequalities

---

As pointed out above, Norway has for long been perceived as an exceptionally egalitarian society. Generally speaking, this has been regarded as a very general statement about the country's social structure as such, which is to say, across different dimensions of social life. It has been repeatedly argued by central politicians that Norway is no longer a class society. This links to a famous statement by the so-called *landsfader* (father of the country), long-time social democratic prime minister Einar Gerhardsen. In a retrospective interview, he held his main achievement to be that he had helped create a country in which no one would need to stand with their cap in their hand. Central to this was not simply muted wage inequalities but also the strong worker protection rights and a universalist welfare regime that limited the extent to which market position determined one's life chances. One could argue that the supposed erosion of class inequalities is a central part of the narrative of social democratic success in a country where the Labour party was the dominant party for the bulk of the post-war period.

So deep-seated was the notion of classlessness that it in fact went largely unscrutinised. Interestingly, the first large-scale analysis of class inequalities in the country reported that class divisions were small and on the wane. While the study found that there were certain discrepancies of income level between the classes, these were largely "explained" by occupation, education, and other control variables (Colbjørnsen et al., 1987). Leaving aside the question of how sound that argument was (see Toft & Flemmen, 2019), it remains the case that wage inequalities have been and remain relatively small in Norway. This is brought out unequivocally by the official Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) statistics. What is often called the "compressed wage structure" is indeed regarded as a defining feature of the Norwegian economy. The gist of this is that there are comparatively small differences in wages, which is to say, there are small economic inequalities between *groups of employees*: Comparatively speaking, there are small wage inequalities between, say, medical doctors and store clerks. These are often explained as a result of the tripartite system of negotiations and the

importance given to the export-oriented industry. The latter have traditionally defined the upper limits of wage increases. Negotiations between the leading trade unions, the managerial associations, and the Norwegian state are highly centralised. The agreements reached in the private sector have therefore also usually defined the frameworks for the negotiations in the public sector.

But from the perspective of class analysis, that is hardly proof that class divisions are small. As Weber stressed, the principal fault line of the class structure runs between the propertied and the property-less (Weber, 2010, p. 139)—that is, the capitalists and the workers—or between those whose life chances depend on wage labour and those whose life chances do not. With the increased attention to the “1%”, as emphasised by both the Occupy movement and by the work of Thomas Piketty, a different picture of Norwegian inequalities has emerged. Indeed, the concentration of income among the top 1% in Norway looks less exceptional than the general wage inequalities do. Indeed, in a ranking of the 21 most advanced capitalist economies (measured by their level of concentration of income among the top 1%), Norway finishes sixth (Hansen, 2014). Importantly, the development of the concentration of income among the top percentage follows a very similar trajectory to those of other capitalist economies (Aaberge & Atkinson, 2010).

Moreover, when other forms of economic capital are considered, the inequalities are revealed to be even deeper. Capital income—income from stocks, interest, etc.—is much more unevenly distributed than wages. Including capital income in the measurement thus shows much more pronounced lines of divisions. Including wealth has the same effect.

In terms of the social space, these changes involve the distribution of economic capital, which may be theorised to increase divisions along both main dimensions of the social space—the volume and composition of capital. In an analysis of the development of economic inequalities in a social space-inspired framework, Toff and Flemmen (2019) showed that the increase in wage inequalities was primarily driven by the economic fraction of the upper class taking off—growing richer than both the cultural upper class and the working class. When a

broader range of forms of economic capital is included, the same pattern is strengthened. Taking capital income or wealth into the equation yields an even clearer differentiation between the economic upper class and the rest: Their wealth is approximately 600–800% of that of unskilled workers (Hansen & Ljunggren, 2021, pp. 58–59).

These different analyses are all based on tax records, gathered in the administrative register data. It has long been suspected that relying on this data source would deflate the estimations of inequality, because it would tend to underestimate the real economic capital of the very privileged. As the wealthy may juggle complex structures of ownership to avoid taxation, analyses relying on tax data would provide overly conservative estimates. Indeed, a recent intervention by a group of prominent economists of inequality has verified this hunch. Using data on ownership, they estimated the true worth of individuals, leading them to conclude that the official statistics greatly underestimated the degree of inequality in Norway (Aaberge et al., 2020). Even though it has not been possible to use these corrected measures in class research, everything suggests that doing so would only strengthen the impression given from work on tax data.

Recent studies have found that there is a rise in economic inequality in all the Nordic countries (Barth et al., 2021). Over the last 30 years, household income inequalities are on the rise in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. As political reactions to multiple macro-economic downturns, the generosity of welfare-state provisions has generally been reduced. Regarded by governing politicians as an incentive to join the labour market, this has indeed increased the employment levels. However, the earnings from increased job participation have not been at the same levels as the welfare-state transfers they were expected or claimed to replace. When measured by the Gini coefficient, from 1995 to 2013 household income inequalities rose from .213 to .236 in Norway. Among those aged 30–59, at-risk of poverty rates have gone up from 5.4% to 8.3%, and the relative mean earnings in the lowest income quantile has decreased substantially—from 27.2% to 18.1%. As pointed out by Barth et al. (2021), “there are important changes in the generosity of the Nordic welfare state. It moves in the direction of

how social protection works in other countries” (p. 20). If this trend continues, there are good reasons to believe that class structuration not only in Norway but also in the other Nordic countries will become more pronounced, especially that of the working class.

Recent analyses also show that the increasing economic inequalities are mainly a product of the increasing gross income of the top 1% and the low percentage of taxes paid by the same percentile. At the top of the class structure, the Norwegian tax system is thus regressive, *not* progressive. As a consequence, when all income is included, over the last ten years the mean income for the top 1% in Norway has grown by more than it has for the top 1% in the United States (Aaberge et al., 2021).

All of this suggests important lessons about class divisions in a social democratic society. The upshot seems to be that social democratic policies, concerning both wage controls and broader labour market regulations, served to restrict inequalities among groups of employees. One aspect of this concerns the comparatively modest “returns on education”—that is to say, the market value of scarce qualifications (Dolton et al., 2009). In other words, it seems as if social democracy managed to restrict inequalities between the working class and the middle class. However, the concentration of economic resources among the top 1%, and especially the weight of capital income and wealth in this pattern, points us to another important part of the picture. The divide between those privileged through property and the rest seems more similar to other countries. Social democracy thus seems more capable of lessening the class structuration of the middle and working class while leaving the power of property alone.

---

## Class, culture, and lifestyle

---

Following the “cultural turn” in class analysis, Norwegian class analysts have increasingly turned their lens towards the ways in which class divisions are reflected in cultural divisions, for instance, in terms of lifestyle, self-identities, and status judgements. In this stream of research, particular attention has been directed towards the thesis forwarded by Bourdieu (1979/1984),

which suggests that the class structure (“the social space”) and the structure of lifestyle differences (“the symbolic space”) are homologous, that is, structured in similar ways. The homology thesis has been pivotal in the international debate centring on the notion of the “cultural omnivore”, in which scholars have argued that a rise of aesthetically “eclectic”, “hybrid”, and “broad” cultural tastes among the upper echelons of the class structure has entailed fundamental divergences from the model forwarded by Bourdieu (see, e.g., [Peterson & Kern, 1996](#)). As pointed out by several critics, however, the plurality of methodologies employed by proponents of the omnivore thesis is not only ill-equipped to properly assess the homology model, but they also carry overly crude operationalisations of lifestyles and tastes (see, e.g., [Robette & Roueff, 2014](#)).

While some Norwegian studies of class-cultural divisions have employed methodologies common among proponents of the omnivore thesis to assess cultural “breadth” and “eclecticism” ([Birkeland & Lemel, 2014](#)), the bulk of Norwegian studies have employed a different approach. Notably, [Rosenlund \(2014\)](#) has developed a pioneering approach to Multiple Correspondence Analysis. This approach involves the construction of two geometrical spaces—one “social space” and one “space of lifestyles”—with separate correspondence analysis procedures for each, and then using coordinates from the one as supplementary categories in the other in order to compare their structures. In a series of studies, Rosenlund and colleagues have shown how the Norwegian social space is structured according to two primary dimensions: The volume of capital and the composition of capital and that the space of lifestyle maps onto these dimensions in systematic ways (see, e.g., [Hovden & Rosenlund, 2021](#); [Flemmen et al., 2019](#)). Moreover, these studies show how a wide range of lifestyle properties are systematically distributed along the two most prominent dimensions of social space: Culturally and economically resource-demanding lifestyles are most distinct for the capital-rich regions of the space while less resource-demanding lifestyles are most distinctive for the least capital-rich regions of the space. Furthermore, the capital composition dimension in the social space distinguishes between two different variants of resource-demanding lifestyles: An expensive and

luxurious lifestyle is most distinctive for those with a preponderance of economic capital, while a considerably more intellectually oriented lifestyle is most distinctive for those with a preponderance of cultural capital.

Notably, these studies bring crucial attention to a systematic interplay of economic and cultural capital in the social structuring of lifestyles: The results clearly indicate that there are horizontal differences *within* the upper reaches of the class structure. It is, however, an open question whether cultural intra-class divisions along the capital composition of the social space are salient in other empirical cases, since there are reasons to suspect that contextual differences—related for instance to the education system and the labour market—may affect the saliency of this dimension. It is, however, difficult to compare existing research, since most studies employ one-dimensional measures of class that do not operationalise such intra-class divisions. Nonetheless, studies that have operationalised such divisions have shown similar results in other countries (see, e.g., Prieur et al., 2008).

While recent Norwegian studies show a clear connection between class and lifestyle, it is also clear that the social structuring of lifestyle is related to other factors, such as age (Hjellbrekke et al., 2013). In particular, the interaction between class and age has been the subject of debate in cultural class analysis. British researchers, for instance, have found that established, “high-cultural” expressions are most distinctive for older age groups, while “emerging” and “cosmopolitan” cultural expressions are most distinctive for younger age groups (Prieur & Savage, 2013). From a class perspective, an interesting question arises as to whether such age differences indicate signs of change in the classed structuring of lifestyles. In their study of cultural preferences among Norwegian students in the late 1990s, Gripsrud and Hovden (2000) show how such preferences are distributed in line with the homology model. Students from capital-rich and capital-poor homes have different preferences, and there are internal differences among capital-rich students: Those from homes with a preponderance of cultural capital are different from those from homes with a preponderance of economic capital. In a follow-up study a decade later, this general pattern remained largely intact (Gripsrud et al.,

2011). However, although the classed structuring of taste remained stable, the *content* of the preferences changed. Specifically, interest in legitimate culture declined among students from homes rich in cultural capital.

In their study of cultural consumption and media use, Helbrekke et al. (2015) have shown that younger respondents exhibit aesthetic orientations that are markedly different from older respondents. With the isolation of the younger respondents in the survey, however, it turns out that taste differences within this age group are internally differentiated by class background. Specifically, parents' institutionalised cultural capital seems decisive: An intellectually oriented taste (e.g. reading books, visiting museums, going to the opera) is distinctive for those with highly educated parents, while those with less-educated parents are characterised by a more popular taste (e.g. watching commercial television channels, sports). In other words, although many studies of culture and lifestyle may point to large differences between older and younger respondents, this does not mean that class has become less relevant. Rather, there are marked class differences internal to the different age groups. Still, the cultural goods constituting these differences seem to be age specific.

Besides inquiries into the social structuring of lifestyle differences, several Norwegian studies have examined how discursive symbolic boundaries—conceptual distinctions made by social actors to demarcate “us” from “them” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002)—are expressed in the upper regions of the class structure. In a much-discussed qualitative study of the highly educated middle class, Skarpenes (2007) finds that interviewees rarely judge other people's cultural tastes. Skarpenes argues that the Norwegian upper-middle class is pervaded by an anti-hierarchical morality that highlights qualities such as kindness and consideration for others and that devalues everything reminiscent of “snobbery” and “self-assertion”. Such moral sentiments, the study suggests, are connected to deeply rooted ideals of equality in Norwegian society and result in curbing the effects of classed lifestyle differences.

However, using other research designs, other studies have suggested that although individuals in the upper regions of the class structure embody a strong egalitarian ethos, they still

draw clear symbolic boundaries against others' ways of life. In his study using qualitative interviews, [Jarness \(2013\)](#) shows how a marked tension between conflicting discursive “repertoires of evaluation” are expressed among upper-class interviewees. On the one hand, egalitarian values seem strong: Interviewees exhibit moral qualms about expressing their own distinctiveness and about judging others' (lack of) taste. At the same time, cultural hierarchisation is also expressed: The interviewees make judgements about a number of characteristics related to, for example, education and knowledge, cultural taste, material consumption, and moral and political attitudes. In other words, it seems that people draw on several—and often contradictory—repertoires of evaluation and that it is far from given that ideals of equality dampen processes of cultural stratification. Rather, the study suggests that status judgements and symbolic boundaries often take subtle forms.

Indeed, explicit demarcations seem to be something that many Norwegians avoid in everyday life. [Gullestad \(1992\)](#) has described this as an “egalitarian-individualistic” mode of conduct, in which judgemental attitudes and social hierarchies exist side by side with ideals of equality and attempts to avoid demarcations, confrontations, and conflicts. While the latter characterises the surface of everyday-life encounters, the former functions in and through avoidance strategies and other ways of “hiding” judgement and dislike of others.

Several studies support such an argument. In his qualitative study of the Norwegian cultural upper class, [Ljunggren \(2017\)](#) has demonstrated that groups who possess large amounts of cultural capital do not exhibit many qualms about describing themselves as a “cultural elite” who possess types of knowledge and aesthetic competence that others lack. At the same time, they report that they often attempt to “hide” hierarchies and downplay certain aspects of themselves in social encounters. [Vassenden and Jonvik \(2019\)](#) point out a similar process among their middle-class interviewees, who report under-communicating cultural differences in encounters with people whom they perceive as outside their own cultural universe. Nonetheless, these studies suggest that discursive universes and associated cultural codes are shared *internally* among social groups. This indicates that mastery of and familiarity with such codes can function



as “hidden” social assets, in the sense that outsiders do not perceive or are unaware of processes of social exclusion. Still, these studies suggest that interviewees are reluctant to draw on “elitist” discursive repertoires that foreground individual achievement and brilliance (and/or others’ lack of such qualities) and that they even report downplaying differences when encountering people perceived as different from themselves, especially if they appear in the public sphere.

This resonates well with [Krogstad’s \(2019\)](#) study of how anti-elitist sentiments against the “cultural elite” are expressed in Swedish and Norwegian national newspapers. The study finds that while explicitly “elitist” statements regarding culture and lifestyle are few and far between, position-taking *against* “the cultural elite” is increasingly salient. Specifically, the study shows how the typical representative of the cultural elite is described negatively as a “taste elitist”, “politically correct”, “powerful”, “arrogant”, and “privileged” figure. Such anti-elitist sentiments also emerge in [Jarness & Flemmen’s \(2019\)](#) interview study of symbolic boundary drawing in the lower regions of the social space. Clear boundaries are drawn against what interviewees perceive as a “snobbish” attitude among the privileged. At the same time, such anti-elitism is far from absolute, and some interviewees even express admiration for certain “down-to-earth” and “humble” members of the elite. The study thus suggests that there is in fact a distinct symbolic market for performances of down-to-earth-ness: Insofar as the well-heeled succeed in producing displays of accommodating attitudes towards those in the lower regions of social space, this generates a high sense of esteem for those who, despite their riches and social advantages vis-à-vis the less fortunate, are then seen as “one of us”. This process, the study suggests, helps to naturalise and thus legitimise cultural and economic class differences.

Another key question in the debate on symbolic boundaries has been whether egalitarian values and the downplaying of cultural differences are more salient in Norway than elsewhere. [Skarpenes \(2007\)](#) has argued that Norway is characterised by a distinct national repertoire of evaluation, where the moral ideals of equality and consideration for others are particularly prominent. These moral values, the authors suggest, make Norway a special case when it comes to the importance of class, culture, and symbolic boundaries. [Jarness and Friedman \(2017\)](#), on

the other hand, show striking similarities in how both Norwegian and British interviewees from the upper reaches of the class structure report downplaying cultural differences in cross-class encounters. Similar accounts of strategic impression management are also found in several Central European studies (see, e.g., [Kuipers et al., 2019](#)).

---

## Conclusion

---

The Scandinavian countries have not only been regarded but have also regarded themselves as being among the most egalitarian in the world. Unemployment rates have remained low, and welfare-state provisions are mostly universal in coverage. Higher education is tuition-free, the wage structures are compressed, unionisation rates have remained high, and the economies have been competitive through various macro-economic downturns and crises. But, as shown in this chapter, class inequalities persist, also in Norway, and economic inequalities have increased, especially between the richest and the rest.

Firstly, the relative mobility rates have shown a high degree of stability. While the intergenerational social fluidity might be comparatively high, the classed barriers against long-distance mobility are still in place, both when it comes to occupational and educational mobility trajectories.

Secondly, recent studies have found clear tendencies towards social closure in recruitment to the higher educational system. Inherited cultural capital thus seems to play an increasing role in recruitment to Norwegian universities. Moreover, in the labour market, the children of the highly educated upper classes benefit economically from their origins: On average, their incomes are higher than those of the “newly arrived”.

Thirdly, economic inequalities are increasing. Whereas the Gini coefficient for income inequality still is low, the Gini coefficient for wealth inequality is among the highest in the Western World. Moreover, inheritance of economic capital is a major source of class divisions.

Finally, despite some claims of the opposite, multiple studies over more than three decades have shown that lifestyles are clearly classed. Moreover, subjective status judgements and symbolic boundaries are drawn along class lines, although often in subtle forms.

If the macro-economic policies of reducing welfare-state provisions as an incentive to job participation continue, we do not expect these inequalities to be reduced. In the foreseeable future, Norway will probably remain one of the richest countries in the world. But it will also remain a society where inherited cultural and economic capital plays an important role in the still ongoing class structuration. Norwegians might still hold egalitarian views of their own country, but as demonstrated in this chapter, there are limits to this egalitarianism.

## Notes

## References

- Aaberge, R., & Atkinson, A. B. (2010). Top incomes in Norway. In A. B. Atkinson & T. Piketty (Eds.), *Top incomes. A global perspective* (pp. 448–481). Oxford University Press.
- Aaberge, R., Modalsli, J. H., & Vestad, O. L. (2020). *Ulikheten—betydelig større enn statistikken viser* [Inequality: Far greater than what the statistics show]. *SSB rapport 2020/13*. Statistics Norway.
- Aaberge, R., Mogstad, M., Vestad, O., & Vestre, A. (2021). *Økonomisk ulikhet i Norge i det 21. århundre* [Economic inequality in Norway in the 21st century]. *SSB rapport 2021/33*. Statistics Norway.
- Barth, E., Moene, K., & Pedersen, A. W. (2021). Rising inequalities in the egalitarian Nordics. In G. Fischer & R. Strauss (Eds.), *Europe's income, wealth, consumption and inequality*. Oxford University Press.
- Birkelund, G. E., & Lemel, Y. (2013). Lifestyles and social stratification: An explorative study of France and Norway. In G. E. Birkelund (Ed.), *Class and stratification analysis*

- (*Comparative social research*) (Vol. 30, pp. 189–220). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Bratberg, E., Nilsen, Ø. V., & Vaage, K. (2007). Trends in intergenerational mobility across offspring's earnings distribution in Norway. *Industrial Relations*, 46(1), 112–129.
- Breen, R. (Ed.). (2004). *Social mobility in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Colbjørnsen, T., Birkelund, G. E., & Hernes, G. (1987). *Klassesamfunnet på hell* [Class society on the wane]. Universitetsforlaget.
- Dolton, P., Asplund, R., & Barth, E. (2009). *Education and inequality across Europe*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ekren, R. (2014). Sosial reproduksjon av utdanning? [Social reproduction of education?]. *Samfunnsspeilet*, 5, 20–24.
- Flemmen, M., Jarness, V., & Rosenlund, L. (2019). Class and status: On the misconstrual of the conceptual distinction and a neo-Bourdieuian alternative. *British Journal of Sociology*, 70, 816–866.
- Flemmen, M., Toft, M., Andersen, P. L., Hansen, M. N., & Ljunggren, J. (2017). Forms of capital and modes of closure in upper class reproduction. *Sociology*, 51(6), 1277–1298.
- Gripsrud, J., & Hovden, J. F. (2000). (Re)producing a cultural elite? A report on the social backgrounds and cultural tastes of university students in Bergen. In J. Gripsrud (Ed.), *Sociology and aesthetics* (pp. 55–90). Høyskoleforlaget.
- Gripsrud, J., Hovden, J. F., & Moe, H. (2011). Changing relations: Class, education and cultural capital. *Poetics*, 39(6), 507–529.
- Gullestad, M. (1992). *The art of social relations: Essays on culture, social action and everyday life in modern Norway*. Scandinavian University Press.
- Hansen, M. N. (2014). Økende makt i økonomiske eliter? [Increasing power in economic elites?]. In J. Hjellbrekke., O. Korsnes, & M. N. Hansen (Eds.), *Elite og klasse i et*

- egalitært samfunn* [Elite and class in an egalitarian society] (pp. 106–125). Universitetsforlaget.
- Hansen, M. N., & Ljunggren, J. (2021). Arbeiderklassen i Norge—definisjon, sammensetning og endring [The working class in Norway: Definition, composition and change]. In J. Ljunggren & M. N. Hansen (Eds.), *Arbeiderklassen* [The working class] (pp. 35–60). Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Hansen, M. N., & Mastekaasa, A. (2006). Social origins and academic performance at university. *European Sociological Review*, 22(3), 277–291.
- Hansen, M. N., & Toft, M. (2021). Wealth accumulation and opportunity hoarding: Class-origin wealth gaps over a quarter of a century in a Scandinavian country. *American Sociological Review*, 86(4), 603–638.
- Hansen, M. N., & Uvaag, S. A. (2021). Arbeiderklassen og sosial mobilitet [The working class and social mobility]. In J. Ljunggren & M. N. Hansen (Eds.), *Arbeiderklassen* [The working class] (pp. 61–89). Cappelen Damm Akademisk.
- Hansen, M. N., & Wiborg, Ø. (2019). The accumulation and transfers of wealth: Variations by social class. *European Sociological Review*, 35(6), 874–893.
- Hjellbrekke, J., Jarness, V., & Korsnes, O. (2015). Cultural distinctions in an ‘egalitarian’ society. In P. Coulangeon & J. Duval (Eds.), *Routledge companion to Bourdieu’s ‘Distinction’* (pp. 187–206). Routledge.
- Hjellbrekke, J., & Korsnes, O. (2012). *Sosial mobilitet* [Social mobility]. Det norske samlaget.
- Hovden, J. F., & Rosenlund, L. (2021). Class and everyday media use. *Nordicom Review*, 42, 129–149.
- Jarness, V. (2013). *Class, status, closure: The Petropolis and cultural life*. University of Bergen.
- Jarness, V., & Flemmen, M. P. (2019). A struggle on two fronts: Boundary drawing in the lower region of the social space and the symbolic market for ‘down-to-earthness’. *British Journal of Sociology*, 70(1), 166–189.

- Jarness, V., & Friedman, S. (2017). 'I'm not a snob, but . . .': Class boundaries and the downplaying of difference. *Poetics*, *61*, 14–25.
- Krogstad, A. (2019). Eliten vi elsker å hate: Mediekonstruerte myter om svensk og norsk kulturelite [The elite we love to hate: Media constructed myths about the cultural elite in Sweden and Norway]. *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning*, *60*(01), 5–29.
- Kuipers, G., Franssen, T., & Holla, S. (2019). Clouded judgments? Aesthetics, morality and everyday life in early 21st century culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *22*, 383–398.
- Lamont, M., & Molnar, V. (2002). The study of boundaries in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *28*, 167–195.
- Ljunggren, J. (2017). Elitist egalitarianism: Negotiating identity in the Norwegian cultural elite. *Sociology*, *51*(3), 559–574.
- Peterson, R. A., & Kern, R. M. (1996). Changing highbrow taste: From snob to omnivore. *American Sociological Review*, *61*, 900–907.
- Pfeffer, F. T. (2008). Persistent inequality in educational attainment and its institutional context. *European Sociological Review*, *24*(5), 543–565.
- Pfeffer, F. T., & Waitkus, N. (2021). The wealth inequality of nations. *American Sociological Review*, *86*(4), 567–602.
- Prieur, A., Rosenlund, L., & Skjøtt-Larsen, J. (2008). Cultural capital today: A case study from Denmark. *Poetics*, *36*(1), 45–71.
- Prieur, A., & Savage, M. (2013). Emerging forms of cultural capital. *European Societies*, *15*, 246–267.
- Ringdal, K. (2004). Social mobility in Norway 1973–1995. In R. Breen (Ed.), *Social mobility in Europe*. Oxford University Press.
- Robette, N., & Roueff, O. (2014). An eclectic eclecticism: Methodological and theoretical issues about the quantification of cultural omnivorism. *Poetics*, *47*, 23–40.

- Rosenlund, L. (2014). Working with distinction: Scandinavian experiences. In P. Coulangeon & J. Duval (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to Bourdieu's 'Distinction'* (pp. 157–187). Routledge.
- Salvanes, K. G. (2017). Inntektsforskjeller og sosial mobilitet [Income inequality and social mobility]. In *Oppvekstrappporten 2017* (pp. 64–75). BUFDIR.
- Skarpenes, O. (2007). Den 'legitime kulturens' moralske forankring ['Legitimate culture' and its moral embeddedness]. *Tidsskrift for Samfunnsforskning*, 48, 531–558.
- Toft, M., & Flemmen, M. (2019). Var klassesamfunnet noen gang på hell? [Was class society ever on the wane?]. *Norsk Sosiologisk Tidsskrift*, 3(2), 137–155.
- Vassenden, A., & Jonvik, M. (2019). Cultural capital as a hidden asset: Culture, egalitarianism and inter-class social encounters in Stavanger, Norway. *Cultural Sociology*, 13, 37–56.
- Vogt, K. C., Lorentzen, T., & Hansen, H.-T. (2020). Are low-skilled young people increasingly useless, and are men the losers among them? *Journal of Education and Work*, 33(5–6), 392–409.
- Weber, M. (2010). The distribution of power within the community: Classes, stände, parties. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 10(2), 137–152.

---

**1** The chapter is mainly based on analyses of data from public registers on the entire

Norwegian population, on high-quality surveys on lifestyles conducted by Statistics Norway, and on data from the International Social Survey Program.

**2** Unlike universities in Norway, university colleges, most often located outside of the larger cities, have traditionally provided shorter academic educations but have not been research oriented or research-intensive institutions.

**3** Measured as the percentage of median gross income in the general population.