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Translation and transformation of class through migration: Rethinking social and spatial mobility across contexts

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Abstract

This issue of *Current Sociology Monographs* explores new conceptual opportunities at the intersection of migration studies and the sociology of class. The contributions examine migration as a distinct site where class is translated and transformed, using rich, empirically specific cases to show how social class is experienced and produced relationally, transnationally and temporally through the lives of migrants. Through this focus, the papers conceptualise class as a mobile process that travels with migrants, links different contexts and is translated through movement. Distinct from paradigms that tend to universalise a particular narrative or definition of class, this issue adopts a comparative and inductive approach aimed at exploring tensions between the universal and the particular. The contributions share a commitment to qualitative enquiry that attends to the particular, affective and experiential dimensions of class as shared and expressed by migrants, using these as an entry point to retheorise class ‘on the move’. Incorporating ethnography, life histories, intergenerational approaches and spatial mapping, the authors inductively examine how class shapes migrants’ lived experiences in diverse contexts. Some researchers follow participants across borders, whereas others trace the imaginative trajectories through which migrants recall and explain their

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movements. Contributions orient their analyses around relationality, transnationality and temporality, showing how class emerges as inherently processual and mobile, linking the personal and the global, the embodied and the institutional, and pasts and futures. Each link foregrounds translation and transformation as both an empirical process and a methodological sensibility, demonstrating how migration unsettles the taken-for-granted and provides opportunities to reconsider established theories of class.

Keywords

International migration, social class, social mobility, transnational class

Introduction

This issue of CS Monographs brings migration studies into dialogue with the sociology of class to explore new conceptual opportunities at the intersection of these fields. At a time of rising populist opposition to immigration and diversity, policy changes increasingly focus on ways to limit cross-border mobility. Despite widespread trends towards national closure and delineation between citizens and non-citizens, migration continues unabated. International migrants have consistently comprised nearly 4% of the world population since the mid-1990s (IOM, 2024), with recent fluctuations not indicating a significant break in trends (OECD, 2024). Given this ongoing spatial mobility in the face of popular resistance and restrictive policies, it is crucially important to understand how forms of social inequality and exclusion shape migration processes and experiences. Factors and resources linked to social class have arguably become one of the most significant sites of inclusion and exclusion across borders since contemporary migration policies have turned to privileging the movement of those with credentialled skills or economic resources (Abu-Laban, 2024; Bonjour and Chauvin, 2018; Liu-Farrer, 2025; Winter, 2024). Furthermore, the freedom to move continues to be a significant driver and index of stratification, contributing to widening socioeconomic disparities at local, regional and global scales. In this context, revisiting the relationship between class and migration is pertinent.

Class is a key sociological lens that has been under-emphasised in migration studies over recent decades (Van Hear, 2014), despite earlier theorisation of its role in the political economy of migration (e.g. Harris and Todaro, 1970 cf. Wallerstein, 1984), and that is only recently experiencing a resurgence of interest among migration scholars (e.g. Butler et al., 2026; Cederberg, 2025; Erdal, 2025; Hunkler et al., 2022; Robertson and Roberts, 2022; Wagner, 2025). Two of the editors of this collection (Coates and Turnbull) started to plan for this issue while attending the 2022 IMISCOE conference in Oslo. Observing that many of the themes explored in the conference panels would benefit from re-engaging with class as a lens for analysis, we also reflected on how migration and migration scholarship have the capacity to unsettle and extend theories of class developed primarily with reference to nationally bounded (and often European) contexts. In other words, while the topic of class needs further attention in migration studies, studies of class in the context of migration can also make significant contributions to our understanding and conceptualisation of class more broadly.

With this conceptual objective in mind, we convened a panel at the 2023 XX ISA World Congress in Melbourne titled ‘Social and Spatial Mobility: New Entanglements of Class and Migration’. It was the most heavily subscribed session for Research Committee 31 Sociology of Migration, demonstrating the growing scholarly interest in the intersection of these two fields. Contributors brought together rich and diverse experiences from East, South and West Asia, Europe, Australia and North America. Collectively, the ISA panel highlighted how re-engaging with the question of class in the context of migration can generate a wealth of new avenues of analysis, as well as reviving the salience of existing theorisations. Most importantly, our discussions identified the need to combine multiple approaches to understanding class with a sensitivity to how class and other intersecting hierarchies (such as caste, gender and race) are differently articulated across national borders. The panel discussion significantly shaped the conceptual underpinnings of this collection. We then broadened our invitation to further ideas and perspectives through an open call for papers for this volume. Both the panel and the high number of submissions to this collection highlighted the need to revisit the question of how social class ‘works’ and is given meaning across the world – particularly the ways in which class is translated in linguistic, material and contextual senses. These discussions reminded us of Latour’s point that translation is crucial for understanding what we are ‘attached’ to within systems and across systems, as well as ‘what we depend’ on globally (Latour, 2017: 69). In other words, attending to how class is translated and transformed between contexts through migration, helps us understand what attaches us to different social milieus and how the process of moving highlights what we depend on to make life worth living.

For those of us working across disciplines, languages, cultures and contexts – as many migration scholars do – the invocation of class as a sociological category carries markedly different meanings. In some corners of social research, the term has been abandoned altogether, dismissed as an analytically limited or Eurocentric construct (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000; Chen, 2010). Others contend that class only acquires meaning within specific linguistic, cultural and historical contexts (Donner and De Neve, 2011; Lentz, 2020). Many scholars, meanwhile, have turned to alternative vocabularies for conceptualising social and economic positioning, such as capital, strata, status or precarity (e.g. Anagnost, 2008; Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2010; Guo, 2008, 2009; Standing, 2011), where the link to the concept of class and class theory is articulated – or disavowed – to varied extents. Against this backdrop of a broader sociological shift to (re-)theorise class and its conceptual cousins from various global locations, moving beyond established class theories developed primarily with reference to European and settler colonial populations, migration scholars can make particular contributions. It is well established that social mobility aspirations are an important motivating factor for migration, although this motivation is not always parsed through the language of class. Research has also shown that social mobility outcomes through migration are mixed and can involve upward and downward as well as contradictory mobility (Cederberg, 2017; Parreñas, 2015). Empirical puzzles such as these, the geographic breadth of migration research, and the simultaneous focus on multiple locations and scales involved, support a careful engagement with the generalisable aspects of socioeconomic inequality. It necessitates us to be mindful of contextual expressions, frames and meanings of class (Erdal, 2025).

Papers in this issue share the ambition to unsettle Eurocentric theories of class and migration, through their empirical specificity and their capacity to transnationalise class theory. They engage a range of qualitative methods to explore class in the context of migration, including reconstructive biographical research (Becker and Worm), ethnography (Kwon), narrative interviewing (Vincent and Butler; Ginnerskov-Dahlberg), focus groups (Nowicka) and urban mapping (Patel). Through empirical findings from diverse global contexts, the papers attend to the particular, affective and experiential dimensions of class shared and expressed by migrants as an entry point to retheorise class ‘on the move’. Collectively, the contributors demonstrate cross-national variations in understandings of class, enabling an exploration of the tension between the universal and the particular.

Opportunities for rethinking class through migration

Debates over the relevance of class to social analysis date back to its earliest articulations in Max Weber, and it has been intermittently revived over subsequent decades (e.g. Bourdieu, 1987; Crompton, 2008). While class was a key focus of post-war sociology, there was a shift away from class in the 1980s. Many thought the concept had lost its analytical relevance as social and labour market transformations had rendered class less central to people’s lives and identities (e.g. Bauman, 1990; Pakulski and Waters, 1996). At the same time, other social divisions and forms of inequality, such as gender, ethnicity and race, gained prominence in sociology and cognate disciplines (see Roth and Dashper, 2016).

Similarly, in migration studies, an earlier focus on class as the basis of conflict between charter group populations and racialised class fractions (e.g. Collins, 1984; Phizacklea and Miles, 1980) was largely superseded by new approaches, including transnational theories that often focused on ethnicity as the key frame of analysis (e.g. Basch et al., 1994; Portes et al., 1999). However, some of these same scholars have since critiqued this ‘ethnic frame’ as failing to account for the ways in which the lives of both migrants and non-migrants are co-constituted, and in many instances ‘ethnicity’ was found to be less salient than other factors in shaping migrants’ positions and experiences (Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018).

More recently, class has come back into focus as a sociological lens to make sense of growing social and economic inequalities at both the local and global levels. The so-called ‘cultural turn’ in class research (e.g. Crompton and Scott 2005) – indebted particularly to Bourdieu’s (1984, 1986) focus on the relationship between class, taste and a wider range of resources typified as ‘capitals’ – has put focus on the many intricate ways in which class is embedded in contemporary societies through social relationships, practices and ways of life. This turn highlighted that ‘(w)hat we read as objective class divisions are produced and maintained by the middle class in the minutiae of everyday practice, as judgements of culture are put into effect’ (Skeggs, 2003). The work of scholars such as Beverley Skeggs not only illustrates these mechanisms but also places focus on the emotional dimensions of class, such as in her account of how young working-class women struggle for ‘respectability’ (Skeggs, 1997). Rising wealth and income inequality, and particularly entrenched inequalities arising through the marketisation of housing (see also Patel, 2026), have at the

same time prompted a revival of classical materialist Marxist conceptualisations of class that define people's social position in relation to capital, labour and production (Atkinson, 2023).

However, much of the most influential work that conceptualises class has historically built general theories from narrow contexts and perspectives (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1980; Thompson, 1963). Even those who made earnest efforts for comparative theories still tended to be Eurocentric (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992) or based on abstract colonial imaginaries (such as in Marx). In non-Western contexts, such as Japan, for example, sociologists like Ryuken Ohashi showed early enthusiasm for theories of class in the 1970s and developed quantitative indices for 'class composition' based on Marxist models (Hashimoto, 2000). However, these approaches were seen as less relevant in the context of Japan's rapid economic growth at that time. Feminist and Marxist scholars have revisited the relevance of class in light of growing inequality in Japan from the 2000s onwards, including through approaches linked to precarity and the precariat (Ishida and Slater, 2010). Much of this earlier and more recent work has focused on applying European theories to the Japanese context. However, and of greater importance to this CSM volume, whether European or Japanese, class scholars have typically not considered what happens when people move between contexts and largely remained methodologically 'nation-focused' (Wimmer and Schiller, 2003) even when comparing different contexts.

A further challenge with discourses around class, particularly in anglophone contexts, is that it is as much a popular debate as a scholarly one. And so, even if sociologists abandon it as a robust theoretical tool, it often returns as a vernacular construct we must engage with as part of our evidence. Migration research has the potential to lay this empirical puzzle bare as it translates across languages, geographies and legal systems, to name a few. From this perspective, class becomes a heuristic shorthand that bridges both emic (folk) and etic (analytical) categories for articulating differences in sociocultural, political and economic positions. Some may consider this imprecision a problem; however, in the context of migration it serves as an opportunity if methodological rigour is applied to how we translate between contexts and theory. Its adaptability across contexts, even when refracted through other terms or frameworks, contributes to its continued salience in drawing our attention to how inequalities are produced, maintained and contested.

Migration research has already generated significant conceptual critiques; while not focused on class per se, they are nonetheless highly relevant to the study of class. Among these, Liisa Malkki's (1992) critique of the 'sedentary metaphysics' of social research – the assumption that societies are naturally static and spatially bounded – speaks of the need to think beyond specific contexts in theorisations of class. This critique was later translated into a more operational argument against treating nation-states as the default units of analysis, a problem Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) famously termed 'methodological nationalism'. Since E. G. Ravenstein's *The Laws of Migration* (1885), one of the central preoccupations of migration research has been to explain how labour moves, and indeed, how the 'stationary classes' become 'moveable' (Ravenstein, 1885: 223). Subsequent theories, from neoclassical push–pull models to more recent cultural and structural analyses, have retained this focus on the mobility of labour

(Coates, 2017). Yet, it is precisely in accounting for movement that the question of class becomes conceptually unsettled.

If class denotes context-specific forms of social positioning, what happens to the class status of individuals households when they move between contexts? Does one remain 'working class' or 'middle class' upon migration, or do these categories transform across different places? Definitions and meanings of class in any society are situationally constructed, and are as much a product of changing emphases of analysis as objective shifts in the organisation of societies (Giddens, 1973: 99). As the contributions to this issue demonstrate, comparative perspectives from multiple global contexts reveal that although the meanings and boundaries of class are locally and culturally specific, certain aspects endure. Resources, dispositions and forms of capital often travel with individuals and families across time and space, making class positions simultaneously mobile and durable, or as in Nowicka's paper (2026), 'shifting yet sticky', resulting in migrants inhabiting class locations that they find, in some cases, harder to change (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2026), easier to regain or retain (Kwon, 2026) or, conversely, difficult to sustain once altered (Becker & Worm, this 2026).

Beyond questions of labour and resources, several contributions to this issue also illuminate the experiential ruptures that migration provokes in class identity, and the relational challenges that accompany these shifts. Moreover, as many of the cases attest, class is frequently ascribed to migrants in ways that challenge or distort their own understandings of social positions. Processes of racialisation, stigma and discrimination often redefine classed identities, regardless of migrants' prior backgrounds or achievements. Through the lens of migration, class thus emerges as a multidimensional construct encompassing (1) resource-dependent dimensions, (2) attributed dimensions and (3) perceived dimensions. Recognising these interlocking layers and how they translate across contexts has important methodological implications. Much like viewing a three-dimensional object, when asking participants to describe their class position, one dimension tends to come into focus, another remains partly obscured and a third lingers in the background, less tangible but still present. The extent to which researchers adopt a multigenerational or transtemporal perspective further shapes the kinds of insights and data produced, suggesting that the study of class in migration is as much about method as it is about theory.

Class as relational, transnational and temporal: key orientations of this collection

In this issue, Bourdieu's approach to social class forms a central theoretical reference point, accompanied by a strong focus on the different cultural and social practices through which the meanings of class, as well as class boundaries and identities, are reproduced or remodelled in the context of migration. In particular, different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) are discussed extensively across the papers. On one hand, this theoretical approach facilitates a multidimensional analysis of class, where economic, cultural and social resources interact in complex ways across transnational social fields, not seldom resulting in what Parreñas (2015) terms 'contradictory class mobility'. On the other hand, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of capital highlights the importance of the social context for determining which resources are valued and 'count' as capital (Anthias, 2007). Here, we see that

resources that are highly valued in one context may be difficult to utilise elsewhere, significantly impacting migrants' class trajectories in different social locations (including different social institutions and different social arenas, but also across different countries). In response, migrants who face obstacles in mobilising their existing resources may need to adapt or convert them into resources that may be more readily used, to acquire new forms of locally valued capital, or even to individually cultivate a transformed class habitus in order to enact strategies of distinction and/or survival in their new contexts (Alloul, 2021; Kim, 2018; Turnbull, 2026).

However, the papers in the issue also demonstrate the importance of going beyond looking at how classed resources are transported and mobilised across contexts that may differ in their specific 'rules of the field' (Bourdieu, 1993), yet share broadly equivalent systems of meaning. The papers show not only how social class entails vastly different vocabularies of practice and meaning across geographic scales but also, importantly, that migration and the movements of people between fields involves new articulations of relative social locations, new 'rules' to play by and, consequently, new trajectories of social mobility.

As the title of this issue suggests, we also draw inspiration from Bruno Latour's (2005) use of the term translation as a vibrant and generative process that produces, defines and transforms the boundaries of contexts. In this way, migration can be understood as a key site of translation and transformation, where new social forms and meanings emerge. Latour conceives translation not as the mere transmission of ideas or entities across contexts, but as an active process of reconfiguration where actors, relations and concepts are altered through movement and encounter. In a similar vein, cross-border, cross-cultural and cross-world migrants act as mediators who translate and transform class as they navigate different social, economic and symbolic environments. Through their practices, aspirations and negotiations of belonging, migrants participate in the rearticulation of class in ways that both reproduce and rework its meanings. In this sense, migration is not simply the movement of people across space, but a dynamic process through which the very categories of social differentiation are translated, challenged, hybridised and made anew.

In other words, we see migration as a distinct site where class is translated and transformed. All the papers in the issue explore how social class is both experienced and produced relationally, transnationally and temporally through the lives of migrants, and how it is transformed through those processes.

Class as relational

Papers in this issue take class to comprise practices, processes and positions that are fundamentally relational, meaning that they are brought into being through interaction and comparison with others. Spatial mobility and the resultant movement across contexts generate new relationships and exchanges that in turn change the ways in which class is experienced. This relationality is not only interpersonal, but also intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989), as class is conceptualised in relation to other social categories such as gender, race and ethnicity.

Nowicka (2026) extends Bourdieu's approach through a detailed examination of the symbolic practices enacted in relation to both class *and* race by Polish migrants living in

the United Kingdom. By drawing on Anthias' (2013) concept of 'translocational positionality', this article explores how race functions in combination with class, gender and ethnicity to produce new social relations, both locally and transnationally. Nowicka's analysis shows how these migrants' classed positionalities are challenged and changed through practices of identification and disidentification within a social field where access to housing, education and employment, key components of social position and social mobility, are sharply differentiated through a racialised social stratification system. Pre-migration class habitus, which Nowicka characterises as 'sticky', is sustained through struggles for distinction that engage the practices of consumption and lifestyle aspirations that migrants associate with British white middle classes and while rejecting those of white working classes and racialised minorities. However, these struggles, enacted at the intersections of both British and Polish classisms and racisms, typically do not result in these migrants attaining their desired social mobility but instead generate new classed locations and relations. Through these findings, Nowicka extends Bourdieu by highlighting the fluidity of class, and the intersectional and transitional changes that emerge under the social dynamics of migration.

In her study of Sindhi textile traders in Dubai, Kwon (2026) also engages an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) to understand how the 'micro-politics of distinction and belonging' are operationalised through a daily entrepreneurial performance that balances a complex matrix of ethnoracial hierarchies, temporal im/permanence (more on this below) and classed displays of wealth and respectability. However, for Kwon's participants, interacting every day in the competitive and contested field of the textile market, classed practices are informed not only by these relational, interpersonal performances but also by factors such as nationality and legal status. Restrictive state policies of exclusion are shown to play a key role in determining the rights and opportunities of non-nationals, whose positions stand in stark contrast with those of Emirati nationals, and in determining which resources migrants can mobilise and under what conditions. However, these restrictions, despite the unequal hierarchies of power and protection they confer, also intersect in diverse and sometimes unpredictable ways with other social processes and forms of recognition that shape opportunities for social mobility in Dubai.

In her contribution to the collection, Patel (2026) builds on Yuval-Davis' (2011) concept of 'nested identities' to highlight how Indian migrants living in Frankfurt 'shift between privilege and marginalisation' within a classed urban landscape that encodes nested inequalities into hierarchies of place. This article maps Indian diasporic class divisions onto the suburbs of Frankfurt, showing how relational dimensions of class that have their origins within India intersect with neoliberal restructuring of the German housing market to create new inequalities and forms of social distance. Patel's ethnography also highlights the importance of attending to the interplay of symbolic and material aspects of class – and how class intersects with other social divisions, including caste, gender and race. Her paper combines Bourdieu's theory of capital with the concept of 'symbolic boundaries' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) to capture how differences among migrants, shaped through the interplay of class hierarchies and colonial legacies, impact on their position in the housing market.

These cases demonstrate that class is relationally produced in ways that are intertwined with ethnicity and race, as well as other markers of identity, such as religion, gender and

caste. Micro-level interpersonal interactions, occurring within a broader socio-cultural and political environment, cumulatively shape distinctions between national and non-nationals, as well as within and between migrant populations. These papers offer new insights into how class ‘on the move’ intersects with other sites of privilege and of symbolic and material struggle, and is in turn transformed through those intersections.

Class as transnational

There is also a need to consider class from a transnational perspective, both because class processes involved in international migration unfold across borders, and because a transnational frame shapes how migrants make sense of their class positions, classed identities and class-related experiences.

By tracing the changing class positionings of a single Syriac Orthodox family over four generations and nine decades, Becker and Worm (2026) highlight how the in/stability of any given social field is a core factor that conditions the accumulation as well as the loss and devaluing of capital, an observation that perhaps becomes particularly clear in the context of conflict and forced migration. Where spatial mobility from Turkey to Syria in the 1940s generated advantage and opportunities to acquire capitals and related status for earlier generations of the family – and imbued contemporary generations with a middle-class habitus of social climbing and professional work – social mobility outcomes proved very different when the family encountered a different Syriac Orthodox social field in 21st century Germany. This is shaped by both the immigration and skill regimes of the receiving state but also the earlier migration and settlement of working-class co-ethnics from Turkey, resulting in a sense of alienation and limited ethno-religious belonging. Becker and Worm show how Syriac Orthodox communities in Turkey, in Syria and in Germany have undergone different class formation dynamics over time, transforming classed aspirations and possibilities, and generating differentially distributed patterns of social mobility across the diaspora.

Vincent and Butler (2026) draw on their study of cross-class couples in Australia to explore how the construction of class involve processes and narratives that are both transnational and, as is discussed below, transtemporal. By anchoring personal accounts of a classed self in family histories that feature spatial mobility and transnational networks, migrants can make sense of the aspects of their (upward or downward) social mobility in different ways. Their paper applies Friedman et al. (2021) concept of the ‘intergenerational self’, originally developed to explain the class obfuscation strategically used in Britain to legitimise claims to individual success and deflect inherited privilege. However, by using this same lens to explore the classed orientations of mobile people and their transnational families, Vincent and Butler show that second- and third-generation migrants’ use of longer family stories to justify their own classed identities are, in general, not intentional attempts to obscure class origins. Rather, their accounts of intergenerational classed experiences across multiple locations function as a way to manage and make sense of the contradictions, complexities and disruptions of social mobility that they and their mobile families experience.

Thinking about class transnationally through new empirical cases that complicate comparative studies of class on the move, several authors are concerned to challenge established

(and limited) ideas of what constitutes particular social classes, by emphasising cross-cultural differences as well as heterogeneity within particular contexts or populations. In particular, papers in this issue feature a critical engagement with the concept of the ‘middle classes’ that both challenges a Eurocentric conceptualisation and highlights a wide spectrum of ‘middle-class-ness’ – where individuals and families that can all be considered (and may consider themselves as) ‘middle class’ vary significantly in terms of their economic resources and relational social positions (see also Ang, 2026; Erdal, 2025).

For example, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg (2026) offers a critical engagement with the concept of ‘middle class’ in her paper on Indian medical students in Georgia. For these students, ‘middle class’ does not denote privilege or an elite status, but rather a more modest social background characterised by an emergent – and anxiously competitive – social mobility. Their experiences and anxieties illustrate that the meanings and implications of being-middle-class in India is changing in pace with an increased sense of insecurity and precarisation. Emergent social mobility among these lower middle classes necessarily becomes facilitated through spatial mobility, as broader Indian middle-class cultures of migration emphasise international education as a key strategy for maintaining class privilege and/or achieving upward class mobility. To make sense of these, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg draws on the concept of ‘mobile livelihoods’ (Olwig and Sørensen, 2002) where aspirations go beyond material dimensions to include ‘culturally shaped aspirations, such as preferred occupations and lifestyles’. However, because of their less resourceful form of middle-class positioning, these medical students are unable to access more well-established study pathways towards socially valued occupations. This in turn necessitates relying on high stakes strategies of spatial mobility for very uncertain social mobility outcomes, generating new forms of precarity and indebtedness.

By focusing on how class is experienced and produced transnationally, this issue underlines the varied meanings and articulations that class may have for migrants whose lives are embedded in multiple social contexts. Parallels can be drawn here to Philip Kelly’s (2012) research (see also Kelly and Lusi, 2006) on how Filipina migrants in Canada evaluate and understand their class trajectories by making sense of their simultaneous position(ing) in Philippine society, in the broader Canadian society, and within the Philippine community in Canada. This enables an analysis of class that goes beyond the downward mobility implied by deskilling in the Canadian labour market, to highlighting how social status and recognition both at ‘home’ and within migrant communities may mitigate feelings of lost status. However, beyond simply making sense of contradictory classed locations, papers in this collection also show how the movement of people between contexts itself generates new formulations and contestations of class. Through an attentive detail to the nuances of classed encounters for people moving through transnational contexts, the papers offer fresh insights into the transnational logics and local expressions of both inter- and intra-ethnic class dynamics.

Class as temporal

Time and temporalities also feature strongly in the conceptual framings of this collection. Two of the papers (Butler & Vincent, 2026; Becker & Worm, 2026) explicitly approach class from an intergenerational perspective. Butler and Vincent’s methods, asking

interview participants to explain their classed locations and trajectories in relation to their cross-class partner, elicit accounts that span decades as well as continents. Importantly, this paper not only highlights the complex social mobility patterns of individuals and their families, but also shows how class processes need to be understood in relation to migration policies and to national discourses of racialisation and conditional belonging that also shift and change over time. Becker and Worm relatedly show how displacement and forced migration occurring today, in this case flight from civil war in Syria, can only be fully understood in relation to broader socio-historical contexts. Their commitment to the methodologies of reconstructive biographical research (see an earlier issue of *Current Sociology Monographs*; Becker et al., 2023) permit a transtemporal perspective on the complex interactions of social and spatial mobility. A strength of the analysis in both these papers is the fact that they go beyond the two generations that tend to be the focus in studies of class reproduction or class transformation (Goldthorpe, 2016), and their analyses highlight the relevance of a *longue durée* intergenerational perspective for understanding classed identities, positions and relations, a new insight that could be leveraged in future research to better understand class for both highly mobile and less mobile people.

The multi/intergenerational perspective on class reminds us of the importance of understanding class in terms of families, including family backgrounds and aspirations that are not individually located but shared – or contested – within families. Although not an explicitly intergenerational paper, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg also highlights class aspirations, anxieties and strategies across generations, as well as the ways that mobility in one generation, in this case young medical students, may be predicated on the mobility of other family members, illustrated by middle-aged fathers undertaking temporary labour migration in the Gulf States so that their children can afford to access international education in Georgia. Her analysis shows how these high-risk strategies of educational mobilities create family-wide stressors that resonate both in the present but also into imagined futures that may be characterised by either upward social mobility or disappointment and long-term debt.

Kwon's study of textile traders in Dubai also highlights the temporal inflections of classed struggles in a context where class is in large part constituted through national identity and institutionalised regimes of temporariness and non-belonging. Migrant entrepreneurs, in marked contrast to Emirati citizens, assert legitimacy and status in this highly unequal space through displays of economic and symbolic resources as well as through claims to varying degrees of durable temporariness. Time, expressed through length of residency and security of settlement under policy conditions of exclusion, therefore forms an element in performances of distinction claiming status and belonging in the markets. Throughout this issue, empirical findings such as these, reflected here only in the most fleeting detail, force us to consider not only the fluidity and mutability of class across both space and time, but also how time itself, in various forms, can function as a dimension of distinction and boundary maintenance.

The direct consideration of the temporal qualities of class, and its intergenerational legacies extend Bourdieu's earlier conceptualisation of 'class trajectory'. They also resonate with Ghassan Hage's more recent reflection's on Bourdieu, where he situates class as a part of a longer processual 'struggle for viability' (2025). Hage's interpretation of Bourdieu distinguishes between class labels as 'synchronic' starting points that serve as

heuristic devices in discussing the politics of inequality. Yet, if we forget the heuristic nature of these class labels, we are in danger of taking them for granted as fixed or static. Consequently, although class labels are useful, social scientists need to pay careful empirical attention to the ways in which this ‘synchronic cut’ leaves out all of what ‘concretely defines the way the position is experienced as a mere stage in a process of social climbing or social decline’ (Bourdieu, 1966 cited in Hage, 2025: 105). In other words, approaches to class that are temporally attuned help us pay attention to wider processes of social mobility, both upward and downward as well as across contexts.

Feeling class on the move: methodological reflections in this collection

The issue’s focus on migrants’ class experiences across contexts required methodologically flexible approaches attentive to both projects and participants. Quantitative cross-cultural and cross-contextual studies of class remain valuable for insights into the structural dimensions of inequality (cf. Milanovic, 2016; World Inequality Lab, 2026), but tend to rely on researcher-defined proxies and variables rather than on participants’ own categories of experience, which can flatten the fine-grained textures of the data participants share. Moreover, quantitative approaches often draw on comparable national datasets that risk reproducing methodological nationalism. By contrast, the incorporation of ethnography, life histories, intergenerational approaches and spatial mapping across the contributions in this issue has enabled authors to inductively explore how class shapes the lived experiences of migrants in diverse contexts. In some cases, researchers have followed participants across borders; more commonly, they have traced the imaginative trajectories through which migrants recall and explain their movements. These methods have proved particularly illuminating in relation to the *affective* dimensions of class: the ways in which status, aspiration and belonging are felt and narrated.

Collectively, this issue contributes to a growing body of scholarship that redefines method as an *affective practice* (Hage, 2025; Skeggs and Loveday, 2012; Walkerdine, 2023), capable of tracing how inequality is felt, embodied and translated through movement. Ethnographers working in Dubai’s textile market (Kwon, 2026), in Frankfurt’s housing landscapes (Patel, 2026) and in post-Soviet Georgian universities (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2026), for example, treat fieldwork not as detached observation but as a means of *feeling* how class is enacted and contested in everyday life. In Dubai, class appears as performance: status expressed through clothing, language and bodily comportment within hierarchies structured by nationality and law. Indian medical students in Georgia, tasked with the ‘prestigious and almost sacred goal’ of becoming a doctor, carry the anxieties of their entire families, combining an oftentimes desperate desire for social mobility with the fear of failure, and a resultant lasting financial and social indebtedness. Urban mapping of Indian migrants in Frankfurt, meanwhile, reveals how spatial segregation carries emotional weight – feelings of displacement, longing and distinction that reinscribe colonial hierarchies within contemporary European urbanism. Such spatially grounded methods exemplify what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls the ‘ordinary affects’ of global mobility, where class difference circulates through atmosphere and space. Rather than treating class

as a measurable attribute, the authors employ approaches that capture how it is lived, remembered and sensed across borders. These methods portray class as a moving formation, something that travels through stories, gestures, bodies and built environments, rather than as a static structure of stratification.

Contributors also show how class endures as an *affective inheritance*, both within individual biographies and across generations. In life-history reconstructions of forced migration (Becker & Worm, 2026) and in intergenerational interviews with migrant families in Australia (Vincent & Butler, 2026), researchers use family trajectories to observe class as a feeling – carried in memory, shame, pride and gratitude. This approach resonates with the insistence on class as processual and relational. For example, in Bourdieu's (2000: 150–151) later reflections, his earlier theories are reinterpreted as processual histories 'objectified' in the form of fields and 'incarnated' in bodies and their habitus. Similarly, feminist attention to the 'emotional work of class' (Reay, 2025; Skeggs, 1997) shows the important role of affect in forming individual and cross-generational subjectivities. By situating individual life stories within longer genealogies of social mobility, contributors to this issue thus show how class persists as an affective thread linking generations, even as its material foundations shift through migration.

The life-story interview here functions as an encounter of emotions as much as of facts. Narrators recount parental sacrifices, the loss of recognition or nostalgia for previous status – embodying Skeggs's observation that class is often 'felt on the skin' before it is spoken (1997; also see Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). This focus on feeling also exposes the ambivalence with which migrants speak about mobility: the coexistence of pride and disappointment, success and loss. As several contributors demonstrate, attending to this ambivalence is crucial for understanding how class translates not only across geographical contexts but also across generational and mnemonic ones. Such ambivalence is vividly illustrated by Butler and Vincent (2026), where participants mobilise intergenerational selves to navigate the affective weight of migration's classed consequences. Manisha's narrative, for example, foregrounds her family's downward class and caste mobility on arrival from Sri Lanka and honours the strenuous labour through which her parents sought to re-establish stability, revealing how class is remembered, translated and felt across generations in ambivalent ways while it is lived in the present.

This capacity to perceive ambivalence and translation is a distinctive strength of qualitative and reflexive methods. It also highlights a broader theme running through the issue: tracing lives across *geographic* borders simultaneously opens space for reflecting on the translation of class across *epistemic* borders. Papers in this collection respond to Chakrabarty's (2000) call to 'provincialise Europe' and Chen's (2010) insistence on multiplying frames of reference through the authors' insistence on foregrounding the frames, meanings and feelings of class carried with participants through and into new contexts. For example, in their work with Indian migrants living in Georgia and Germany, respectively, Ginnerskov-Dahlberg and Patel closely attend to the ways that class is imbricated with regional and caste-based expressions of privilege, alternative indicators of status that remain invisible to Eurocentric frameworks. In both instances we see how Indian conceptualisations of caste translate across both geographic and epistemic borders to shape migrants' experiences of social mobility. In this context, social mobility in economic terms grates with other forms of privilege to the degree that

migrants may simultaneously experience a sense of both upward and downward mobility (cf. Parreñas, 2015).

Inspired by examples such as these showcased at the ISA in Melbourne, this issue originally aimed to include contributions from a wider range of regional contexts, and the final selection – largely concerned with movements towards Europe, the United Kingdom and Australia – reveals the enduring epistemic barriers within global scholarship. Differences in academic conventions, linguistic accessibility and the relative value placed on descriptive empirical work versus theory-building may partly explain this imbalance. Recognising such asymmetries reinforces the importance of methodological reflexivity as a form of epistemic translation.

Across these thematic strands, what ultimately unites the issue is a shared methodological ethics: to follow class as it moves across borders, generations and affects. The contributors' commitment to relational, processual and reflexive methods transforms research practice into a mode of translation. Ethnography, narrative analysis and comparative interviewing each show that class travels not only with capital but with feeling.

Conclusion

This issue features and investigates the experiences of people whose understandings of class categories must be transported to, translated for and operationalised in different contexts. The papers in this collection show that the meanings and categorisations of class vary across different places, requiring a particular sensitivity in migration research that aims to understand social class mobility, transformation and reproduction. Arguably, it is precisely because a single definition of class is not desirable or possible, that we need theorisations of class that are equipped to capture the various social practices which contribute to reproducing inherited inequalities.

As a whole, this Monograph is the result of a collective effort that has taken place over several years, through the initial idea for and forming of a panel for the ISA World Congress, the discussions held during the conference in Melbourne and the work involved in creating this special issue, in different stages. We owe particular thanks to two scholars who participated in the ISA panel and in the collaborative email dialogue that followed as we developed the proposal for this issue, but who eventually did not contribute full papers to this collection. Manashi Ray encouraged our collective engagement with the transnational lens that supports the bi-focal and multi-focal framing of social position and social mobility, highlighted through her research with Indian women entrepreneurs (Ray, 2026). Sylvia Ang insisted on the necessity of critically engaging with common glosses of class categories across languages and contexts, such as in the phrase 'Asian middle class', and demonstrated the utility of carefully documenting how the local and particular ways classed positions are described in interview methods to illustrate the heterogeneity of class within and across contexts (Ang, 2022, 2026).

The findings and analyses presented through the papers in this issue offer some general directions for further theorisation of class. First, they embrace relationality: class gains meaning only in comparison to others, to past selves and to other places. By taking class to be highly relational and embedded in particular social, cultural and historical contexts, the papers foreground intersectionality and coloniality, showing how class

interacts with race, citizenship and region to produce layered inequalities. Second, and closely related, the papers all engage with class as a transnational phenomenon, expanding our understanding of how multiple classed locations simultaneously lived, experienced and contested across contexts. Third, the papers emphasise temporality, showing how class is an affective inheritance shaped by intergenerational social trajectories and histories. These inform imagined futures and the ways class is experienced as stages in longer processes of social decline, ascent or suspension.

Social class positions are not left behind when people move; they travel with them, shape their movement, stick to them and transform along the way. Instead of treating class as a static structure, all the papers in this issue trace its movements and trajectories, across generations (Vincent & Butler, 2026), decades (Becker & Worm, 2026), racialised differences (Nowicka, 2026), life stages (Ginnerskov-Dahlberg, 2026), legal statuses (Kwon, 2026) and across urban spaces (Patel, 2026).

Finally, the papers in this issue advocate methodological pluralism and the continued importance of qualitative and interpretative methods. While there is a strong focus here on migrants' subjective experiences of and perspectives on class, these are seen as embedded in particular cultural and historical contexts; and while space is given to migrants' individual voices, they are also at the same time considered as expressions of the wider transnational structures and frameworks in which those migrants are situated. Taken together, this collection turns the once static concept of class into a moving structure that links the personal and the global, the embodied and the institutional, the past and the future. It also invites empirical engagements and innovations for cross-cultural sensitivity towards understanding how class is translated, reproduced, expressed and experienced.

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Résumé

Ce numéro de *Current Sociology Monographs* explore de nouvelles possibilités conceptuelles, à l'intersection des études sur les migrations et de la sociologie des classes. Les articles, qui examinent la migration comme un espace particulier où la classe est traduite et transformée, s'appuient sur des cas abondamment documentés et empiriquement spécifiques pour montrer comment la classe sociale est vécue et produite de manière relationnelle, transnationale et temporelle à travers la vie des migrants. Dès lors, la classe est ici conceptualisée comme un processus mobile qui voyage avec les migrants, relie différents contextes et se traduit à travers le mouvement. À la différence des paradigmes tendant à universaliser une version ou une définition particulière de la classe sociale, une approche comparative et inductive est adoptée de manière à explorer les tensions entre l'universel et le particulier.

Les différentes contributions ont pour objectif commun une recherche qualitative attentive aux dimensions particulières, affectives et expérientielles de la classe sociale telles qu'elles sont partagées et exprimées par les migrants, employées comme point de départ pour repenser la classe sociale « en mouvement ». En intégrant l'ethnographie, les histoires de vie, les approches intergénérationnelles et la cartographie spatiale, les auteurs examinent de manière inductive comment la classe sociale configure les expériences vécues par les migrants dans divers contextes. Certains chercheurs suivent les participants d'un pays à l'autre, tandis que d'autres retracent les trajectoires imaginatives à travers lesquelles les migrants se souviennent de leurs mouvements et les expliquent. Les analyses contenues dans ces contributions touchent à la relationnalité, la

transnationalité et la temporalité, et montrent ainsi comment la classe sociale apparaît comme intrinsèquement processuelle et mobile, reliant la dimension personnelle et la dimension globale, la part incarnée et la part institutionnelle, les passés et les futurs. Chaque lien met en avant la traduction et la transformation à la fois comme processus empirique et comme sensibilité méthodologique, montrant comment la migration bouleverse ce qui est tenu pour acquis et offre des possibilités de reconsidérer les théories établies sur la classe sociale.

Mots-clés

classe sociale, classe transnationale, migration internationale, mobilité sociale

Resumen

Este número de *Current Sociology Monographs* explora nuevas oportunidades conceptuales en la intersección de los estudios sobre migración y la sociología de la clase social. Los artículos examinan la migración como un lugar particular en el que la clase se traduce y transforma, utilizando casos de estudio con abundante información y empíricamente específicos para mostrar cómo la clase social se experimenta y se produce de manera relacional, transnacional y temporal a través de las vidas de los migrantes. A través de este enfoque, los artículos conceptualizan la clase como un proceso móvil que viaja con los migrantes, vincula diferentes contextos y se traduce a través del movimiento. A diferencia de los paradigmas que tienden a universalizar una narrativa particular o una definición de la clase social, este número adopta un enfoque comparativo e inductivo con el fin de explorar las tensiones entre lo universal y lo particular.

Las contribuciones comparten un compromiso con la investigación cualitativa que atiende a las dimensiones particulares, afectivas y experienciales de la clase tal como las comparten y expresan los migrantes, utilizándolas como punto de entrada para re teorizar la clase 'en movimiento'. A través de la integración de etnografía, historias de vida, enfoques intergeneracionales y mapeo espacial, los autores examinan inductivamente cómo la clase da forma a las experiencias vividas por los migrantes en diversos contextos. Algunos investigadores siguen a los participantes a través de las fronteras, mientras que otros trazan las trayectorias imaginativas a través de las cuales los migrantes recuerdan y explican sus movimientos. Las contribuciones orientan sus análisis en torno a la relacionalidad, la transnacionalidad y la temporalidad, mostrando cómo la clase emerge como inherentemente procesual y móvil, vinculando lo personal y lo global, lo encarnado y lo institucional, y el pasado y el futuro. Cada vínculo pone en primer plano la traducción y la transformación como un proceso empírico y como una sensibilidad metodológica, mostrando cómo la migración perturba lo que se da por sentado y brinda oportunidades para reconsiderar las teorías de clase establecidas.

Palabras clave

clase social, clase transnacional, migración internacional, movilidad social