

Annual Conference of the “Arbeitskreis für moderne Sozialgeschichte”

Family and Inequality in the 19-20th Century

15–16 May 2025

Leibniz-Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung (ZZF), Am Neuen Markt 1, Potsdam

Organizers: Prof. Dr. Frank Bösch (Potsdam) / Prof. Dr. Michael Goebel (FU Berlin)

The study of socio-economic and other societal inequalities has long been part and parcel of social history *tout court*. It has likewise become a central part of the political agenda of multiple countries, not only in the West or the Global North, during the last decades.

Consequently, the *Arbeitskreis Moderne Sozialgeschichte* has partly dedicated several of its past annual workshops to this broad theme. In spring 2025, it will continue to do so, this time by inquiring how family mediates broader societal experiences of inequality, both within and between countries.

In foregrounding the family as a social unit that produces, preserves, and modifies broader patterns of inequality, our workshop harks back to the once venerable field of family history, which however during the last three decades has come out of fashion, displaced, absorbed, or centrifugally dissipated into a number of adjacent themes: gender; class and education; ancestry, race, and ethnicity. The intergenerational transfer of different forms of capital (wealth, networks, education, cultural knowledge) within family networks will be a particular focus. Obviously, migration influenced inequality: How did increasing mobility in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries influence inequality related to family structure and what kind of transfers developed within families? What kinds of inequality arose within families and kinship, often due to gender structures or personal relations? We will also discuss the role of changing political systems that changed the framework of family-related inequality, like the rise and fall communism, corrupt autocracies or democracies with different tax and welfare systems. All these larger themes can themselves be viewed as overlapping (or intersectional) modes that pattern inequalities. Yet they typically condense, and frequently are experienced, at the micro-level of families.

The contributions to our meeting will, in various degrees, speak to one of the following four areas of interest.

1. Kinship

Anthropologists studying non-Western societies have sometimes foregrounded the supposedly more culturally neutral term “kinship” over family. As a result, the notion of family, and especially the precept of the nuclear family, was occasionally accused of Eurocentrism, whereas “kinship” could acquire a distinctly Orientalist timbre. In the maze of words, the impact of different family structures, practices, and ideals on global patterns of inequality has received little attention—at least outside some flashpoints such as the

notorious Moynihan Report of 1965. These, however, will be one line of inquiry in our meeting.

2. The Transfer of Wealth and Property

One of the ways in which families can most directly feed into the preservation and exacerbation of broader socio-economic inequalities is through the intergenerational transmission of wealth and property. Especially where the return on capital outpaces the fruits of labor, inheritance systemically drives inequality. Historically however, even beyond the great levelers of wars and revolutions, inheritance regimes may well have yielded more variegated results. To tease out how the intersection of family, law, and the transfer of wealth related to the historical development of inequalities is one of the purposes of our meeting.

3. Culture, Education, and Labor

Educational attainment in the contemporary West is not only a reasonably dependable predictor of income, but also infamously correlates with the educational level of parents. In some societies education is more intergenerationally rigid than income and wealth. And it is inescapably tied to labor markets. Social historians of Europe, for instance, long interpreted occupational homogamy as the bridegroom and his prospective father-in-law exercising the same trade. Educational and occupational continuities often underscore the links between family networks and labor markets, as well as the reproduction of inequality across generations. Understanding how family structures influenced access to education, labor, and social mobility offers crucial insights into how inequalities were sustained and challenged in different historical contexts.

4. Mobility and Migration

Migration, whether voluntary or forced, has long influenced family structures and exacerbated or mitigated inequalities. In the context of global migration patterns, family networks often played a critical role in providing financial, social, and emotional support across borders. However, migration also created new forms of inequality both within families—due to separation, differing legal statuses, or gender roles—and between families, as some benefited from remittances and others were left vulnerable. By exploring how migration shaped family dynamics and social stratification, we can better understand the historical interplay between mobility and inequality.

5. Ancestry and Race

The significance of ancestry and race in family history is deeply intertwined with global patterns of inequality. In many societies, family lineage has been a key determinant of social status, rights, and access to resources, while racial categories, sometimes codified in law, further reinforced systemic inequalities. From colonial racial hierarchies to modern-day debates about identity and privilege, the intersections of ancestry, race, and family have

continually shaped social and economic inequalities. Our discussions will examine how family structures were influenced by and contributed to racialized systems of oppression, as well as how these dynamics evolved over time.

Program

Thursday, May 15

14.00 Welcome and introduction: Prof. Dr. Frank Bösch / Prof. Dr. Michael Goebel

14:15–15:45

Prof. Dr. Diana Paton (Edinburgh), Inheriting Women and Family Transmission of Wealth Across and Beyond the British Atlantic

Prof. Dr. Joachim Eibach (Bern), Numerous Inequalities: How Family Experience Mirrored and Shaped Inequality - Perspectives from Self-Narratives

Chair: Prof. Dr. Jakob Tanner (Zurich)

16:15 –18.30

Prof. Dr. Christina de Bellaigue (Oxford), Education, Inequality and Downward Mobility in a Family of the industrial middle class, 1825–1914

Prof. Dr. Michael Goebel (FU Berlin), Mobility and Immobile Capital: Migratory Families and Real Estate in Nineteenth-Century Histories of Inequality

Prof. Dr. Ravi Ahuja (Göttingen), South Asian Families and Work Migration in Industrial Regions in the Twentieth Century

Chair: Prof. Dr. Friedrich Lenger (Gießen)

19.30 Dinner

Friday, May 16

9:00–10:30

Prof. Dr. Christoph Conrad (Geneva), The Last Inequality: Dying With or Without Family

Prof. Dr. Simone Lässig (GHI Washington), Jewish Families: The Arnholds

Chair: Prof. Dr. Ulrike von Hirschhausen (Rostock)

11:30–13:00

PD. Dr. Jürgen Dinkel (Leipzig), All Remains in the Family: Inheritance and Inequality in Europe and the United States since the Nineteenth Century

Prof. Dr. Frank Bösch (ZZF Potsdam), Transferring Family Property in and after Socialism: The Case of East Germany

Chair: Prof. Dr. Alexander Nützenadel (HU Berlin)

13:00–14:00 Lunch

14:00–15:30

Prof. Dr. Till Kössler (Halle), Families and Right-wing Authoritarianism in Spain Between the Second Republic and the Franco Dictatorship, 1931–1945

Dr. Jana Tschurenev (FU Berlin), The Male Breadwinner Family in a Global Historical Perspective

Chair: Prof. Dr. Kiran Klaus Patel (LMU München)

15:30–16:30

Internal Meeting of the Arbeitskreis