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Summary

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Despite recurrent controversy, class theory remains the major sociological explanation of social inequality. While there are several approaches to class theory, one particular model has achieved dominance in empirical research over the last decades: the EGP (or Goldthorpe) class schema, recently updated into the European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC). In a 2007 paper in the *European Sociological Review*, Michael Tåhlin tests the theoretical foundations of this model empirically on the basis of unique Swedish data on employment relations. The outcome of the test is decisively negative for the theory. Reciprocal dependence relations between workers and employers – at the center of attention in current conceptual accounts, but never before explicitly measured – are conspicuously unimportant in a class context. Instead, the main source of class advantage among employees is the skill content of jobs. This accords well with parts of the early theoretical justifications of the EGP class model, elements that have since been abandoned. It is suggested that future theoretical work on class inequality should return to the skill-based roots of the model and proceed from there.

In a recent working paper, Carl le Grand and Michael Tåhlin extend these analyses by analyzing data from eleven European countries. They examine the underlying positional factors that determine the strong empirical relations between class, occupation and wages. Four such factors are distinguished on the basis of previous research: skill requirements, authority, autonomy and scarcity. The empirical results, based on data from the European Social Survey (ESS) 2004, show (a) that class explains a very large proportion of the occupational variation in wages, and (b) that skill requirements are much more important than other factors in accounting for the class-wage gradient. In fact, the empirical association between class, occupational prestige and wages, on the one hand, and authority, autonomy and scarcity, on the other, is almost completely due to the variation in the skill content of work across occupations. These findings are highly similar in all countries examined. Existing class theories – the model underlying EGP / ESeC as well as Wright's class model – should be accordingly revised.