

Interview with Prof. Henryk Domański

# The Logic of Structure

**Academia:** What do we mean when we talk about social structure?

**Henryk Domański:** A configuration of relations between certain entities. They might be people, institutions, or various social groups. Many kinds of such structure exist, one of them being class structure. Though there are also various hierarchies that are hard to describe in terms of "class structure." Ones that are regenerated and become institutionalized - all the interactions between the government, the Church, public bodies, the organizations people are involved in. Social structure likewise means relations between individuals within the family, between closer and farther families, between neighbors, and among acquaintances.

**And which of those do you study, as a sociologist?**

There are two main traditions in sociology. One, descending from Marxism and other schools, focused on class structure. The other focused on social stratification, where the elements of the structure are not social classes, but other hierarchies and distances, which may for instance be called "social strata." But all the kinds of relations I talked about a moment ago are also studied, including those based on belonging to various institutions. The most important thing is that without social structure there can be no society.

**So what are the main strata or classes that we have in Poland?**

Before I answer that question, I will pose another: What do we mean by "social class"? Social classes are groupings of people distinguished in terms of various types of ownership: companies, capital, education, particular qualifications, or simply labor. These various types of possessions are "resources," defining the market position of the individual, and

they have a "price," which translates into specific income, bargaining strength, power (or being subject to control), opportunities for advancement, and lifestyle. The main social classes are laborers, farmers, small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs, intellectual workers, specialists, and the business elite. And here arises the problem of how many such categories there are, what specific groups of owners and of hired workers we need to distinguish. Or at least, that is how Max Weber defined class affiliation. The theories that arose in the 20th century noticed that there is also something else, layered over that market position. Pierre Bourdieu's contribution was to point out that social classes are not merely groups defined in terms of how they rank by ownership relations and market strength, but that belonging to them is also shaped by cultural and social capital. In addition, he also distinguished symbolic capital and also "human" capital. In view of all this, I can say that Poland does not at this point differ from other Western democracies and countries undergoing modernization processes, starting from industrialization and ending with the expansion of the service sector.

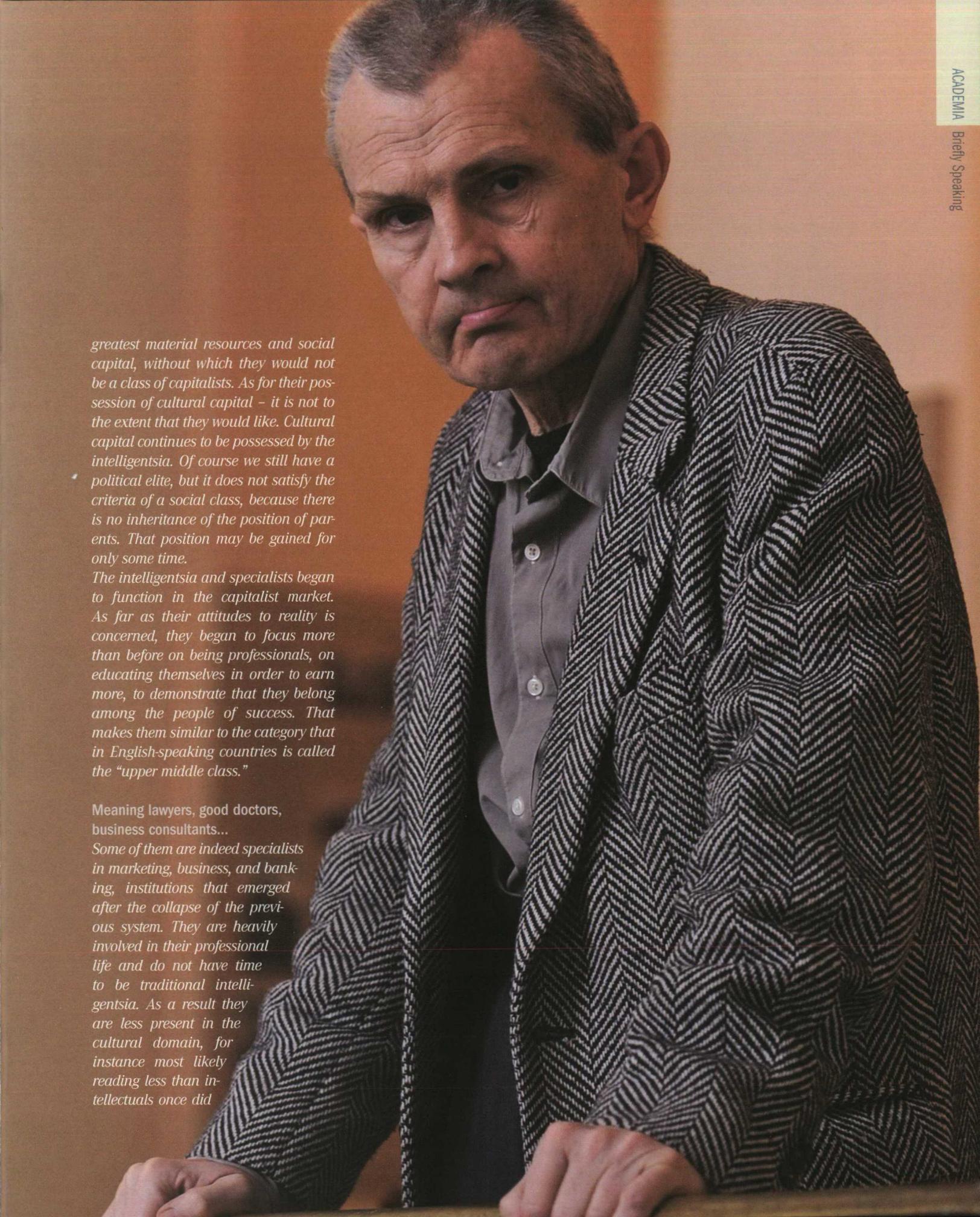
**Has much changed in Poland's social structure since 1989?**

In 1988-2012, the class structure did not become more open, in the sense of growing intergenerational mobility (decreased inheritance of parents' position), choice of spouse, and increased friendship relations between the intelligentsia, lower white-collar workers, owners, manual workers, and farmers. The class inequalities remained similar in terms of inequalities of income and the threat of unemployment, although in the early 1990s there was an increase in stratification, and in particular a greater difference

between the incomes of the higher managers and specialists on the one hand, and the working class on the other. This was further exacerbated by inequalities related to the threat of unemployment, which became a new dimension of class division.

Other new dimensions include stratification in voting and participation in protests. In 1990-2012 they came to the fore - class membership proved to affect people's participation in street protests and preferences for political parties in parliamentary elections. Admittedly, social class is a relatively poor indicator of voting preferences, but is still a stronger determinant of voting than, for example, religiousness, sector of employment, size of place of residence, or age. Another confirmation of the presence of class divisions is its effect on orientations and attitudes. The privileged classes, with greater resources, "ownership," and human capital, express less support for state interventionism and greater tolerance on moral issues, in terms of acceptance of homosexuality, extramarital affairs, and premarital sex. For the lower classes, the reverse is true. That would indicate that members of different classes behave in keeping with their own interests. Intellectuals share not only common economic interests, which involve defending their privileged positions, but also profess the same values concerning marital life and family values.

After 1989, the nomenklatura, the ruling class in the communist system, disappeared. The question arises whether a class of owners, in other words the category that plays the role of the "ruling class" in the capitalist system, emerged to take its place. And the answer is yes, one is emerging, albeit slowly. We do have a class of "big" capitalists. This business elite consists of people who have the



*greatest material resources and social capital, without which they would not be a class of capitalists. As for their possession of cultural capital – it is not to the extent that they would like. Cultural capital continues to be possessed by the intelligentsia. Of course we still have a political elite, but it does not satisfy the criteria of a social class, because there is no inheritance of the position of parents. That position may be gained for only some time.*

*The intelligentsia and specialists began to function in the capitalist market. As far as their attitudes to reality is concerned, they began to focus more than before on being professionals, on educating themselves in order to earn more, to demonstrate that they belong among the people of success. That makes them similar to the category that in English-speaking countries is called the “upper middle class.”*

**Meaning lawyers, good doctors, business consultants...**

*Some of them are indeed specialists in marketing, business, and banking, institutions that emerged after the collapse of the previous system. They are heavily involved in their professional life and do not have time to be traditional intelligentsia. As a result they are less present in the cultural domain, for instance most likely reading less than intellectuals once did*

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back during the communist era, but they still represent a high degree of cultural capital, albeit of a different sort. One systematic trend evident in recruitment into the intelligentsia is a reduction of the role played by higher education. Back in communist-era Poland, 75% of those who graduated with a university degree became intelligentsia and specialists, whereas now the figure is now about 35-40%. Higher education has lost its market value. As far as low-level white-collar workers are concerned, they account for 30%. This category is systematically increasing, but the greatest numerical growth has been seen among rank-and-file personnel in trade and services – from 6-7% up to 16%.

### What about the owners of small companies?

In the communist era, entrepreneurs were craftsmen or “upstarts,” as the government officials degraded them, but they enjoyed society's support. Their numbers increased from around 3% in 1988 (Poland had the greatest percentage of them among the eastern-bloc countries), up to 7-9% at present. According to my analyses based survey data from the early 1990s, they were recruited mainly from the lower classes – laborers and farmers – but nowadays they more often come from the white-collar workers and specialists. That attests to a transformation in terms of social origins, towards growing similar to the “new” middle classes.

On the other hand, the relative share of laborers in the social structure is decreasing. In 1988, qualified workers accounted for 25-26%, whereas now the figure is about 16%. That attests to processes of assimilating to modern market systems, a departure from the domination of the worker class and the farmer category. In the 1980s, farm owners made up 23% of Polish society, whereas now it is just 7-8%, even though the percentage of farmers continues to be high in comparison to other countries.

### How are government officials now viewed in terms of prestige?

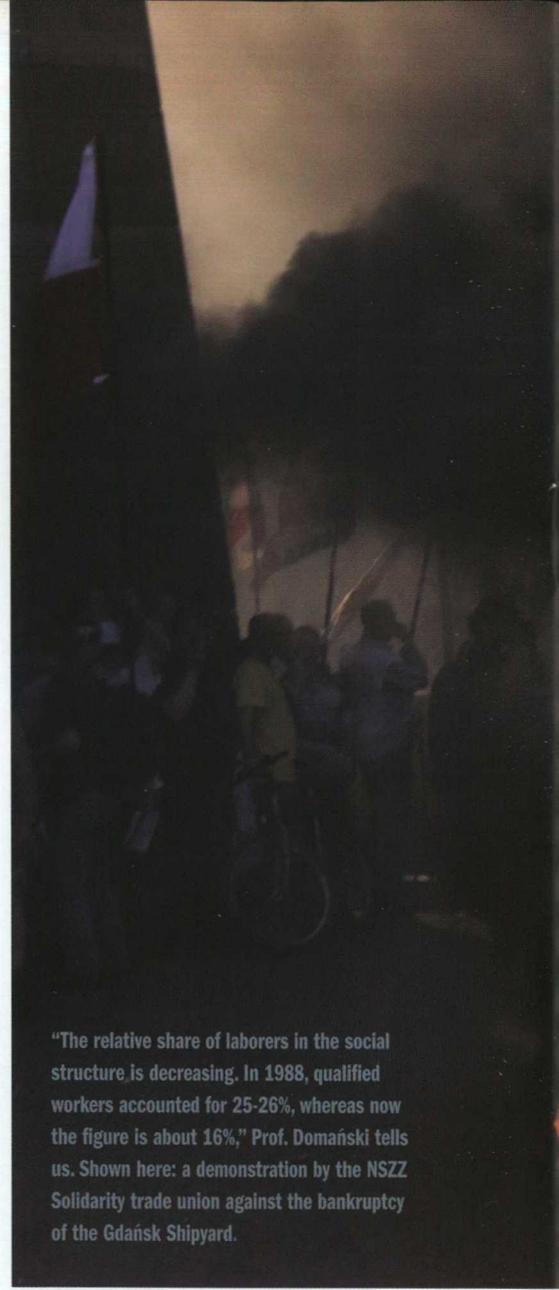
A successive drop in the prestige of governmental ministers started at the beginning

of the 1990s. From 1991 to 1995, the prestige of the minister's position decreased from 77 down to 62 on a 100-point scale, then it further decreased to 59 in 1999 and reached its lowest point in the years 2004-2006, at 48-50. The radical nature of those transformations suggests that the public felt that a degradation had occurred in those wielding political power. The job of minister moved from the top to the very bottom of the hierarchy of professions in terms of prestige, ending up on the same level as an administrative clerk, unskilled worker, or housecleaner. Such degradation has affected all representatives of the ruling class. In 2004, on the list of 36 occupations, “government minister” and “member of parliament” were ranked in second and third place from the bottom, with only one occupation, “political party activist,” ranking below them. In 2004, regional and government representatives on the local level also were ranked very low. “Province governor (voivode)” came in 25th, and “town mayor” was ranked 27th.

### Are those surprising results?

One of the main factors affecting occupational prestige is the power that is ascribed to high-ranking positions. The fact that the transition from a totalitarian system to a democracy brought about a decrease in politicians' esteem is paradoxical. But on the other hand, we can realistically assume that the prestige that politicians enjoy in any social system is greater, the more distance there is between them and ordinary citizens. There are many indications that the communist system had weak support and enjoyed, at best, legitimacy of a pragmatic kind (the view that there was little option but to accept it). At the same time, however, in the mind of the ordinary citizen, a minister personified the authority of governmental power, which commanded respect.

The collapse of that system led to a reduction in the distance between citizens and government. Firstly, politicians are chosen by election, which means that they hold the top-ranking posts only temporarily, and after their term is up they can become ordinary citizens once again and return to their previous positions.



“The relative share of laborers in the social structure is decreasing. In 1988, qualified workers accounted for 25-26%, whereas now the figure is about 16%,” Prof. Domański tells us. Shown here: a demonstration by the NSZZ Solidarity trade union against the bankruptcy of the Gdańsk Shipyard.

Secondly, in a democracy a political career is a path open to everyone, which means that these positions have become more easily accessible, and – in line with the theory of stratification – whatever is easier to attain has less prestige. Thirdly, ministers, members of parliament, governors, and mayors have become exposed to media criticism, laying their human weaknesses bare. We can say that democracy has weakened the mysticism of power, depriving it of prestige.

### An “underclass” category has also appeared.

Yes, it is a characteristic trait of the market system and a new category in Poland. The most important question is whether the category of people affected by the greatest poverty rightfully deserve to be described as an “underclass.” In the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century, such people



accounted for around 8%-10% and were situated, on average, on the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy. But if we compare the social location of this category to “non-poor” social classes in the basic dimensions of social stratification, its transformation into an underclass appears not evident. This shows that the category of poor people does not locate much lower than categories of working class and farmers, in other words the lowest class in Poland. However, belonging to this category involves relatively low income and social exclusion – these people are outside the labor market, they are permanently unemployed. The real problem with this category is that if poverty persists, it results in reproduction in time, which means that the children of such people inherit poverty.

**To what extent, if at all, can one outflow from one's parents' position?**

The high self-recruitment would suggest a lack of major change in the degree of openness of social structure. The results of my analysis based on national surveys would in fact indicate a certain decrease in openness in 1988-2005, and a renewed increase in 2005-2011. However, it would be hard to interpret this trend as being due to political changes. For example, during the period of the greatest decrease in openness (1999-2005), the rightist Solidarity Electoral Action (AWS) coalition was first in power, to be succeeded in 2001 by the leftist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), whose government ended in a spectacular failure in the 2005 elections. More important in causing the greater closure of the social structure was the growing unemployment, which in 2002-2003 rose to the previously – and subsequently – unseen level of 20%. The attendant increase in uncertainty of

market positions should have been more conducive to inheritance than to mobility – unlike the next period, which was characterized by a successive decrease in the unemployment rate. In 2009, it subsided to 7.9%.

Another factor that might have increased intergenerational transitions between social classes in 2005-2011 was the abrupt surge in emigration after Poland acceded to the European Union. While the number of emigrants seeking permanent residence abroad was 22,200 in 2005, by 2006 it had jumped up to 47,000. The “opening up” of the social structure we are discussing would have been the effect of the outflow of emigrants, who left behind more vacancies to be filled.

**How about other possibilities for advancement, such as through marriage?**

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Spouses and acquaintances choose one another in line with their system of values, based on whether they can find a common ground with someone, and so for instance the percentage of individuals who choose a spouse of similar status is greater than the percentage of individuals who inherit a position similar to that of their parents. One might say that intergenerational openness, meaning the ability to shift away from parents' social position, is greater than the degree of marital homogamy. That is important, because while it does not alter the market position of individuals that much, it consolidates their social position based on social relations. It illustrates that our lives depend not only on the determinants of our economic situation, but also on our own choices. Without anyone forcing us to, we ourselves choose partners from a similar category. An even stronger tendency to homogamy is evident in the choice of acquaintances. In this case, the percentage of individuals who have friends and acquaintances from the same occupational category/class/strata is the largest in relative terms as compared to inheritance and selection of spouses.

**And so we have a quite consolidated, or to use the sociological term, "petrified" society.**

As in other countries. This is consistent with the principles by which societies function. Logic would indeed indicate that there cannot be too many *mésalliances* of various sorts, because society would grow disintegrated, not to say fall apart.

**The Gini coefficient has increased, there are greater income differentials in society. To what extent is the Polish public prepared to accept that change?**

Of course, everyone would like to earn more money, you don't need sociology for that. Is that harmful for the stability and development of market relations? Research on how much people agree with inequalities would suggest that is not the case. A pragmatic attitude towards the hierarchy of incomes is confirmed, for instance, by the findings of studies in which we ask respondents as follows: "I

will now read out the names of various occupations. Please say approximately how much you think people in these occupations actually earn on a monthly basis, and next how much you think they should earn. We are concerned with typical workers whose education and skills are not too different from most people in the occupation." For each occupation, an "actual" amount of monthly income and a "should be" amount were then calculated. Then we look at whether or not the hierarchy that people think is fair coincides with the hierarchy they think actually exists. If not, we could say that people are dissatisfied, that something needs to be changed.

**And so what do the findings suggest?**

They lead to two conclusions. Firstly, Polish society does not question the existing hierarchy. People do not want to change it to comply with other principles of fair distributions. In particular, people do not want to reward occupations that require higher education (like doctors, university professors) at the expense of financially privileged representatives of big business. The umbrella of pragmatic acceptance also covers politicians, as is shown by the higher amount of earnings assigned as fair to a government minister than to a representative of the intelligentsia, despite politicians' extraordinarily low prestige. And so the existing state of affairs is seen as making sense - it justifies itself by the very fact that it exists.

Secondly, acceptance of the shape of the existing income hierarchy goes hand-in-hand with a belief that its degree of differentiation should be reduced. The amount of earnings thought to be fair for owners, directors, politicians, and representatives of the intelligentsia were lower than the amounts they were thought to actually be earning. In the colloquial sense of justice, therefore, representatives of these occupations deserve less than they actually receive. The reverse is the case for occupations with the lower earnings. The earnings that they "should" receive are higher, which (if applied) would reduce the difference between the averages for the occupations with the

### Prof. Henryk Domański

studies social structure in Poland. He first studied sociology at the University of Warsaw, then earned his doctorate at the PAS Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. In 2000-2012 he served as director of that Institute and head of the Research Group on Social Structure. He has been a guest lecturer and researcher at many prestigious universities in the world. The author of several dozen books and articles on stratification and mobility, including: *Rola klasyfikacji zawodów w analizie struktury społecznej* [The Role of Classifying Professions in the Analysis of Social Structure] (1985), *Wzory prestiżu a struktura społeczna* [Patterns of Prestige and Social Structure] (1991), *Zadowolony niewolnik. Studium o różnicowaniu społecznym między kobietami i mężczyznami w Polsce* [The Satisfied Slave: A Study of Social Diversification Among Women and Men in Poland] (1992), *Spółczeństwa klasy średniej* [Middle-Class Societies] (1994), *O ruchliwości społecznej w Polsce* [On Social Mobility in Poland] (2004), *Spółczeństwa europejskie, stratyfikacja i systemy wartości* [European Societies, Stratification and Systems of Values] (2009), *Sprawiedliwe nierówności zarobków* [Fair Income Inequalities] (2013), *Czy są w Polsce klasy społeczne?* [Are There Social Classes in Poland?] (2015).

highest and lowest earnings. We might say that people are not eager to support revolutionary change. ■

Interview by Anna Zawadzka  
Photos Jakub Ostalowski