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Income Dynamics in Three Societies

An investigation of social dynamics
using „old“ and „new“ types of social indicators

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Abstract

This paper* sets out to offer new insight into social change, especially social transformation. The authors have drawn up new types of social indicators to encapsulate the nature of social change, with the intention of widening its meaning. The investigation draws on longitudinal panel studies: the German Socio-Economic Panel Study 1990–96 (GSOEP) and the Hungarian Household Panel 1992–96 (HHP). The single, albeit crucial social dimension examined is the income position of families, including the mobility of families within the income structure. The analysis takes a *comparative* and a *longitudinal* approach. Hungary and East Germany, as societies in transition, are compared with West Germany, as a case of ‘usual’ social change, while the income mobility of individuals is traced over time. Both these aspects are examined in relation to modernization theories. While classical measures such as the Gini Coefficient show a remarkable stability of income inequality, the indicators elaborated here reveal a high degree of individual movement behind the macro stability.

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In the Academic Year 1997/98 Zsolt Spéder (Budapest University of Economic Sciences) and Roland Habich (Social Science Research Center Berlin - WZB) had been fellows at the Collegium Budapest. During their stay they had the excellent opportunity to organize the above mentioned workshop with European experts from eight countries. The workshop was jointly arranged by the Collegium Budapest and the WZB.

At this point Zsolt Spéder and Roland Habich would like to thank the Collegium Budapest for providing a marvellous and pleasant working atmosphere.

Some papers presented at the workshop will be published in the discussion paper series of the WZB.

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Introduction

The idea that inequality, especially income inequality, increases during transformation is not a new one (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1992; Förster and Tóth, 1997). However, it is worth examining these phenomena again, bearing in mind the research already done on them. For these are questions of general importance, some aspects of which have been almost entirely neglected until recently. The *dynamic aspect*, especially overall ongoing mobility at household and individual level, has rarely been analysed (Mathwig and Habich, 1996; Müller and Frick, 1996). Although there have been useful descriptions of mobility patterns among households and individuals, new insights into the changes occurring in times of transition and evidence yielding a better understanding of them can emerge from analysing annual changes and overall movements over periods of time. This contribution seeks to explore this approach using panel data and the comparative perspectives of dynamics.

The panel method is fruitful in many respects. It allows new indicators to be constructed alongside the macro indicators in common use, such as Gini and income distribution. These measure not only the *net changes* between two points in time, but the *gross changes*, while also illuminating the process by which new structures emerge. This effects a shift in the perspective of analysis and understanding, from *structural figures* to real, *ongoing processes*. It ties in with the purpose of focusing not only on structural changes, but on *mobility* between shifting structures.

The panel-data method provides one of the most effective ways of measuring the various types of movement experienced by individuals, taking individual events and sensations into account. Panel research involves interviewing and tracing the same individuals and households year after year, throughout the investigation. It allows various types of career to be constructed and inter-structural moves by individuals to be followed.

The advantages of a *comparative* study are plain (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1992; Van den Bosch *et al.*, 1996; Förster and Tóth, 1997; Immerfall, 1995). Comparing the societies of Hungary and East Germany highlights the general and the specific (country-specific) features of the transition process. West Germany serves as a reference case or ‘type’ of normal social change occurring in a modern industrial society. This helps to reveal what significant differences exist between usual social change and processes associated with transformation.

The analysis begins with some figures for income development, using structural (static) income-inequality indicators.* Then a more detailed description of some figures follows for individual mobility over time. These mobility patterns allow some statements about the character of social change to be made. After the discussion of change in society as a whole, the focus shifts to the individual level.

* The investigation draws on the German Socio-economic Panel (GSOEP) and the Hungarian Household Panel (HHP).

Income distribution and income inequality in the 1990s

Several parallel types of transition have been occurring in the countries undergoing transformation since the early 1990s (Kornai, 1993; Offe, 1994; Zapf 1994). New institutions have been introduced in the welfare as well as the economic system. Each country has acquired a new type of consumer market, while its labour market has shrunk and been restructured. New firms have been established, state property has been privatized, and so on. All that needs to be said here is that several types of change have taken place, without giving a broader description of them. The focus here is on the *consequences these changes have on income inequality* in transformation societies. The worst of these are commonly agreed to be rising poverty and mounting inequalities. It will be seen later what account of the transition is provided by the commonly used inequality indices and what contribution to this account can be made by new types of income-trend indicators introduced here. This is precisely the purpose of this section of the paper.

Two common indices, P90/P10 and the Gini Coefficient, appear in *Table 1*. This shows clear differences among the three countries, income inequality being *highest in Hungary and lowest in East Germany*.^{*} The very robust Gini Coefficient and the more sensitive P90/P10 ratio produce almost the same picture. However, if development is considered, it looks at first glance as if the transformation has yet to alter the income distribution in the transition countries to the extent expected. Still, it is important to note a tendency for inequality to mount in Hungary, indicated especially by the P90/P10 ratios. Whether this increase can be deemed high or not is a relative question. In East Germany, no change appears, which supports the hypothesis that the West German welfare system has played an important role in the East German transition, a phenomenon termed as the ‘ready-made state’ by Richard Rose (Rose and Haerpfer, 1996). The West German patterns, at least, show us the predicted figures: society seems to be unaffected by transformation and reunification.

These are indicators of income inequality used all over the world, but it is worth looking at some other structural measures as well. Another classic measure is the distribution of individuals within income categories. We created *six relative income categories* for each country and each year, based on annual mean equivalent net household income. Those in the bottom income category—those in poverty—receive less than 50 per cent of the mean equivalent income. The second poorest category has incomes between 50 and 75 per cent of the mean. The next band goes up to the mean income, followed by 125 per cent and 150 per cent of the mean. So the richest category receives more than one and a half times the mean income. Looking at the results in *Figure 1*, the first impression is similar to the one obtained from *Table 1*. The differences among the three societies are clearly apparent, as is the relative stability of income distribution over time.

Closer examination shows that the increasing income inequality in Hungary results from mounting poverty and from the rising proportion of the rich in the population. This means there is a shrinking middle-income category, especially by comparison with Germany.

* For a detailed analysis of income inequality in the former socialist countries, using the classical distribution measures, see Flemming and Micklewright, 1997, and Förster and Tóth, 1997.

Table 1: Inequality Indicators for West Germany, East Germany and Hungary

Year	P90/P10			Gini Coefficient		
	West Germany	East Germany	Hungary	West Germany	East Germany	Hungary
1990	3.01	2.49		0.25	0.18	
1991	3.08	2.44		0.25	0.20	
1992	3.02	2.53	3.36	0.25	0.20	0.28
1993	3.03	2.50	3.25	0.25	0.20	0.28
1994	3.08	2.50	3.48	0.25	0.20	0.29
1995	3.05	2.65	3.63	0.26	0.20	0.30
1996	3.09	2.47	3.62	0.24	0.19	0.30

* Equivalent household net income; e: 0.73; individual level, children included.
Data base: GSOEP, 1990–96 and HHP 1992–96. Authors' calculations.

A clearer understanding of increasing inequality can be gained by considering two approaches. One hypothesis is that *the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer*. If this is the case, the position of those in the middle will be relatively stable, and changes will be confined to the extremes of the income distribution: falling incomes of the poor and rising incomes of the rich. The other hypothesis is that Hungary has a *shrinking middle category*. Here the mounting inequality will result from shifts that cause households in a middle position to slip into poverty and/or to become rich. As already mentioned, Figure 1 seems to suggest that the second case applies to Hungary.* We will return to these two hypotheses after analysing the mobility between the income categories.

However, the shift does not seem to be very robust. Although the differences are somewhat greater than with the Gini Coefficient, the picture remains very similar, especially the development of it. Let us look at the last structural indicator, the *Kernel Density Estimate* (Cowell *et al.*, 1994; Becker and Hauser, 1997). Here the estimate used deflated equivalent income. The results speak for themselves, telling a different story from the Gini Coefficient and the income-category figures (Figures 2-4). East and West Germany clearly experienced a real increase in the general income level during the period of the survey (a shift to the right), while Hungary saw a decrease in the income level (a shift to the left). More interesting in relation to the approach in this paper is the quite large alteration in income distribution, if the shapes of the curves for the first and last years investigated in each country are compared. The two West German curves are more similar, but the East German ones are very different from each other—a mountain becomes a hill. In Hungary the alteration is just the opposite, with the income-distribution mountain becoming higher and steeper. Furthermore, there is a longer slope on the right, and a steeper one on the left. So what do the alterations in East Germany and Hungary mean?

* An important insight into this can be gained from the trend in the so-called poverty gap. The examination of the HHP failed to reveal any noticeable increase in the poverty gap (Andorka *et al.*, 1995; Szívós and Tóth, 1998), that is there is no increase in the gap between the average and the poor.

Figure 1: Relative income positions, 1990–96 (percentages of the mean)

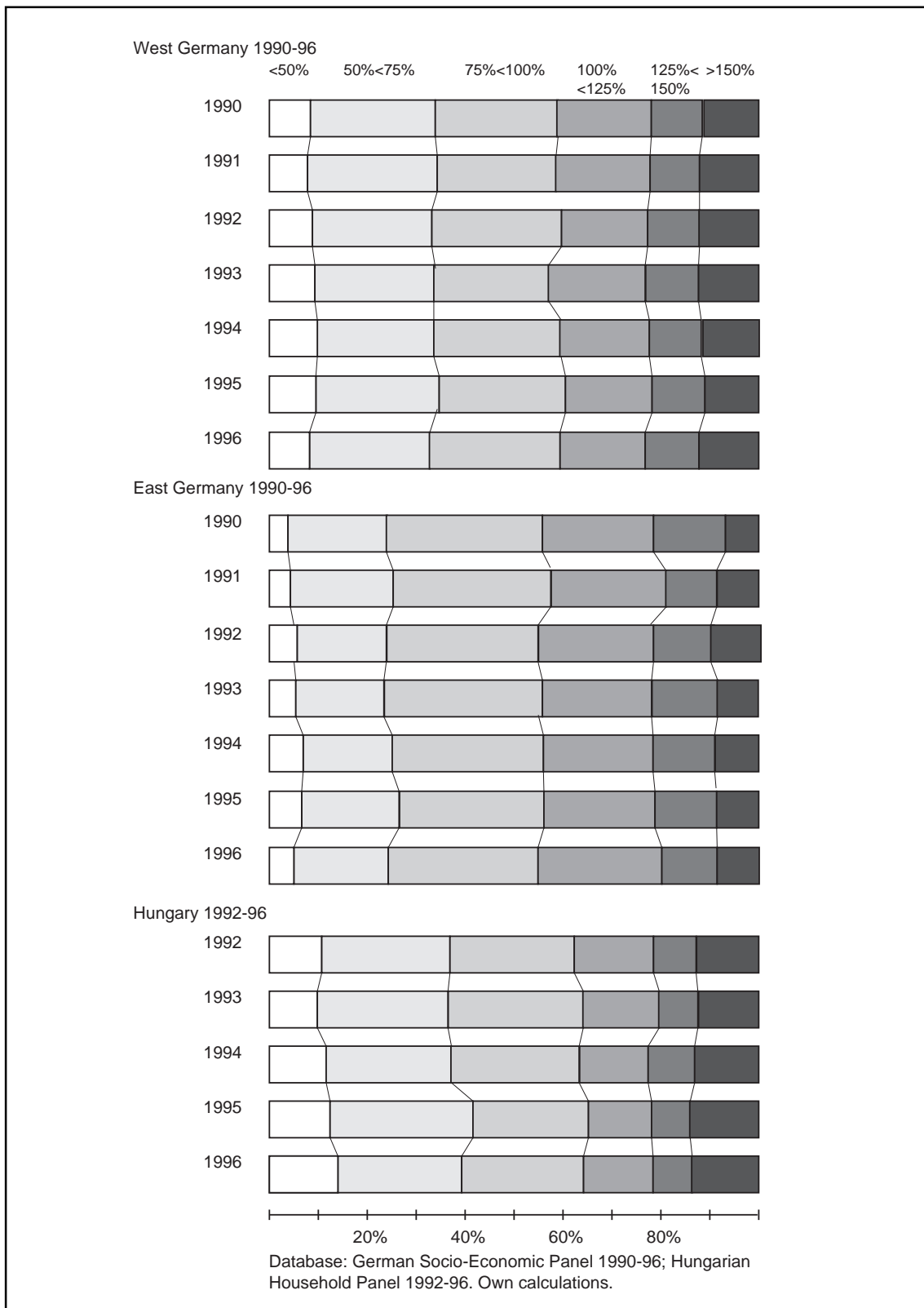
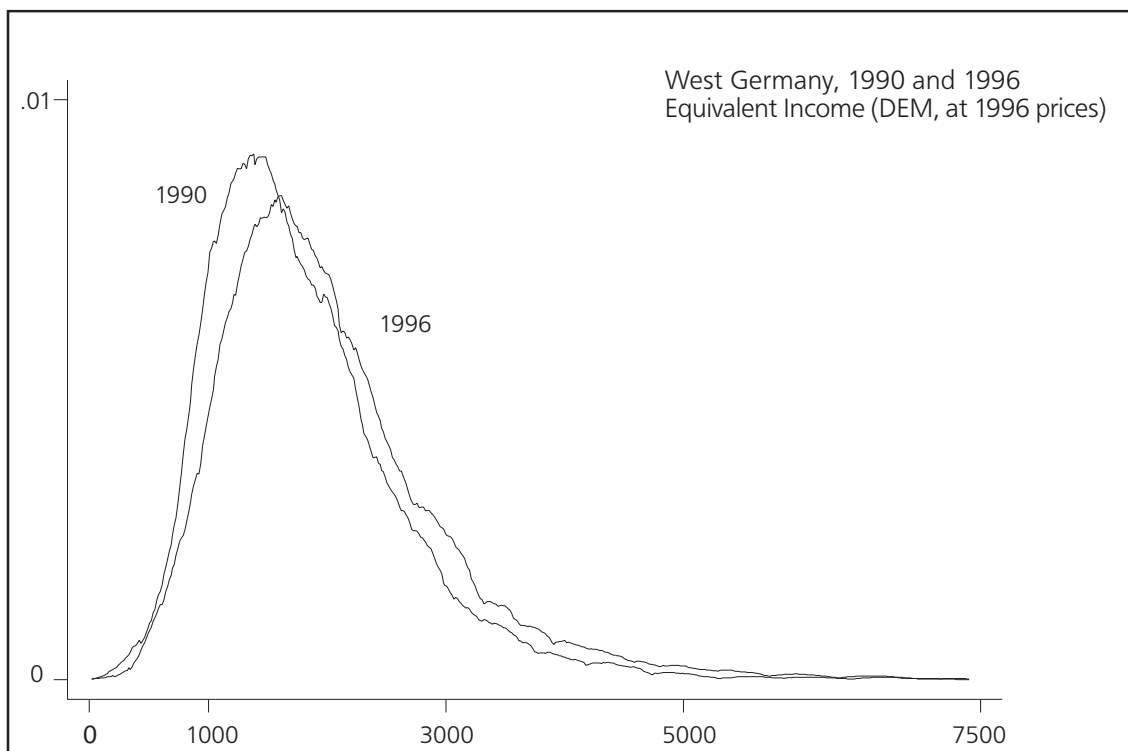


Figure 2: Kernel density estimates of income distributions

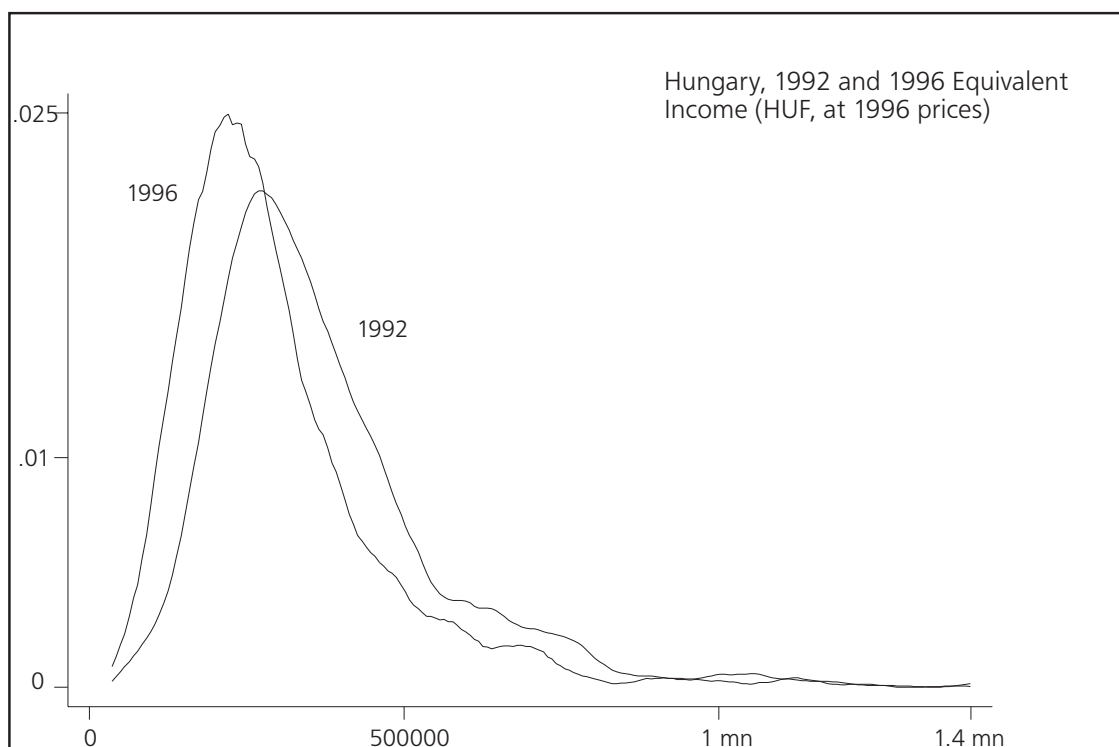
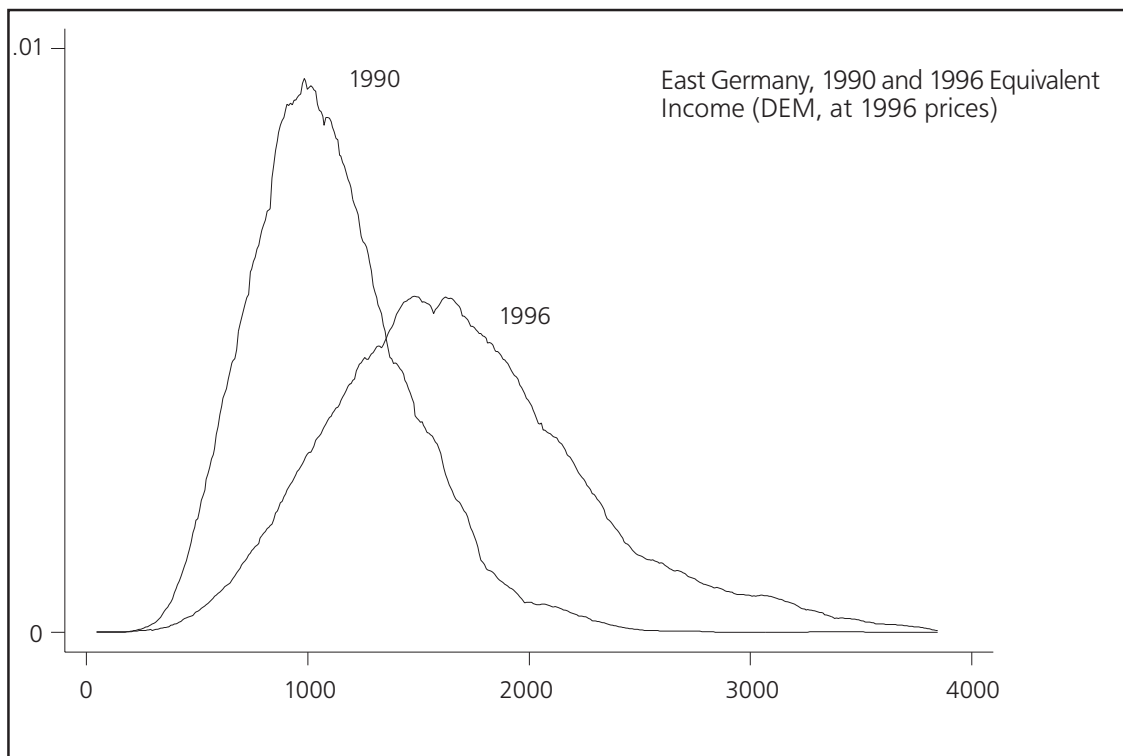


Generally speaking, a clear majority of the *Hungarian* society has moved closer to the mode of the income distribution and to each other. If only four-fifths of the society are considered, the income differences have decreased. Furthermore, the income positions of those in the upper-middle and upper income brackets have hardly deteriorated at all. At one point of the distribution an interval was found where real income had even increased. This explains the increasing Gini Coefficient and P90/P10-ratio for Hungary.

Meanwhile individuals in *East German* society have tended to diverge from the mode income. There is no longer a dense cluster of observations around it. There seems to be a fairly uniform density in the middle, with two low peaks. The two slopes of the curve are quite similar, and smoother than they were before. A majority of individuals was found on the right slope of the income distribution (in the upper-middle income category). So an unchanged degree of income inequality in East Germany coincides with wider real income distances among families. (This all means that income categories have narrowed in Hungary and widened in East Germany, which may affect the Glass-Prais Index.)

With West Germany, somewhat more variation is found on the lower side of the income distribution, and an expansion in the middle.

Figure 3-4: Kernel density estimates of income distributions



Changes at micro level: year-to-year mobility

Authors analysing panel data usually observe that household movements and fluctuations between income categories frequently lie behind a relative stability of income distribution (Duncan, 1984; Hauser and Wagner, 1995; Headey, Habich and Krause, 1994a and 1994b). One simple method of showing this is to use a transition matrix to analyse the turnover from one year to the next, or from the starting point to the final point. The latter shows the income position at the end of the period gained by individuals who belonged to a certain income category at the beginning of the period. This shows whether people retain their income position over time or whether it moves upwards or downwards. *Table 2* presents the movements of individuals between income categories from an *outflow* perspective.⁵ Let us consider some of these movements.*

In the *West German* case, 44 per cent of those who in 1990 belonged to the lower middle-income category (75-100 per cent of the mean) remained in the same income category in 1994. The others changed their relative income positions: about 25 per cent slipped downwards and the remaining 30 per cent improved their position over the five years. About a twentieth of the lower middle-income categories in 1990 became rich in 1994. It should not be forgotten that these flows took place in a relatively stable society. Regarding theories of modernization or social change, this is clear evidence of *continual social change* in modern industrial societies. This is relevant when considering the extent of the flows in the transforming countries.

The comparison between the same categories in *East Germany* and *Hungary* shows that 40 per cent of the individuals retained their income position. As far as mobility is concerned, the downward mobility was higher in Hungary than in East Germany, while in East Germany more individuals than in Hungary managed to improve their relative income position.

This preliminary summary is designed to demonstrate that the societies undergoing transformation contain far more people whose relative income position has changed over time than the West German society does. Behind an almost unchanged income-distribution structure and widening gaps between families lie enormous changes in income position, which are part of a more dynamic process than the one taking place in West Germany. A comparison of Hungary with East Germany shows that the latter has a somewhat higher income mobility. This seems to contradict the results given by the classic inequality indicators, but it ties in with the changes in the shape of the income distribution drawn by the Kernel Density Estimate. To arrive at a better description and a better comparison of the mobility patterns in different countries and at different times, we constructed what is known as Glass/Prais Mobility Index (Mathwig and Habich, 1996; Müller and Frick, 1996). This is a good way of illustrating change in mobility-stability patterns.

The Glass/Prais Index is based on the *mobility matrices* analysed.** In a semi-technical sense, the index sums up the probabilities of remaining in a certain income category from one year to the next, relative to the overall probabilities of staying in this income position in both years. The main

* In principle transition matrices can be analysed from two points of view. An outflow perspective gives information about movements from the beginning (time 1) to the end of the period ($t_1 + x$). An inflow perspective looks specifically at the pattern of recruitment of current income positions.

** The distribution in the transition matrix depends on the length of the chosen period too. This means that periods of the same length need to be analysed. To do so, we took the period 1992–96 for Hungary and the period 1990–94 for Germany. Some of the other tables in this paper contain the total available information for Germany in the period 1990–96.

Table 2: Distribution of individuals among income categories, by former income position (outflow perspective)

Income categories	Income categories 1994/1996						Total
	West Germany 1990–94						
1990	<50%	50-75%	75-100%	100-125%	125-150%	>150%	
<50%	49.7	29	11.6	7.0	1.9	0.8	8.3
50-75%	14.6	50.2	24.9	6.6	2.1	1.5	25.7
75-100%	4	21.3	43.9	20.6	6.1	4	25.2
100-125%	3.8	10.4	29	33.8	14.7	8.3	19.2
125-150%	0.9	7.1	11.7	28.4	32.9	19.1	10.4
>150%	0.9	3.8	8.8	11.8	16.5	58.1	11.2
N	869	2112	2320	1616	916	1022	8856
%	9.8	23.9	26.2	18.2	10.3	11.5	100
East Germany 1990–94							
<50%	29.6	36.9	21.1	7.9	1.8	2.8	3.8
50-75%	11.8	31.5	31.1	17.9	6.4	1.3	20.2
75-100%	6.3	20	40.4	22.3	7.6	3.3	31.9
100-125%	3.3	12	33.2	25.6	19.5	6.5	22.8
125-150%	3.7	8	17.5	28.6	19.5	22.7	14.5
>150%	0.6	4.6	11.8	19.5	24.3	39.2	6.8
N	176	471	792	574	327	229	2569
%	6.9	18.3	30.9	22.3	12.7	8.9	100
Hungary 1992–96							
<50%	45.5	28.8	14.8	5	2.1	3.7	9.4
50-75%	16.7	43.5	25.4	9.6	1.9	2.9	24.8
75-100%	9.8	27.7	39.3	12.7	3.2	7.2	25.6
100-125%	4.2	17.8	24.5	23.5	15.2	14.9	17.9
125-150%	6	11	18.2	19.8	20.7	24.4	8.6
>150%	6.6	6.1	11.4	15.6	16.7	43.5	14.1
N	565	1101	1088	609	357	593	4314
%	13.1	25.5	25.2	14.1	8.3	13.7	100

Data base: GSOEP, 1990–96 and HHP 1992–96. Authors' calculations.

difference compared with other indicators is that the index also takes into consideration the changing income structure (total distribution). Using the index, we have estimated the stability of each income category over several periods of time. In a non-technical sense, the Glass/Prais Index is simple to understand and interpret. It normally varies between 0 and 1, and the higher its value for an income category, the higher the mobility in that category from one year to the next. A value of 1 means total mobility (no stability) over time, which means that someone's income position in one year cannot be predicted from his/her income position in the previous year. A value of 0 means total stability, so that the position of all persons from one year to the next can be predicted perfectly. To see all the movements between the income categories and gain an insight into the trends behind the movements, let us take the Glass/Prais Mobility Index for all the year-to-year periods.

Before doing specific analyses, it is worth stating briefly some of the *theoretical hypotheses* made here about the *dynamics of income inequality and the pace of social change*. It was assumed that the pace of social change and the dynamics of the income-position movements would be very different in the three societies. As mentioned earlier, the West German pattern is used as a reference category. The approach taken draws on modernization theory (Zapf, 1994). It was assumed that there are continuing social dynamics in the developed industrial countries, caused by the functioning of the labour market and the ongoing, social innovations in all spheres of life. Since we were making here an assumption of 'stable dynamics' (concerning West Germany), no real, significant change in the mobility pattern could be expected over the period examined.

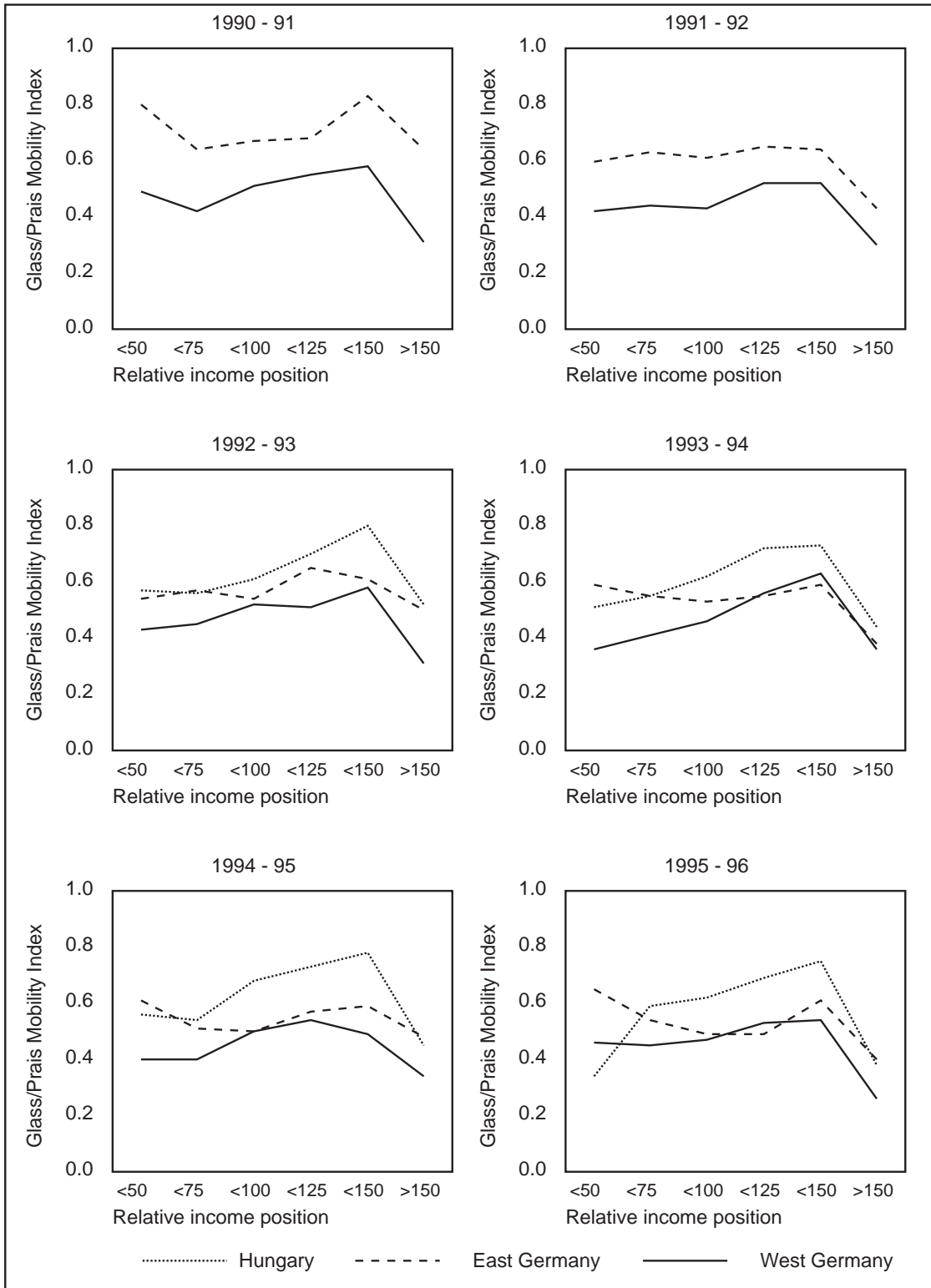
Conversely, we expected much higher mobility in the transition countries than in West Germany. It was also assumed that there would be some clear differences between the two former socialist countries. The dynamics of change should be affected by the different paths of transformation, including the strategy of transition, the rebuilding of institutions, integration, and economic recovery (Balcerovicz, 1995; Offe, 1994; Stark, 1992). We expected the trends of mobility to slow down sooner in East Germany than in Hungary. However, it was not possible to predict which country would have the higher mobility rate. This is important because the research takes *the magnitude of mobility as a valid measure of the quality of social change*. If no increase or decrease in mobility is found, or if the mobility is very similar to the West German pattern, it becomes appropriate to refer to an 'accomplished' transformation.

The Glass/Prais Mobility Index (*Figure 5*) illustrates individual movements from one year to the next.* It does not yield the total individual movements over the whole period, which is a quite different approach described in the next section. The Glass/Prais Mobility Index used here has the advantage of discussing annual mobility patterns and the change of the patterns over time. What are the most interesting results obtained from the Glass/Prais Mobility Index?

- The degree of income mobility in West Germany, a country not in transition, was quite high. Looking at the various income categories, there was not much change in the mobility *pattern* over the period investigated: the pattern in 1990 was very similar to the pattern seven years later. The mobility was somewhat higher in the middle categories, partly because those at the ends of the scale only had a chance of moving in one direction.

* We have also used the Glass/Prais Index (Mathwig and Habich, 1996) as an indicator of the pace of social change.

Figure 5: Mobility between relative income positions



- In East Germany, much higher mobility rates were confined to the very beginning of the transformation. According to the income-mobility patterns, the transformation *slowed down to West German* levels around 1993. After that time, there was one special fact to observe: the two bottom categories, the poor and the almost poor, had much higher chances of escaping from poverty than the same categories had in West Germany. So *segmentation of the population into poor and not poor was less sharp in East Germany*.
- Mobility was higher in Hungary than in East Germany (and of course higher than in West Germany) in each of the four investigated periods. The first period investigated in each country (in Germany 1990–91 and in Hungary 1992–93) reveals a very similar pattern in the two transitional countries. *The transformation period was characterized by very high income mobility in every income category*.
- Hungary did not show the same slowing-down effect as East Germany. This leaves room for a different hypothesis about the Hungarian development. It can be assumed that in Hungary the transformation lasted somewhat longer, and has not yet been finished, but it can also be postulated that the ‘normality’ of the mobility pattern in Hungary may be unique, and it will also be higher than Germany’s in the future.
- Clear differences between the countries become apparent in the income categories if the curves for the last period are considered. While the upper-income categories show the highest degree of stability in each country, the poorest seem more stable in Hungary than Germany. The middle-income categories, on the other hand, show very high mobility. These observations provide somewhat different pictures of the transformation in these countries. In Hungary the poor seem to have become a strongly disadvantaged group in the last year, by comparison with the other countries. However, it is just possible that this was a ‘one-off’ instance of hardship, caused by the Bokros package of stabilization measures introduced in 1995. By contrast, the West German welfare system seems to have functioned efficiently in East Germany, where the chance of escaping from poverty was the highest. High mobility in the middle categories in Hungary indicates that this category was ‘volatile’—not a place of ‘arrival’, but one of ‘departure’. Although the direction was usually downward, there were paths leading upward as well.

Our closing remarks in this paragraph concern the empirical examination of modernization theories. By using transition matrix and Glass/Prais Mobility Index we hope to give a better insight into the nature of social change. Those indicators give an opportunity to differentiate between specific pathes of social change.

Income dynamics during the whole period: overall mobility patterns

Having looked at the observable year-to-year movements between different income positions, we now want to illustrate and sum up the overall mobility patterns between 1990 and 1994 or 1996 (in Germany) and between 1992 and 1996 (in Hungary). This entails the change of the strategy of analysis and the methodological perspective. The tables that follow present the results of analysis of all ‘observations’, which means that they report at an analytical level on ‘person-years’.* This angle allows to examine in more detail whether total mobility in the three societies differed significantly.

Three steps are involved. The first is to look at the total average income of all ‘person-years’. A breakdown gives information about the underlying, time-related or person-related effects on mobility. The second step reveals the overall distribution of the relative income positions, and allows to decide whether each society contains more or fewer individuals involved in income mobility. The third step allows the mobility and the stability of relative income positions to be generalized over time, by reporting the overall annual transition probabilities from one income position to another. Such transition probabilities may also be seen as individual chances of their income position improving or deteriorating over time. This is different from the information that the Glass/Prais Mobility Index provides by measuring the stability of the same category from one year to the next.

Table 3 summarizes the mean equivalent income of all ‘observations’ (‘person-years’), by reporting the overall mean income as well as the more interesting breakdown of the standard deviations. The ‘*overall*’ standard deviation records the total variation of equivalent income. The ‘*between*’ standard deviation shows the individual variation within the period given, and the ‘*within*’ deviation points to the total variation over the whole observed period of five years.

The figures show at least one significant difference between the three societies. In West Germany and in Hungary, the income variations among persons are somewhat higher than the variations over time. In East Germany the opposite result is obtained. The variations over five years (1990–94) are higher than the variations among individuals. So East Germany displays a strong time-related effect of income development, which tells us that the income variation among East Germans is much lower than the observed income variation for a given person over this period. This again indicates an overall increase in income in East Germany, with the whole population participating. One of the most interesting consequences of such a development could be described as income increase without an inequality increase (Headey, Habich and Krause, 1994b). Hungary’s real income decrease, on the other hand, is accompanied by increasing income inequality.

A contrary development appears in the results for the West Germans over the period 1990–94, who split into two different population groups, and for the Hungarians in the period 1992–96. Here the income variations across the related populations are higher, over the period observed, than those for a given person (‘within’). This denotes for the West German population groups that they had a

* This change of perspective has to be noted. The level of analysis here is not the individual, but the sum of all yearly ‘events’ happening to the individual.

Table 3: Breakdown of real income over time

Country	Mean income*	Standard deviations**		
		'Overall'	Between	Within
West Germany				
Germans only	1982	1080	899	612
Foreigners	1500	627	514	374
East Germany	1318	593	405	433
Hungary	235312	186020	143019	118967

* Germany: DM per month; Hungary: HUF per year.

** 'Overall': person-years; between: persons; 'within': person-years.

Data base: GSOEP, 1990–96 and HHP 1992–6. Longitudinal data, authors' calculations.

comparably low income increase on the one hand, and a higher proportion of individual income variations on the other. For Hungary, where a remarkable nominal income increase was recorded, the figures indicate a development that increased inequality.

Let us look more closely at the mobility and stability of all the income-category positions, across the period of transformation (second step). Again the measure is 'person-years' observed. The findings of *Table 4* are to be understood as referring to the distribution and the stability/mobility pattern of the relative income positions over time, as follows:

- The '*overall*' percentage sheds light on the total distribution of all person-years in the income positions concerned. It could be regarded as a generalization of the annual distributions.
- Turning to individuals, the '*between*' percentage shows the proportions of all persons who have ever been in the income position concerned, in other words, what proportion of persons experienced a certain income position at least once.
- For a comparison between societies, '*overall between*' can be interpreted as a comparable measure of greater or lesser mobility for the total population over the whole period. The higher the value, the higher will be the proportion of the population involved in total mobility.
- The next column reports on how many times (how long) individuals stayed in particular income positions. So these '*within*' percentages denote the fraction of time which a person has spent in the specified position. This is obviously a good measure of the overall stability of an income position.

To make things clearer, let us take an example. When we look at the lowest income category (below 50 per cent of mean income) and at the richest category, it becomes apparent that the three societies show different proportions of all observations falling into such under-privileged or privileged positions. In West Germany, only eight per cent of observations fell into the lowest income category, while in East Germany there were about five per cent and in Hungary nine per cent. As for the wealthiest category, the proportions were twelve per cent for West Germans, eight per cent for East Germans and 16 per cent for Hungarians.

Table 4: Income positions over time: breakdown of proportions (%)*

Income positions	Proportion of all observations in total time in income category ('overall')			Proportion of persons experiencing income category ('between')			Proportion of the time a given person remains in the same income category ('within')		
	West Germany	East	Hungary	West Germany	East	Hungary	West Germany	East	Hungary
<50	8	5	9	17	15	24	63	41	56
50-75	25	19	25	47	47	54	69	53	61
75-100	25	32	25	53	71	60	62	57	55
100-125	19	23	15	43	59	44	57	50	45
125-150	11	12	9	28	35	29	51	44	40
>150	12	8	16	22	20	32	73	55	68
Overall **				210	247	242			

* 'Overall': percentage of all observations (person-years) in each category; 'between': proportion of persons found at least once in a particular income position; 'within': proportion of observations per person in the category (fraction of time)

** 'Overall between': the sum of the 'between' percentages.

Data base: GSOEP, 1990–96 and HHP 1992–96. Authors' calculations.

However, these different figures tell only parts of a different story. The next category of 'between' percentages—income-position experience—expands the account by documenting the proportion of people involved in these lowest and highest income categories. In West Germany, 17 per cent of the total population were in a poverty position at some time. The equivalent proportion for East Germans was around 15 per cent, but in Hungary it was 24 per cent. The figures for the wealthiest position were similar at a different level.

However, the picture is incomplete without considering the 'duration' of the state of poverty or wealth. This is supplied by the 'within' percentage, which denotes how many observations of a person in a certain income position there have been. The figure is a measure of stability. From a comparison of the two extreme positions, the top position seems to have been more stable than the bottom, poverty, or to put it another way, poverty was less stable than riches.

The point to note from this analytical framework is that there were very different chances and risks of winning or losing a specific income position over time. In general it is clear that for the *Hungarians*, the lower and the top positions were more stable than the others. The second highest position (125 to 150 per cent) was the most precarious. A very low percentage of all observations and only a minority of persons fell into this category, and they had relatively little chance of remaining there over time. Perhaps one could interpret this as the presence of a new, unstable upper-middle class. When the various documented indicators are compared, there seems to have been the beginning of a segmentation of income positions. The stability patterns ('within') make it clear that two possible processes could continue: the wealthiest position had good chances of stabilizing its advantages, and the positions just below the average could also be reinforced.

Table 5: Transition probabilities between income positions, 1990–94/96

Initial income category	Final income category					
	Lowest	2	3	4	5	Highest
Transition probabilities						
West Germany 1990–96						
Lowest	59	32	6	2	1	0
2	9	66	20	4	1	1
3	2	18	59	17	3	1
4	1	5	21	52	16	5
5	1	3	7	24	45	21
Highest	1	1	3	8	16	71
East Germany 1990–96						
Lowest	35	44	16	3	1	1
2	10	50	31	7	1	1
3	3	18	53	21	4	1
4	1	7	26	46	16	5
5	1	2	9	31	38	19
Highest	1	2	5	11	25	56
Hungary 1992–96						
Lowest	50	32	11	3	1	3
2	14	53	26	6	1	1
3	4	26	46	16	4	4
4	2	9	28	34	16	11
5	1	5	13	27	27	28
Highest	1	3	6	9	16	65

Data base: GSOEP, 1990–96 and HHP 1992–96. Authors' calculations.

The story for *East Germany* was different. There the figures reveal no evidence of a similar drift in the income distribution. Unlike the Hungarian, the overall East German trend seems to be towards the average. This means that the income positions around the mean were the most 'favourable', covering many more 'person-years' than fell within this band in West Germany, for instance. A vast majority of East Germans (>75 per cent) occupied such positions, which were characterized by comparably high mobility processes.

Even in the reference case of *West Germany*, there was much more fluctuation than one would expect. It should be stressed again that societies undergoing 'usual' social change display processes of considerable mobility at the micro level and a stable income distribution at the macro level.

All in all, there is clear evidence that the total income mobility in East Germany and in Hungary (an overall population proportion of around 240 per cent) was higher than in West Germany (210 per cent). Furthermore, behind proportions of mobility that were almost the same, Hungary and East

Germany showed dissimilar income position changes. In Hungary many more persons were affected, and there was a longer duration in the bottom categories and at the top than was the case in East Germany.

These results offer new insight into the well-known problem of macro-micro analysis. The stability of income distribution observed at a macro level needs to be complemented by an adequate micro perspective before one can really talk about the changing living conditions of the population. It has already emerged that there were remarkable fluctuations at the individual level.

The evidence of the processes of mobility could in some theoretical sense be seen as valid indicators of an 'open' society, where the borders between good and less good living conditions are not totally closed. In principle and in fact, people have the chance of access to more favourable circumstances, such as better income positions.

Looking at the findings in this case, let us try to decide whether the three societies can be characterized as 'open' in this way. Are there big gaps between lower and higher positions, or are there only small differences between 'neighbouring' positions? An approach to this can be made by analysing the transition probabilities between all income positions over time (third step).

Table 5 illustrates the probability of transition between income categories. The matrix presented differs from the one documented earlier. Here there is a 'generalization' of the year-to-year transitions. The probabilities can be understood as the proportion of persons remaining in a certain position in each year. The line for *West Germany* shows that the population in poverty has an 'annual risk' of 59 per cent of remaining poor in each of the following years, and a total 41-per-cent chance of escaping poverty. However, this 41-per-cent chance of improvement signals a 32-per-cent chance of improving slightly (50-75-per-cent position), and, for example, no chance of jumping into the wealthiest income category.

All in all, the figures recorded do not give strong support to the thesis of a fully 'open' society or verify the opposite notion of a society with hard borders between social strata. The conclusion must be that these are 'semi-open' societies. West Germany, for instance, fits the well-known formula that upper class remains upper class and lower class remains lower class. On the other hand, there are real chances of improvement over time, the 'normal' mobility pattern being exchange between adjacent positions. The probabilities of remaining in a certain position were highest in West Germany. So it can be assumed that transformation brought much more 'openness' into the societies in transition. When the two transition countries are compared, East Germany shows somewhat greater chances for significant downward and upward mobility. Hungary displays a strange and somewhat surprising situation, in which the lowest and highest positions are comparatively stable, but there are considerable probabilities of 'jumping' into these positions. The middle-income groups are characterized by instability over time.

It should be emphasized again that new types of findings emerge from longitudinal panel analysis. Behind the relative stability of annual income distribution an intensive process of income position change can be detected. *In our view, the trend of income position change—'circulation' in the income-distribution system—is similar or more characteristic of the transformation than is a growing income inequality.* The stress here is on the very frequent, constant changes of position. Growing inequality is a consequence of these intensive changes.

As far as the types of social change are concerned, it is necessary to stress our former hypothesis. With view at the shifts in income position, *transformation becomes a sub-case of social change*, because even in societies not undergoing transformation there may be frequent mobility. Yet the mobility during transformation is much more intensive, and after a while there is a 'slow-down' effect, as we have seen in the case of East Germany. The very short period of high mobility suggests

that the East German case might be labelled as a transition, while the far from complete process in Hungary represents a different type of social change that can be called transformation, which lasts longer and probably affects far more people deeply.

Summary

We confine ourselves here to summing up some statements about the features of social change in general and transformation in particular.

- (1) The classic literature on income inequality (Atkinson and Micklewright, 1992; Becker and Hauser, 1997; Förster and Tóth, 1997) confirms that there is very little or hardly any change in the commonly used inequality indicators, such as the Gini Coefficient, quintile distribution, and so on. It has been demonstrated clearly by the data in this paper that there are *very frequent shifts of individual position* underlying this stability of macro-social distribution. This is in keeping with the authors' understanding of social change and their everyday experience. The theory of social change states that modern industrial societies are characterized by constant modifications in the economy and in social life (Zapf, 1994). The role of innovation in the economy is frequently underlined, for instance, while there have been several studies about occupational careers or exclusions from the labour market. The results here that point to constant mobility are in keeping with those findings.
- (2) The analysis shows that there were no modifications in the traditional inequality measures in West and East Germany, although a different shape of income distribution and a different pattern of individual mobility were found. So *the invariance of income distribution may have resulted from very different individual mobility regimes*. It is an interesting question to decide whether there is a correlation between the levels or shapes of inequality and the pattern of individual mobility behind them.
- (3) In the post-socialist societies examined, clear indications were found that the transforming countries displayed significantly *higher income mobility* than West Germany. This applied when the Glass/Pais Mobility Index and when the overall mobility indicator was used. On the other hand, on the basis of the latter approach it can be argued that transformation is a special case of social change.
- (4) The similarities and dissimilarities of the mobility in East Germany and Hungary provide the opportunity to formulate some new hypotheses. Based on the overall mobility in Hungary and East Germany, the *dynamics of changes in the position of income—the 'circulation' in the income distribution system—seem to be more characteristic of transformation than an increase in income inequality, or at least equally characteristic*.
- (5) Clear differences were found in the pace of transformation in the two post-socialist countries. East Germany showed a very fast change only in the first two years of transformation, while in Hungary the higher mobility lasted longer. It can be assumed that the 'unification effect' on

- East Germany was responsible for the high mobility to some extent, and so the effect of transformation has been lower than in Hungary.
- (6) Over the whole period, a lower chance of escaping poverty was more characteristic of Hungary than of East Germany, and there was higher stability among the rich. East Germany's adoption of the West German social system seems to have been more effective in avoiding breaches in the society (taxing the rich, supporting the poor). The East German system seems to destabilize the top positions and take families out of poverty.
 - (7) Based on the analysis here, it seems apt to speak of '*semi-open societies*'. On the one hand, there are relatively permeable borders between social positions, but on the other hand there is not full freedom of movement between all social positions either. There are chances of moving out from positions, but the options are limited. Most of the shifts are directed to 'neighbouring' income positions. It can also be argued that transformation has brought more openness. The chances of moving are open for a broader range of the population.
 - (8) In East Germany, a robust middle-income category seems to have emerged. In Hungary, there seems to have taken place rather a polarization. The middle-income category is very 'fragile' in Hungary .

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