PERCEIVED AND DESIRED IMAGES OF SOCIETY: HOW (UN)EQUAL IS SOCIETY?

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Abstract
In the contemporary world, it is very important to understand how people see and perceive our societies themselves. The main research objective of this article is to study imagined – perceived and desired – types of society using comparative analysis. The target group is composed of the 23 countries which participated in social inequality studies of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 2009 and 2019. Among the questions to answer in this study are: What is the gap between the assessment of perceived and desired types of society? How are the perceived images of society related to different macro socioeconomic and political conditions? How are individual assessments influenced by sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics? The shortage of studies on topics relating to these questions justifies the importance of this article. A novelty of this study is not only in the cross-national comparison of images of society, but also in the linking of this concept to human and social capital, well-being, and subjective identities. The research results show that contemporary societies are perceived as socially unequal in most countries; however, the majority of populations still expect to live in more just societies in future.
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1. Introduction

Today, most countries in the developed world are referred to as welfare states, where at least a minimum level of prosperity is guaranteed for all citizens. A welfare state is usually described as a system of governance in which the government is committed to ensuring the economic and social security of its people and to provide at least minimum standards of social welfare. The principles of the welfare state are aimed at reducing social inequalities and the differences between various groups in society. The emergence of the welfare state in the 20th century was common to all societies and was a policy response to social inequalities or to the fragmentation of society in terms of income, wealth, education, employment, and other socioeconomic indicators. This was also a response to the social and political conflicts arising from this fragmentation. There are various indicators for measuring the wellbeing of society, including: the GINI index, which measures the extent of income inequality; the absolute poverty rate; or GDP per capita (International Comparison Program (ICP), World Bank), which shows how rich countries are and how effectively they can provide welfare for their citizens. But how do people themselves see their societies; how socially just do they imagine them? Both questions require separate answers.

As Evans and Kelly (2017:316) argued, inequality and class are the most important aspects of human society, acting as a source of solidarity and conflict. This is largely true, as in many cases these factors are second in importance after religion and ethnicity. In general, the political history of the Western World since the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century is a history of class and inequality. This can also be considered as a conflict between the Left, which elevates equality, and the Right, which tolerates inequality. In the modern world, since the emergence of the welfare state, this observable conflict has determined most political decisions, but the neoconservative Reagan–Thatcher revolution in the early 1980s was the starting point of a dizzying rise in inequality within countries that continues to this day. Income and wealth inequalities have been on the rise nearly everywhere since the 1980s, and contemporary global inequalities are close to early 20th century peak-Western-imperialism levels. Global wealth inequalities are even more pronounced than income inequalities. The poorest half of the global population barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the total. In contrast, the richest 10% of the global population own 76% of all wealth. While inequality has increased within most countries over the past two decades, this has occurred more sharply in some than in others. The gap between the average incomes of the top 10% and the bottom 50% of individuals within countries has almost doubled, from 8.5x to 15x (Chancel et al. 2021:10–11).

However, in a political sense, according to Evans and Kelly (2017:316), the objective reality of inequality and the class reality of the structure of society is not so important, but rather how these phenomena are perceived by members of that society. If inequality is unrecognizable, it may not have any political consequences, but if it is clearly perceived or imagined, it will have clearly felt consequences. Therefore, it is important to understand how people perceive and imagine the society in which they live.

Looking from constructivist perspective different images of society can be seen as expressions of perceived inequality. In the early 1960s, there was a broad interest within social sciences in how different societies perceive and imagine their class structures, i.e., class images (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963). Since then, this interest has grown gradually (Goldthorpe et al. 1969; Lockwood 1966; Platt 1971; Platt 1984; Bulmer 1975; Savage 2000). According to Vanneman and Cannon (1987:101), perhaps the best-known study of this kind and of that time is the British survey of "affluent workers", or study of the embourgeoisement thesis by Goldthorpe et al. (1969), based on a poll conducted in 1962.

Meanwhile, if initially a key point of reference – the "working class" – was used in a neutral, categorical sense, in the 20th century the term moved into popular usage and became highly politicized. Moreover, the strong political element in the terms "working class" and "middle class" is a disadvantage of the traditional subjective class identification question, especially in trying to understand (1) people's perception of their place in the stratification hierarchy, (2) how that perception is shaped by their social structural location, and (3) whether that perception links their structural location to class consciousness or political ideology. Furthermore, because the degree to which these terms are politicized varies from country to country, comparative analyses using them are not genuinely comparable. Also, we must devise a set of pictorial questions about class that uses none of the traditional politicized terms (Evans, Kelly and Kolosi 1992:462).

The new development of questions to assess images of the social stratification began in Hungary in the late 1970s (Kolosi, Papp, Gombar, Pal, and Bara 1980:114-134; Bokor and Karajannisz 1989, cited from Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992:462). Surveys of specific occupational groups suggested: that these images are measurable; that there is no universally shared image of society; that considering perceptions of class composition provides insights into subjective class identification; and that the link between one's class self-location and one's perception of the class composition of society is real but weak (Kolosi et al. 1980, cited from Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992:462). For comparative analysis, particularly between capitalist and communist societies in the late 1980s, an extended module of pictorial questions which was suitable for both capitalist and communist societies was developed, and was fielded in Hungary in 1987 and in Australia in 1987 and 1989 (Evans, Kelly and Kolosi 1992:462).
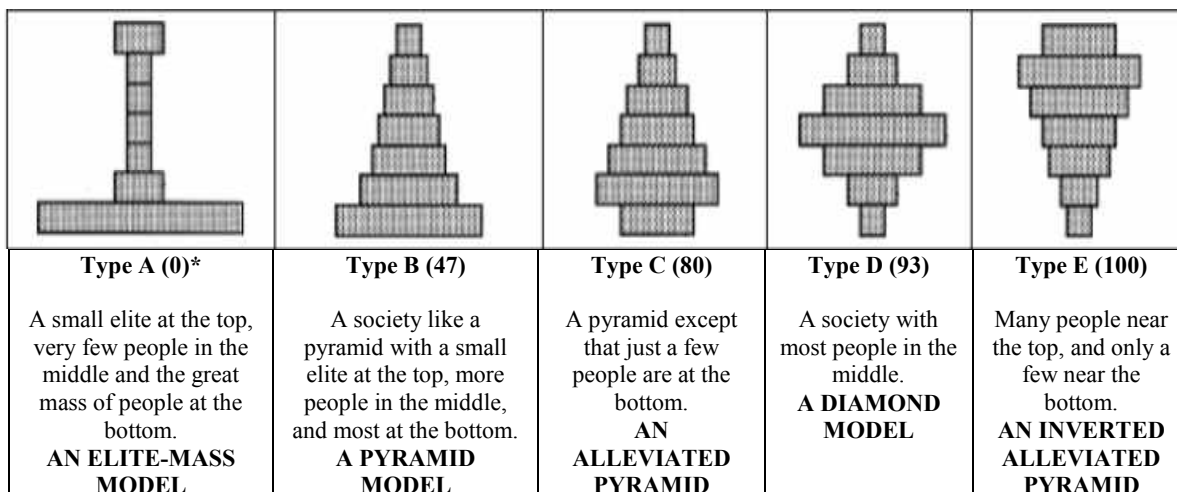
The surveys of the Hungarian and Australian populations used visual questions – which evolved from the research of the Hungarian scholars mentioned above – about the imaginary

structures of societies in these countries. These questions were later applied extensively, and they are also used by the International Social Survey Programme in the module "Social Inequality", the data of which is analyzed in this article.

Perceptions of inequality and class stratification might vary to a large degree. Some people hold an elitist image, i.e., a large mass at the bottom of society and a small, privileged elite at the top; others perceive society as equalitarian, with the largest classes in the middle, or a society in which most people have a good position and access to a good life; and yet others have intermediate views between elitist and equalitarian (Kelley and Evans 2017:56). Naturally, a society with most of its members at the bottom and only a small elite at the top is very different from one where most people are perceived to belong to the middle class.

The visual question has a set of five diagrams representing a range of plausible societies, each accompanied by a brief description (Figure 1). These diagrams each have an approximately equal area, but differ in relative class sizes. They range from an extremely elitist society with tiny middle classes (such as a stereotypical medieval agrarian society or the traditional Marxist image of a capitalist society) through to a top-heavy egalitarian society in which the lower classes have dwindled away to almost nothing (such as the traditional socialist ideal or some images of post-industrial society) (Kelley and Evans 2017: 56). While they may seem strange, these questions are easy for respondents to answer, even in very socially and culturally different countries.

Figure 1. Types of society.

Type A (0)*	Type B (47)	Type C (80)	Type D (93)	Type E (100)
A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom. **AN ELITE-MASS MODEL**	A society like a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom. **A PYRAMID MODEL**	A pyramid except that just a few people are at the bottom. **AN ALLEVIATED PYRAMID**	A society with most people in the middle. **A DIAMOND MODEL**	Many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom. **AN INVERTED ALLEVIATED PYRAMID**

Source: publicly available data (ISSP 2009).
* Degree of inequality, from 0 for the most elitist type of society to 100 for the most equalitarian, with intermediate types scored in proportion to their coefficient of variation.

Figure 1 shows perceived types of society, and the degree of egalitarianism is indicated in parentheses next to each type. Type A, according to Riedl and Haller (2014:16), which is named an elite-mass model, has a small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and a great mass of people at the bottom. It is absolutely elitist and is the most socially unjust model with a zero degree of egalitarianism. A pyramid model society, or type B, is organized like a pyramid, with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom. This is a somewhat more socially just model of society than the elite-mass, but it remains much more elitist than egalitarian. An alleviated pyramid model, or type C, has a social pyramid, except that only a few people are at the bottom. In this model, the lower class is much smaller and the middle class is correspondingly more numerous, but still this type remains moderately elitist. Type D, or a diamond model, is a society with most people in the middle. This is a clearly egalitarian society with few upper and lower classes. Type E, or an inverted alleviated pyramid model, has many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom. This society is the most egalitarian and socially just, as most of its members are at the top and only a few at the bottom.

Riedl and Haller (2014:12-13), who studied the effects of increasing income inequality on individual beliefs of inequality in contemporary Central East European societies, observed that people's attitudes can be egalitarian, functionalist, or meritocratic. Egalitarian views

support substantive equality and redistribution, whereas functionalists strongly oppose this idea and thus are anti-egalitarian. Functionalists are also characterized by an accent towards the positive effects of social inequality, and a belief in achievement as the basis of unequal rewards. The meritocratic position prefers a social order that guarantees the appreciation of high-quality work, a good education, and equality of opportunities (Haller et al., 1995 cited from Riedl and Haller 2014: 13). Riedl and Haller assumed that meritocracy is of minor relevance in post-socialist societies, while functionalism – as the dominant ideology of a market-driven capitalist society – and egalitarianism – as the dominant ideology of communism – are the prevalent ideologies (2014:13).

Evans, Kelly and Kolosi (1992) found that the perceptions of people living in different political regimes regarding type of society differed considerably, and these differences were illustrated by the examples of capitalist Australia and communist Hungary. Later research by the same scholars also showed that the collapse of communism, both in Hungary and in other post-communist countries, dramatically changed the perception of inequality. The main outcome in these countries was that "in sharp contrast to these diverse perceptions, ideals are shared, almost everyone preferring prosperous egalitarian societies" (Evans and Kelly 2017:315).

Evans, Kelly and Kolosi (1992:467) noted that the reference group theory and available heuristic arguments also imply that people project their own situation and the situations of their families and friends onto the broader social world. Along these lines, it was found that people of high objective socioeconomic status (in terms of education, occupation, and family income) thus tend to perceive the society in which they live as more egalitarian, and, by contrast, people lower in the hierarchy have a more conflicting view, seeing society as structurally elitist and other people as poor and belonging disproportionately to the lower classes. On the other hand, the reality blend theory helped the arrival of two more conclusions, i.e.: the more developed a nation, the more egalitarian its citizens will perceive it to be; and societies that are actually very unequal are perceived as only moderately unequal (Evans and Kelly 2017:323).

Often in surveys on the types/images of society, respondents are asked to tell not only what kind of society they live in, but also what type of society they would prefer to live in. The greater the gap between the perceived and the desired type of society, the more people are frustrated and feel that they live in a socially unjust society. Although we would not normally find the same perceived model of society within any one society, and the dominant models vary even more across different countries, the ideal society is common to all – the vast majority of people prefer egalitarian models (usually type D, less often type E (Evans and Kelly 2017:344).

Psychological factors are also important in assessing inequality in society. People generally do not accurately assess the extent of inequality in a largely depersonalized society. They tend to perceive the structure of society from the starting point of the social status of the people they know, i.e., reference groups. People do not expect absolute equality, because this depends on hard work and/or exceptional human talents. However, social inequality is tolerated as long as equal opportunities to achieve one's goals are ensured. Inequality is caused by moral dissatisfaction, when welfare inequalities are perceived as a form of fraud or a reluctance to contribute to the common good. In this way, inequality becomes inequity (Nielsen 2017). Niehues (2014), Gimpelson and Treisman (2016) have also shown that the extent of inequality perceived by people in societies is sometimes even very different from the inequality measured by objective indicators. Here it is very important to note that a subjective social class or a subjective identity of belonging to particular social class has a very high correlation with perceived and desired images of society. In this study, the authors also tried to test a linkage between human capital and social capital (emphasizing the most important variable of social trust) on the one hand, and images of society on the other.

However, the general picture of the objective structure of society shows very well to what extent the society is perceived as socially right or wrong (equal or unequal) by its members. The Human Development Index (HDI) is rather a good measurement to reflect the general structure of different societies, as it is a summary measure of average achievement in key dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, being knowledgeable, and have a decent standard of living (Human Development Index). This indicator was applied in this

study of societal images along with other socioeconomic variables, including GDP per capita in PPP and the GINI Index.

Finally, this study attempts to test a linkage between images of perceived and desired types of society on the one hand, and accumulated political characteristics – the EIU Democracy Index and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index – of different countries on the other.

2. Data and Methods

The primary units of analysis in this article are the countries which took part in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) polls on social inequality in 2009 and 2019. The ISSP conducted surveys on social inequality in 1987, 1992, 1999, 2009, and 2019. The following analysis is based on the Social Inequality IV ISSP module from 2009 (ISSP Research Group: International Social Survey Programme: Social Inequality IV - ISSP 2009) and the Social Inequality V first release from 2019 (ISSP Research Group: International Social Survey Programme: Social Inequality V - ISSP 2019) – the latest two rounds of the Social Inequality module. In addition to countries as units of analysis, observations were made about individual-level perceptions of types of society along with some sociodemographic and attitudinal characteristics (Table 1). In this case, individuals are the unit of analysis.

The analysis of perceived and desired types of society in this article is based on two questions from the ISSP surveys about the perceived and desired structure of the society in which respondents live. These questions follow the methodology of visual questions earlier proposed by Evans, Kelly and Kolosi (1992), where respondents are presented with five possible types of society and choose which society, they think they live in and what kind of society they would prefer to live in (Figure 2). In the first case, the perceived type of society is shown; in the second case, the desired, or ideal, type of society is described, which demonstrates the expectations of the respondents. This study also performed a correlation analysis between the perceived type of society and the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents.

Figure 2. ISSP questions about perceived and desired types of society.
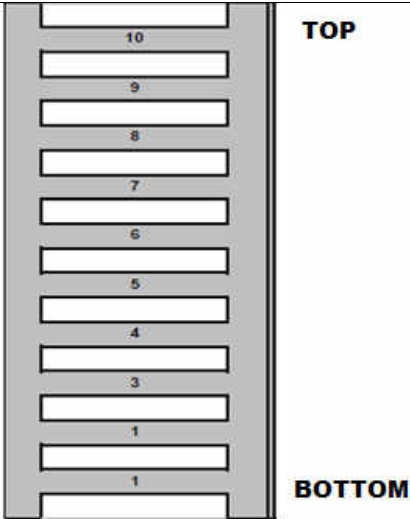

Q14a*. These five diagrams show different types of society. Please read the descriptions and look at the diagrams and decide which you think best describes <country>... First, what type of society is <country> today – which diagram comes closest? Q14b. What do you think <country> ought to be like – which would you prefer?

Type A A small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom.	**Type B** A society like a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom.	**Type C** A pyramid except that just a few people are at the bottom.	**Type D** A society with most people in the middle.	**Type E** Many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom.

Source: publicly available data (ISSP 2009). The same questions were asked in the ISSP 2019 survey.
*Q15a and Q15b in the 2019 ISSP study, respectively

In an attempt to establish specific patterns about how the choice of perceived and desired types of society relate to the respondent's self-perception in the social hierarchy, and to assess factors of personal success, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to measure associations between variables. Statistical significance of all correlations was also checked (p-value). This coefficient was chosen because mainly all analyzed questions used ordinal scales to measure respondents' attitudes. For the correlation analysis, questions were chosen about the respondents' attitudes on factors which are important in order to achieve something in life, also they were asked to self-place themselves on an imagined "ladder" or a top-bottom scale of society. Eventually, each respondent was questioned about subjective assessment of class position (i.e., belonging to a specific social class or a self-assessed different social class) (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected ISSP questions and sociodemographic characteristics.

Question	Answer categories
Q1. How important you think it is for getting ahead in life…: … is coming from a wealthy family? … having well-educated parents? … is having a good education yourself? … is having ambition? … is hard work? … is knowing the right people? … is having political connections? … is giving bribes? … is a person's race? … is a person's religion? … is being born a man or a woman?	• Essential • Very Important • Fairly important • Not very important • Not important at all • Can't choose
Q10a (Q13a in 2019). In our society, there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale that runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself now on this scale?	TOP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 1 1 BOTTOM
Q20 (Q22a in 2019). Most people see themselves as belonging to a particular class. Please tell me which social class you would say you belong to?	• Lower class • Working class • Lower middle class • Middle class • Upper middle class • Upper class
Current employment status	• Employed-full time, main job • Employed-part time, main job • Employed, less than part-time • Helping family member • Unemployed • Student, school, vocational training • Retired • Housewife, -man, home duties • Permanently disabled • Other, not in labour force
Occupation ISCO/ ILO 1988	Coded in descending order from the professionals with the highest qualifications to the unskilled workers.
Trade union or a similar organization membership	1. Currently member 2. Once member, not now 3. Never member
Attendance of religious services	1. Several times a week 2. Once a week 3. 2 or 3 times a month 4. Once a month 5. Several times a year 6. Once a year 7. Less frequently than once a year 8. Never
Type of community: respondent's self-assessment	• Urban, a big city • Suburb, outskirt of a big city • Town or small city • Country village, other type of community • Farm or home in the country

Source: publicly available data (ISSP 2009). The same questions were asked in the ISSP 2019 survey.

This study also performed a correlation analysis between the perceived images of society and the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Variables such as gender, age,

education (number of years of schooling and highest education level), employment status, occupation status, trade union membership, attendance of religious services, and type of community were analyzed (Table 1). This selection of variables followed a framework of analysis applied by Gethin et al. (2021) for a recent study of political cleavages in Western countries. The linkage between images of society and human capital was also analyzed, primarily based on education-related variables. Basically, this choice on education-related variables was made because the human capital theory points to the fact that people invest in themselves through education, training, coaching and similar activities. The correlation between sociodemographic variables and the desired type of society was not calculated, because most respondents preferred the same type of society: type D. All above-discussed variables consider sociodemographic factors and their effects on attitudes about the perceived and desired types of society.

The concept of social capital emphasizes the networks of relationships between people in a particular society, allowing that society to function effectively. Still, the key function of social capital is the distribution of trust, and the social trust-images of society link was tested in our study. We presumed that higher social trust level in different societies would lead to more often to choose of more equal perceived types of society. This part our research was based on indicators of social trust from International Social Survey Programme. In the ISSP studies, social trust is measured by a question whether people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people, or generalized trust – i.e., the perceived trustworthiness of the generalized other.

An individual perception of a particular type of society depends on the macroeconomic and macrosocial characteristics of the particular society. At least, such a hypothesis might be formulated. Among the variables used in this study to assess the impact of socioeconomic factors on attitudes towards types of society are the Human Development Index (HDI), GDP per capita in PPP, and the GINI Index.

As additional indicators for cross-sectional analysis of a linkage between perceived and desired types of society, two political characteristics about countries in the ISSP polls are employed – i.e., the EIU Democracy Index, and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Certainly, there are more possible evaluations of political regimes – such as the Freedom House ranking, the Polity IV project, Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, the Democracy Barometer developed by Wolfgang Merkel and associates, the Worldwide Governance Indicators, and so on. However, as Coppedge et al. noted, "measuring an abstract and contested concept such as democracy is hard and some problems of conceptualization and measurement may never be solved definitively" (Coppedge et al. 2017:2). The two indices mentioned above present a particularly detailed measurement of the different polities.

The Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project measures the quality of elections, suffrage, freedom of expression and the media, freedom of association and civil society, checks on the executive, and the rule of law (see Coppedge et al. 2017).

Another cumulative index is the Economist Intelligence Unit's (EIU) Democracy Index. This index belongs to a group of so-called "thicker" indexes: "a key difference in measures is between "thin", or minimalist, and "thick", or wider, concepts of democracy (Coppedge 2005). The thin concepts correspond closely to an immensely influential academic definition of democracy, that of Dahl's concept of polyarchy (1971). The Economist Intelligence Unit's index is based on the view that measures of democracy which reflect the state of political freedoms and civil liberties are not thick enough" (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2018:62). The "thick" notion of democracy encompasses not only Dahl's (1971) concept of polyarchy, but also various aspects of society and political culture in contemporary polities.

The EIU Democracy Index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. Among our arguments for selecting the EIU Democracy Index was the fact that it is not only based on experts' assessments of countries, but is also supplemented with, where available, public opinion surveys – mainly the World Values Survey. Other sources are also leveraged, including Eurobarometer surveys, Gallup polls, the Asian Barometer, the Latin American Barometer, the Afrobarometer, and various national surveys. All this means that evaluations in this index have better evidence and proof compared to those in other similar indexes.

3. Perceived and desired types of society: results and discussion

According to Riedl and Haller (2014:16), an individual's perception of a particular type of stratified society depends on their membership in a particular welfare regime. Thus, populations in post-Soviet countries and people in countries with high socioeconomic inequality (for, instance, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia, or Ukraine) will see the stratification of their society more as an elite-mass type, but will prefer to live in the inverted pyramid type. Populations in Central-East European countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia, or Hungary will perceive their societies mostly as pyramidal, and would prefer a middle-class type.

However, data from the 2009 and 2019 ISSP studies shows that most of the population in the countries surveyed said that they lived in pyramidal, or type B, societies (Table 2). Societies with a small elite at the top, some people in the middle, and most people at the bottom exist in very diverse countries such as Chile, Taiwan, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Philippines, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. Data from 2019 was not available for all countries, but in 2009 in addition to the previously named countries, where most respondents perceived their societies as belonging to type B, Belgium, China, France, South Korea, Spain, the USA, and Venezuela can be added. Of course, this type is not a completely elitist model of society, but its degree of egalitarianism is low. Respondents from many post-autocratic countries as Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia, Slovenia, and South Africa claimed to be living in the least egalitarian societies – type A. In addition, in 2009 in mainly new and flawed democracies as Argentina, Latvia, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Turkey, and Ukraine, most respondents saw their societies as belonging to the same A type. This type of society, as it was already noted, is the most socially unjust, in which most people are at the bottom of society.

Table 2. Perceived type of society, 2009 and 2019 (%).

Country	Type of society**									
	Type A		Type B		Type C		Type D		Type E	
	2009	2019	2009	2019	2009	2019	2009	2019	2009	2019
BG-Bulgaria	63.5*	56.3	27.2	33.2	5.5	7.0	3.3	2.9	0.5	0.6
CH-Switzerland	6.7	5.1	24.8	24.0	25	31.3	39.8	34.5	3.7	5.1
CL-Chile	24.3	20.9	48.0	39.7	13.1	16.4	11.7	17.4	2.9	5.7
CZ-Czech Republic	30.9	12.8	35.1	37.0	18.5	31.0	13.5	16.7	2.1	2.6
DE-Germany	18.8	14.7	35.4	30.8	23	31	18.6	21.2	4.2	2.3
DK-Denmark	1.6	1.6	10.7	13.6	25.5	27.4	58.7	53.2	3.5	4.2
EE-Estonia	32.6	20.1	46.6	44.5	9.6	18.6	9.8	14.2	1.5	2.7
FI-Finland	6.9	6.9	23.7	17.9	32.6	31.7	35.6	41.3	1.2	2.2
GB-Great Britain	14.9	18.3	41.9	42.1	18.8	19.0	20.9	18.2	3.5	2.4
HR-Croatia	57.4	55.2	28.8	28.1	6.4	11.6	5.5	3.2	1.9	1.9
HU-Hungary	56.6	49.8	32.3	37.8	6.0	5.4	3.7	5.4	1.4	1.6
IL-Israel (Jews & Arabs)	18.6	16.6	55.8	29.3	15.3	22.5	9.3	29.3	1.1	2.3
IS-Iceland	9.7	4.0	18.6	16.6	19.5	22.2	47.6	50.7	4.5	6.6
IT-Italy	32.4	30.8	41.0	40.5	12.8	14.4	11.7	11.6	2.1	2.7
JP-Japan	11.1	9.9	38.5	35.3	26.4	28.9	20.0	22.8	4.0	3.0
LT-Lithuania	48.8	41.7	36.2	37.7	7.4	15.0	5.9	3.8	1.7	1.8
NZ-New Zealand	6.5	10.6	33.0	34.0	25.5	29.0	33.3	24.5	1.7	1.9
PH-Philippines	31.5	29.6	40.4	44.5	11.2	11.1	10.1	9.6	6.8	5.2
RU-Russia	40.7	49.6	35.0	27.9	12.5	10.1	8.4	7.9	3.4	4.5
SI-Slovenia	26.4	28.6	31.5	26.0	27.2	22.0	12.3	20.9	2.7	2.4
TW-Taiwan	18.3	11.7	36.9	36.4	26.3	31.2	16.0	18.5	2.4	2.2
ZA-South Africa	50.8	31.2	31.8	27.4	8.7	25.3	6.6	11.7	2.2	4.4
Median	25.4	19.2	35.1	33.6	16.9	22.1	12.0	17.8	2.3	2.5

Source: ISSP 2009; ISSP 2019.
In grey cells are the dominant types, i.e., those that were supported by the most respondents.
*** Those who did not answer and/or can't choose were excluded.*

In 2019 in full democracies as Germany, and in 2009 in Austria and Cyprus, most respondents believed that they lived in an alleviated pyramid model, or type C, society, which differs from the pyramid image in that there are fewer members at the very bottom the society (Table 2). The most obvious correlation between a country's development and economic
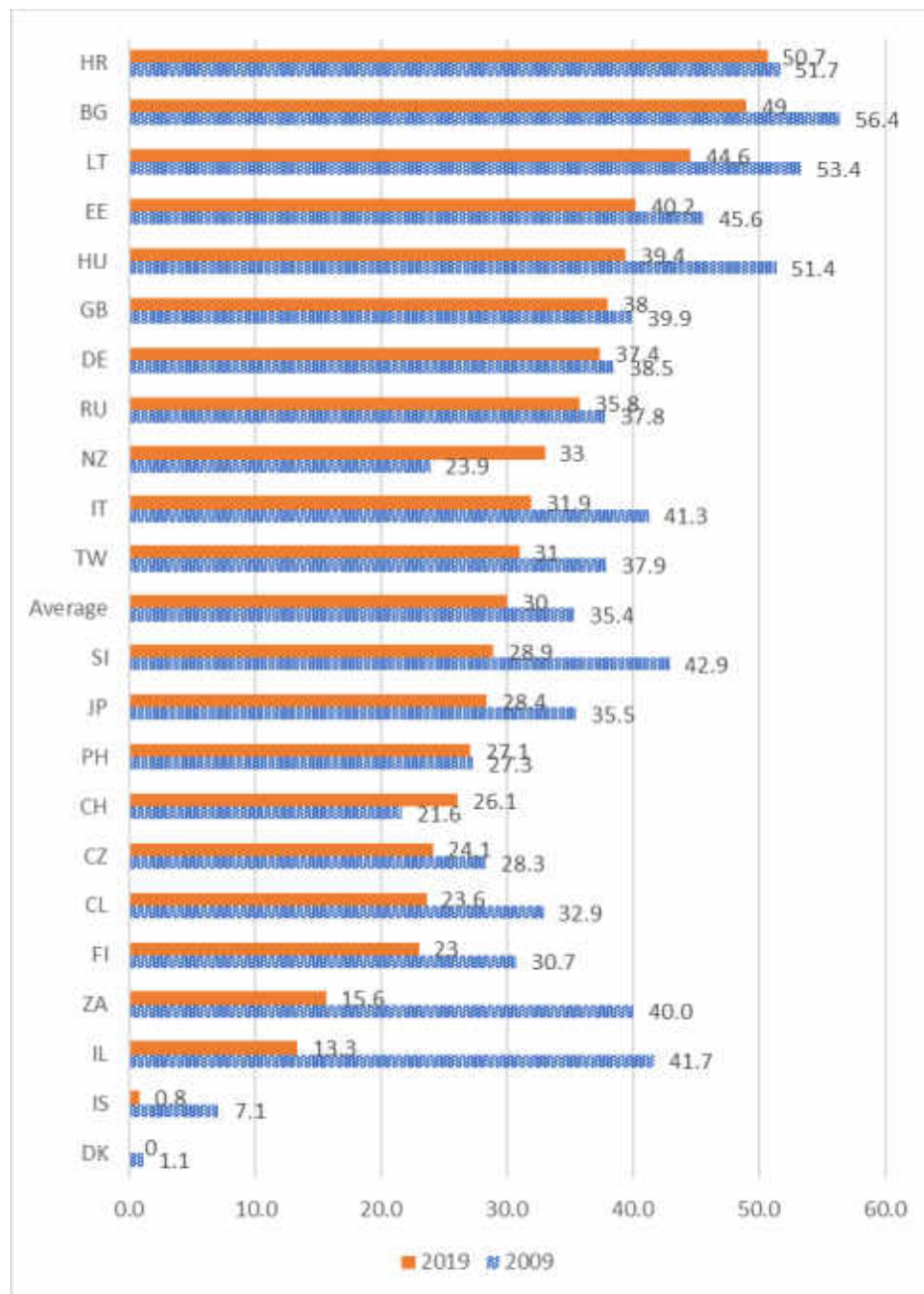
welfare is observed in the case of countries that chose a diamond image, or type D, society. Most respondents in 2019 in affluent Western countries as Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Switzerland thought that they lived in societies where the majority of population belonged to the middle class (Table 2). In 2009 respondents from 8 affluent Western countries – Australia, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland – chose the D type. The diamond type is highly egalitarian, with a low level of social inequality where an absolute majority of members of such a society have equal opportunities to achieve their goals. The most egalitarian type of society is the inverted alleviated pyramid model, or type E, where most people are at its top and only a few are at the bottom, but this type was not perceived as a dominant social model in any country.

The availability of 2019 ISSP data from only 22 countries (Table 2) restricted comparative cross-national and cross-sectional analysis about types/ images of society. However, if trends and changes among nations in the 2009–2019 period are compared, and there is a quite clear status quo: in no country did views about a dominant perceived type of society change fundamentally, except Israel. The case of Israel requires an in-depth qualitative analysis to explain changes between the 2009 and 2019 surveys. In 2019, all 22 countries along the variable of perceived type of society can be grouped in the following way: a) post-communist European countries (an exception is the Czech Republic), with most respondents perceiving the current social model as highly unequal; b) Western and Southern European and Asian countries, where many viewed type B as the dominant model, which is a hierarchical society that is not as unequal as a type A society; and c) Northern European countries, where a relatively equal or type D model was the main choice in the ISSP polls. A general tendency here is that societies which are more economically affluent and have historically broader and longer welfare coverage tended to see themselves as more equal.

When it comes to people's perceptions of what societies they live in, it should also be noted that while these are subjective assessments, according to Kelley and Evans (2017:57), they still reflect reality somewhat well because the objective truth is that developing and poorer countries are generally less egalitarian (as measured by the GINI Index) than developed or richer countries.

The extent to which respondents feel living in an unjust society particularly well is shown by the gap between the perceived and the desired, or current and ideal, models of society. Bulgaria, as an example, is the country most dissatisfied with the perceived type of society, because the gap between most desired (diamond model) and actual (A type) form of society reached as high as 56.4% in 2009, and slightly decreased to 49% in 2019 (Figure 3). This gap was a little smaller in Lithuania – in 2009 it was equal to 53.4%, and 44.6% in 2019; in Croatia, it was 51.7% and 50.7%, respectively. A large gap (35–45%) between perceived and desired types of society also existed in Estonia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Russia in both the 2009 and 2019 ISSP polls. These gaps between the perceived and desired models of society show that in many countries social needs are rather not satisfied, which in turn leads to broad perceptions of high social injustice (Ranking of the Gini index by country 2020). Still the expectations of people for a just society were met most satisfactorily in Denmark and Iceland, where the gap between the desired and the perceived model of society was just a few percent (Figure 3).

Figure 3. A cross-national comparison of the differences between perceived and desired type of society, 2009 and 2019 (%)

*. Source: ISSP 2009; ISSP 2019.
* The difference between dominant desired type (indicated by the percent of respondents) and respective perceived type was calculated; i.e., if the dominant desired type was D, then the difference between the percentages of desired and perceived type D was calculated.

It is noteworthy that most respondents in all countries, despite different political histories, various current political backgrounds, distinct socio-economic development, chose the diamond model or type D society, with a numerous middle class exclusively as the desired societal model. Moreover, in 2009 the median preference for type D societies in 22 countries was 55.3%, and 50.5% in 2019 (Table 3). And these findings show that the general situation is frozen. Still as global inequalities have been rising around the world due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however – especially in the extreme level of wealth concentration (Chancel et al. 2021) – this might lead even towards an increase in perceptions of more unequal societies in future.

Although the most egalitarian type of society is the alleviated pyramid type, or type E, this was not the most desirable in any country. In 2009, the median preference for type E societies was 23.4%, and in 2019 this figure increased to 26.5%. In both years, type E was the second

choice in most countries. This extremely egalitarian type of society remains more of a utopia rather than a real alternative to contemporary feelings of inequality.

Table 3. Desired type of society, 2009 and 2019 (%).

Country	Type of society									
	Type A		Type B		Type C		Type D		Type E	
	2009	2019	2009	2019	2009	2019	2009	2019	2009	2019
BG-Bulgaria	0.2	0.9	3.4	2.6	14.0	12.6	59.7	51.9	22.7	32.0
CH-Switzerland	1.4	0.9	9.0	7.3	18.0	13.1	61.4	60.6	10.2	18.0
CL-Chile	0.8	2.6	4.8	9.5	14.6	18.6	44.6	41.0	35.2	28.2
CZ-Czech Republic	1.2	2.1	6.5	12.2	29.1	29.5	41.8	40.8	21.4	15.4
DE-Germany	1.5	0.4	10.4	3.2	18.2	15.4	57.1	58.6	12.9	22.3
DK-Denmark	0.1	1.6	1.8	13.6	8.2	27.4	59.8	53.2	30.1	4.2
EE-Estonia	0.6	1.5	5.3	7.6	20.4	12.2	55.4	54.4	18.2	24.3
FI-Finland	0.1	0.2	3.4	2.2	8.7	9.2	66.3	64.3	21.4	24.1
GB-Great Britain	1.4	0.9	6.7	8.0	15.6	16.8	60.8	56.2	15.4	18.1
HR-Croatia	1.2	2.0	2.5	3.3	9.6	6.4	57.2	53.9	29.5	34.3
HU-Hungary	1.7	2.4	4.4	6.8	19.3	23.5	55.1	44.8	19.5	22.5
IL-Israel (Jews & Arabs)	1.2	0.8	11.3	5.9	20.6	13.2	51.0	42.6	16.0	37.6
IS-Iceland	0.2	0.4	1.5	1.4	8.3	7.3	54.7	51.5	35.3	39.5
IT-Italy	0.8	2.6	5.6	10.3	12.9	17.2	53.0	43.5	27.7	26.5
JP-Japan	0.8	0.6	9.2	9.1	17.5	18.1	55.5	51.2	16.9	20.9
LT-Lithuania	1.0	1.1	3.9	3.9	11.7	13.1	59.3	48.4	24.0	33.5
NZ-New Zealand	0.7	0.6	3.4	3.1	14.0	10.6	57.2	57.5	24.7	28.2
PH-Philippines	5.9	5.3	15.1	16.2	12.4	16.6	37.3	36.7	29.3	25.2
RU-Russia	1.8	3.4	7.7	6.7	14.8	17.9	46.2	43.7	29.5	28.3
SI-Slovenia	1.4	1.3	3.9	3.8	17.1	10.7	55.2	49.8	22.3	34.3
TW-Taiwan	0.3	0.3	4.7	4.9	8.5	13.4	53.9	49.5	32.6	31.8
ZA-South Africa	2.4	10.1	8.1	16.1	9.9	20.1	46.6	27.3	33.0	26.4
Median	1.1	1.2	5.05	6.8	14.3	14.4	55.3	50.5	23.4	26.5

Source: ISSP 2009; ISSP 2019.

When considering macro-level explanatory variables, it was decided to test two groups: socioeconomic – as GDP per capita, GINI Index, and HDI; and two political indices, the EIU Democracy Index and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Correlations were calculated between perceived and desired type D societies with the above mentioned socioeconomic and political variables. Firstly, it should be noted that most correlations were statistically significant except the GINI Index. Secondly, the explanatory power of correlations was high in each case, but the strongest and most positive association was between perceived society and GDP per capita and the EIU Democracy Index – 0.70 in both cases (Table 4). HDI was in third position, but from the perspective of social research this correlation was strong as it reached 0.62. Slightly lower correlations – between 0.32 and 0.62 – were observed with the desired model of society. A general conclusion can be drawn that macro socioeconomic and political indicators might predict perceived and desired images of society quite well. Additionally, a typical trend was observed as countries with high economic and social development levels tended to see themselves now and in future as more equal societies compared with lower economically and socially developed polities.

Table 4. Correlations between type D society and socioeconomic and political indicators, 2019.

	GDP per capita, PPP, 2019 USD with D type	HDI 2019 with D type	GINI Index 2020 with D type	EIU Democracy Index, 2019 with D type	V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, 2019 with D type
Perceived society	0.70	0.62	-0.36	0.70	0.53
Desired society	0.58	0.62	-0.63	0.41	0.32

*All correlations were statistically significant, except the GINI Index.

After describing general macro trends about perceived and desired types of society, it is necessary to look at attitudes on the individual level. These attitudes were divided into two groups: subjective social positioning, social self-placement as a subjective social class, or top-bottom placement in societal structure; and personal attitudinal perceptions about factors which are important for getting ahead in life (Q1 in Table 1). Unfortunately, the absence of a complete integrated ISSP file for all 22 countries in the 2019 study not allowed to analyze individual level attitudes on perceived and desired types of society in a consistent manner. Still, some trends can be observed even from this limited data.

Perceived image of society is highly dependent on individual self-assessment within the top-bottom structure of society. Correlation analysis showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between at which stage of the so-called "ladder" of social status (Table 1) the respondents see themselves and to which type they assign their society. This echoes well to the conclusion of Evans, Kelly and Kolosi (1992:468), that those who see their societies as egalitarian are more likely to see themselves higher in the hierarchical structure of society. Moreover, if a respondent sees themselves in a higher position in society, then this leads to them choosing a more egalitarian perceived image of society (Table 5). The same logic is used in the self-assessment of belonging to a social class – the higher the social class the respondent assigns themselves to, the more socially equal the image of perceived society is, and vice versa. To sum this up, the 2009 and 2019 ISSP data shows that top-bottom self-placement in social hierarchy and subjective social class have strong relationship with perceived type of society (Table 5).

Table 5. Subjective social self-placement and attitudinal characteristics of evaluations of perceived type of society, 2009 and 2019: Pearson correlation coefficient.

		Q14a (Q15a). Type of society: What type of society is [Rs country] today - which diagram comes closest?	Q10a (Q13a). Groups tending towards top bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?	Q20 (Q22). Which social class you would say you belong to?	Q1a. For getting ahead in life…how important is coming from a wealthy family?	Q1f (Q1e). For getting ahead in life…how important is knowing the right people?	Q1g (Q1f). For getting ahead in life…how important is having political connections?
Q10a (Q13a*). Groups tending towards top+bottom. Where would you put yourself on this scale?	2009	0.241**	-	-	-	-	-
	2019	0.195					
Q20 (Q22). Which social class you would say you belong to?	2009	0.209	0.524	-	-	-	-
	2019	0.200	0.471	-	-		
Q1a. For getting ahead in life…how important is coming from a wealthy family?	2009	0.124	0.125	0.117	-	-	-
	2019	0.130	0.091	0.144	-	-	
Q1f (Q1e). For getting ahead in life…how important is knowing the right people?	2009	0.097	0.082	0.069	0.351	-	-
	2019	0.086	0.037	0.048	0.326	-	-
Q1g (Q1f). For getting ahead in life…how important is having political connections?	2009	0.120	0.100	0.082	0.405	0.489	-
	2019	0.165	0.103	0.137	0.421	0.513	-
Q1h (Q1g). For getting ahead in life…how important is giving bribes?	2009	0.147	0.147	0.102	0.348	0.307	0.513
	2019	0.153	0.104	0.173	0.373	0.337	0.572

Source: ISSP 2009; ISSP 2019. As for 2019, the integrated ISSP file involved 15 countries: Chile, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Philippines, Russia, Slovenia, South Africa, Switzerland, and Thailand.
* Numbering of questions for the 2019 ISSP study is in brackets
** for all cases $p < 0.01$.

In assessing the relationship between the respondents' predisposition for meritocratic or egalitarian attitudes and the perceived type of society, it can be concluded that the relationship between these two variables is statistically significant but not particularly strong (Table 5). Also, there is a statistically significant relationship with all possible factors of success in life except hard work, but the strongest relationships are with giving bribes, being from a wealthy family, having political connections, and knowing the right people as prerequisites for success. Correlation coefficients show that the less important the above factors are to persons, who tend to see perceived society as egalitarian, and vice versa – the more important these success factors are to whom, those think that they live in an elitist society.

Many researchers have already shown – i.e., Evans and Kelley (2017) – the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents, especially their socioeconomic status or so-called SES variables, strongly influence their attitudes towards the structure of the society in which they live. The socioeconomic status of a person is described primarily by their income, education, and occupation. Persons with a higher socioeconomic status tend to see their actual society as more socially just and egalitarian, while lower socioeconomic status respondents tend to see perceived society as more elitist and not providing opportunities for a good life for everyone, or at least the majority.

Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship not only with the individual's socioeconomic status but also with several other individual social and demographic characteristics. Both education and the number of years spent in education, as well as occupation and employment status, are related to the assessment of the perceived society (Table 6).

An important objective of this study was testing the linkage between human capital, on the one hand, and images of society, on the other. Human capital theory rests on the assumption that education is its main variable. Despite well-known criticisms of human capital theory, it is still the important approach for understanding personal income distribution (Fix 2018:15). However, this article now leaves aside the human capital-income link while taking education as the most important element of human capital and using this restrictive definition as a variable to understand different perceptions of models of society. Three education-related variables were selected from two ISSP studies to find out the hypothetical linkage of human capital with different models of perceived society: firstly, education as the number of years of schooling; secondly, highest comparative completed degree of education; and, thirdly, occupation, as the previous two variables have significant intercorrelations with occupation. In addition, occupation has an element of [social] hierarchical rank, which is also helpful in understanding human capital (see Fix 2018).

What conclusions might follow here? All education-related variables of human capital had correlations with perceived types of society in 2009 and 2019 ISSP studies on social inequality. Moreover, a few interesting trends were observed: less educated and less skilled respondents, in an occupational sense, tended more frequently to choose highly unequal A or B type of perceived societies than more educated and more skilled respondents. The respondents with a tertiary level of education preferred type C or D variants of perceived society. This means that educated populations and those with higher human capital have more positive evaluations from the perspective of social equality. Still human capital needs further testing for a measurement of images of society as correlation coefficients are rather weak.

Other sociodemographic indicators also are weakly linked with perceived types of society. Gender and age influence choice of perceived types of society: males and younger people are more likely to see actual society as providing more opportunities to succeed and achieve goals for a larger number of people, while females and older people are more likely to perceive today's societies as elitist. Belonging to a trade union or similar employee advocacy organization has a positive relationship with respondents' attitudes towards seeing actual societies as more socially just. Attitudes of perceived types of society are also influenced by a variable of religiosity – more frequent participation in religious ceremonies outside special

occasions such as weddings or funerals increases the likelihood that such a person will consider their society to be more egalitarian. Finally, a place of residence, is related to the respondent's perception of the societal model – urban respondents are more likely to view perceived societies as elitist or less socially equitable, but in less populated or rural areas, respondents see the same societies as more egalitarian (Table 6).

Table 6. Perceived type of society and respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, 2009 and 2019.

Variable	Pearson r coefficient*	
	2009	**2019**
Education I: years of schooling	0.049	0.141
Education II: highest education level	0.072	0.122
Current employment status	-0.044	-0.022
Occupation ISCO/ ILO 1988	-0.119	-0.136
Trade union or a similar organization membership	-0.105	-0.088
Attendance of religious services	0.075	0.104
Place of living: urban- rural	0.024	0.014
Working for private or public sector or self-employed*	-0.011	-0.024

Source: ISSP 2009; ISSP 2019. * For all cases $p < 0.01$.

An interaction between social capital and perceived types of society is important to study too. The 2009 and 2019 ISSP studies have shown that more socially trusting populations, for instance, Northern European countries, tend to choose type D or equality-based societies more often, whereas less socially trusting, as Eastern European, societies tend to choose B or A type of perceived societies.

Recently Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, and Piketty (2021) discussed the reversal of the educational cleavage, which is being strongly linked to the emergence of a new "sociocultural" axis of political conflict. Equality as a political value was for many decades related to the Left-wing political parties, as votes for them historically came from lower-educated and low-income voters. However, in the new millennium, this linkage has changed and has gradually become associated with higher-educated voters in Western countries (Chancel et al. 2021:1). Both 2009 and 2019 ISSP surveys showed that the highest completed degree of education and years of schooling as variables of education correlated positively with the assessment of the current type of society, and better educated respondents saw more equal contemporary societies compared to lower educated respondents. In other words, the latter group of respondents perceived today's society as less just. The same tendencies were observed for the desired types of society: more educated respondents tended to choose more socially equal types (mainly type D) compared to less educated respondents.

Along the Left-Right political divide in both ISSP polls, respondents identifying with Right/conservative political ideologies assessed perceived society as relatively more equal than Center/liberal and Left/center left respondents. However, there were no significant differences in thinking about the desired model, as respondents from different political leanings preferred type D society almost evenly.

4. **Conclusions**

The main findings from two ISSP studies on social inequality show that contemporary societies are perceived as socially unjust in most countries. Still, most populations expect to live in more equal societies in future. Variations in perceptions of both perceived and desired types of society are significantly determined by the overall level of wellbeing in the country (measured by GDP per capita and HDI), and the distribution of human and social capital. However, an important factor here might be (in)equality of income and wealth distribution within society as well. But this still requires more in-depth study and discussion. To sum up all arguments, variations of perceptions are tightly linked to (in)equality of different societies.

The majority of respondents in the ISSP Social Inequality IV and Social Inequality V surveys indicated that they lived in a pyramid-type society with a small elite at the top, a much larger proportion in the middle, and a large number of the population at the bottom. One of the most socially equal types of society is the diamond-type society, with a dominant middle class. This image of society was mostly opted for in socially and economically

developed countries. The least egalitarian type of elite-mass society was highly typical of those countries with high-income inequality, for instance, Bulgaria, Russia, or Lithuania. On the other hand, the most desired model of society was type D, with a large middle class. However, the gap between perceived and desired types of society was large (no less than 30 percent on average) in almost all countries.

Human capital is major factor in explaining the differences in perceptions between lower- and higher-educated populations, as the latter prefer more socially equal perceived and desired types of society.

Social trust as major component of social capital is important in the selection of perceived society type, as higher trust correlates well with a perception of more equal types of society. However, this is not a significant variable in the choice of desired type of society, as the preferences of all respondents fell within type D society.

Analysis of the 2009 and 2019 ISSP data on social inequality also discovered that individuals with higher subjective social class and higher socioeconomic status tend to see their society as more socially just and more egalitarian, while respondents of lower subjective class and with lower socioeconomic status tend to view their society as more elitist.

This study as a kind of introduction to more systematic enquiry about subjective images of society. Among future avenues or agendas for future studies might be considered to explore interactions within the triangle of human capital-social capital-subjective images of society.

Data Availability Statement: Data used in this article is available here: ISSP Research Group (2017): International Social Survey Programme: Social Inequality IV - ISSP 2009. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA5400 Data file Version 4.0.0, https://doi.org/10.4232/1.12777. ISSP Research Group (2021): International Social Survey Programme: Social Inequality V - ISSP 2019. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7600 Data file Version 1.0.0, https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13599.

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