This last chapter has two aims. First, it picks up the multiple threads that run through this work and tries to create a synopsis of the preceding chapters to provide a unified understanding of this work and its results. The remainder of this chapter tries to answer the one big final question that cannot remain unanswered in a comparative work: the question of differences between the intergenerational permeability in the United States and Germany. This conclusion closes with a discussion of some of the limitations of this work and the suggestion of possible future venues for expanding the research started here.

Social change changes mobility?

After a brief introduction, this work started in Ch. 0 with a stylized review of change in industrialized countries over the 20th century and the elaboration of different hypotheses about the influence of societal change on intergenerational mobility. The economic sphere was singled out as most important for the explanation of changes of intergenerational mobility. The most decisive of these changes was the economic transformation of societies from agricultural-industrial to industrial and finally, most recently since the 1970s, to post-industrial societies. While this transition was gradual and anything other than universal, it occurred in almost all G7 countries and, arguably, in all modern countries that are well integrated in the global economy. This change in economic activity was accompanied by the transformation of the mode of production. It started with the diffusion of Fordist production and Taylorist work management over the first half-century, then continued with post-Fordist production modes like the diversified quality production or other forms of flexible specialization and, finally concluded with lean production methods in combination with post-Taylorist or neo-Taylorist work management strategies that replaced the earlier modes of production and increasingly were generalized to economic activities outside manufacturing. While economies nearly linearly grew over the last century and societies became ever more affluent, living conditions also rose, although not as linearly or universally.

In the post-WWII economic boom years, the golden age, the process of civilization, understood here as betterment of the living conditions of all people, grew in momentum. Economic growth following global trade expansion and the stalled
development between the beginning of the First and the end of the Second World War, lifted many boats. Full employment allowed ordinary workers to participate in the growth of affluence resulting in declining inequality in all Western countries. At the same time, the welfare states expanded and de commodified, to a cross-nationally varying extent of course, the lives of the disabled, the old, the poor and the sick. The three decades following the end of WWII brought affluence to the masses and generalized the model of mass consumption even for those who were not (any more and yet) economically active. In the United States, this development was further fueled by the civil rights movement which freed African Americans finally from the crassest forms of racial subjugation and disenfranchisement under Jim Crow. The most important and universal field of welfare state growth for this work is the educational expansion, which generalized education starting in the 1950s and going on for most of the remaining decades of the 20th century by allowing ever increasing numbers of individuals to enroll in secondary and tertiary education. While this moment of multi-dimensional affluence was conditional on global inequality and a long history of exploitation and a shorter history of mass murder, (democratic) equality was within reach of the people in the Western industrialized countries at the end of the golden age, maybe for the first time ever in their history. However, it was not meant to last.

While economic growth cooled down over the next four decades after the mid-1970s, unemployment recurred in the wake of deindustrialization. Welfare state expansion slowly stalled and financial constraints grew, driving inequality. Similarly, further gains in educational enrollment translated to a lesser degree into equalizing educational opportunities. During periods of growing polarization, the degree of commodification increased again and politics of work enforcement pushed ever more people into the expanding post-industrial services. At the same time, however, women made inroads into paid employment and were, if not freed from the patriarchal lot of housework, ever more able to emancipate themselves from male economic dominance. While for many, this was a better world than that of their forbearers, others felt again the plight of servitude as interpersonal services grew in importance. Consequently, the managerial and administrative middle classes of the era of industrial capitalism were supplemented and supplanted with the rise of the information age by the post-industrial professional and semi-professional classes. Working classes on the other hand increasingly traded the blue for the pink-collared shirt. The result was a more even mix of classes at the end of the century than at its beginning or middle, and an increasing dispersion of economic resources and the value of educational assets.

While this overly simplistic and unduly universal description glosses over much cross-national variation and excludes the majority of humankind completely, it makes the point that economic and social change was likely to affect