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Social Mobility and Equal Opportunity *

The concept of equal opportunity is explored by first contrasting individualistic conceptions of equal opportunity with a class conception. Next, an index of class opportunity is introduced and applied to data for nine western countries. The resultant patterns of inequality are discussed with reference to the underlying mobility process—redistributive mobility—that is responsible for them. The article concludes with speculations about the causes and consequences of redistributive mobility.

The current phase of debate and polemic on the American left is marked by the absence of an accepted general doctrine that joins together radical analyses of contemporary society and radical prescriptions for the future. In recent years most radical spokesmen have restricted themselves to the pursuit of programmatic goals—such as school decentralization or community control. Others have directed their efforts towards remedying the problems of particular disadvantaged groups—such as blacks and women.[1] Only the concept of participatory democracy has been offered as a candidate to synthesize these diverse programs into a theory of man and society.[2]

* I am grateful to Peter Eisinger, Murray Edelman, Charles Cnudde, and J. David Greenstone for helpful criticisms of earlier versions of this manuscript. I also acknowledge with thanks the trenchant and constructive comments of two anonymous readers for this *Journal*.

[1] For an introduction to the concepts of school decentralization and community control, see Marilyn Gittell and Alan G. Hevesi, eds., *The Politics of Urban Education* (New York: Praeger, 1968), Parts IV and V. See also Milton Kotter, *Neighborhood Government* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), Chap. 10. On the radical approach to black liberation one need only consult the writings of black spokesmen such as Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Leroi Jones, and Huey P. Newton. For somewhat more "academic" radical approaches, see Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, "Monopoly Capitalism and Race Relations," in Tom Christoffel, David Finkelhor, and Dan Gilbarg, eds., *Up Against the American Myth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970), pp. 277-90; and Michael Parenti, "Power and Pluralism: A View from the Bottom," *Journal of Politics*, 32 (August 1970), 501-31. On the radical approach to female liberation, see Beverly Jones, "Capitalism in Action: The Oppression of Women," and Tom Christoffel and Katherine Kaufer, "The Political Economy of Male Chauvinism," in Christoffel, Finkelhor, and Gilbarg, pp. 296-320.

[2] For a useful definition of participatory democracy, see Martin Oppenheimer, "The Sociology of Participatory Democracy," in Hans Peter Dreitzel, ed., *Recent*

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This doctrinal vacuum among radicals may be traced in part to a growing disenchantment with what for many years served as the guiding purpose of American reform. I refer to the rejection of "equal opportunity." Of the many reasons offered by reformers for turning away from equal opportunity there stands out especially the belief that equal opportunity is actually a debasing deviation from egalitarianism.[3] Many observers believe that, unlike other notions of equality, the equal opportunity concept takes the class system for granted. Equal opportunity seems to concern itself mainly with assuring people relatively equal access to different positions in the class hierarchy. It appears to challenge neither the criteria by which the class hierarchy is ordered nor the existence of the hierarchy itself. Worse yet, some feel it accepts the existing levels of economic and social inequality that accompany occupational position.[4] Proponents of equal opportunity appear anxious only to provide the wherewithal for people to differentiate themselves from each other *legitimately*, that is, on the basis of individual merit, rather than *illegitimately*, that is, on the basis of ascriptive criteria. They seem not to visualize any shrinkage in social differentiation through the imposition of policies designed to reallocate income, education, and prestige. In short, unlike true egalitarian concepts, equal opportunity is not a prescription for redistribution.

SOME WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Are these allegations against equal opportunity warranted? It is obvious that we cannot answer this question without some working definition of equal opportunity. Let us therefore explore the implications of one commonly accepted definition of the concept. Equal opportunity, according to this definition, "asserts that each man should

Sociology #1 (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 88-99, 90. Two especially useful considerations of participatory democracy are Arnold Kaufman, "Human Nature and Participatory Democracy," and "Participatory Democracy: Ten Years Later," in William E. Connolly, ed., *The Bias of Pluralism* (New York: Atherton, 1969), pp. 178-213. A useful critique of the concept may be found in Robert A. Dahl, *After The Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 84-86.

[3] The argument is made with wit and style by Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958). See also John Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond," in J. Roland Pennock and John W. Chapman, eds., *Equality, Nomos IX* (New York: Atherton, 1967), pp. 228-50.

[4] For an extremely sophisticated statement of this argument, see Frank Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order* (New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 82-88.

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have equal rights and opportunities to develop his own talents and virtues and that there should be equal rewards for equal performances." [5] Notice that there are two separate components to this definition. The second phrase ("equal rewards for equal performances") focuses on the outcomes of performance. The first phrase ("equal rights and opportunities to develop his own talents and virtues") focuses upon the opportunity to perform. It is important to consider the implications of these two aspects of equal opportunity separately.

Let us consider the second phrase first, that which prescribes equal rewards for equal performances. Let us also specify these rewards in the form of occupational position. The question thus becomes how a system could be constructed that would assure equally meritorious people equal opportunities to obtain the occupational position in the stratification system that their achievements deserve. The answer to this question, obviously, is that the social practices which currently confer different mobility opportunities on these equally meritorious people would have to be eliminated. It requires only a moment's reflection to realize that these practices are not randomly distributed throughout society. Rather, they are intertwined, cumulative, and systematic. They stem from inherited differences in wealth and prestige that multiply the occupational opportunities available to people from a higher class origin while restricting occupational opportunities for comparable achievers from lower class beginnings.[6]

Take, as an example, access to higher education, with its many ramifications for future job placement. The bright high school student from a lower class family must all too often make do with guidance counselors who are ignorant of the college opportunities the youth might pursue. After all, relatively few lower class children can afford any college at all; therefore, the demand for skilled college counseling in lower class high schools is perforce limited. An equally meritorious student lucky enough to attend a suburban high school suffers no such handicap, of course, for the suburban norm of college attendance assures him skilled, informed guidance counseling.[7] Thus, inequalities

[5] Schaar, "Equality of Opportunity, and Beyond," in Pennock and Chapman, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

[6] For excellent empirical descriptions of these forces, see Otis Dudley Duncan and Peter Blau, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: Wiley, 1967), Chap. 5; and William H. Sewell, "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education," *American Sociological Review*, 36 (October 1971), 793-810.

[7] For an empirical investigation see Aaron V. Cicourel and John I. Kitsuse, *The Educational Decision-Makers* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), esp. pp. 136-39.

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in the opportunities enjoyed by comparably meritorious performers are systematically related to the material inequalities that define the class system. It therefore follows that any effort to assure equal rewards for equal performance requires some shrinkage in the inequalities associated with class position. The result of such an effort cannot help but be a set of redistributive policies.

Consider now the first part of the equal opportunity definition, that which prescribes equal opportunities for the development of individual potential. We know that innate potential is rarely developed without motivation, but, as recent research suggests, levels of motivation are themselves heavily influenced by class origin.[8] Different class-based methods of socialization instill lower levels of motivation in working class children than in middle class children.[9] Therefore, the aspect of the equal opportunity definition that deals with innate potential cannot be satisfied without some rearrangement of socialization patterns, such that children born into different social classes would acquire uniform amounts of motivation.

Indeed, taken to an extreme the definition of equal opportunity we have been exploring would require that children be removed from their parents and raised uniformly in publicly controlled nurseries. Otherwise parents occupying different positions and possessing different value systems could not be prevented from systematically disequilibrating their children's opportunities, either by passing on differential access to status or differential exploitation of innate potential.[10] Thus, how can one seriously argue that equal opportunity, as commonly used, is not redistributive and does not strike at the very heart of the class system?

Of course, equal opportunity need not be defined in its usual form. Let us turn to an alternative conceptualization whose implications for

[8] The literature on this point is massive. See particularly Herbert Hyman, "The Value Systems of Different Classes," in Reinhard Bendix and S. M. Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1953), pp. 426-42; Ephraim Mizruchi, *Success and Opportunity* (New York: Free Press, 1964), Chap. 4; and Melvin Kohn, *Class and Conformity* (Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey Press, 1969).

[9] Joseph A. Kahl, "Educational and Occupational Aspirations of 'Common Man' Boys," *Harvard Educational Review*, 23 (Summer 1953), 186-203.

[10] Even if we should satisfy this definition of equal opportunity, differentiation between people with different genetic potentials would probably remain, simply because similar levels of motivation would have different effects on the performances of innately bright and dull children. See Richard Herrnstein, "IQ," *Atlantic Monthly*, 228 (September 1971), 43-64, 50.

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redistribution may be different from those of the definition we have so far been discussing.

The notion of equal opportunity we have just reviewed is distinguished by two characteristics. First, its unit of analysis and evaluation is the individual. It clearly specifies equal opportunity in terms of individual opportunity either to develop potential or to enter various occupations. Second, it requires as a condition of equal opportunity that comparably meritorious persons should enjoy identical rewards, such as entry into identically ranked occupations. The concept of equal opportunity can be redesigned, therefore, simply by altering its units of analysis and the character of its social rewards. By so doing we can apply equal opportunity to occupational *classes*, not to individuals, and, especially, to a class' ability to provide its members access to other occupational *classes* rather than access to equally ranked occupations. In this way we arrive at the following definition: equal opportunity exists if and only if occupational classes provide their members, taken as aggregates, equal opportunities for movement to other classes.

Two aspects of this definition demand particular attention. These involve, first, the meaning of equal mobility opportunities for classes as aggregates and, second, the tie between individual opportunities and class structure.

The Meaning of Equal Mobility Opportunities for Class Aggregates

Consider the following example, indicating hypothetical mobility opportunities:

Classes	Mobility Opportunities for Persons	
A	x=1.0	y=0.0
B	x'= .6	y'= .4

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A and B are two occupational classes, each of which includes just two members. In Class A Person x is guaranteed mobility, while Person y has no chance at all for movement. By contrast, Persons x′ and y′ in Class B have mobility chances equal to .6 and .4 respectively. In other words, each has a moderately decent opportunity to move out of his class.

Though these classes are very different from each other in terms of the opportunities they provide their members as individuals, they equal each other in the aggregated opportunities they provide their members. The summed and averaged mobility opportunities available to members of Class A and Class B—which measures each class aggregate's level of opportunity—both come to .5.[11] In short, as this example demonstrates, under our new definition the mobility opportunities facing individual members of two classes need not be equal to each other in order for the classes of which they are part to be judged equal to each other in the opportunities they provide.

Individual Opportunities and Class Structure

Now consider the following example:

Classes	Mobility Opportunities for Persons	
A	x= .5	y= .5
B	x'= .5	y'= .0

If we were to focus solely upon individual opportunities we would judge this class structure to provide considerable equality. After all,

[11] The actual formula used is simply $\frac{\text{opportunities } n^1 + n^2 + \ldots n^k}{\text{N of sample}}$.

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three of its four members enjoy identical mobility opportunities. However, the class opportunity criterion forces us to conclude that, in fact, these classes are very different from each other. Class A actually provides twice the opportunity (.5) that Class B provides (.25). Thus, just as individual inequality may exist alongside class equality, so may substantial individual equality exist alongside of class inequality.

Notice that because the class conception of equal opportunity concerns itself mainly with the circulation of people between classes it implicitly accepts the persistence of some form of class structure. In so doing, it distinguishes itself sharply from the individualistic notion of equal opportunity we have already examined. Moreover, its focus on the occupational transitions of individuals ignores the actual nature of rewards for occupational achievement. It thereby also avoids evaluating the distributive base of the class structure.

The three remaining sections of this paper will explore the class conception of equal opportunity further. We will first attempt to operationalize and apply the concept descriptively. Next, we shall speculate about some consequences of the characteristic mobility pattern that has created the current structure of class opportunity. Finally, we shall try to account for this mobility pattern itself. Always we will be concerned about the relationship of the class conception of equal opportunity to the question of redistribution.

MEASURING AND COMPARING CLASS OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

We know that class membership subjects the individual to a circumscribed range of mobility opportunities. Unfortunately, we can never describe these opportunities for all members of a class; the amount of information required for such a task is simply prohibitive. Luckily, however, we need not do so. Let us recall that we are interested in a single figure which will represent aggregated individual opportunities. This figure can be provided by the actual percentage of a class's members who have become mobile. A class's mobility rate is, after all, no more than the precipitate of its members' individual confrontations with mobility opportunities. Therefore, the class mobility rate is likely to be a fair macro-estimate of the modal range of mobility probabilities facing class members as individuals.[12]

[12] In this respect the situation represented above is highly atypical. It was chosen only to provide a clear demonstration of the differences between judgments about class equality and judgments about individual equality.

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But how should we utilize these mobility rates? Certainly, by themselves, gross rates of movement across class lines cannot provide us an accurate measure of class opportunity. Consider, for example, the following occupational distribution at t_1.

Class I: Elite (consisting of professional, managerial, and some self-employed)—10 percent

Class II: Middle Class (consisting of white collar salaried workers, sales personnel, clerical and service workers, as well as some self-employed)—40 percent

Class III: Working Class (consisting of skilled and semi-skilled manual laborers)—40 percent

Class IV: Lower Class (consisting of unskilled and day laborers, welfare cases, etc.)—10 percent

Let us restrict our attention to Classes II and III for the sake of simplicity. Furthermore, let us assume that all of the mobility out of these two classes flows to the classes directly above. All Class II mobiles move into Class I, and all Class III mobiles enter Class II. Let us also assume that both of these classes generate mobility for 25 percent of their members. Thus, 25 percent of the members of Class II advance to Class I, while 25 percent of Class III members enter Class II. At t_2, after these movements have occurred, the resulting class distribution is

Class I: 20 percent

Class II: 40 percent

Class III: 30 percent

Class IV: 10 percent

The important thing to notice in this case is that although Classes II and III have identical gross mobility rates, they distribute their mobiles unequally. All of the mobiles from Class II enter Class I, a class which at t_2 includes only 2/6 or 1/3 of the social positions outside of Class II. Put another way, 1/3 of the hypothetically available positions to which movement could occur from Class II captured all of Class II's mobiles. The situation is different for Class III, however. Like Class II, all Class III mobility proceeds upward, this time to Class II, but the latter class at t_2 comprises 4/7 of the positions outside of the class of origin, Class III. Thus, identical mobility rates and distances may conceal substantial distributive inequalities between classes. Somehow distribution must be combined with mobility rates in any index of class opportunity.

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Luckily, we can solve our problem by relying on the concept of "perfect mobility." Perfect mobility is "defined by statistical independence of origins and destinations" in a standard inter-generational social mobility matrix.[13] "In the case of perfect mobility each destination group has the same distribution of origins as the total population, each origin group has the same distribution of destinations as the total population, and all indices are 1.0."[14] Departures from the 1.0 ratio for any social class indicate that the class's position in the social hierarchy has biased its mobility capacities. Thus, a ratio of more than 1.0 indicates that proportionately more of a class's mobiles have reached the destination class in question than would have been expected under the model of perfect mobility. A ratio of less than 1.0, on the other hand, indicates less mobility than would have been warranted by the perfect mobility criterion. These ratios amalgamate a class's gross mobility rate and the distribution of its mobiles. They therefore provide us with the quantitative tool we require to compare class opportunity structures fruitfully.

Let us apply this tool to data made available by Miller in his study of comparative social mobility in the mid-twentieth century.[15] Table 1 below reports mobility ratios calculated for the middle and manual classes of nine industrialized societies. These ratios are only approximate; Miller's definitions of class vary slightly from country to country, as do the dates of the studies he describes, the size of country samples, and specific mobility estimation techniques. Nonetheless, the pattern revealed by Table 1 is so consistent that it overrides methodological scruples.

Table 1 clearly contradicts anyone who believes that focussing on class opportunity removes the impetus toward social reform. There exist substantial amounts of class inequality in every country examined. The most spectacular expression of this inequality involves the extremes of the class continuum, elite and lower class destinations. Sons of the middle class enjoy a tremendous advantage over those of manual origin in the race for elite status. The normal pattern showers those of middle class background with three to five times more opportunity

[13] *Duncan and Blau, op. cit.*, p. 35.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] S. M. Miller, "Comparative Social Mobility: A Trend Report and Bibliography," *Current Sociology*, 9 (1960), 1-89. Miller provides data from two American studies and two French studies. We utilize both sets of data for each of the two countries.

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to become a member of the elite than those of manual birth enjoy. By contrast, sons of manual workers are usually much more likely to fall into the lower class than are sons of white collar workers.

TABLE 1

MOBILITY RATIOS FOR MANUAL AND MIDDLE CLASSES OF NINE COUNTRIES *

Country	Class of Origin	Class of Destination: Elite	Middle Class	Manual	Lower Class
USA (I)	Manual	.66	.76		1.00
	Middle Class	2.51		.40	.07
USA (II)	Manual	.90	1.10		1.12
	Middle Class	1.34		.46	.14
Italy	Manual	.07	.32		.90
	Middle Class	1.12		.48	.46
France (I)	Manual	.33	.95		.72
	Middle Class	1.43		.83	.70
France (II)	Manual	.33	1.05		.39
	Middle Class	1.54		.83	.75
Japan	Manual	.65	.92		.37
	Middle Class	1.27		.80	.37
W. Germany	Manual	.79	1.18		.61
	Middle Class	1.95		.83	.50
Netherlands	Manual	.64	.75		.95
	Middle Class	1.10		.68	.49
Great Britain	Manual	.43	.80		1.20
	Middle Class	1.36		.82	.58
Denmark	Manual	.33	.79		1.02
	Middle Class	1.71		.77	.48
Sweden	Manual	.57	.76		.90
	Middle Class	1.83		.72	.59

* Standardized against "perfect" mobility, defined as independence of class origins and destinations. The grouping of occupations into classes follows Miller's designations. Elites comprise professionals, operators of large businesses, and higher civil servants. Middle Classes normally include owners of small businesses, lower civil servants, and clerical workers. Manual classes include skilled and semi-skilled workers. Lower classes include unskilled labor and, occasionally, farm labor.

But this kind of comparison is not entirely fair. After all, manual children who aspire to the elite must leap two classes upward, while middle class children have but to take one step up. Similarly, the child of the working class need take but one false step to fall into the lower

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class, but the middle class child must fail twice. Therefore, we should expect inequality when we compare manual and middle class mobility to the poles of the class continuum.

TABLE 2

MOBILITY RATIOS AND INDICES OF ADVANTAGE FOR CONTIGUOUS UPWARD MOBILITY AMONG MANUAL AND MIDDLE CLASSES OF NINE COUNTRIES

Country	Class of Origin Class of Destination	Mobility Ratio	Index of Advantage *
USA (I)	Middle to Elite	2.51	141
	Manual to Middle	1.10	
USA (II)	Middle to Elite	1.34	
	Manual to Middle	1.10	24
Italy	Middle to Elite	1.12	
	Manual to Middle	.32	80
France (I)	Middle to Elite	1.43	
	Manual to Middle	.95	48
France (II)	Middle to Elite	1.54	
	Manual to Middle	1.05	49
Japan	Middle to Elite	1.27	
	Manual to Middle	.92	35
W. Germany	Middle to Elite	1.95	
	Manual to Middle	1.18	77
Netherlands	Middle to Elite	1.10	
	Manual to Middle	.75	35
Great Britain	Middle to Elite	1.36	
	Manual to Middle	.80	56
Denmark	Middle to Elite	1.71	
	Manual to Middle	.79	92
Sweden	Middle to Elite	1.83	
	Manual to Middle	.76	107

* The Index of Advantage is the difference between the Middle to Elite Ratio and the Manual to Middle Ratio. An index number of 0 would represent absolute equality between the opportunities of middle class people to move upward a step and the opportunities of manual people to do likewise. Positive numbers indicate comparative advantage for the middle class. Negative numbers, of which there are none, would indicate comparative advantage for the manual class.

A more valid comparison would hold mobility distance constant by comparing only movement between *contiguous* classes. Hence, Table 2 focuses upon movement upward a single class (from Manual to Middle Class, from Middle Class to Elite), while Table 3 concentrates on move-

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ment downward a single class (from Middle Class to Manual, from Manual to Lower Class). Finally, Table 4 compares movements in both directions and provides a summary rating of middle and working class opportunities.

TABLE 3

MOBILITY RATIOS AND INDICES OF ADVANTAGE FOR CONTIGUOUS DOWNWARD MOBILITY AMONG MANUAL AND MIDDLE CLASSES OF NINE COUNTRIES

Country	Class of Origin Class of Destination	Mobility Ratio	Index of Advantage *
USA (I)	Middle to Manual	.40	
	Manual to Lower	1.00	−60
USA (II)	Middle to Manual	.46	
	Manual to Lower	1.12	−66
Italy	Middle to Manual	.48	
	Manual to Lower	.90	−42
France (I)	Middle to Manual	.83	
	Manual to Lower	.72	+11
France (II)	Middle to Manual	.83	
	Manual to Lower	.39	+44
Japan	Middle to Manual	.80	
	Manual to Lower	.37	+43
W. Germany	Middle to Manual	.83	
	Manual to Lower	.61	+22
Netherlands	Middle to Manual	.68	
	Manual to Lower	.95	−27
Great Britain	Middle to Manual	.82	
	Manual to Lower	1.20	−38
Denmark	Middle to Manual	.77	
	Manual to Lower	1.02	−25
Sweden	Middle to Manual	.72	
	Manual to Lower	.90	−18

* The Index of Advantage is the difference between the Middle to Manual ratio and Manual to Lower ratio. A positive index number indicates an advantage for the Manual Class, since a positive number is the result of comparatively greater downward mobility from middle to manual than from manual to lower classes. A negative number represents advantage for the Middle Class.

Table 2 shows that even when we limit ourselves to an examination of single-class movement upward the middle class enjoys a considerable advantage over the manual class. In not one case is the opportunity of manual children to move into the middle class as great as the opportunity of middle class children to become part of the elite. This is true

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despite the fact that qualifications for middle class entry into prestigious elite positions would seem to be comparatively stiffer than qualifications for manual entry into the middle class.

TABLE 4

INDICES OF CONTIGUOUS MOBILITY OPPORTUNITY FOR MIDDLE AND MANUAL CLASSES OF NINE SOCIETIES

Country	Class	Index *
USA (I)	Manual	−24
	Middle	+211
USA (II)	Manual	−2
	Middle	+88
Italy	Manual	−58
	Middle	+64
France (I)	Manual	+23
	Middle	+60
France (II)	Manual	+66
	Middle	+71
Japan	Manual	+55
	Middle	+47
W. Germany	Manual	+57
	Middle	+112
Netherlands	Manual	−20
	Middle	+42
Great Britain	Manual	−40
	Middle	+54
Denmark	Manual	−23
	Middle	+94
Sweden	Manual	−14
	Middle	+111

* The Index is constructed by subtracting a class' downward mobility ratio to the contiguous class from its upward mobility ratio to the contiguous class for manual and middle classes. A positive index indicates comparatively greater opportunity for upward over downward mobility. A negative index indicates the opposite.

Table 3, which describes the protection against downward mobility that the middle and manual classes extend their members, reveals more fully the extent of middle class advantage. In seven of the eleven cases reported manual workers are less well-insured against falling into the lower class than are middle class people against demotion into the manual sector. This manual class disability survives despite govern-

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mental efforts in many countries to open up mobility channels between the middle and manual classes, to deter working class downward mobility by extending unemployment compensation, and to sustain the market's demand for manual workers by the application of Keynesian fiscal policies.

Finally, as Table 4 shows, the overall balance of class opportunities tilts markedly in favor of the middle class in each of the nine countries we have examined. Most middle class children bask in a quite favorable mobility climate. But in the United States, Italy, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Denmark manual sons are confined within a generally negative range of opportunities.[16] Worse yet, there is not one country in which working class sons enjoy opportunities that are as favorable as those open to the sons of the middle class.

Surprisingly enough, however, a description of the mobility pattern responsible for the current structure of class opportunity at first yields a quite different picture from that painted by our opportunity ratios. To begin with, there is great uniformity in mobility rates. Estimates of the proportion of mobiles across the manual-non-manual barrier in industrialized societies range from a low of 17 percent in Finland to a high of 33 percent in the United Kingdom.[17] In other words, most industrialized societies circulate about the same modest proportions of their members across class lines. Moreover, limited time series estimates for Japan, the United States, Italy, and the United Kingdom reveal considerable within-country stability in mobility rates.[18] Nor is consistency limited to democratic societies whose governments, for the most part, reject control of the economic factors that largely influence mobility. Independent estimates of mobility in the Soviet Union taken

[16] The U. S. findings are particularly damning in view of our heavy rhetorical commitment to equal opportunity. See, for example, S. M. Lipset, *The First New Nation* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), Chap. 3.

[17] Data computed from Robert M. Marsh, *Comparative Sociology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967), p. 166.

[18] On Italy, see Marsh, *ibid.*, and Joseph Lopreato, "Social Mobility in Italy," *American Journal of Sociology*, 71 (November 1965), 311-14; on Japan, see Marsh, *ibid.*, and Ken 'Ichi Tominaga, "Occupational Mobility in Tokyo," in Joseph Kahl, ed., *Comparative Perspectives on Stratification: Mexico, Great Britain, Japan* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1968), pp. 180-95, 186. On the United States, see Marsh, *ibid.*; and Duncan and Blau, *op. cit.*, Chap. 2, esp. p. 55. On Great Britain, see Marsh, *ibid.*, and D. V. Glass and J. R. Hall, "Social Mobility in Great Britain: A Study of Inter-Generation Changes in Status," in David Glass, ed., *Social Mobility in Britain* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), pp. 177-217.

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at two recent time points yield identical moderate mobility rates.[19] Thus, in every industrial society examined, no matter its ideology or governmental complexion, we find moderate, stable mobility rates.

More important, despite the existence of much class inequality, is the fact that mobility actually tends to redistribute society's personnel. In most industrialized societies middle class sons experience approximately twice as great a rate of downward as upward mobility. Indeed, there is not one case where movement out of the middle class is predominantly upward. The reverse finding characterizes sons of the manual class, who are twice as likely to move upward as downward.[20] In short, the most common pattern of mobility demotes people of middle class origin into the manual class and replaces them with recruits drawn from the ranks of manual labor. Modern societies *are* redistributive, at least with regard to the placement of people, if not with regard to the perquisites of class status.

What then accounts for the apparent discrepancy between redistributive mobility, which seems to favor those of manual origin, and class inequality, which clearly favors the middle class? The answer, of course, is that the discrepancy is illusory. Redistributive mobility is simply incapable of overcoming class inequality. The reason is that gross rates of mobility take account only of percentages mobile from origins to destinations; they ignore the *size* of origin and destination classes. This omission is critical. After all, there is a large middle class in industrialized societies; therefore, the flow of manuals to the middle class must also be sizeable in order for the manual disadvantage to disappear. By contrast, the elite class is fairly small; therefore, it need receive but a trickle of middle class people before it yields a positive mobility ratio to the middle class. Likewise, only a very substantial flow of downward mobility out of the middle class could overcome the built-in advantages the middle class enjoys because of the great size of the modern working class. Finally, in most industrialized societies the lower class is comparatively small; therefore, even a limited rate of

[19] Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 411 fn.; and H. H. (*sic*), "Education and Social Mobility in the USSR," *Soviet Studies*, 18 (July 1966), 57-65, 61 (limited sample).

[20] This ought not to conceal the variability in mobility patterns from country to country, however. On this score, see Marsh, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-78. Nor should we ignore the difficulties in making national comparisons of mobility figures and patterns. See especially Otis Dudley Duncan, "Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Social Mobility," in Neil J. Smelser and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development* (Chicago: Aldine, 1966), pp. 51-98.

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working class downward mobility is enough to penalize those of manual origin. Thus, redistributive mobility, though a major form of redistribution in modern society, is not commonly enough practiced to overcome class inequality.

CONSEQUENCES OF REDISTRIBUTIVE MOBILITY

The consequences of redistributive mobility may be described best by contrasting this pattern with other forms of mobility. We will compare redistributive mobility with upgrading, downgrading, polarization, and revolutionary mobility.

Upgrading occurs when a society experiences an expansion in the supply of its prestigious white collar and professional positions and a contraction in the supply of its lower class unskilled positions. These developments squeeze mobility into a predominantly upward pattern at all levels. Almost all mobile sons of the working class are recruited into the middle class, and almost all middle class mobiles attain elite status. Upgrading thereby reverses the predominantly downward flow of middle class mobility that pertains under redistribution. It also virtually eliminates the residue of working class downward mobility that characterizes redistributive mobility.

By its reduction of downward mobility upgrading treats the manual class much more equitably than does redistribution. But upgrading also shuts off the flow of downward mobility out of the middle class and redirects all middle class mobility upward into a swelling elite. The result of this development is that upgrading biases middle class mobility even more favorably than does redistribution. Therefore, although upgrading changes the terms of inequality between the manual and middle classes, it does not actually diminish the amount of inequality between these classes.

But we should not restrict ourselves to examining the fate of class inequality under alternative mobility patterns. There are other things to be considered, such as, for example, the allocation of intellectual potential and occupational talent in industrialized societies. There is substantial working class talent in all modern societies, just as there is much middle class mediocrity.[21] This dispersion of talent across class

[21] Presently the range of talent, as measured by such indices as IQ, is greater within classes than between classes. This is inferrable from data in David Wechsler, *The Measurement and Appraisal of Adult Intelligence*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins, 1958), p. 92 and Chap. 7.

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lines not only provides a moral justification for circulating personnel between the classes, but also necessitates personnel exchange in order that the industrial machine be manned efficiently.[22] Upgrading assures recruitment of working class talent by expanding the supply of middle class jobs, but it fails to demote dullards in the middle class, who either retain their positions of relative privilege or actually find their way into demanding elite positions which they are incapable of filling properly. Thus, upgrading does not allocate society's fund of talent efficiently.

By contrast, redistributive mobility demotes incompetent middle class progeny and promotes promising manual offspring. It thereby distributes talent more effectively than does upgrading. This is not to deny, however, that redistribution leaves a portion of manual talent untapped, nor that it ignores residues of middle class mediocrity.[23] On balance, however, given equal gross rates of mobility, redistribution sorts the intellectual wheat from the chaff more effectively than does upgrading.

Let us now examine downgrading, which occurs when large numbers of both middle class and manual workers see their opportunities turn sour because of a shortage of white-collar jobs and an expansion of marginal lower class positions. The immediate consequence of this situation is an increase of downward mobility and a virtual cessation of upward mobility.

Unlike redistribution or upgrading, downgrading wipes out the middle class's ability to protect its members from downward mobility. Therefore, under downgrading ratios of middle class mobility approach the egalitarian (1.0) norm for the first time. But, at the same time, downgrading chokes off all upward mobility channels for the manual class, thereby depressing manual mobility ratios far more drastically than does redistributive mobility. In sum, like upgrading, downgrading only alters the terms of inequality between the middle and manual classes. It does not close the opportunity gap between these classes.

Nor does downgrading exploit the distribution of social talent effectively. Some deserving people of manual origin actually find themselves demoted, while most whose merits should qualify them for

[22] On future problems associated with the recruitment of talent in post-industrial societies, see John Porter, "The Future of Upward Mobility," *American Sociological Review*, 33 (February 1968), 5-20.

[23] For an insightful discussion of the practices that protect incompetents in the middle class, see William J. Goode, "The Protection of the Inept," *American Sociological Review*, 32 (February 1967), 5-19.

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middle class jobs must confront the bleakness of dead-end manual positions. These conditions cannot help but engender a wave of bitterness in the working class that unchecked, would eventually spur the growth of working class consciousness.[24] At the same time, of course, middle class people, who can only hope to hold on precariously to their privileged positions, may well turn their incipient status panic into political reaction.[25] Downgrading thus not only wastes talent, but actually pits social classes against each other in a desperate scramble for survival.

By contrast, redistributive mobility forestalls class conflict by providing many opportunities for upward mobility out of both the working and the middle classes. Redistributive mobility also makes certain that talented people at all social levels are used effectively by society. Finally, it provides as much equality of opportunity as does downgrading.

But more disastrous than downgrading is class polarization, which reserves the patterns of redistributive mobility. When class polarization occurs middle class mobility turns predominantly upward and working class mobility precipitously downward. The result is the destruction of society's middle sectors. It should be obvious that class polarization increases the inequalities associated with class origin. The predominantly upward pattern of middle class mobility under polarization gives middle class people an even more advantageous mobility ratio than that which they enjoy under redistributive mobility. In addition, the heavy downward flow of manual mobility under polarization sends those of manual origin to an even more unpleasant fate than that to which they are consigned by redistribution. The accelerating gap between these classes increases the likelihood of class warfare, as formerly middle class people attempt to protect their newfound elite status and newly impoverished people of manual origin recoil from their sudden degradation.

Polarization also does an especially poor job of allocating social talent, for it protects incompetent middle class people and wastes almost all working class talent. This inefficiency contrasts with the

[24] The best example of this principal is the gradual growth of Communist voting during the Depression days of the Weimar Republic in Germany. For a comprehensive analysis, see S. M. Lipset, *Political Man* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1960), p. 139.

[25] *Ibid.*, Chap. 5. See also for pertinent American data James A. Barber, *Social Mobility and Voting Behavior* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970), *passim.*

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performance of redistribution, where the circulation of personnel between the manual and middle classes often matches talent to reward successfully. In sum, when compared to distributive mobility, class polarization increases mobility inequalities, utilizes talent ineffectively, and raises the spectre of class warfare.[26]

At last we come to revolutionary mobility, under which a majority of middle class children fall in status and a majority of working class children rise. Revolutionary mobility differs from all the other forms of mobility we have considered because it affects not only the direction but also the rate of mobility. It moves over 50 percent of any particular generation, as opposed to the usual 24-30 percent. But revolutionary mobility retains the circulatory features of redistribution; it simply increases these exchange processes.[27]

Revolutionary mobility equalizes class opportunities more completely than does any other form of mobility. It demotes the sons of the middle class in proper proportion to their numbers, and it fills the vacuum thereby created with a massive surge of mobiles from manual backgrounds. In so doing, it brings the mobility ratios of middle and manual classes together near the egalitarian norm of 1.0.

Moreover, revolutionary mobility, unlike redistribution, taps all the working class talent available to society. It also purges the middle class of all its incompetent offspring. Thus, with regard to both class equality and social talent revolutionary mobility is preferable to redistribution.[28]

Revolutionary mobility suffers in but one respect, namely, the avoidance of class conflict. As Runciman shows, a sense of collective identity begins to assert itself whenever people come to believe that mobility is theirs by the accident of membership in a particular group, rather than by achievement in individual competition.[29] Mobility too certain

[26] Perhaps it is because class polarization fails on all three of our criteria that one finds it occurring so rarely. Special efforts are obviously made to prevent its appearance.

[27] Some theorists are willing to call this situation truly revolutionary, even if there is no alteration whatever in the income and educational discrepancies between the classes. See Ralf Dahrendorf, *Class and Class Conflict in Industrial Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), p. 221.

[28] Indeed, some might argue that revolutionary mobility would not only circulate all the incompetents in the middle class and the meritorious in the working class, but portions of working class incompetents and middle class competents as well.

[29] Runciman states these conditions in terms of relative deprivation, but his argument translates easily into statements about class consciousness. See W. G.

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can induce as much class solidarity as can no mobility at all. These considerations apply both to downward and upward mobility. Whenever class members begin to feel that they are doomed to fall in status no matter what their individual qualities, they cannot help but develop a collective sense of deprivation. Likewise, whenever class members come to feel that they will rise no matter what their merit, they are very likely to discover a collective rationalization for their good fortune. Under revolutionary mobility high status becomes no longer a valuable prize to be attained by individual competition against peers or low status a failure of individual contest. Instead, status slowly comes to be a collective fate either to be feared or embraced equally by all members of a class. Once such a collective vision is established it is only a matter of time before middle class people cease striving against each other and begin to organize collectively in order to protect their common interests against the upstart manual class or before manual people coalesce in order to further their growing claims to class betterment and to widen their newly opened channels of opportunity. In short, revolutionary mobility, like downgrading, significantly increases the opportunity for class conflict.

It is, of course, impossible to predict exactly what rate of personnel exchange will turn peers away from within-class competition and toward a sense of shared fate and the forging of collective bonds. We can be certain, however, that this flashpoint will be reached sooner when, as in the case of revolutionary mobility, circulation of people becomes the rule and not the exception in a society.[30]

Let us now gather the strands of our discussion together in an attempt finally to answer the question with which this section began. What are some consequences of redistributive mobility? By now it is apparent that redistribution represents an uneasy compromise between the incompatible demands enunciated by differently placed social groups, some of whom wish mainly to utilize talent efficiently, others of whom wish to equalize opportunities, and still others of whom are preoccupied

Runciman, *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 9-36.

[30] Other factors crucial to the determination of the flashpoint are the normative mobility expectations centered in a culture and the sorts of criteria used to promote and demote. On the latter point, it seems likely that the current distribution of occupational talent in the U. S. would not permit revolutionary mobility without some promotion and demotion unmerited on purely achievement and potential grounds.

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with deterring class conflict. Redistribution is the only form of mobility that goes some distance toward meeting all three of these demands, although it accomplishes none completely. Indeed, the price of attempting to meet each demand is the failure to satisfy any one fully. As with so many other common practices in modern societies, redistributive mobility juggles competing and strongly held ideologies: meritocracy, the desire to utilize talent effectively; egalitarianism, the humanitarian impulse toward equal opportunity; and conservatism, the fear that class conflict will rip the social fabric asunder.

CAUSES OF REDISTRIBUTIVE MOBILITY

Redistributive mobility is the product of many forces, chief among which are the long-term expansion of white collar positions through investment and technological innovation, a relative decline in middle class fertility which opens the way for working class talent to move upward, and, finally, the decline of ascriptive practices that traditionally shielded children of the middle class and penalized ambitious working class children.[31] Underlying these processes, however, is perhaps the most fundamental fact of modern economic life—gradual long-term economic growth—which creates the necessary job opportunities for redistributive mobility to flourish.

Yet, if Gross National Product is any indicator of economic fortunes, modern economies usually do not grow consistently over time.[32] The economic history of industrialized societies, especially those operating under "free enterprise," is characterized by short-term (two to ten year) business cycles during which there is first expansion and then contraction of investment, productivity, wages, and, finally, GNP itself. These cycles have been studied almost exclusively by economists, who have generally ignored their larger social ramifications. Yet business cycles may in fact help regulate mobility processes. For example, as economic activity expands in the early stages of the business cycle job opportunities multiply, especially in the white collar sectors where much investment and innovation have their initial impact. The result is a reduction in unemployment, a rise in middle class occupational oppor-

[31] See S. M. Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 57-64.

[32] For pertinent data on the United States, Great Britain, Germany, and France, see Arthur F. Burns, *The Business Cycle in a Changing World* (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1969), pp. 16-17.

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tunities, and, perhaps, the creation of an upgrading mobility process. By contrast, the contraction phase at the end of the business cycle, with its high manual unemployment rate and its decrease in investment, may create downgrading. Thus, the long-term norm of redistributive mobility in modern societies may in part be the precipitate of short-term mobility cycles coterminous with the phases of the business cycle.

Although the economic forces of the business cycle greatly influence mobility processes, we should not overlook inherent aspects of mobility which play an autonomous part both in sustaining the redistributive norm and in stabilizing the business cycle as well. Indeed, the real paradox is that, just as economists have ignored the social ramifications of the business cycle, sociologists and political scientists have ignored the economic consequences of redistributive mobility. Yet the business cycle and redistributive mobility are so closely intertwined as to defy separate analysis.

For example, consider the expansion phase of the business cycle, when technological innovation and abundant investment capital spawn new white-collar intensive industries that increase the supply of elite bureaucratic and professional positions.[33] These new jobs create a demand for the managerial talent possessed by the sons of the middle class. The subsequent upward mobility of these newly enfranchised elites opens many conventional middle class positions to those of working class origin. Thus, the entire stratification system responds to economic growth with a chain reaction of upward mobility. Everywhere, propelled by the initial demand for manpower to fill elite and upper middle class positions, redistributive mobility turns toward upgrading.

But upgrading is normally shortlived, not only because the purely economic forces which sustain rapid economic growth soon peter out, but also because many sons of the working and middle class suddenly find themselves in positions for which they have not been properly trained and which they therefore cannot perform especially well.[34] These unprepared beneficiaries of economic expansion may be retrained, of course, but both their own temporary incompetence and the resultant efforts of others to re-educate them decrease labor productivity. The result is the gradual application of brakes both to upgrading and to economic expansion.

[33] Recent examples of such industries include the growth of data processing and information transmission companies, such as Xerox and IBM.

[34] Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

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In addition, many adolescents benefit from the newfound prosperity of their parents by entering upon a luxurious period of supported, enforced, but aware inactivity, often spent attending universities. For some from middle class origins this period becomes the prelude to an ironic rejection of the occupational system that has demanded so much from and given so much to their parents. Some of the youthful beneficiaries of expansion attempt to withhold their talents from this system and, instead, to live *off* but not *in* society.[35] This denial temporarily removes from the job market some of the new talent necessary to sustain upgrading and economic growth. The resultant marginal scarcity of talent slows down the economy, and conditions worsen for the middle class. Suddenly many middle class parents discover that they no longer can afford to provide the wherewithal for their children to continue their leisure. Slowly the youthful prodigals are forced back into the hated salariat. Their return not only reduces the mobility opportunities for ambitious working class children, but also causes greater competition for jobs within the middle class itself, thus driving the net flow of middle class mobility downward. In sum, as the economy levels off redistributive mobility re-establishes itself.

Now let us consider the contraction phase of the business cycle. When the economic growth rate falls below that which is necessary to sustain redistributive mobility an unusually large number of middle class sons entering the job market are forced into manual jobs, and many working class children can find no jobs at all. In other words, downgrading becomes the rule.

However, this situation too is likely to be shortlived. Not only do governments normally take steps to tease the economy out of its doldrums, but the downward flow of mobility is also to some extent self-correcting. For one thing, many middle class downwardly mobiles refuse to accept their dreary fate. They believe their fall to be a temporary reverse, recoupable with an extra effort that they promptly exert.[36] In addition, their unfortunate experience serves as a warning to those still in the middle class, who thereupon redouble their efforts in order to retain their positions. The result of both these processes is an increase in labor productivity that stimulates the advent of economic rejuvenation.

[35] See Richard Flacks, *Youth and Social Change* (Chicago: Markham, 1971), p. 57.

[36] See the formulation by Harold Wilensky and Hugh Edwards, "The Skidder: Ideological Adjustments of Downward Mobile Workers," *American Sociological Review*, 24 (April 1959), 215-31.

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Downgrading also makes the skills possessed by many downwardly mobile sons of the middle class available to the working class. The result may be a kind of demonstration effect that raises the quality of working class labor. These same considerations apply, of course, to downwardly mobile members of the elite who fall into the middle class. By making superior skills available to inferior occupations throughout the stratification system, downgrading raises the general level of occupational performance and helps push the economy into its recovery phase.

Recovery once more increases white collar job opportunities for middle class sons, whose removal from competition for manual jobs, in turn, reopens manual positions to many workers and their children who would otherwise perhaps have faced unemployment. The widespread relief associated with regaining an expected social status does its part to increase individual productivity and to propel economic recovery. In addition, reduced unemployment lightens society's welfare burden and liberates investment capital. Together these factors help to re-establish economic growth and to return temporary conditions of downgrading to the norm of redistributive mobility.

Thus, redistributive mobility in industrialized societies is partly a product of powerful social and economic forces and partly a self-sustaining, equilibrating process.[87] Racial conflicts, generational tensions, and governmental ideologies may influence these processes somewhat, of course,[88] but, despite its disabilities, it would be foolhardy to expect redistributive mobility to be easily transformed into an entirely new system for the allocation of status.

[87] For a theoretical discussion of the sort of equilibrium mechanisms we have been discussing, see Austin T. Turk, "On the Parsonian Approach to Theory Construction," *Sociological Quarterly*, 8 (Winter 1967), 37-50.

[88] For data suggesting how such influences may occur, see S. M. Miller and Pamela Roby, *The Future of Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), p. 134; and Jerome H. Skolnick, *The Politics of Protest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), pp. 203-4.

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