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SPONSORED AND CONTEST MOBILITY IN AMERICA AND ENGLAND: A REJOINDER TO RALPH H. TURNER¹

EDWARD WARREN NOËL

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to examine and evaluate Ralph H. Turner's differentiation of the accepted modes of social mobility in America and England; second, to suggest the kind of behavior which is associated with upward social mobility.

Turner accounts for the structural differences between American and English systems of education by postulating that they are the outcomes of contrasting organizing norms of social mobility. He uses the term "contest mobility" to describe the folk norm of social mobility in America, and defines it as "a system in which elite status is the prize in an open contest and is taken by the aspirant's own efforts."² He further describes the "contest norm" as follows:

... victory by a person of moderate intelligence accomplished through the use of common sense, craft, enterprise, daring and successful risk-taking is more appreciated than victory of the most intelligent or the best educated.³

The term "sponsored mobility" is employed to describe the organizing folk norm of social mobility in England:

Under *sponsored* mobility, elite recruits are chosen by the established elite or their agents, and elite status is *given* on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit and cannot be *taken* by any amount of effort or strategy.⁴

Both organizing folk norms of social mobility are, Turner admits, ideal types. Thus, we should not be surprised to find instances of both norms of social mobility operating in the same country.

Methodologically, ideal types are useful in viewing social phenomena. Yet, as we shall see below, we must be cautious that they do not distort the particulars they are used to describe.

On close examination of Turner's position important difficulties emerge. First of all there is the problem of motivation. If we

take Turner's definition literally, that elite status "cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy" in England, then we will have to dispense with the concept that motivation contributes to social mobility in a sponsored-shaped school system. Yet motivation is often used to account for the discrepancies in two children's careers holding IQ constant.⁵ Second, does Turner's contest mobility in fact account for mobility in America? Is the prize in contest mobility merely awarded by hard work? According to Turner the elite in contest mobility do not decide who shall get the prize.⁶ But is this predominantly the case in America? Certainly there is evidence to show that entrance into a profession or a semi-profession is determined by criteria established by the already existing elite in the profession. Furthermore, becoming a bricklayer, a barber, or a postman entails conforming to standards in these occupations. C. Wright Mills argued that business controls the criteria and credentials for elite status within the company organization, always mindful that a better, so-called psychological test will come along that will sort out the right men.⁷ Thus, the elite do in considerable measure guard elite status in America.

Third, one could question the adequacy of the notion of sponsored mobility when applied to particular instances. Turner writes:

The governing objective of contest mobility is to give elite status to those who earn it, while the goal of sponsored mobility is to make the best use of the talents in society by sorting each person into his proper niche.⁸

Does this statement imply that those who gain elite status under sponsored mobility do not earn it?—that it is given to them? It would be hard to maintain that a Britisher who successfully made the grade did not earn his new station. Turner's emphasis

on the sorting out process in sponsored mobility is probably based on the tripartite secondary school system. However, do not the students *earn*, through their scholastic achievement, the streams to which they are allocated? In fact, the eleven-plus is the *contest* which determines which students earn grammar school education, which secondary modern, and so forth. Consequently, the differences between the goals of sponsored and contest mobility asserted by Turner do not differentiate the two folk norms. Allocation of children to three streams does take place earlier and in a more formalized manner in England than it presently does in America. If this is a fact that Turner is attempting to account for, then he has struck on a salient feature of both systems, which differentiates them on the manifest structural level. However, he pushes his point to an unacceptable extreme when he affirms that contest social mobility gives rewards to those who earn them while sponsored mobility merely sorts out people.

It would be more appropriate to say that the English system is characterized by objective criteria and explicit routes or strategies for social mobility while the American system *appears* to be characterized by non-objective criteria and inexplicit strategies.⁹ It would be a mistake to be deceived on this important point. Most certainly the degree of explicitness does distinguish the two systems, but the fact that in America routes for mobility are not formalized at age eleven does not imply the nonexistence of objective, even though inexplicit, strategies and criteria that are requisite for social mobility. For example, the particular course of study an individual pursues in the American comprehensive high school is a strategy, either explicit or inexplicit as the case may be, with objective criteria; that is, one is not admitted to the best universities by spending one's time in shop courses. The college boards, and more recently the National Merit Scholarship examinations, represent objective criteria and strategies that may be successfully employed in upward social mobility.

Turner almost recognizes this distinction concerning the explicitness (or lack of it)

of routes and strategies for social mobility.

To forestall rebellion among the disadvantaged majority, then, a contest system must avoid any absolute points of selection for mobility and immobility and must delay clear recognition of the realities of the situation until the individual is too committed to the system to change radically.¹⁰

But he also seems to ignore the import of his own statement quoted above. That there are not many public agencies constantly stressing the importance of early decision making and the correct perception of strategies for social mobility, is most likely accounted for by the prevailing spirit of equalitarianism in America. But this does not vitiate the existence in America of objective criteria and strategies.

The central problem, then, appears to be inextricably connected with, and perhaps reducible to, the *perception* of strategies for mobility and the *perception* of the objective criteria employed in the selection of the elite. The following quotation from Turner concerning job aspirations of children supports the notion that the perception of routes and strategies is pivotal in a comparison of America and England.

Researches in the United States consistently show that the general level of occupational aspiration reported by high-school students is quite unrealistic in relation to the actual distribution of job opportunities. Comparative study in England shows much less in the way of "phantasy" aspiration, and, specifically, shows a reduction in aspiration among those not selected following the "eleven-plus" examination.¹¹

One might say that the eleven-plus exposes "the realities of the situation" in the British system, and that the realities of the situation are imposed on children by the results of this examination. Education, consequently, is viewed as directly instrumental in achieving certain stations in life. In America, even though a child's choice or level of aspiration is not forced or challenged at any given time in his career, the fact still remains that his choices exert tremendous influence on the future routes for social mobility available to him. This is just

as influential in a child's future as is a publicly recognized system of forced decision making. That a child or his parents may not perceive the routes and strategies for social mobility, does not imply that these routes and strategies do not objectively exist. Rather, it only means that they have not been perceived.

If perception is regarded as crucial in social mobility, then we must analyze the kind of behavior which entails the perception of strategies for mobility. The small child's parents and siblings act as models upon which he patterns his behavior and eventually judges himself.¹² Much of this socialization process in the family is a matter of the child learning his role through identification with family members. The degree to which the child perceives the standards and expectations of the family, and models his behavior accordingly, is an indication of his conformity to the family value system. In addition, playmates are used as reference groups by which the child can evaluate his actions. Thus, a certain behavior results from the emulation of and identification with those models (parents, siblings, playmates) whose actions, when imitated, bring the child reward. In short, the perception of areas of reward and the perception of the means by which to realize them through emulation and imitation, are an important part of the learning process of the child.

There are other models: the postman, the dentist, the policeman. The main point of this article is that the perception and emulation of social models are necessary in individual social mobility in America or in England. It is almost tautological to say that the middle class has a wider range of potential models than the working class. The activities and interrelationships between members of the middle class facilitate the perception of future roles. If the range of models which the child perceives are restricted to his own subculture (even though models from higher adjacent subcultures are available), then the likelihood of upward social mobility is practically nil.¹³ The fact that social mobility for the working class is high-

est in cities¹⁴ can be accounted for by the greater availability of social models potentially playing a decisive role (if they are perceived and emulated) in upward mobility.

In William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, a study of an Italian immigrant neighborhood in Boston, an interesting comparison is made between young men who were mobile and those who were relatively stable. The socially mobile college boys had patterned themselves on social models and standards which were different from those of their social class origin, while the street corner boys were still basically oriented to their original subculture.¹⁵ Doc, one of the leaders of a street corner gang, made a remark to Whyte which is relevant to the problem of social models. Complaining of the low representation of Italians in important positions in the neighborhood, Doc said: "If I had my way, I would have half the schoolteachers Italians and three-quarters of the people in the settlement. Let the other quarter be there just to show that we're in America."¹⁶ For many in the street corner society the distance was too great between themselves and those social models which, if emulated, could have provided the momentum for upward mobility.

Before mobility can occur there must be perception of a way of life different from that which is a social given to the individual. Preceding this act of perception, there must exist models which are concretely available for emulation. It would be hard to believe that there exists a large segment of the population which does not know what a pharmacist is, or a doctor, a schoolteacher, a minister, a banker, a postman, and so forth. Yet, depending upon the social environment, there are varying degrees of relating potential social models to one's particular way of life. One should expect the chances for social mobility to rise concomitantly with the quality of the perceived-as-real models which the individual is able to emulate.

The importance in upward social mobility of long-range planning, whether it takes the shape of restricting the size of one's family, or the manner in which money is spent,¹⁷ or the course of study a child is encouraged

to take in high school, is further evidence of the necessity for the perception of routes and instruments for social mobility. A statement made by Robert Hess and Gerald Handel regarding a professional family is relevant here: "Nothing significant is left to chance—neither the day-to-day activities nor the long-range career plans of the family's junior members."¹⁸

Finally, there exists a problem in America which can be partially accounted for by our description of the behavior involved in social mobility. The teen-age peer group viewed as a subculture presents many potential models to the individual teen-ager. In some instances the number of possible models for identification might be so large that the result is a kind of role diffusion, or social model diffusion. There is a possibility, therefore, that confusion and inactivity can result from the presence of too many possible choices. This situation is likely to be as much of a disadvantage in upward social mobility as the existence of too few potential models. This point can be extended to explain the steady increase in the percentage of high school drop-outs. That is, the teen-age peer group's influence on the potential models for identification is probably stronger for the drop-out than is any influence coming from outside the peer group. The role of the peer group in an individual's chances for social mobility becomes an even more pressing problem when one considers the increasing importance of the teen-age subculture in America.

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- ² *Ibid.*, p. 122. Turner is not using "elite" in the sense of *the elite*. See note 4, p. 137.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ⁵ See Dael Wolfe, "Educational Opportunity, Measured Intelligence, and Social Background," in Halsey, Floud and Anderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 216–240.
- ⁶ Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
- ⁷ C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 294.
- ⁸ Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
- ⁹ See J. E. Floud, A. H. Halsey, and F. M. Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1957).
- ¹⁰ Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.
- ¹² For a detailed analysis of this point, see W. Allison Davis and Robert J. Havighurst, *Father of the Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), and W. Allison Davis, *Psychology of the Child in the Middle Class* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1960).
- ¹³ See Seymour M. Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), p. 198.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213.
- ¹⁵ William F. Whyte, *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 107.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- ¹⁷ See Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.*, pp. 86, 273.
- ¹⁸ Robert D. Hess and Gerald Handel, *Family Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 172.

There is a fragment of an old poem which reads, "And not by eastern windows only, When daylight comes, comes in the light." In each man's house, in each nation's house, there are two major windows. The meaning of life is colored by both. The western window is one of promise, of expectation, of the future; the eastern window is one of history, of experience, of the past. The fullness of life of an individual or a nation is measured by a balanced perspective in the significance of the two. Neither is the exclusive harbinger of human progress.

*We are learning the hard way that there are no unilateral, one-track answers to the problems of education. As we sheepishly turn from that feverish and illusory search, there is the awareness that education, like love, is a many-splendored thing.—T. M. STINNETT, "Prejudices and a Platform," *Teachers College Record*, October 1962, page 40.*