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# Social Mobility in American History: Some Brief Reflections

By EDWARD PESSEN

IN THE FIFTY YEARS SINCE PITIRIM ALEXANDROVITCH SOROKIN published his pioneering classic on the subject,<sup>1</sup> sociologists have been increasingly drawn to the study of social mobility, completing many hundreds of works on the traits and characteristics of the socially mobile and on the rates and patterns of what Sorokin called vertical and horizontal mobility in the United States during the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Entering the field only recently, historians have in slightly more than a decade made their own substantial contribution to the literature as they have searched earlier centuries for signs of upward and downward social movement.<sup>3</sup> The very weight of the literature attests to the importance scholars attribute to the theme that has inspired it. Several interesting recent publications indicate, however, that celebration of social mobility and its significance is by no means universal.

One critic charges that most social-mobility research is in effect a waste of time. The great demands in terms of energy and time

<sup>1</sup> Sorokin, *Social Mobility* (New York and London, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> The weight of the bibliography on the theme is suggested in Raymond W. Mack, Linton Freeman, and Seymour Yellin, *Social Mobility: Thirty Years of Research and Theory: An Annotated Bibliography* (Syracuse, 1957); Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power: Social Stratification in Comparative Perspective* (2d ed., New York and London, 1966); and Edward Pessen, ed., *Three Centuries of Social Mobility in America* (Lexington, Mass., Toronto, and London, 1974). 305-13. Since 1974 the leading sociological journals have, if anything, quickened the pace of their publication on diverse aspects of social mobility and on methodological problems associated with such research.

<sup>3</sup> Although earlier historians had not been altogether oblivious to the issue, the first book-length study of social mobility by a historian was Stephan Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in a Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), a volume which has inspired great interest by historians in the theme. Pessen, ed., *Three Centuries*, 311-12, discusses other studies by historians. The post-1974 contributions are too numerous to cite here. A useful survey of some of the recent publications is Theodore Hershberg, "The New Urban History: Toward an Interdisciplinary History of the City," *Journal of Urban History*, V (November 1978), 3-40.

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are not justified, he argues; the countless hours of exacting research could be put to better use if expended in the study of "family tragedies and triumphs, recreational outings, collective movements," and other such "routinely ignored" events of ostensibly "immense personal significance to the working population."<sup>4</sup> Another skeptic dismisses scholarly interest in mobility as a token of the successfully executed plot by those who run the system to divert the masses from the need to change it. "Social mobility . . .," he suggests, "is a classic idea bolstering the existing arrangements . . .," an idea that has attained "sacrosanct status," serving as a "great legitimizer—and mystifier—of the unequal distribution of resources in the United States."<sup>5</sup> I suspect that others of us who, like this author, have devoted much time indeed to social-mobility research, will be as disconcerted as he by the suggestion that we have been misusing our time. What nonspecialists wish to know is whether or not the recent criticism is warranted. This paper will consider this and other questions.

My purpose is not to report on everything we have learned in the past half century but rather to reflect on what it means. While our studies have reduced only slightly the area of our ignorance concerning social mobility, they are by now so many in number that even the most succinct summary of them would require something close to a book-length volume to do them justice.<sup>6</sup> I trust that a critical analysis of important questions will be more rewarding than an inevitably thin report on the great array of empirical studies, both for the specialists as well as for that greater number of us whose chief interests lie elsewhere but who wish to make use of the fruits of social-mobility research. There are, of course, a great number of questions that can be raised. It seems most sensible to concentrate on a few that are of particular interest.

What is social mobility? Lest this be thought too primitive and therefore too patronizing a question, let me hasten to observe that some of our most highly regarded historians have offered defini-

<sup>4</sup> James A. Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility: Ideological Assumptions and Cultural Bias," *Labor History*, XVIII (Spring 1977), 165–78; quotation on p. 168. Skepticism about the significance of social mobility, if not nearly as great as Henretta's, is expressed also by Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, Eng., 1975), 109, 136; and Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, Eng., 1976), 165–66.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Cumings, "Reflections on Schurmann's Theory of the State," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, VIII (October–December 1976), 60.

<sup>6</sup> In reviewing a most comprehensive collection on social mobility, C. Arnold Anderson has written that "no single book can more than touch on the bold outlines of this enormous field of phenomena, controversy, and data." *American Journal of Sociology*, LXXIV (September 1968), 197.

tions that are surprisingly at odds with professional usage.<sup>7</sup> How one defines social mobility determines both the extent and the significance one attributes to it. Some scholarly controversy, marked by conflicting interpretations of what appear to be similar data, are at bottom differences over the meaning given to social mobility.<sup>8</sup> There is little doubt that different specialists would not uniformly appraise the following item which appeared in a recent issue of the *New Yorker*: "Up Life's Ladder [*From the Fremont (Ohio) News-Messenger*]. JACK LOUDERSLAGER has been promoted from the position of associate non-productive buyer to non-productive buyer, monthly salary, according to an announcement from the Whirlpool Corp.'s Clyde Division."<sup>9</sup> Of course, this most sophisticated cosmopolitan journal found this item fit to print as filler only because its clever editor found hilarious the provinciality of the small-town editor who would publish so petty a piece of news.

The question is: Was Mr. Louderslager's modest good fortune an evidence of upward mobility? Those who agree with Sorokin that vertical mobility requires an individual to move from one social stratum or position to another would probably answer in the negative, describing the movement in question as an example of what Sorokin called "horizontal . . . mobility": that is, a "shifting" in situation "without any noticeable change of the social *position* of an individual."<sup>10</sup> Those who discern social or vertical mobility in almost any change in an individual's situation, whether for the better or worse, would doubtless answer in the

<sup>7</sup> See for example Lee Benson, "Group Cohesion and Social and Ideological Conflict: A Critique of Some Marxian and Tocquevillian Theories," *American Behavioral Scientist*, XVI (May-June 1973), 759-60; Samuel P. Hays, "History and Genealogy: Patterns of Change and Prospects for Cooperation," *Prologue*, VII (Spring 1975), 41; and Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility," 165-66.

<sup>8</sup> For examples see Jackson T. Main, "Mobility in Early America," in Main, *The Social Structure of Revolutionary America* (Princeton, 1965), 164-96; Allan Kulikoff, "The Progress of Inequality in Revolutionary Boston," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXVIII (July 1971), 375-412; Stuart Adams, "Origins of Occupational Elites, 1900-1955," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXII (January 1957), 360-68; and Adams, "Trends in Occupational Origins of Physicians," *American Sociological Review*, XVIII (August 1953), 404-409; as against Robert Perrucci, "The Significance of Intra-Occupational Mobility: Some Methodological Notes, Together with a Case Study of Engineers," *ibid.*, XXVI (December 1961), 874-83; and Carolyn Cummings Perrucci and Robert Perruci, "Social Origins, Educational Contexts, and Career Mobility," *ibid.*, XXXV (June 1970), 451-63.

<sup>9</sup> *New Yorker*, LII (January 3, 1977), 73.

<sup>10</sup> Sorokin, *Social Mobility*, 133. Italics mine. Interestingly, Sorokin treated horizontal mobility as movement in what he called "social space," in contrast to the treatment by this writer and others which equates horizontal with geographical or physical mobility. On reflection, I believe Sorokin's usage to be worthy of maintaining because it so sparsely and effectively portrays social movement "in place," as it were.

affirmative. Most scholars, however, appear to agree with Bernard Barber that social mobility involves a change not merely in job or some other particular but in the individual's social class or, in the useful language of Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, a "move from one position to another in society—positions which by general consent have been given specific hierarchical values."<sup>11</sup>

While the definition of social mobility that insists it must signify movement upward or downward rather than sideways in social space commands wide acceptance because of its good sense, it should not be subscribed to too literally. For example, the sons of mid-nineteenth-century Newburyport's industrial workers with few exceptions themselves remained blue-collar workers.<sup>12</sup> Yet their greater success in accumulating homes and property, no matter how modest, can hardly be dismissed as insignificant. As Stephan Thernstrom has wisely observed, whether the new generation's movement from "the floating, unstable, propertyless sector of the working class" to the "respectable, property-owning" sector of the same class represented a movement between "distinct social classes or [between] different strata of the same class seems . . . a verbal rather than a substantive problem."<sup>13</sup> The Nobel laureate Peter B. Medawar's recently stated dictum "that the comfort brought by a satisfying and well-worded definition is only short-lived, because it is certain to need modification . . . as our experience and understanding increase . . .," seems peculiarly appropriate to discussions of the meaning of social mobility.<sup>14</sup>

If defining the term presents some difficulties, measuring social mobility with any precision is downright impossible. Social mobility involves two elements: motion and position. Werner Heisenberg suggested, in studying the electron, that perfect knowledge of the one is irreconcilable with exact knowledge of the other. A similar indeterminacy appears to govern attempts to fix the changing social location of individuals. Tracing social movement is difficult enough: deciding whether to do it intergenerationally or intragenerationally, fixing the point in the careers of one's sub-

<sup>11</sup> Barber, *Social Stratification: A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process* (New York, 1957), 356; Lipset and Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959), 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 160-65.

<sup>13</sup> Thernstrom, "Notes on the Historical Study of Social Mobility," in Don K. Rowney and James Q. Graham, Jr., eds., *Quantitative History: Selected Readings in the Quantitative Analysis of Historical Data* (Homewood, Ill., and Georgetown, Ont., 1969), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Medawar, "The Crab," *New York Review of Books*, XXIV (June 9, 1977), 10.

jects to be isolated for most intensive examination, choosing the moment in the lives of sons to be used in comparing them with fathers, all are troublesome problems. Determining social position is an insoluble problem. For, as sociologists have pointed out, " 'social mobility' is a complex multidimensional concept consisting of an indeterminate but considerable number of components."<sup>15</sup> There are indeed "a host of different ways of measuring mobility," whether by changes in occupation, income, wealth, cost and location of residence, life-style, club memberships, class, status and prestige, religious denomination, or any combination of these and other variables.<sup>16</sup> It is, of course, possible to fix with numerical precision which one or ones of the nation's more than twenty thousand occupational classifications apply to a contemporary subject. But locating that job in the small number of categories that must be created to represent the occupational hierarchy, like creating that hierarchy and dividing it among upper-white-collar, managerial, professional, semiskilled, unskilled, or other personnel rubrics inevitably is a subjective task that will be performed differently by different scholars.<sup>17</sup> Further bedeviling the student of earlier centuries is the inexactness of the occupational data assembled in censuses and city directories.<sup>18</sup> Other indicators of social position, particularly such intangibles as status and prestige, present at least as many difficulties as do occupations. For every measure, whether occupational or any other, is likely to be internally differentiated. The aggregate data compiled by the researcher necessarily fail to allow for the heterogeneity of the category under study. The problem is magnified when the inevitably oversimplified findings of one project are compared

<sup>15</sup> Charles F. Westoff, Marvin Bressler, and Philip C. Sagi, "The Concept of Social Mobility: An Empirical Inquiry," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (June 1960), 375.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Fox and S. M. Miller, "Intra-Country Variations: Occupational Stratification and Mobility," in Bendix and Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power*, 581.

<sup>17</sup> Unusually good discussions of this widely noted problem are Peter M. Blau and Otis D. Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York, London, and Sydney, 1967); Lipset and Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*; Michael B. Katz, "Occupational Classification in History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, III (Summer 1972), 63-88; Melvin M. Tumin and Arnold S. Feldman, "Theory and Measurement of Occupational Mobility," *American Sociological Review*, XXII (June 1957), 281-88; John H. Goldthorpe and Keith Hope, "Occupational Grading and Occupational Prestige," in Keith Hope, ed., *The Analysis of Social Mobility: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford, 1972), 19-79; and Clyde Griffen, "Occupational Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America: Problems and Possibilities," *Journal of Social History*, V (Spring 1972), 310-30.

<sup>18</sup> Griffen, "Occupational Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," 310-30, reports the many errors he encountered in the data he had to use for his own empirical research. See also Griffen, "Making It in America: Social Mobility in Mid-Nineteenth Century Poughkeepsie," *New York History*, LI (October 1970), 479-99.

with those of another.<sup>19</sup>

In view of the incommensurateness both of the social indicators and of scholars' handling and appraisals of them, it is no wonder that we continue to lack a coherent, internally consistent picture of social mobility over the course of American history. Nor are we likely to reduce the chaos by much in the near future. Scholars will, I think, continue to go their own way, for all the calls for methodological uniformity. Some of their regression equations may well be similar, but their perceptions of the significance of their data, like their judgments in deciding what data to assemble, will continue to be individualistic, idiosyncratic, subjective.<sup>20</sup> (That is, in situations where neither commissars nor dissertation advisers of commissarial mood are in charge.) There is no cause for dismay in this state of affairs. What is wanted are not studies that achieve a commensurateness that is in fact unattainable but studies that are worthwhile because they illuminate whatever aspect of the theme they consider.<sup>21</sup> Perfection is out of the question. Good sense and studies free of avoidable lapses seem sufficiently attractive objectives.

On the assumption that knowledge of past mistakes is indispensable in the search for understanding, let me allude briefly to some errors of judgment and method that have been committed in social-mobility research. Who is of a mind to do so could, of course, compile a list of flaws in such research that would dwarf the not insubstantial catalogue of "historians' fallacies" one intrepid historian has published.<sup>22</sup> While I would have no difficulty

<sup>19</sup> Richard F. Curtis, "Income and Occupational Mobility," *American Sociological Review*, XXV (October 1960), 727; Harold L. Wilensky, "Measures and Effects of Social Mobility," in Neil J. Smelser and Seymour M. Lipset, eds., *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development* (Chicago, 1966), 98-140; Saburo Yasuda, "A Methodological Inquiry into Social Mobility," *American Sociological Review*, XXIX (February 1964), 16; and Otis D. Duncan, "Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Social Mobility," in Smelser and Lipset, eds., *Social Structure and Mobility*, 96-97, which notes that "Interspatial comparisons of mobility patterns or 'rates' are seriously compromised by noncomparability of study procedures."

<sup>20</sup> Harold M. Hodges writes that "To attempt to pinpoint and then measure 'social mobility' is to undertake what amounts to an unattainable quest. The concept is simply too general and slippery . . ." Hodges, *Social Stratification: Class in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 247. See also Robert W. Hodge, "Social Integration, Psychological Well-Being, and Their Socioeconomic Correlates," *Sociological Inquiry*, XL (Spring 1970), 182-206, which is excellent on this problem. He notes further (p. 204) that "the correlations between such components of socioeconomic status as income, occupational prestige, education, and social background factors . . . [are] at best modest."

<sup>21</sup> Two of the outstanding authorities, collaborating on a magisterial study of occupations, concede that they themselves "not only differed concerning the best interpretation of a set of empirical findings, which is to be expected, but sometimes even disagreed as to what the findings themselves show." Blau and Duncan, *American Occupational Structure*, viii.

<sup>22</sup> David H. Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York, Evanston, and London, 1970).

finding ample space in such a listing for my own failures, I would be cheered nonetheless by the fact that the inclusion on such a roster of some of the outstanding scholars in the history and sociology professions turns it into an honor roll of sorts. For the most part my allusions will be to deficiencies in the work of otherwise exemplary studies performed by first-rate scholars. I call attention to them not because they are unique but because they are not atypical and, above all, because I think their public discussion can be of profit to specialists and nonspecialists alike.

A glaring flaw, fortunately much diminished in this era of quantification, is the statement of ringing generalizations about social-mobility rates or patterns for the population as a whole or for substantial elements of the population that are based on "impressions," a handful of examples, or even no examples whatever. Alexis de Tocqueville, as we have come to know, was a master of this approach, but it has by no means been entirely discontinued by modern historians.<sup>23</sup> The methodological revolution by which historians in recent years have finally begun to emulate their sociological cousins in insisting that generalizations about social trends be based on quantitative or statistically representative rather than impressionistic data has permitted them to overcome this particular weakness. But, not surprisingly, the new method has generated new species of error.

Everyone knows—or pays lip service to knowing—that correlations, no matter how impressive, do not establish causal relationships among the variables they measure. And yet the examples of precisely such relationships being inferred are too numerous to require documentation. It has become a commonplace, for example, to conclude that, because a given group of rich or successful men with few exceptions had rich or successful parents, the achievements of the sons were due to the good things conferred on them by the fathers. Perhaps they were. Unfortunately, the aggregate data are unrevealing. For, as I have argued elsewhere, it is conceivable that the young person born to great fortune might

<sup>23</sup> On Tocqueville's penchant for making unsubstantiated statements about the backgrounds and careers of the American rich see Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass., Toronto, and London, 1973). For a recent discussion of how Tocqueville formed his impressions see William J. Murphy, Jr., "Alexis de Tocqueville in New York: The Formulation of the Egalitarian Thesis," *New-York Historical Society Quarterly*, LXI (January/April 1977), 69–79. Richard C. Wade's observation that "movement up and down the [social] hierarchy took place constantly" in western cities during the early nineteenth century is offered without confirming documentation. Wade, *The Urban Frontier: The Rise of Western Cities, 1790–1860* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 128. This is also true of Lee Benson's comment that the United States is not only "highly heterogeneous" but that it "has high social mobility." Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, 1961), 165.



have succeeded even in the absence of his inherited social and economic advantages. Not aggregate data but detailed and complex evidence on the career of an individual can alone throw light on the balance of factors that accounted for his or her success. The quantitative data can illuminate the measurable characteristics of social climbers (I do not use the term in an invidious sense), skidders, and standpatters. They do not explain why individuals and groups are the one thing or the other; and they are often misused as well as misunderstood.

A justifiably respected study of class structure assumes "that all the men in the labor force in 1920 [were] replaced by their sons by 1950," a methodological gamble which is undermined by the massive number of exceptions to the assumption.<sup>24</sup> Another study, in attempting to explain why one European immigrant ethnic group has "been more consistently upwardly mobile in America" than another, measures the correlations between five independent variables and the dependent variable, upward mobility, and concludes that "the principal source of the difference demonstrated" between the two groups arose because the less successful group "were more accepting of lower status occupations."<sup>25</sup> Indubitably, the coefficient of correlation between the latter variable and the lesser success enjoyed by one of the two nationalities was greater than that obtaining between their lack of success and such variables as level of aspiration or a tradition of learning. Among the questions that come to mind, however, is why these variables were selected and not others that might well be more revealing as to why the two groups experienced such unlike career paths. A study of the relationship between level of aspiration and degree of success achieved by a group of Negro high school seniors in an unnamed "medium-size southern city" is filled with interesting information on the backgrounds, including the heavy rate of broken homes, the ideals, and the later experiences of these youngsters.<sup>26</sup> But how much more valuable it would have been had its

<sup>24</sup> Joseph A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure* (New York, 1957). See the criticism by Otis D. Duncan, "Methodological Issues in the Analysis of Social Mobility," 56-57.

<sup>25</sup> Fred L. Strodbeck, Margaret R. McDonald, and Bernard C. Rosen, "Evaluation of Occupations: A Reflection of Jewish and Italian Mobility Differences," *American Sociological Review*, XXII (October 1957), 546, 553. The authors' categories are not quite precise: they say they are comparing "Jews" with "Italians." They mean they are comparing other-than-Italian Jews with Italians who are not Jews. For a very different approach to this issue see Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York, 1977).

<sup>26</sup> Norman G. Keig, "The Occupational Aspirations and Labor Force Experience of Negro Youth: A Case Study," *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, XXVIII (April 1969), 113-30.

author taken the further step, surely within his grasp, of comparing the findings for his sample group with those that obtained for the rest of the graduating class or for the youthful black population in general.

A recent methodologically sophisticated yet flawed piece of research by a young historian tested for vertical mobility in an antebellum city by using occupational level and residential area as its clues to social standing.<sup>27</sup> One flaw consists in assuming that the different wealth levels *associated* by the manuscript census schedules with the fifty-one occupations classified in the study were actually earned by or due to the occupations. The assumption is questionable.<sup>28</sup> Another problem is its treatment of the political units, the city wards, as the atomic elements in its ranking of residential communities by wealth, despite the fact that wards are large, heterogeneous units often containing juxtapositions of poor, wealthy, and middling residents, not to mention large commercial buildings that badly distort or falsely suggest high per capita wealth for their surrounding populations. Another valuable study by a historian of the same city reports on interesting changes in the backgrounds of lawyers between Jefferson's time and Lincoln's. But since the legal profession is internally differentiated with a vengeance—a great divide separating ambulance chasers from the solicitors for the mighty—it would be good to know the nature of the practices carried on by the new plebeian elements.<sup>29</sup> Of course, every piece of research, particularly if it is fruitful, suggests yet additional work to be done; the meaning of this study of the social background of lawyers remains elusive until additional research is undertaken. More disconcerting is the judgment of another young historian in evaluating as “successful” the man whose assessed wealth increases over a ten-year period and as “unsuccessful” the man whose assessment “remained constant or

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Blumin, “Mobility and Change in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia,” in Stephan Thernstrom and Richard Sennett, eds., *Nineteenth-Century Cities: Essays in the New Urban History* (New Haven and London, 1969), 165–206.

<sup>28</sup> See Edward Pessen, “The Occupations of the Antebellum Rich: A Misleading Clue to the Sources and Extent of Their Wealth,” *Historical Methods Newsletter*, V (March 1972), 49–52; and Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American Metropolis, 1880–1970* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 336–37, for detailed criticisms of Blumin's methodology.

<sup>29</sup> Gary B. Nash, “The Philadelphia Bench and Bar, 1800–1861,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, VII (January 1965), 203–20. Subsequently, Professor Nash advised me that it is not at all clear that the legal practice of the new men compared either in prestige or financial rewards with the practices of such eminent Philadelphia legal families as the Vauxes, the Kaness, the Merediths, and the Hares.

decreased.”<sup>30</sup> Surely, there is something questionable in a standard that seems to attribute success to the pauper who in ten years amasses five dollars and failure to the millionaire who over the same period loses that amount. I am happy to note that historians—as sociologists would be the first to admit—do not have a monopoly on lapses in judgment.

Researching contemporary American society, as they do, sociologists have the advantage of dealing with subjects that are alive, articulate, capable of disclosing their aspirations and anxieties, among other things, in contrast to the silent dead who occupy the historian’s research universe. Ah, but there’s the rub! For the “volunteered statements” offered by living respondents are often “highly colored by status conceptions.”<sup>31</sup> In plainer language, the responses people make to sociologists’ questions and questionnaires may or may not be truthful, suggesting at times that the questioners are told not what people think but what people think they will look good if they say they think. The famous North-Hatt ratings of occupational prestige, for example, place professors above bankers, corporate directors, and factory owners on the basis of a representative sample of “volunteered statements.”<sup>32</sup> It is difficult to avoid harboring the nagging suspicion that this rating represents not how the American people think but rather how they believe it is admirable for them to think. To the extent that mobility studies rely on uncorroborated estimates of the respondents’ own and other people’s standings—as does W. Lloyd Warner’s famous study of Yankeetown—they lean on a frail reed, indeed, rather than the solid, if partial and limited, written evidence available to historical researchers.<sup>33</sup>

The burden of the argument in this section is that social mobility no more than any other human phenomena can be studied with perfect detachment or precision. It is sufficient for it to be studied sensibly.

<sup>30</sup> Peter R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830–1860: A Study in City Growth* (New York, 1971), 81.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Gross, “The Occupational Variable as a Research Category,” *American Sociological Review*, XXIV (October 1959), 640–49; quotations on p. 640.

<sup>32</sup> “Jobs and Occupations: A Popular Evaluation,” *Opinion News*, IX (September 1, 1947), 4–5; see also Paul K. Hatt, “Occupation and Social Stratification,” *American Journal of Sociology*, LV (May 1950), 533–43; Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *Occupation and Social Status* (Glencoe, Ill., 1961); and Robert W. Hodge, Paul M. Siegel, and Peter H. Rossi, “Occupational Prestige in the United States, 1925–1963,” *American Journal of Sociology*, LXX (November 1964), 286–302.

<sup>33</sup> Warner and Paul S. Lunt, *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (New Haven, Conn., and London, Eng., 1941). I shall not take the space to cite the other volumes in this series. For a savage criticism of the methodology of Warner and his associates see Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 225–39.

Let me return to the question implicitly posed by the skeptics: How important is social mobility? Perhaps because they think the question too large or its answer too obvious, most workers in the field have been more concerned with measuring the extent of vertical mobility than with estimating its influence or significance. Our unspoken assumption, occasionally stated explicitly, appears to be that the extent to which individuals can rise and fall socially "are prime indicators of the quality of a society or . . . of the degree to which it is a social democracy."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the harsh criticism leveled against the very undertaking of social-mobility research is in part a reaction against the unanalytical affirmation contained in such language. For, as I have more recently observed, "the assumption does not stand close scrutiny. The point is not that social mobility is lacking in significance; it is rather that its significance is not precisely that which is so often attributed to it."<sup>35</sup> One cannot help being struck by the very last sentence in Stephan Thernstrom's first book: "Whether the presence of opportunity of this kind [that is, "the petty success stories enacted in nineteenth-century Newburyport"] is a sufficient test of the good society, however, may be doubted."<sup>36</sup> It is useful to remember that a certain amount of social mobility is inevitable in all but the rigid caste societies that affix social positions to individuals entirely on the basis of birth or the rankings of their families.

Doctrinaires of varied stripe, who reject out of hand the importance of pursuit by individuals of social and material improvement or the prevailing arrangements in a liberal capitalistic society, will understandably show little enthusiasm for vertical mobility within that society. The spiritually inclined will agree with William Ellery Channing, who in 1840 told workingmen that the improvement that counted was "not an outward change of condition." It was "something deeper. I know but one elevation of a human being, and that is Elevation of Soul," Channing proclaimed.<sup>37</sup> Unrelenting social critics may agree with James A. Henretta that "the entire conceptual framework of the analysis of social mobility is predicated upon the universality of the values and goals of . . . [the] white, upwardly-mobile, Quaker or Protestant middle class"

<sup>34</sup> Pessen, ed., *Three Centuries of Social Mobility*, xi. For variations on the theme of the centrality of social mobility see Arthur M. Ross, foreword to Lipset and Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, vii; Blau and Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure*, vii-viii; and W. Lloyd Warner, *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago, 1953).

<sup>35</sup> Pessen, "Social Mobility," in Glenn Porter, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Economic History* (to be published shortly by Charles Scribner's Sons).

<sup>36</sup> Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, 224.

<sup>37</sup> Channing, *On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes* (Boston, 1840), reprinted in Channing, *The Works of William E. Channing, D.D.* (6 vols., Boston, 1843), V. 166.

and that scholarly emphasis on equality of opportunity over its alleged opposite, equality of condition, is a choice that is "ideological in nature"; or with Bruce Cumings that the idea of mobility within the system is an ideological weapon forged by the ruling class the better to maintain their control.<sup>38</sup> Those of us who on the one hand feel that heaven can wait, for all our interest in spiritual mobility, and on the other that the social implications of vertical mobility are not exhausted by the fact that some conservative propagandists have enthusiastically encouraged belief in the idea will maintain our curiosity about both its extent and its significance.

Certainly mobility, whether upward or downward, has been of vital importance to those who experienced it. Those who, like Jack Louderlager, get a raise both in pay and title are likely not only to live better but to feel that sense of psychic reward and well-being that one would have thought would be of particular interest to scholars discontented with probing man's material condition alone.<sup>39</sup> Surely, it tells something important about a society that it is this rather than that number or proportion of its members who know the joys of personal betterment or the despair of personal fall. The beauty of our plodding empirical studies is that they give us a clearer idea of what these proportions have been.

Nor is social mobility unimportant to those who have not experienced it. Since Mr. Cumings does not document his estimate that "one upwardly mobile individual infects [*sic*] at least ten others with the idea that they could or should make it, too,"<sup>40</sup> it cannot be treated as other than an informed guess. Yet it seems clear enough that knowledge of other people's rise affects our behavior. Black youngsters performing "coolly" on hot outdoor basketball courts in Bedford Stuyvesant schoolyards during summer vacations seem to be dreaming of achieving for themselves the glamorous status and the amazing style of living that they know his style of basketball earned for Walt Frazier.

<sup>38</sup> Henretta, "The Study of Social Mobility," 173 (first quotation), 169-70 (second quotation); Cumings, "Reflections on Schurmann's Theory of the State," 60. Henretta documents very unimpressively (p.170) his interesting notion that "other ethnic, racial, or class groups" did not accept the "value" of social mobility, relying on several random quotations from secondary sources, in this case from practitioners of "the new labor history."

<sup>39</sup> Kathleen Kutolowski observes that in nineteenth-century Genesee County "vertical upward mobility within Masonry . . . brought achievement and satisfaction" to those who experienced it, resulting not only in important "business and political contacts, but in additional psychological rewards." Kutolowski, "Freemasonry in the Early Republic: A Case Study," 7, a paper presented at the spring meeting of the New England Historical Association, May 8, 1976.

<sup>40</sup> Cumings, "Reflections on Schurmann's Theory of the State," 60.

The actual incidences of dramatic individual rise up the economic and status ladders seem important too because they give substance to a general belief in the prevalence of social mobility in our society. It seems to me that we know a great deal more about the propagation of this belief than we know about its acceptance. Scholars occasionally appear to assume that the Horatio Alger novels and the variations on the rags-to-riches theme that have been published and circulated over the course of American history were not only widely read but that their social message was absorbed. As Robert K. Merton has pointed out there is no way of ascertaining precisely how deeply the American public and interested Europeans accepted or were influenced by this belief. We do know with greater certainty that, to whatever extent it did touch them, it served as a kind of social cement, helping to muffle dissent and turn have-nots against prophets of social doom by seemingly belying their sour report that society in the New World was no more open than it was in the Old. We have inferred from the unprecedented numbers of immigrants who flocked to our shores, the absence of revolutions, and the pathetic state usually characteristic of radical parties in our history that a widespread belief in the pervasiveness of upward mobility provides at least a partial explanation of these historical developments.<sup>41</sup> Such an inference is a perfectly appropriate historical exercise, but it would of course be strengthened if future research enables us to transform some of our surmises into actual knowledge of what ordinary people were thinking and feeling.

Whatever may be its ultimate significance, social mobility is not incompatible with the continuation of a sharply stratified society. The ascent or descent of persons into new social categories, in the language of Bernard and Elinor Gellert Barber, "can occur without transforming the stratification system as a whole."<sup>42</sup> In the more technical language recently used by an English scholar, "we can envisage low or high degrees of movement between clusters, whether intergenerationally or intragenerationally. The clusters

<sup>41</sup> Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (rev. ed., Glencoe, Ill., 1957), 170-71; Carl N. Degler, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America* (New York, 1959), 257-59, 269-72; Edward Pessen, "Why the United States Has Never Had a Revolution—only 'Revolutions,'" *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXXII (Winter 1973), 29-42; and Seymour M. Lipset, "Why No Socialism in the United States?" in Seweryn Bialer and Sophia Sluzar, eds., *Radicalism in the Contemporary Age: I, Sources of Contemporary Radicalism* (3 vols., Boulder, Colo., 1977), I, 31-149.

<sup>42</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, 1956), 53; Judah Matras, "Social Mobility and Social Structure: Some Insights from the Linear Model," *American Sociological Review*, XXXII (August 1967), 608-14; and Barber and Barber, *European Social Class: Stability and Social Change* (New York, 1965), 5.

may be quite stable whatever the degree of internal movement, provided that individual mobile persons conform to the conditions of the aggregate in which they find themselves.”<sup>43</sup> A class system marked by drastic disparities in the wealth, status, and influence of the members of the different classes is neither weakened nor made more equitable when the persons who manage to move up to the highest classes from below have absorbed the values and identified themselves with the interests of their new social order. The sociological literature—and for that matter, popular folklore—offer many instances of the secular variation on the theme that the recent convert is often “more Catholic than the Pope.”<sup>44</sup>

More important than the social backgrounds of influential persons or whether or not they have been upwardly mobile are their behavior patterns as adults and the social values and recent experiences that are likely to have influenced that behavior. In Daniel Scott Smith’s phrase about the enduring “elite or upper class in America,” its “social and ideological character . . . and its relationships to the rest of the society are both more crucial for its history than the social origins of its members.”<sup>45</sup> The defendant brought before the bar presided over by a judge whose origins were plebeian would understandably be more concerned about the jurist’s present philosophy than about his earlier condition. I must admit to having been curious and foolish enough to try to check out the connection between poor boys and the Presidency, for no better reason than that James Bryce once implied that there was such a connection. Yet it seems to me that political historians—particularly those of us who have performed quantitative research into the early backgrounds of officeholders and party leaders—often overestimate, even if implicitly, the significance of these social origins.<sup>46</sup> My point is not that personages of worldly stature are totally uninfluenced by their beginnings, whatever they may have been. The psychological concept that the child is the father to

<sup>43</sup> Keith Hope, *The Analysis of Social Mobility*, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Lee Benson’s assumption that men tend to be “more influenced by their ethnic and religious group membership than by their membership in [ostensibly changing] economic classes or groups” goes against the weight of sociological opinion on the comparative influence of newer and older affiliations. Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 165.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, “Cyclical, Secular, and Structural Change in American Elite Composition,” *Perspectives in American History*, IV (1970), 372. A mid-twentieth-century survey of the “self-made man” reports that “his early economic disadvantage appears to have little impact on his social attitudes.” Patricia Salter West, “Social Mobility Among College Graduates,” in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset, eds., *Class, Status, and Power: A Reader in Social Stratification* (1st ed., Glencoe, Ill., 1953), 480.

<sup>46</sup> See for example David J. Rothman, *Politics and Power: The United States Senate, 1869-1901* (New York, 1966), 271-75.

the man no doubt applies as well to the mighty as to the lowly. The former are undoubtedly at least as emotionally complex as the latter. The point, rather, is that the recent statuses of powerful men are likely to be more revealing about their subsequent social actions than are the material circumstances of their childhoods.

A functionalist model would underscore a complex society's growing need for persons of the requisite skills (and social attitudes) regardless of their backgrounds or origins. Those with greater sympathy for a more radical analytic model will find sustenance in Richard E. Mitchell's recent essay on sponsored mobility in the later Roman Republic.<sup>47</sup> Mitchell brilliantly depicts the role of the small aristocracy that ruled that society in actually abetting the upward movement of *novi homines* into the new (lesser) magistracies that had to be created in the wake of Rome's expansion and overseas conquests. In so doing, the great families did not so much share their power as they buttressed and extended it. "The increased sophistication and complexity of Roman life, administratively, economically, and socially," reports Mitchell, "... contributed to mobility." But, "In reality, mobility occurred as a consequence of the aristocrat's desire to retain control." "Mobility," he concludes, "was the direct result of an attempt by the few to remain dominant," functioning "in the interest of the noble factions."<sup>48</sup>

The liberal American republic of the modern era is of course far removed in nature as well as in time from the Roman Republic of two millennia ago. I know of no substantial evidence documenting Carl Russell Fish's and Matthew Josephson's old suggestion that civil service reform—and the prospects for upward mobility it held out for countless farm boys and workingmen's sons—was coolly manipulated by an ascendant bourgeoisie fed up both with the incompetence and the recurrent embarrassment resulting from post-Civil War corruption and spoilsmanship. Such evidence is not needed, however, to sustain the impression that the inordinate wealth, status, and influence commanded by relatively few families in our midst is, if anything, strengthened by the availability of great numbers of able young men and women drawn from families other than their own to occupy positions in the swelling bureau-

<sup>47</sup> Mitchell, "The Aristocracy of the Roman Republic," in Frederic C. Jaher, ed., *The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful: Elites and Upper Classes in History* (Urbana, Chicago, and London, 1973), 27–63. On "sponsored mobility" see the discussion in Lawrence Stone, "Social Mobility in England, 1500–1700," in Rowney and Graham, eds., *Quantitative History*, 241–43.

<sup>48</sup> Mitchell, "The Aristocracy of the Roman Republic," 46, 27, 48, 60; quotations appear in order on the pages cited.



cracies of government and business, to do the scientific and social thinking, to dream the poetic dreams, to compose and sing the songs, to play heroically the games that are so vital to order and stability in modern society. In sum, questions arise as to the nature of the "social democratization" represented by upward movement of plebeians into posts of lesser significance, if often of great attractiveness, in a stratified society.

One cannot speak of the importance of social mobility in general because, as has been noted, social mobility is itself an internally differentiated phenomenon. There is mobility and mobility. A better, because a more workable, question asks, what is the significance of the fact that the "rates" of mobility or entry into different social categories or plateaus differ from one another?

There are, of course, detailed explanations as to why masons or molders in Poughkeepsie were about three times as likely as butchers, painters, and saloonkeepers to have been laborers early in their careers.<sup>49</sup> There are no doubt explanations of similar specificity that account for the differential rates of mobility into say ambassadorships, upper business management, history professorships, the entertainment fields. A boyhood neighbor of mine leaped from modestly paid journeyman utility man to high-paid star slugger with the Giants when he suddenly learned, late in his career, to pull the ball. One suspects that the reasons for dramatically different rates of ascendancy into unlike social levels are both more complex and less idiosyncratic than that. C. Wright Mills was struck, as well he should have been, by the fact that whereas "On the lower and middle levels of management, objective criteria having to do with skillful performance of occupational duties do often prevail,"<sup>50</sup> thus creating opportunities for the able and talented of whatever background. The situation was very different at the top. As a business leader told a *Fortune* magazine interviewer in 1953, "We used to look primarily for brilliance [in top executives] . . . Now that much abused word 'character' has become very important. We don't care if you're a Phi Beta Kappa or Tau Beta Phi. We want a well-rounded person who can handle well-rounded people."<sup>51</sup> "Character" and "well-roundedness" are somewhat like the emperor's new clothes in that they are not always discernible to those of little faith. The numer-

<sup>49</sup> Griffen, "Occupational Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," 321.

<sup>50</sup> Mills, *The Power Elite*, 140.

<sup>51</sup> "The Crown Princes of Business," *Fortune*, XLVII (October 1953), 266, cited in Mills, *The Power Elite*, 145; see also "The Nine Hundred," *Fortune*, XLVI (November 1952), 132-35, 232, 234-36.

ous modern studies revealing that the entrepreneurial elite in the mid-twentieth century as in Tocqueville's time have been recruited overwhelmingly from their own sort, closing their ranks to the socioeconomic majority as well as to ethnic, religious, and racial minorities, indicate that in some eyes character is what the sons of rich, white, native-born Protestants of prestigious denomination have.<sup>52</sup>

For all the instability theoretically attendant on the intrusion of social upstarts into the most exalted "clusters" of American society, the extant evidence suggests that even the minor disturbance of this sort seldom happens. These disparate patterns of entry into the various levels of American society suggest the wisdom of our occasionally looking up from our path or multiple-regression analyses, stochastic models, and Markov processes to ponder further the significance of these disparities.

Having posed several questions that emerge from previous research, I shall close by offering a few thoughts concerning future work. A very articulate and well-known historian has recently commented that he knows "of no historical study [of social mobility], whose findings, when critically examined, can be said to be highly (or even moderately) credible."<sup>53</sup> In view of such skepticism from so prestigious a source, what need is there for exhortation to workers in the field to strive in their future labors to improve their work? Instead of general admonitions, let me make a few very brief suggestions.

Sociologists have taught us a great deal lately about the physical, emotional, and intellectual as well as the social traits of the socially mobile. Working with masses of aggregate data on anonymous and long-dead individuals, historians understandably are less likely than their sociological colleagues to unearth such per-

<sup>52</sup> Working backward in time see Mabel Newcomer, *The Big Business Executive: The Factors That Made Him, 1900-1950* (New York, 1955); Suzanne Keller, "The Social Origins and Career Lines of Three Generations of American Business Leaders" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1953); "The Nine Hundred"; W. Lloyd Warner and James C. Abegglen, *Occupational Mobility in American Business and Industry, 1928-1952* (Minneapolis, 1955); Frank W. Taussig and C. S. Joslyn, *American Business Leaders: A Study in Social Origins and Social Stratification* (New York, 1932); William Miller, "American Historians and the Industrial Elite," *Journal of Economic History*, IX (November 1949), 184-208; Frances W. Gregory and Irene D. Neu, "The American Industrial Elite in the 1870s: Their Social Origins," in William Miller, ed., *Men and Business: Essays in the Historical Role of the Entrepreneur* (Cambridge, Mass., 1952); Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War*, 73-164; and Brian J. Danforth, "The Influence of Socioeconomic Factors upon Political Behavior: A Quantitative Look at New York City Merchants, 1828-1844" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1974).

<sup>53</sup> Benson, "Group Cohesion and Social and Ideological Conflict," 760.

sonal and idiosyncratic information. Yet they would be wise to be alert to any signs of this sort of evidence, not only to humanize material that is otherwise disconcertingly abstract, if not arid, but to gain deeper insight into the amazingly complex causes of any individual's upward or downward social movement. The point is not that being pretty, say, is invariably conducive to the social success of those women who happen to be so but rather that in some cases physical attractiveness does seem to play a decisive role in the lives of persons who experience what sociologists call upward marriage mobility.<sup>54</sup> The student of social mobility is well advised to cast the widest possible net in searching for explanations of the elusive phenomenon he seeks to understand.

For all the strenuousness of our recent efforts, our knowledge of the extent or rates of social mobility for different periods in American history remains pitifully inadequate. Our heroic empirical studies have lighted up only a small corner of the darkness, so small a corner in fact that any attempt to draw sweeping generalizations about the differential mobility patterns in different types of social milieu are fraught with risk, if they are not simply unwarranted, because their data base is so slight. We cannot assume that because certain patterns of social mobility obtained in particular communities previously studied these patterns must have prevailed in similar communities that are as yet unstudied. Historians, of all scholars, should be skeptical of social "laws" purporting to describe in advance the nature of places we have not yet examined. Historians need to continue gathering information on social mobility in the enormous number of previously unexamined American communities, not only to enlarge our information as to the shape of these patterns but in order to attain a clearer idea of the broad environmental factors that helped account for them. For our curiosity about social mobility extends beyond the desire to know how much of it there has been. We wish to know the diverse causes and the consequences of the mobility rates disclosed by our research.

Achieving such understanding is enormously difficult. In trying to account for the invariably different rates of vertical mobility in diverse American communities at different times, scholars need pay attention to more than the relative size and the degree of technological advance of these communities, to name two factors

<sup>54</sup> Glen H. Elder, Jr., "Appearance and Education in Marriage Mobility," *American Sociological Review*, XXXIV (August 1969), 519-32, offers a convincing statistical argument on the important role women's looks play in determining the social standing of their marital choices.

that quite appropriately have received much attention. Historians more easily than sociologists are likely to see the wisdom in testing for the possible significance of regional factors in accounting for unlike mobility patterns. Do the "southernness," "northernness," "easterness," or "westernness" of villages, towns, and cities appear to play an important part in influencing their comparative levels of social opportunity? This is a question that may well be worth pursuing, as are any number of additional questions previously unasked.

In seeking to uncover the various significances of vertical mobility, it would seem sensible to check the relationship between the patterns of social movement on the one hand and the social structure, the political system, and even ideological developments on the other.

Although internal differentiation within certain social ranks and occupations, such as the professions, has been studied very intensively, it has been largely neglected for other perhaps equally important and interesting categories. Slavery, as we have long known, was by no means an undifferentiated social and economic plight.<sup>55</sup> The diversity within rural, and for that matter political, occupations and rankings remains to be explored by curious scholars, as do the implications of this diversity.

As a number of scholars have noted, we pay relatively little attention to downward mobility (perhaps for the same reasons so much less ink has been expended on the St. Louis Browns than on the Yankees). We seem not to be very interested in life's losers. It would be good to know more about skidders as well as climbers.<sup>56</sup>

I have indicated that historians know more about the widespread circulation of publications proclaiming allegedly massive vertical mobility than they do about popular perceptions of and reactions to this literature.<sup>57</sup> A scholarly era that shows as much interest as does ours in fathoming the moods of the inarticulate masses should have no difficulty in turning its attention to what

<sup>55</sup> Herbert G. Gutman, "The World Two Cliometricians Made: A Review Essay of  $F + E = T/C$ ," *Journal of Negro History*, L (January 1975), 53-227, demolishes the contention in Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (Boston and Toronto, 1974) as to the allegedly high rate of upward movement from field hand to a more attractive status within slavery.

<sup>56</sup> See Donald J. Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities* (Chicago, 1963); Howard M. Bahr, "Worklife Mobility Among Bowery Men," *Social Science Quarterly*, XLIX (June 1968), 128-41; and Joseph Lopreato and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, "The Political Orientation of Skidders: A Middle Range Theory," *American Sociological Review*, XXXV (June 1970), 440-51.

<sup>57</sup> For an informed discussion of the great difficulty in trying to measure popular reaction to the Alger myth and variations on it see Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 170-71.

ordinary people thought and felt about their own life chances. That good data of this sort are likely to be hard to come by will discourage only sunshine researchers.

Above all, historians must strive to make their studies of social mobility less boring than I think they are. Readers no doubt wish to know the sources and the evidence underlying the scholar's generalizations. It is nevertheless an imposition on them to fill thirty pages of journal text with twenty-eight pages of tables, equations, charts, many of them undecipherable. Journal editors and dissertation advisers may have grown comfortably latitudinarian, social mobility may have become so modishly "in" a subject that almost anything reported on it will in some quarters be approved, no matter how appallingly dull, if it seems methodologically imposing enough. Yet I think it wise for the scholar planning to publish the fruits of his or her research on the topic to pause and ask: Do I have something to say that is likely to be of interest to an intelligent reader? If the answer is yes, let each of us then take a vow to say what we have to say clearly and unpretentiously. We owe it to the theme of social mobility to discuss it in a manner befitting its importance and its great human interest.