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# A Comparative Study of Social Mobility\*

HOWARD M. BROTZ

EMPIRICAL research in social stratification has for long had the implicit rationale that the exposure of inequality was a political good and that over-all social justice would be served by producing this information. This is not a mere accident. Both the critique of capitalism, which came to a head during the depression, and the older utilitarian impulses animating and shaping so much of social science led it to be concerned, in different ways, with an attack upon privilege. The fact, too, that social science in its modern form arose in a society in which the fundamental victory of democracy over a hereditary oligarchy, if not fully consummated, was regarded as a matter of time, meant that there was a politically vital principle and even a political party in that society to which one could appeal in exposing yet remaining bastions of privilege. Even those later developments in social science which deny the possibility of democracy do not transcend the horizon laid down by the utilitarian framework. To be sure, writers in this later tradition, such as Michels, could not attack inequality with the buoyancy of their forebears against whom they were a reaction. Since, however, with a few exceptions they were (and still are) liberal democrats, although one is tempted to wonder exactly on what basis, their reflections and observations about the inevitability of inequality in the decisive respect, that is, between rulers and ruled, could only be made with a certain regret about the facts they felt compelled to adduce. We need not concern ourselves here with the validity of this point of view, e.g., its difficulties in attempting to account, among other things, for the power of public opinion in modern democratic societies.

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\* REVIEW ARTICLE: *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, by Seymour Martin

Lipset and Reinhard Bendix. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959. \$5.00.

As is so often the case in the history of thought, problems can get detached from both the theoretical and the political contexts in which they arose. It is necessary to be aware of these contexts. Broken off from their roots, the problems continue to be studied in an *ad hoc*, empiricistic manner, even in cases where the issues to which they were once related have been visibly settled. The criteria for selecting problems become matters of fashion, even ritual.

If this is true in general, it is particularly so with regard to the study of social stratification. The original political issue, namely, the attack upon hereditary privilege, has expired; and in those societies in which there are students of social mobility, that is, modern industrial societies, even the fight against the extremes of inequality generated by early capitalism is no longer the issue it once was. The middle class has triumphed, and the standard of living, more uniform throughout the society as a whole, has risen. Detached from these massive facts, the persistent interest in inequality *per se* must of necessity focus upon the existing social distinctions and inequalities to which, in practice, more importance tends to be given than to the more fundamental political and economic equalities. Within such a framework one is not theoretically prepared to raise the question whether these social inequalities are in fact more or less decisive than the equalities that exist in that same society. Yet, until one raises this question, how can one even begin to account for the pressures towards leveling and mediocritization?

Beyond all this, the habits of empiricism are as pronounced in this sphere as in any other that one can name. To so many of those studies which have patiently and carefully shown that there is a little more social mobility here and a little less there, one cannot help wondering from time to time what difference it all makes.

It is the singular merit of *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* that its authors are acutely aware of this state of affairs. Their insistence that research which does not have an intellectual rationale will prove to have an anti-intellectual one is a most healthy and welcome canon in the contemporary situation. Their intention in this book is thus nothing less than a most serious attempt to reconnect the more significant findings of a generation's work in this area with the most substantial questions to which they point.

The book is, in the first instance, a collation of the authors' own findings in a study of labor mobility in Oakland, California, together with a most comprehensive sweep of international, comparative re-

search in this field. To a lesser degree they also make use of historical comparisons and certainly prepare the ground for a more intensive sociological use of such data. A major part of the study is an attempt to clear up the popular misimpression that European societies are simply more closed than the American and to establish precisely in what sense this is or is not the case. As they show, the crude rate of occupational mobility in the United States, from unskilled rural occupations upwards, is very similar to the rates in a number of industrialized countries. Furthermore, the over-all occupational structures of these countries, that is, the proportion of people in different types of occupations, are similar. (There is in these respects an excellent summary of the facts of an industrialized occupational structure on pages 83–85.) They thus refute the hypothesis that high social mobility or, to be more precise, occupational mobility, is incompatible with the existence of marked distinctions of status or social class. One might even go farther and argue that in a society where there are stable and clear distinctions of status and rank, there may paradoxically be more social mobility than in an egalitarian society. On the one hand there may be selection procedures from above, such as becoming the protégé of a powerful patron, which are not present in the same degree in a society where everyone is more or less equal and on his own. On the other hand, change in occupation can mean much more—and can be the basis of a more permanent change in status—when it is connected with different life styles and different manners which permeate one's whole existence and which are not directly dependent upon wealth. Where there is no firm ladder, to use a metaphorical example, there may be much movement but much less of clear social progression.

Granted, then, that the mass of opportunities for occupational mobility are roughly the same in industrialized America and Europe, what is the relation between social mobility and democratic egalitarianism, that is, the belief that opportunities are greater in America than in Europe? The authors state that they can only assume that this belief is more widespread in America. (Here it seems to me they might have considered the possibility that a major support for this belief and a clue to its precise meaning were the expectations and achievements of European immigrants in raising their *absolute* standard of living above that which they could realistically have achieved in Europe.) In any event they properly lead the understanding of egalitarianism back to that upon which it solidly stands:

the effective political equalization and the egalitarianism in manners that this brings about. As the authors assert, these are not a matter of belief but a reality. They do not, of course, deny that there are inequalities in income levels, occupational classes, and levels of social estimation generally. But what is more important, as they argue, is that these inequalities arise in a political framework which has been unaffected by a feudal past and by the effect which this in turn would have upon the very conception of status distinctions, differences in life styles, bearing, and modes of education.

In the establishment of their thesis the authors have brought together a truly massive amount of information and have taken the opportunity to range into a number of interesting by-ways. It was illuminating, for instance, to learn that the long-standing view about the superior propensity of German Protestants towards capitalistic activities is more questionable than had been thought to be the case. The original study upon which this view was based contended among other things that Protestants owned 60 per cent of taxable property. The authors cite a later study by Kurt Samuelsson,<sup>1</sup> who, in re-examining the issue, found that this was in fact precisely the percentage of Protestants in the population at that time.

Especially worthy of mention is the question upon which the study closes. The authors bring to a head their varied observations on the relationship between mobility, individual happiness, and the stability of society by explicitly questioning the assumption that high mobility and greater equality of opportunity lead to greater human happiness in a completely unproblematic way. They thus reopen for discussion what had become the dogmatic starting point of so much recent research in this area. This seems to be highly desirable, if for no other reason than to understand what this assumption means.

In all of this, I wonder whether the psychological assumptions underlying some of the facts guiding their formulation of the question are not much more problematic than they seem. The authors speak of an achievement drive as productive of psychic discontent and have in mind as a model for this an insatiable quest for relative superiority in prestige, power, or wealth. Yet is all orientation towards achievement, is all ambition as such, of this character? Are there not certain goals, such as, most obviously, the pursuit of sci-

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<sup>1</sup> Kurt Samuelsson, *Ekonomi och religion* (Stockholm: Kooperativa Förbundet, 1957).—Ed.

entific truth, which are intrinsically desirable for their own sake and of which the pursuit is certainly not productive of any kind of psychic discontent rooted in anomic envy? A psychology which can at best account for the latter only by reducing it to the former would then seem to create insuperable difficulties. Not the least of these would be its inability to distinguish in a clear and satisfactory way between the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of approval, granted that they may in cases appear to be the same. What is thus at issue, and what the authors themselves point to in their reservation about the typicality of the status-obsessed, is the possibility of a psychology which can distinguish precisely between these two orientations toward achievement. This seems to be crucial since it is only through a clarification of the psychological issues involved that one can approach the fundamental problem posed by social mobility in an egalitarian society. This is the maintenance of respect for high standards of excellence or achievement and, in particular, for those standard-setting institutions which protect and support this type of achievements rather than the other. It is on such grounds that they logically question the good of unlimited social mobility. Now one may grant the validity of this diagnosis for an important range of facts about contemporary society, if one does not forget about the aspirations of the really great empire-builders and conquerors who did not seem to have been suffering in any way. But even on levels below the successful giants, one wonders whether all desire to achieve, all ambition, even all energy as such is intrinsically pathological as something which necessarily forces the individual into an insatiable quest for status. What about craftsmanship in the widest sense of this word? Is this really productive of anomic envy? What reflection about this suggests is that in the connection between high mobility and psychological disorder, it is not so much the rate of mobility qua rate which is the primary cause of disorder as it is the kind of mobility going on in the society and the standards it raises to prominence. Specifically, this would be a kind which subordinates the claims of craftsmanship, which rests upon finite capacities, to certain generalized symbols of conventional prestige, which are intrinsically unlimited, of which wealth is the most obvious example. In the extreme this would be the kind of mobility going on in a society in which nothing at all counted except money or some kind of status equivalent. To assimilate all mobility to this

necessarily obscures the fact that even in a competitive, commercial society some measure of genuine self-respect, based upon doing well what one can, is possible at all levels of the society, as well as mutual respect between people of different capacities and with different rewards, which are not the cause of anomic envy because they are regarded as right. If one does not distinguish between these two orientations toward achievement and these two kinds of mobility, one will make a valid critique of the costs of high mobility but in a way which at the same time deprives whatever approximation exists in a society to the workings of a fair and socially harmonious merit system of its sanction. The difficulty, however, is that for some considerable time in the history of thought we have been wedded to a psychological theory which looks upon man as enslaved to his *amour-propre*, and, therewith, upon human life as a ceaseless status race. If, however, this is radicalized and there really is nothing above vanity in the human horizon, then craftsmanship can be at best only a means to its demands. As such, craftsmanship and standards of excellence lose any independent status—in both the life of societies and the life of the individuals—as a basis of self-respect and happiness. A merit system based upon such standards then becomes meaningless as a criterion for seeing the precise character of the kind of social mobility going on in a specific society. It is for this reason that a theoretical framework which rests upon this image of man cannot distinguish between healthy and pathological mobility. Now when the authors, faced with these difficulties, are driven to question, as they do in their concluding essay, the universality of the obsession with status, they may be guilty of some inconsistency inasmuch as their remarks on the pathology of an achievement drive partake of this premise. What is of greater importance, however, is the degree to which this reservation constitutes a genuinely fresh turn in the analysis of stratification, for it rests upon an awareness of the limitation of one of the most deeply embedded psychological postulates now in vogue. This seems to be crucial since it is only through a clarification of the psychological issues involved that one can approach the fundamental problems about social mobility in an egalitarian society that they have so forthrightly raised.

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