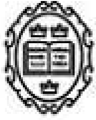

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Are American rates of social mobility exceptionally high? New evidence on an old issue

ROBERT ERIKSON AND JOHN H. GOLDTHORPE

HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

The question of whether or not the USA is a nation characterized by distinctively high rates of social mobility is one that has a long and complex history. It is, however, a history that remains instructive for those sociologists who would wish to broach the question anew, even though they may feel that they can now do so with significantly greater resources—empirical, conceptual and technical—than their predecessors were able to command.

Arguments stressing American 'exceptionalism' in the extent of social mobility must be traced back at least to Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique* of 1835. For Tocqueville, the USA stood in significant contrast with the older nations of Europe on account not only of its democratic form of government but also of various features of the society out of which the new republic had grown. And one of these features to which Tocqueville gave major emphasis was the instability of the social position of families, and, hence, the uncertainty of lines of class demarcation. 'Chez les peuples aristocratiques [i.e. those of Europe]', he wrote, 'les familles restent pendant des siècles dans le même état, et souvent dans le même lieu . . . Les classes étant fort distinctes et immobiles . . . chacune d'elles devient pour celui qui en fait partie une sorte de petite patrie . . .' However, 'Chez les peuples démocratiques [i.e. the Americans] de nouvelles familles sortent sans cesse du néant, d'autres y retombent sans cesse, et toutes celles qui demeurent changent de face . . . Chaque classe venant à se rapprocher des autres et à s'y mêler, ses membres deviennent indifférents et comme étrangers entre eux.' (1835; 1968:243–4)[1].

Some decades later, one finds claims remarkably similar to the foregoing being maintained on various occasions by Marx and Engels, even though of course out of political interests very different to those of Tocqueville. Again the contrast is drawn between the old world and the new: more specifically, in this case, between the established capitalist societies of Europe which possess 'a developed formation of classes' and the nascent capitalist society of America in which classes 'have not yet become fixed but continually change and interchange their elements in constant flux.' Above all, in seeking to explain the weakness of organized labour in America, Marx and Engels stressed the fact that, because of the open frontier and the wide range of opportunities for minor entrepreneurship, America still lacked the presence of 'a permanent and hereditary proletariat'. Writing in the 1860s, Marx remarked on the 'continuous conversion of wage labourers into independent self-sustaining peasants', and went on to assert that 'The position of wages labourer is for a very large part of the American people but a probational state which they are sure to leave within a longer or a shorter term.' Likewise, towards the end of the century, Engels saw America as remaining close to the ideal of a nation in which 'everyone could still become if not a capitalist, at all events an independent man, producing or trading, with his own means, for his own account.'[2]

The crucial difference in perspective between Tocqueville on the one hand and Marx and Engels on the other is revealed when one considers how they viewed the future of the American exceptionalism which in their own day they found so striking. In both cases, the expectation was that this exceptionalism would diminish. But while for Tocqueville this would come about through European societies, and polities, drawing closer to

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the democratic model inaugurated by the USA, for Marx and Engels America was destined sooner or later—as the frontier was closed and as large-scale enterprise developed—to become, like all other capitalist societies, one in which class divisions progressively hardened and revolutionary potential increased.

The issue posed by these two conflicting expectations can then be taken as that which was central to the debate on social mobility in America throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In the years before and immediately following the first world war, the leading protagonists were in fact Marxists of one kind or another, both American and foreign, for whom the main point of reference was Werner Sombart's challenging essay of 1906, *Warum gibt es in den Vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus*? Sombart followed Marx and Engels in regarding high rates of mobility of wage workers into independent employment—'die Flucht des Arbeiters in die Freiheit'—as a check on working-class formation and, hence, as being one of several major obstacles to the growth of the American labour movement. However, to the dismay of more orthodox Marxists, Sombart revealed a good deal of ambivalence over what the future might bring. While recognizing that features of American society unconducive to socialism, including extensive mobility, might well disappear with the further advance of capitalism, he flatly rejected all notions of 'historical inevitability'. Furthermore, he stressed the pervasiveness in America of an individualistic and achievement-oriented ideology which could, in any event, seriously inhibit 'class' interpretations of the social structure and of the fate of individuals within it.

Not surprisingly, then, as socialism remained clearly unattractive to the large mass of the American people, what appeared to Sombart as necessary qualifications to a Marxist view of American society became for other commentators —of diverse political commitments —the basis of interpretations of quite different kind. What these shared in common was a return to the Tocquevillian position that American society and culture were in fact *sui generis*—that is, were permanently marked by the influence of their unique historical origins; thus, they could not be adequately understood in the light of theories deriving from European experience. In particular, the ideal, and what was widely accepted as the not-so-distant reality, of a society of abundant opportunity and essential 'classlessness' were not destined to fade, as orthodox Marxists supposed; rather, 'Americanism' could serve as a surrogate for, or alternative to, socialism. As one author put it (Samson, 1935:16–21), equality of opportunity was 'a socialist conception of capitalism'.

Finally, though, to complete the circle, it may be noted that by the middle decades of the century such views were in turn being called into question —and not only by the Marxist faithful, heartened by the years of the Great Depression. In addition, certain dissident liberals and conservatives—whom Petersen (1953) has aptly labelled 'nostalgic Americans'—came in effect to endorse the standard arguments of the Left, changing only their tone from one of vindicated prophecy to angry alarm. As a result of urban-industrial development and the growing power of both big business and the labour unions, it was contended, America was now witnessing a decline in her historically high rates of mobility and, thus, the emergence of stable, homogeneous and conflicting classes on—what was taken to be—the European pattern. Only through a determined renewal of the individualistic ethos of the past, these authors warned, could the 'open' society be preserved.

As the foregoing outline should have made clear, the debate to this point was one of an essentially *political* character: that is to say, those who engaged in it, although in some cases social scientists, were evidently moved so far more by political than by academic or intellectual interests. Thus, it is notable that little effort was made at any direct investigation of the central factual questions involved; and that the arguments advanced from all quarters alike rested on little more than their authors' impressions, supported by whatever items of miscellaneous information were at hand and could be usefully pressed into service. At the same time, it should be said, the sociologists themselves showed no great eagerness to contribute to the debate. It is, for example, rather remarkable that Sorokin, in the first comprehensive academic treatise on social mobility, published in the USA in 1927, should apparently regard the issue of American exceptionalism as one not warranting any explicit attention or comment. It is true that by the 1940s and 1950s the controversy over whether

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lines of class division within America were tending to become more 'rigid' had reached the pages of the American sociological journals, and was in some instances being discussed with a relatively sophisticated concern for problems of evidence and inference (cf. Sibley, 1942; Sjoberg, 1951; Hertzler, 1952; Hollingshead, 1952; Rogoff, 1953; Chinoy, 1955; Lenski, 1958). But what was still crucially lacking, if the distinctiveness or otherwise of the American experience was to be appropriately assessed, was of course a systematic *comparative* review of mobility rates and patterns across a wide range of national societies.

The first serious attempt at such a review was not in fact made until the end of the 1950s—by Lipset and Bendix (1959) in their landmark volume, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*[3]. This produced, however, an empirical result and a theoretical argument through which the terms of the entire debate were significantly changed. Drawing on the findings of a series of national mobility studies, undertaken in the 1940s and early 1950s, Lipset and Bendix presented evidence to show that at the level of 'mass' movement—that is, of the intergenerational mobility of men between manual and non-manual occupations—the rate of mobility in the USA was not greatly different from that found in other industrial societies. In almost all instances, mobility of this kind appeared to be relatively high, with a quarter to a third of the men in successive generations moving from manual to non-manual occupations and *vice versa*. Moreover, Lipset and Bendix hypothesized that this broad similarity was a direct product of industrialism: specifically, of the generally uniform pattern and outcome of the development of occupational structures in the course of industrialization. In other words, no need arose to invoke, in the American or in other cases, the peculiar characteristics of national capitalisms, at least as an influence on mobility rates as objectively ascertainable. Where national differences did seem important, Lipset and Bendix suggested, was in the cultural and political contexts within which mobility was subjectively interpreted and evaluated. If America were distinctive, it was not in the rate of mobility that actually occurred, but rather in the way in which the extent of mobility tended to be viewed affirmatively, as indicating openness and equality, rather than critically, as indicating the persistence of inequalities of opportunity and condition alike.

Since Lipset and Bendix wrote, the further extensive cross-national analyses of mobility that have been undertaken have not themselves led to renewed discussion of the issue of American exceptionalism—in part, perhaps because the results produced have not come into any very obvious contradiction with the negative conclusion that Lipset and Bendix reached. Indeed, in a recent paper reviewing current comparative mobility research, Lipset (1983) has felt able to reaffirm, in its essentials, the view that he took over twenty years previously. None the less, it would, we believe, be mistaken to suppose that the question of the distinctiveness of American mobility rates is now a closed one. On the contrary, it must, on a number of different grounds, be regarded as one that still calls for much further examination.

THE PRESENT STATE OF THE QUESTION

It should, first of all, be noted, that the more general thesis from which Lipset and Bendix's position on mobility in the USA derives—namely, that rates of mobility in all industrial societies are at much the same, relatively high level—is one which *has* been subject to much critical comment. Indeed, it could be said that this thesis, at least in the sense in which it was originally proposed, can now stand only with very heavy qualification. Several recent investigations, in which advances in quality of data, conceptualization and analytical technique have been incorporated, have led to the conclusion that modern societies display in certain respects significantly varying mobility rates (e.g. Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1979, 1983; Pöntinen, 1983). One consequence of this is, then, that it no longer seems appropriate to pose the question of American exceptionalism in relation to some supposedly uniform pattern of mobility prevailing elsewhere. Rather, the implication is that one should now ask whether America is 'exceptional' only in the sense of appearing at the 'high' end of the range of variation in mobility that is in process of being revealed.

Secondly, however, it must be recognized that this new question is by no means a straightforward one to answer. Criticism of the comparative mobility analyses drawn on by Lipset and Bendix

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has in fact usually turned on a demonstration that they are excessively crude. As already indicated, only two (occupational) categories were used, only intergenerational mobility was considered, and only one measure of mobility—'outflow' rates—was examined. It has then been often possible to show that once a more refined and differentiated view of mobility is taken, the cross-national similarity that Lipset and Bendix assert is no longer apparent. Societies, it can be argued, are best thought of as having 'mobility profiles' (Miller, 1960), among which similarities may be evident in some respects but not in others. From this standpoint, then, it may not be possible to establish any one definitive ranking of societies in terms of the amount of mobility they display. At the same time, though, it has also to be noted that the way has thus been opened for several American authors, writing after Lipset and Bendix, to seek still to preserve the claim of American exceptionalism, albeit in some restricted version: that is, by confining the claim to a certain type or mode of mobility which is then represented as having a special importance.

Thus, for example, Blau and Duncan, in comparing the results of their 1962 study of mobility in the USA with those of various other national inquiries, were led to confirm Lipset and Bendix's finding that in terms of 'mass' mobility across the manual/non-manual line America does not appear very different from other industrial societies. But Blau and Duncan then go on to maintain that American society *does* appear distinctive in the amount of 'elite' mobility that occurs—such mobility being defined as that of the sons of industrial workers or farm labourers into professional positions. It is this distinctiveness in rather spectacular mobility—the 'grain of truth in the Horatio Alger myth'—they suggest, that explains what Lipset and Bendix leave obscure: namely, how the American egalitarian ideology and positive view of mobility have actually been sustained over time (1967:432–5). And, in turn, Blau and Duncan seek explicitly to restore the Tocquevillian argument, questioned by Lipset and Bendix, that superior chances of upward mobility are in themselves a major factor preserving the legitimacy and stability of the American system of democracy (pp. 436–41). Likewise, Thernstrom (1970) has compared data from a study of mobility in Boston between 1800 and 1963 with data produced by studies of European cities during the same period, and on this basis has suggested that American men have had uniquely high chances of moving out of the working class and especially, perhaps, *in the course or their own lifetimes*. Findings such as those drawn on by Lipset, he argues (1974), could be misleading in that similar rates of *inter*generational mobility may obscure different rates of *intra*generational departure from particular class origins[4]. Thernstrom thus still sees force in what may be thought of as the Marx-Sombart argument that American mobility patterns have been in certain respects distinctive and that this has 'a good deal to do with another fairly distinctive aspect of the American historical record—the failure of working-class-based protest movements to attract a mass following.' (1974: 551)

Finally, the issue of American exceptionalism appears as one of yet greater complexity when due account is taken not only of the different types or modes of mobility into which crude mobility rates may be disaggregated, but further of divergencies and distinctions in the conceptualization of mobility that occur at a more fundamental level.

For example, it is apparent in historical perspective that virtually *ab initio* the context within which mobility has been defined—and hence observed—has tended to be viewed in two different ways: that is, either as a class structure or as some kind of social hierarchy (cf. Goldthorpe, 1984). Thus, to revert to the debate on the American case, it is clear that Marx and Engels and likewise Sombart are primarily concerned with mobility between different class positions—that is, with mobility that entails some change in the individual's market and work relations: the wage worker becomes an independent farmer or artisan, or a small trader. Whether such a shift represents social ascent or descent is then only a secondary concern, if indeed it is considered at all; for the ultimate interest in this approach is with the consequence of mobility not for individuals but rather for the stability and homogeneity of classes, and of the working class in particular. In contrast, for Tocqueville and likewise for most American commentators, social mobility obviously implies 'vertical' movement between the levels of a hierarchy—whether this is seen as being one of

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wealth, prestige, socioeconomic status or whatever. In this view, it is what happens to the fortunes of individuals that is the overriding interest; and changes in class position, as defined in terms of market and work relations, only become of relevance in so far as they lead to social ascent or descent. What, for present purposes, is of importance is not the question of the relative merits of these two approaches, but the rather evident possibility that they may lead to quite different assessments of comparative mobility rates: specifically, American society could appear as being more or less exceptional depending on which context for the study of mobility is chosen.

Again, another conceptual divergence that has for long been present in the discussion of mobility—although often unrecognized or only imperfectly perceived—is that between what would now be termed absolute and relative mobility rates; that is, between mobility rates as actually observed and what may be determined as the underlying 'mobility regime' or 'pattern of social fluidity', which characterizes the association between origins and destinations, independently of structural and other effects reflected in the marginal distributions of the mobility table. For writers in the Marxian tradition, concerned with the implications of mobility for class formation, it is clearly absolute rates that must be the focus of attention. Thus, in the American case, what was seen as important was the actual amount of mobility that occurred away from working-class positions, albeit as a particular outcome of a period of rapid economic and social structural change. However, liberal exponents of the thesis of American exceptionalism, from Tocqueville onwards, have wished to emphasize not simply the volume of particular mobility flows, such as might be occasioned by stuctural change, but rather the general condition of 'openness' of American society or, in other words, the relatively slight connection that prevails between individuals' social origins and their subsequent careers and eventual social positions.

Tocqueville himself, as we have seen, recognized as the appropriate empirical evidence of such a condition (viewed within a hierarchical perspective) that rates of both upward *and* downward mobility should be high. Unfortunately, though, later commentators have tended to be less clear-headed. Claims are apparently made for the distinctive openness of American society on the basis of evidence which indicates only superior chances of upward movement. It seems to have been overlooked that what may be reflected here is no more than a relatively rapid expansion in the American case of the higher levels of the social hierarchy, and that if this is so, then—in the absence of any change in relative rates—the concomitants of increased upward mobility will be a reduction in downward mobility from these higher levels and greater immobility within them. It may of course be argued that the distinctiveness of American society lies precisely in the rapidity of its structural transformations—the consequence, say, of an exceptionally dynamic economy—so that objective opportunities for social ascent are maintained more abundantly than elsewhere. But what it is then important to recognize is that this is a different argument to that claiming a distinctive openness, and that the two arguments must be tested by comparative evidence of different kinds. In the former case—just as with the Marxian thesis of working-class instability—it is certain absolute mobility rates that are relevant: specifically, outflow rates from lower-level social origins to high-level social destinations. In the latter case, however, the relevant evidence will be that of relative rates—or patterns of social fluidity—as these prevail within the social hierarchy, or the class structure, considered overall.

PROBLEMS OF DATA AND COMPARATIVE STRATEGY

Until recently, comparative analyses of social mobility relied almost entirely on the published data of national inquiries. Where, as was typically the case, difficulties arose from cross-national differences in the ways in which mobility had been conceptualized and observed, the attempt was made to overcome these by the—rather drastic—collapsing of the categories used in the national studies so as to bring about some degree of at least nominal comparability. This procedure was, however, increasingly recognized as a far from satisfactory one, and has of late been largely superseded by that of the secondary analysis of original data sets. Working on this basis, it is possible to ensure that the national populations

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under investigation are rendered comparable in such respects as age, citizenship etc., and further to achieve major improvements in both the refinement and reliability of mobility analyses through the recoding of the relevant 'unit record' data of the original tapes to new categorizations, devised for the comparative purposes in hand. If, then, the question of whether American social mobility rates are exceptional is to be reopened, there can be little justification for treating it other than by secondary analysis. And indeed it may be said that a major incentive in returning to the question is to see if new light is thrown on it when analyses are undertaken with data of a better quality than those that were previously available.

However, secondary analysis in no way provides a guarantee that all problems of comparability can be resolved; and what can be achieved through it must of course be always conditioned by the original research that it seeks to exploit. In attempting to place American mobility data in a new comparative perspective, we saw as our main resource the 1973 replication, carried out by Featherman and Hauser, of Blau and Duncan's 1962 Occupational Change in a Generation study, which was the first national social mobility inquiry to be undertaken in the USA (Featherman and Hauser, 1978; Blau and Duncan, 1967). The conceptual context within which mobility is viewed in these two studies is that of a socioeconomic status hierarchy, and the basic tables are presented in terms of 17 occupational groupings ordered by socioeconomic status. Our aim was, however, to bring American mobility data into close comparability with data for three western European countries—England, France and Sweden—which we had already analysed within the alternative conceptual context of a class structure (Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1979, 1982, 1983). In order, then, to obtain this kind of comparability, we sought to recode the 1973 US data to the class schema that we had developed in our previous work. *Prima facie*, this appeared quite feasible since the categories of the schema were defined in terms of occupational groupings and employment status (employer, self-employed, employee etc.), and the American data were coded to the three-digit occupational groupings and also to the 'class of worker' categories of the US Bureau of the Census. But, unfortunately, when the recoding was actually attempted, it proved impossible to carry it through with a satisfactory degree of precision. The Bureau of the Census occupational classification was evidently devised on more 'sectoral' lines than the European ones to which our class schema was related, and correspondingly gave less attention to differentiation in terms of authority or responsibility. In consequence, we frequently found that the actual occupations shown in the *Classified Index* (1960) as belonging to a single three-digit category were ones that we would have wished to allocate to two, or even three or four, different classes within our schema.

Some difficulties of this nature must of course be met with in any recoding exercise, and can often be accepted as unavoidable but not serious imperfections. However, those we encountered were such as to mean that the comparability of the American class mobility tables which we did eventually produce with those for our three European countries was of a decidedly lower order than the comparability that we had established among the tables for these three countries themselves. Thus, while results from this 'class' recoding of the American data are discussed in a later section of this paper, it was apparent to us that they were not adequate to serve as the only or even the main basis of our comparative efforts, and that some alternative strategy had to be sought.

Given that the American data could not be very satisfactorily treated in terms of the class schema that was our theoretically-preferred instrument for the analysis of mobility, our obvious next-best approach was to seek to apply to the European data the categories of the American mobility tables in their original form: that is, the 17 occupational categories earlier referred to, which are in fact the ten 'major groups' of the Bureau of the Census occupational classification further differentiated in some cases by either employment status or industry (Blau and Duncan, 1967:23–6). Here again, though, difficulties arose. Recoding to these categories was clearly not possible with the Swedish data, and only questionably so with the French. It was only in the English case that a high level of reliability could be assured—and that by dint of highly complex and laborious procedures[5]. None the less, we decided that it would in fact be a worthwhile strategy to concentrate our attention primarily on an England–USA comparison based

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on the American categories, since this could perhaps permit some wider inferences than might immediately be apparent. Two considerations were of importance in this respect. First, we had from our previous work a fairly detailed knowledge of how rates and patterns of intergenerational class mobility in England related to those of France and Sweden; and, in particular, we had established that in their underlying mobility regimes, or patterns of social fluidity, these countries showed a quite close similarity. Secondly, we thought it safe to assume that in making our England–USA comparison on the basis of the 17 categories used in the American inquiry, we would overall be more likely to show up variation in mobility than if we had been able to work with the class schema. For, as we have already noted, the occupational categories are relatively heterogeneous ones, and the greater such heterogeneity, the greater the probability of variation in mobility being displayed simply on account of differing distributions, from one country to the other, of occupations *within* categories. It would then follow from the foregoing that in the event of our comparison revealing that the USA was not in fact a more 'open' society than England, or did not in any other way differ appreciably in its pattern of social fluidity, such findings could very reasonably be supposed to hold good in regard to France and Sweden also.

The next section of the paper is then taken up with presenting findings from our England–USA comparison. Out of the very wide range of analyses that could have been undertaken, it will be seen that we have focused our attention on those which would appear most relevant to addressing the several issues that were reviewed in the introductory sections of the paper.

RESULTS FROM AN ENGLAND–USA COMPARISON OF MOBILITY BETWEEN OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS

Both the 1973 American inquiry and the 1972 English inquiry from which our data derive were restricted to males, and we have in each case

TABLE 1 *Occupational Distribution of Respondents and Respondents' Fathers, Men Aged 20–64*

Occupational category[a]	Respondents' fathers[b] USA 1973	Respondents' fathers[b] ENG 1972	Respondents USA 1973	Respondents ENG 1972
	%		%	
1 Professionals, self-employed	1	1	2	1
2 Professionals, salaried	6	3	14	10
3 Managers	6	8	12	14
4 Salesmen, other	3	2	4	2
5 Proprietors	5	8	3	5
6 Clerks	4	4	7	6
7 Salesmen, retail	2	1	2	1
8 Craftsmen, manufacturing	7	13	8	14
9 Craftsmen, other	7	10	8	8
10 Craftsmen, construction	6	6	6	7
11 Operatives, manufacturing	9	9	11	10
12 Operatives, other	8	14	8	9
13 Service	6	4	6	3
14 Labourers, manufacturing	2	2	2	1
15 Labourers, other	4	8	4	7
16 Farmers	18	5	3	2
17 Farm labourers	5	4	1	2
N	21013	9438	21013	9438
Dissimilarity indices (Δ) respondents' fathers/respondents:			USA	22
			ENG	17

Notes: (a) For full details, see Blau and Duncan (1967: 26–9) and Featherman and Hauser (1978: 25–38).
(b) At respondent's age 16 (USA) or 14 (ENG).

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analysed data referring to respondents aged 20–64. Some minor differences remain between the populations of the two studies, but none of a kind likely to have any significant effect on the results reported[6].

We begin with a consideration of intergenerational mobility rates and patterns, since it is on mobility viewed in this perspective that discussion of American exceptionalism has chiefly centred. In Table 1 we show the distribution of respondents to the two inquiries and of their fathers over the 17 occupational categories on which our analyses are based, and then in Table 2 we show father-to-son mobility rates expressed in the form of outflow

TABLE 2 *Intergenerational Mobility Among Men Aged 20–64, 17 Occupational Categories. Outflow Percentages, Upper Figure USA; 1973; Lower Figure ENG, 1972*

	Respondent's occupation at time of inquiry																	
Father's occupation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Δ
1 Professionals, self-employed	12	32	18	6	3	4	2	3	5	3	1	4	4	1	1	1	–	24
	17	27	26	1	5	2	0	5	3	1	6	1	0	0	1	3	1	
2 Professional, salaried	4	34	15	4	1	7	3	5	6	3	6	4	5	1	2	1	–	16
	4	24	22	3	3	9	–	8	7	3	5	3	4	1	3	1	1	
3 Managers	3	22	24	8	3	6	4	4	6	3	4	5	5	1	2	–	–	19
	4	16	30	3	6	9	1	7	6	2	5	3	2	0	3	1	–	
4 Salesmen, other	4	21	20	12	2	7	3	4	6	2	5	5	5	1	3	–	1	20
	3	19	26	5	6	7	0	6	8	1	6	6	1	0	5	0	1	
5 Proprietors	3	17	20	8	8	6	3	6	6	5	6	6	4	1	2	1	1	17
	2	12	18	3	18	5	1	8	8	7	6	5	2	1	3	1	1	
6 Clerks	1	22	16	4	2	11	2	6	6	4	8	6	6	1	3	–	–	16
	2	17	19	4	5	10	–	12	9	4	6	5	3	–	4	–	–	
7 Salesmen, retail	4	14	16	8	6	9	5	6	8	3	7	6	6	1	2	1	–	34
	0	9	11	0	10	9	3	14	14	1	4	17	1	0	6	1	0	
8 Craftsmen, manufacturing	1	16	11	5	2	7	2	13	9	4	13	7	5	2	3	1	–	17
	1	10	12	2	3	5	–	23	8	6	12	6	4	2	6	–	1	
9 Craftsmen, other	1	15	11	4	3	8	3	9	13	5	10	8	6	2	4	1	–	16
	1	12	15	2	4	6	–	15	11	6	8	8	4	1	6	1	1	
10 Craftsmen, construction	1	11	12	3	4	6	2	6	9	15	10	8	5	1	5	1	1	14
	1	7	9	2	5	5	–	11	11	17	9	7	4	1	9	0	1	
11 Operatives, manufacturing	1	11	9	3	3	8	2	12	8	5	20	8	6	3	3	1	–	17
	1	6	10	2	3	5	–	20	8	6	16	10	3	2	8	–	–	
12 Operatives, other	1	10	9	3	3	8	2	9	10	6	12	14	6	2	5	1	1	15
	–	6	9	1	3	5	1	14	9	7	12	17	4	1	10	–	–	
13 Service workers	1	12	10	3	3	9	2	6	9	5	12	9	11	2	5	–	1	19
	1	10	15	2	3	7	1	14	9	6	8	11	6	–	5	1	1	
14 Labourers, manufacturing	1	7	8	3	3	6	2	11	8	8	19	10	5	6	5	1	1	15
	0	4	7	0	4	6	0	16	10	6	17	11	5	4	10	1	1	
15 Labourers, other	1	7	9	2	3	7	1	8	9	7	16	11	8	2	9	–	1	17
	–	5	8	1	3	5	1	15	7	10	13	11	4	1	15	–	1	
16 Farmers	1	7	8	2	3	4	2	7	8	7	13	9	6	3	5	12	4	22
	2	5	8	2	5	1	0	7	5	4	7	8	3	2	7	23	10	
17 Farm labourers	–	4	4	2	2	5	1	10	9	7	16	11	7	4	8	4	7	20
	0	4	6	2	3	3	1	10	9	7	9	13	2	1	14	3	16	

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TABLE 3 *Intergenerational Mobility Among Men Aged 20–64, Five Social Strata. Outflow Percentages, Upper Figure USA, 1973; Lower Figure ENG, 1972*

Father's stratum	Respondent's stratum at time of inquiry 1	2	3	4	5	% of total	Δ
1 Upper nonmanual	58	12	13	17	1	16	5
(occupational categories 1–4)	55	14	16	14	1	14	
2 Lower nonmanual	44	17	16	21	1	12	11
(occupational categories 5–7)	36	21	24	19	1	12	
3 Upper manual	30	12	27	29	1	21	8
(occupational categories 8–10)	26	10	36	28	1	29	
4 Lower manual	22	12	24	41	1	30	8
(occupational categories 11–15)	17	9	32	41	1	36	
5 Farm	16	9	23	37	15	23	12
(occupational categories 16–17)	14	6	21	33	27	9	
% of total	31	12	22	32	4		
	27	11	29	30	3		

percentages. Table 3 draws on exactly the same data as Table 2 but presents it in a more compact form, the 17 occupational groups being collapsed, on lines proposed by Featherman and Hauser (1978:27–9), so as to form five broad social strata. In examining these results, we face a rather familiar difficulty in comparing absolute mobility rates across nations: that is, a lack of any obvious criteria for deciding whether the rates observed are to be regarded as similar or not. Thus, both those who would claim, along with Lipset and Bendix, that the extent and pattern of social mobility in the USA is 'much the same' as in other western industrial societies and those who would wish to modify this claim could find some support for their views in the evidence presented. On the one side, it could be noted that in Table 2 there is no tendency for the American figures in the diagonal cells to be regularly lower than the English ones—as might have been expected if the USA were an exceptionally open society. And, moreover, the dissimilarity indices for corresponding outflow distributions cannot be reckoned as very large: for outflows from 12 of the 17 categories, it would be necessary to shift less than one in five cases in order to make the distributions for the two countries identical. On the other side, though, it could be pointed out that (as Table 3 best shows) there is a consistent pattern for more upward mobility to occur in the USA than in England, in the sense of mobility from manual and farm origins to non-manual destinations; and taking Blau and Duncan's preferred definition of 'elite' mobility (1967:433–4)—that is, movement from manual origins (categories 8–15 and 17) into the two professional categories (categories 1 and 2)—then the absolute rate of such mobility works out from Table 2 at 12 per cent for the USA as compared with 8 per cent for England. Further, if total mobility rates (i.e. the proportion of all cases falling off the main diagonal) are calculated from the raw data of Tables 2 and 3, these also prove to be in both instances higher for the USA: 86 per cent as against 83 per cent with the 17×17 table, and 68 per cent as against 62 per cent with the 5×5 one.

Before any adjudication between these two possible emphases is attempted, an observation, based on the data of Table 1, might usefully be made: namely, that in so far as variations in rates and patterns of mobility *are* revealed between England and the USA, they are ones of a kind which would be favoured by differences in the patterns of development of their occupational structures and indeed ones which might perhaps be accounted for *entirely* in terms of such differences. Thus, Table 1 provides evidence of more extensive structural change in the USA in that the dissimilarity between the occupational distribution

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of respondents to the American inquiry and the distribution of their fathers is clearly wider than it is in the English case. And it is further suggested that while this dissimilarity comes about in some large part because of the decline in the USA in the numbers engaged in farming (category 16)—a decline which occurred in England at a much earlier stage in its industrialization—the USA has also experienced a rather greater expansion of professional and managerial occupations (categories 1–4). What may then be said is that if an argument for American exceptionalism is to be made out on the basis of the data so far presented, it should only be one of the qualified kind earlier suggested: that is, one which claims for American society particularly favourable opportunities for upward movement, in consequence of the timing and form of its structural transformation, rather than any distinctive degree of 'openness'. Whether such openness *also* contributes to some extent to the differences in absolute mobility rates that are shown up in Tables 2 and 3 is a question which can only be settled by further analysis, to which we now turn.

An appropriate analysis in this respect takes the form of fitting to the data of Tables 2 and 3 a series of log-linear models which embody various hypotheses concerning the relative mobility rates, or patterns of social fluidity, underlying the observed rates—or, in other words, the patterns of association between social origins and destinations which exist in the tables, independently of all structural influences mediated through their marginal distributions.

In Table 4 we report the results of such a model-fitting exercise. Model A, the 'independence' model, represents the hypothesis of 'perfect mobility' in England and the USA alike. It does not of course fit at all well, and is introduced, as is now conventional, simply to provide a baseline which can be helpful in assessing the degree of fit of other models. Model B, the 'common social fluidity (CSF) model, is, however, of prime substantive importance. This model, while not requiring perfect mobility, embodies the hypothesis that the relative rates or patterns of social fluidity inherent in the English and American mobility tables are identical; or, more specifically, that all corresponding odds ratios indicating the strength of association between origins and destinations are exactly the same in the English as in the American case. If, therefore, this hypothesis were found to hold good, it would be confirmed that any claims of American exceptionalism can only be made in regard to differences resulting from structural influences, and that the idea of America as a society distinctive on account of its social fluidity must be abandoned.

What is in fact shown by Table 4 is that the CSF model does not fit the data of either the 17×17 or the 5×5 mobility table—but that the extent to which the observed values in these tables deviate from the values expected under the model is slight and, in the case of the 5×5 table, very slight indeed. We may therefore say that even though the differences in absolute mobility rates displayed in Tables 2 and 3 cannot be entirely attributed to structural variation, they do result from such variation to a quite preponderant extent. None the less, since the CSF model does not entirely fit, it remains of interest to consider further, and especially in regard to the 17×17 table, the distribution of the deviation from it. In particular, we need to ask how far this deviation is concentrated in cells on the main diagonal: for if it were the case that the CSF model consistently overestimated the American values in these cells, then the argument for America as an exceptionally open society could still not be altogether dismissed.

Inspection of the residuals under the CSF model reveals that while the American values in each diagonal cell of the 5×5 tables are overestimated, in the 17×17 table—where the overall deviation is greater—such a tendency is far less marked: overestimation occurs in nine of the diagonal cells and underestimation in four, with the four remaining values being almost exactly predicted. Moreover, the overestimations appear sizable in respect of only two categories: those of proprietors (category 5) and of farmers (category 16). So that we can better assess the importance of these deviations, two further models are then introduced: model C in Table 4, which is the CSF model but with, in the 17×17 table, the diagonal cells for categories 5 and 16 fitted exactly; and model D, which is the CSF model with *all* diagonal cells fitted exactly. The revealing result is that while model C produces a significant improvement of fit over that of model B—the 'pure' CSF model—the improvement of fit achieved by model D over model C is not significant. What can thus be

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TABLE 4 *Results of Testing Log-Linear Models Against American and English Intergenerational Mobility Data*

Model	Mobility by 17 occupational categories G²	df	p	% reduction in G²	Δ	Mobility by five social strata G²	df	p	% reduction in G²	Δ
A. NO ND (independence)	7487·5	512	0·00	—	17·6	5363·6	32	0·00	—	15·2
B. NO ND OD (common social fluidity)	385·2	255	0·00	94·9	3·3	84·2	16	0·00	98·4	1·7
C. NO ND OD with diagonal cells for categories 5 and 16 fitted (17 categories) or strata 2 and 5 fitted (5 strata)	349·6	253	0·00	95·3	1·3	43·3	14	0·00	99·2	0·5
D. NO ND OD with all diagonal cells fitted	337·4	238	0·00	95·4	0·2	37·7	11	0·00	99·3	0·2
B – C	35·6	2	0·00			40·9	2	0·00		
C – D	12·2	15	>0·50			5·6	3	0·13		

N = Nation
O = Origin—father's category or stratum
D = Destination—respondents category or stratum

concluded here is that in so far as differences are located on the main diagonal of the 17×17 table, they are effectively limited to the propensities for immobility among proprietors and farmers, these being in both instances lower in the USA than in England. And it would then also appear—not very surprisingly—that these same differences account for much of the deviation in the 5×5 table. When applied to this table, the CSF model, as reported in Table 4, returns at G^2 of 84·2 with 16 degrees of freedom. But if this exercise is repeated with the 2–2 and 5–5 cells of the table fitted exactly—that is, the cells in which immobile farmers and proprietors are located—the G^2 value falls, significantly, to 43·3 with 14 degrees of freedom, while being still 37·7 with 11 degrees of freedom if all five diagonal cells are fitted.

In sum, it is only the deviations from the CSF model arising in the case of the propensities for immobility of proprietors and farmers which would appear to call for any sociological comment—the remainder being both too small and too scattered. However, cell-by-cell inspection of the residuals associated with categories 5 and 16 suggests that their interpretation may not be straightforward. Offsetting the lower immobility among the sons of American proprietors is a stronger tendency than in the English case for them to move into managerial and non-retail sales positions, while at the same time proprietorship in the USA seems somewhat more accessible than in England to the sons of manual workers. Among American farmers, lower immobility is associated with a greater propensity for their sons to move into routine non-manual and skilled manual occupations, while there is a stronger movement of the sons of farm workers into farm ownership. One possibility is then that a real cross-national difference in fluidity patterns exists, in that proprietorship, whether agricultural or otherwise, is generally more open in the USA than in England. But an alternative possibility which must be recognized is that what is chiefly reflected in our results is a relatively high degree of heterogeneity in the composition of the two categories in question. There is, for example, some reason to think that men classified as proprietors in the USA may on average be of lower socioeconomic status

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than those so classified in England; and there is rather clear evidence that farmers in the USA are on average of lower status than their English counterparts[7].

For present purposes, in fact, the implication that can be most readily drawn from the results presented in Table 4 is a negative one: namely, that no grounds exist for claiming—as Blau and Duncan wished to do—that high rates of upward mobility into elite occupations in the USA are *more* than simply a consequence of structural change. We can in fact say that, so far at least as the comparison with England is concerned, nothing other than this factor need be postulated in order to account for the differences observed. If the attempt to uphold the idea of American openness had continued in the earlier tradition which stressed the accessibility of proprietorship, then some measure of support from our findings might perhaps have been claimed for it. But if the issue is made to turn on the mobility patterns associated with elite occupations as defined by Blau and Duncan, then we can say unequivocally that these occupations are *not* more open in America than in England—they have simply expanded more rapidly. Although the CSF model overestimates the American value for immobility among self-employed professionals (category 1), it actually underestimates that for immobility among the—much larger—category of salaried professionals (category 2).

Finally in regard to intergenerational mobility, it is of interest to ask whether our major finding of a large commonality in the pattern of relative rates holds steady across successive birth cohorts—or, one might better say, quasi-cohorts—within the English and American samples. In Table 5 we give the results of fitting the CSF model to the data describing the mobility experience of three 15-year cohorts in terms of our five social strata. It can be seen that only very small differences in the degree of fit occur and that there is no indication that deviation from the model is increasing over time.

TABLE 5 *Results of Testing the Common Social Fluidity Model Against American and English Intergenerational Mobility Data, Five Social Strata, for 15-Year Birth Cohorts*

Birth cohort(a)	G^2	df	p	Δ
1 1908–9 to 1922–3	33·6	16	0·006	1·8
2 1923–4 to 1937–8	41·7	16	0·000	2·0
3 1938–9 to 1952–3	30·0	16	0·018	1·6

Note: (a) 1908–22 refers to the English Cohort and 1909–23 to the American, and so on.

If it is then the case that a broad similarity in social fluidity between England and the USA has been more or less constant over recent decades, there is one implication relating back to absolute rates that should be noted. We should find that in the American case the relatively rapid growth of higher non-manual occupations has increased rates of upward mobility, and more so than in England, but that it has at the same time led to less downward mobility or, in other words, to *a greater intergenerational stability* in the upper levels of the stratification hierarchy—an outcome to which, as earlier remarked, liberal commentators have not appeared alert. Both expectations in fact receive support. If we consider men born between 1908–9 and 1922–3 and between 1923–4 and 1937–8 (who may all be thought of as having reached a stage of relative occupational maturity), it emerges that from the first to the second of these cohorts the rate of upward mobility, defined, say, as movement from stratum 3 or 4 into stratum 1, increases from 20 to 23 per cent in England but from 25 to 31 per cent in the USA; while, on the other hand, the rate of intergenerational *im*mobility within stratum 1 rises in England from 54 to 57 per cent and in the USA from 63 to as high as 68 per cent.

We move on now to intragenerational, or worklife, mobility. As was previously noted, commentators such as Marx, Engels and Sombart saw America as being exceptional specifically in the extent to which men were able to 'escape' from manual wage labour in the course of their own working lives. And, more recently, Thernstrom has sought to qualify Lipset's rejection of the thesis of exceptionalism by arguing that when mobility is viewed in a global, intergenerational perspective, the distinctiveness of such intragenerational patterns may be concealed. In studying intragenerational mobility it is customary to compare individuals' present positions with those they held on their first entry into employment. We would, however, regard results thus obtained as likely to be misleading in that they take no account of

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individuals' social origins, which are well known to condition worklife mobility chances—as, for example, via processes of 'counter-mobility' which are by now amply documented (cf. Girod, 1971; Bertaux, 1974; Thélot, 1979; Goldthorpe, 1980). When in fact the authors referred to earlier were considering intragenerational mobility out of the working class, we would assume that what essentially they had in mind was such mobility on the part of men who had begun employment in working-class positions *and who were also of working-class origins.* In other words, they would not have seen as very relevant to their concerns the worklife mobility that would result if, say, the son of a factory owner, after working on the shop-floor for a year or so, then joined his father in running the family business. Thus, in what follows we will draw on mobility tables of a three-way kind in which, using our five strata, we can relate present occupation to first occupation and to social origins simultaneously.

In Table 6 we present the data afforded by such three-way analyses which would seem to have the most direct bearing on the line of the argument that Thernstrom has taken up against Lipset: that is, data for England and America on the rates of upward worklife mobility achieved by men who started their employment in manual jobs and who were the sons of manual workers. It would be difficult to deny that the most striking feature of Table 6 is in fact the cross-national similarity in these rates that is revealed. Whatever may be the validity of Thernstrom's case for the nineteenth century—an issue we cannot address—our findings would clearly indicate that in twentieth-century America the chances of escape from the working class via worklife mobility should *not* be thought of as exceptional: or at least not unless twentieth-century England is to be reckoned as exceptional also. Indeed, the rates of mobility reported are scarcely impressive for what they imply in regard to either 'opportunity' or 'volatility' within the working class, especially in view of the rather broad terms in which stratum 1 is defined. Furthermore, it should be noted that the conception of 'manual strata' which we have here taken over from American mobility research extends beyond that of a working class *stricto sensu* in ways which tend to inflate the amount of upward mobility observed—most notably, in that, in addition to manual wage-workers, self-employed artisans and all foremen and other manual supervisory grades are comprised[8].

TABLE 6 *Rates of Upward Worklife Mobility of Men of Manual Origins (Strata 3 and 4) Who Began Work in Manual (Strata 3 and 4) Occupations, by Birth Cohort*

Birth cohort	% found (1972–3) in upper nonmanual occupations (stratum 1)	% found (1972–3) in upper and lower nonmanual occupations (strata 1 and 2)
1908–9 to 1922–3		
USA	16	28
ENG	13	23
1923 to 1937–8		
USA	15	25
ENG	15	23
1938–9 to 1952–3		
USA	10	18
ENG	12	17
All		
USA	13	23
ENG	13	21

In treating the above issue, attention must obviously centre on certain quite specific mobility flows, represented as absolute rates. However, if we consider worklife mobility more generally, it also becomes of interest to ask, as we did in the case of intergenerational mobility, whether English–American differences are to be found at the level of relative rates; or, rather—so as to take account of our point about the importance of social origins for worklife mobility chances—to ask whether differences in underlying fluidity patterns are revealed when intergenerational mobility is viewed as falling into two (related) phases: first, the transition from origins to first occupation and, secondly, that from first occupation to present occupation. It should be noted that the answer to this question is not already given by our previous finding that a broadly similar pattern of fluidity underlies mobility from origins to present occupation. For this similarity could result from quite different—though largely offsetting—patterns of fluidity occurring in each of the two component transitions which we now distinguish.

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TABLE 7 *Results of Testing Log-Linear Models Against American and English Three-Way Mobility Data, Five Social Strata*

Model	G^2	df	p	% reduction in G^2	Δ
A. NO NE ND (independence)	21,762·1	224	0·00	–	32·9
B. NO NE ND OED (common social fluidity)	432·4	112	0·00	98·0	4·0
C. OED NOE NED	132·6	80	0·00	99·4	2·1
D. OED NOE NOD	278·8	80	0·00	98·7	3·2
E. OED NED NOD	124·6	80	0·00	99·4	2·0
F. NOE NED NOD	189·2	128	0·00	99·1	2·3
G. OED NOE NED NOD	70·0	64	0·28	99·7	1·4
C – G (NOD)	62·6	16	0·00		
D – G (NED)	208·7	16	0·00		
E – G (NOE)	54·6	16	0·00		
F – G (OED)	119·3	64	0·00		

N = Nation
O = Origin—father's stratum
E = Entry—stratum of respondent's first occupation
D = Destination—stratum of respondent's occupation at time of inquiry

In Table 7 we report the results of a further exercise in log-linear modelling relevant to the question we have posed. In this case, we are concerned with the pattern of association that prevails among four variables: namely, nation plus the variables of our three-way mobility tables, as already specified. Model A is again the independence model, or model of perfect (three-way) mobility, introduced as a baseline; and model B can then be regarded as that which instead postulates a cross-nationally common pattern of social fluidity underlying three-way mobility or, in other words, underlying the two transitions from origins to first occupation and from first occupation to present occupation. This model contains a term for the interaction between these two transitions, the existence of which we have emphasized (OED), but still requires that this interaction be the same in England and the USA. However, when applied to our data, model B, as can be seen, displays a significant, even if a not very large, lack of fit and cannot therefore be accepted unreservedly. Moreover, the same can be said of models C, D, E and F, each of which includes three out of the four possible three-way interaction terms that the structure of our data allows. It is only when we reach model G, which incorporates all four of these terms, that a satisfactory fit may be claimed. What this means, then, is that as well as recognizing an interaction between origins, first occupation and present occupation, we must also recognize that such differences in fluidity patterns as are implicit in the English and American intergenerational mobility tables are the—net—outcome of further differences in fluidity which underlie each of the two sequential phases into which intergenerational mobility may be decomposed.

Given this finding, it thus becomes of interest to set models C to F against model G in order to establish the relative importance of the different three-way terms. As is shown in Table 7, clearly the most important is that which pertains to cross-national variation in relative chances of worklife mobility—that is, from first occupation to present—when the effects of origins are controlled (NED). Whether or not this variation reveals any tendency of a sociologically significant kind will

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then be evident from inspection of the residuals under model D, in which the term in question is omitted. It turns out in fact that for 17 of the 25 diagonal cells indicating worklife immobility within our three-way tables model D overestimates the English values. In other words, England would in this regard appear to be rather more fluid than the USA. For such a tendency to be compatible with our earlier finding that in intergenerational perspective little difference in fluidity exists between the two countries—or that, if anything, it is the USA that is the more fluid—one must then also expect to find that in the English case there is a greater propensity for counter-mobility: that is, for worklife mobility which returns the individual to his stratum of origin following a movement away from it on entry into employment. This expectation is indeed supported if we turn to the residuals under model B which, as we have suggested, represents the CSF model for our three-way tables. In these tables we can regard as indicative of counter-mobility the 20 cells which are diagonal ones in respect of origins and destinations but *not* in respect of first occupation also; and we then discover that for 14 of these cells model B underestimates the English values.

We must be careful not to exaggerate the extent of the cross-national differences that our analyses have disclosed; for it is at the same time shown in Table 7 that these differences are in fact very small ones. Model B does, after all, account for 98 per cent of the G^2 produced by the independence model. What is chiefly of note is that, in so far as differences do exist, they are ones which point to English society being more fluid than American although in a rather special—one might even say perverse—way: that is, in displaying generally stronger tendencies for intragenerational mobility, but ones which, to a greater extent than in the USA, serve to maintain intergenerational stability.

In conclusion of this section, we may then say the following. Using occupational categories devised by American mobility researchers, we have compared English and American mobility rates in a variety of ways suggested by different versions of the thesis that the USA is a distinctively open society; but we have been unable to find evidence which would provide convincing support for this thesis. It is true that the USA displays a somewhat higher total mobility rate and also more upward mobility intergenerationally than does England; but these differences can be shown to result essentially from structural factors and can scarcely be claimed as indicative of greater openness. A further concomitant, it can be noted, is a greater continuity of families within the higher levels of the American occupational hierarchy. When mobility is considered in terms of relative rates or, in other words, when we look at the patterns of social fluidity underlying absolute rates, our central finding is one of a large and apparently stable similarity between England and the USA. The differences which do emerge are in some instances of sociological interest; but they again are not ones which could be readily drawn upon in order to sustain the idea that American society is exceptional in the generally high levels of fluidity that it displays.

It could conceivably be argued that we are here placing too much reliance on a single comparison: differences shown up between England and the USA might be relatively small because—if one envisages modern societies as showing in certain respects significant variation in their rates of mobility—*both* these countries lie within the same range of this variation: for example, towards the 'high mobility' end. However, there is little theoretical basis for any such argument and, further, our earlier three-nation study would suggest that England cannot in fact be thought of as being a particularly mobile society. We found, rather, that Sweden tended to have both higher absolute mobility rates and also a somewhat higher level of social fluidity than either England or France (cf. Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1982). Thus, what would appear especially desirable would be to complement the foregoing analyses with ones in which the Swedish case is introduced, so that what would seem a still more demanding test of the thesis of American exceptionalism may be made. As we have already noted, the Swedish mobility data cannot be recoded to the American occupational categories. We must therefore at this point revert to our class schema as the basis of analysis—while attempting to take full account of the fact that it can be applied only imperfectly to the American data with which we are working.

RESULTS FROM AN ENGLAND–USA–SWEDEN COMPARISON OF (INTERGENERATIONAL) MOBILITY BETWEEN CLASSES

Since the Swedish data do not contain information

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TABLE 8 *Distributions of Class Origins and Destinations, Men Aged 20–64*

Class[a]	Class origins USA	Class origins ENG	Class origins SWE	Class destinations USA	Class destinations ENG	Class destinations SWE
		%			%	
I+II service class; professionals, administrators, managers	14	13	11	28	25	24
III routine nonmanual employees	8	7	3	11	9	8
IVa+b petty bourgeoisie	12	10	11	7	8	8
IVc farmers	19	5	26	3	2	5
V/VI lower technicians, supervisors of manual workers, skilled manual workers	19	39	24	24	33	30
VIIa semi- and unskilled manual workers	23	23	20	26	22	22
VIIb agricultural workers	4	4	5	1	2	2

Dissimilarity indices (Δ) origins/destinations:

USA	25
ENG	14
SWE	27

Note: (a) The numbering of classes here used preserves that of the original version of the schema in Goldthorpe (1980).

on respondents' first occupations, the analyses on which we report in this section are limited to intergenerational mobility[9]. We concentrate our attention in fact on two questions arising out of the preceding discussion of English and American occupational mobility. First, is it the case that, when Sweden is introduced into the analysis and when we think of mobility in terms of class, the USA still appears distinctive in the extent to which opportunities for mobility have been generated by structural change? And secondly, since we know that Sweden shows rather more fluidity within its class structure than does England, how in this respect does Sweden compare with the USA, which showed a broadly similar level of fluidity to England as regards movement between occupational groupings?

Full details of the class schema that we developed for the purposes of our three-nation study are available elsewhere (Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1979). We here adopt a version which is aimed at reducing the problems involved in recoding to it the occupational and employment status data of the American mobility inquiry. For example, as can be seen from Table 8, Classes I and II of the original schema are collapsed, and no distinction is made within Class IV between self-employed workers with and without employees. None the less, it must be emphasized that various non-negligible imperfections remain, in particular as a result of the heterogeneity (from our point of view) of the occupational categories of the US Bureau of the Census to which we earlier alluded. In this regard, special note should here be taken of the composition in the American case of Classes I and II—those primarily of professional, administrative and managerial employees. In recoding the American data, we find that certain three-digit categories both of 'Professional, Technical and Kindred Workers' and of 'Managers, Officials and Proprietors' which (when in conjunction with employee status) must clearly be

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TABLE 9 *Intergenerational Class Mobility, Men Aged 20–64. Outflow Percentages*

Father's class		Respondent's class at time of inquiry							
		I+II	III	IVa+b	IVc	V/VI	VIIa	VIIb	N
I+II	ENG	59	12	6	1	15	7	–	1242
	SWE	56	12	6	0	17	8	1	225
	USA	53	13	5	1	14	13	1	2918
III	ENG	34	13	7	–	28	16	1	694
	SWE	38	14	10	0	22	15	1	73
	USA	37	18	6	–	18	20	–	1695
IVa+b	ENG	28	9	21	1	25	16	1	902
	SWE	30	5	17	2	27	18	–	233
	USA	35	11	12	2	21	18	1	2505
IVc	ENG	15	6	7	23	20	20	9	427
	SWE	13	8	7	17	24	27	4	543
	USA	16	8	8	13	23	29	3	4030
V/VI	ENG	20	8	7	–	41	23	1	3676
	SWE	25	8	6	1	38	21	1	495
	USA	27	12	5	1	30	24	1	3931
VIIa	ENG	15	9	6	–	37	32	1	2150
	SWE	19	7	7	1	38	26	1	416
	USA	21	11	5	1	27	36	1	4862
VIIb	ENG	8	5	7	3	28	33	16	343
	SWE	14	3	5	3	30	38	7	110
	USA	9	6	7	3	25	42	8	807

allocated to Classes I and II do, however, also comprise occupations which would be more appropriately allocated to routine non-manual or manual worker categories—and hence to Classes III, V/VI, VIIa or VIIb: for example, tracers (074), foresters (103), undertakers (104), testers, samplers and laboratory assistants (191, 192), railroad conductors and ticket collectors (252), floor walkers (254) and prison warders (270). In the comparisons which follow, there can, therefore, be little doubt that the American Classes I and II are more loosely defined than are either the English or Swedish. And it would then in turn be reasonable to suppose that rates of mobility associated with them will tend to be somewhat higher on this account alone.

In Table 8 we show the distributions of class origins and destinations of men in the English, American and Swedish samples. Of major interest here is the fact that, although the difference between the distributions of respondents and their fathers is greater in the American than in the English sample—just as it was when we considered their distribution by occupational category (cf. Table 1)—the dissimilarity index for the Swedish sample is as high as for the American. In other words, the Swedish data here reflect, in much the same way as the American, a period of relatively rapid structural change, characterized above all by a marked decline in the class of farmers. This being so, one is then led on naturally to ask whether Sweden likewise matches the USA in its rate of total intergenerational mobility and also of upward mobility into expanding service-class positions.

Table 9 presents our basic findings on intergenerational class mobility. As can be seen, mobility is here shown in outflow terms. However, we may first of all note that if total mobility rates for each nation are calculated from the raw data (i.e. the proportion of all cases falling in cells off the main diagonal), the American rate again proves to be higher than the English—73 per cent as against 64 per cent—but is in fact equalled by the Swedish rate, which also works out at 73 per cent. Turning

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to the outflow rates, and specifically to those which may be taken as indicating social ascent—let us say, those for mobility from Classes V/VI, VIIa and VIIb into Classes I and II—we then discover a similar comparative pattern. Our previous finding, based on occupational mobility, of generally greater upward movement in the USA than in England (cf. Table 2) is confirmed; but, once more, the Swedish figures turn out to be very close to the American. If we calculate the total outflow from Classes V/VI, VIIa and VIIb into Classes I and II—or what could be regarded as an overall rate of mobility from working-class origins into service-class positions—this proves to be 18 per cent for England, 21 per cent for Sweden and 22 per cent for the USA. Bearing in mind what was earlier said about the unduly heterogeneous constitution of Classes I and II in the American case, we would feel it safe to conclude here that, over the period covered by our data, rates of upward mobility in Sweden were, at very least, no lower than in the USA.

The foregoing does therefore serve to show that the USA is not unique among modern industrial societies in the extent to which opportunities for mobility, and in particular for upward mobility, have been created by rapid structural change: the Swedish case appears as a quite closely comparable one. We may then move on to the further question that we posed at the start of this section—that concerning levels of fluidity. In Table 10 we show the results of fitting to the raw data of Table 9 the 'common social fluidity' (CSF) model which we introduced in the course of our England–USA comparison of occupational mobility. In this case we are of course considering class mobility, and we have three nations among which we can make three comparisons of a two-way kind.

TABLE 10 *Results of Pairwise Testing of the Common Social Fluidity Model Against American, English and Swedish Intergenerational Class Mobility Data*

Nations compared	G^2	df	p	Δ
USA–ENG	179·7	36	0·00	2·4
ENG–SWE	70·4	36	0·00	1·8
USA–SWE	42·2	36	0·22	0·9

From Table 10 it can be seen first of all that, as before (cf. Table 4), the CSF model does not fit altogether satisfactorily when applied to the English and American data. Moreover, inspection of the residuals reveals that the American values are overestimated in six of the seven diagonal cells—the exception being that for Class III. In other words, if we were prepared to discount the imperfections in the recoding of the American data, we could claim that a somewhat greater degree of fluidity prevails within the American class structure than within the English. Secondly, Table 10 shows that the CSF model also fails to fit in the English–Swedish comparison, and the residuals on the main diagonal turn out here to have an indentical pattern to those produced by the previous comparison: that is, the Swedish values are in this case overestimated in each diagonal cell except that for Class III. This finding is in fact one which, as already noted, we could readily anticipate from our earlier work. The third, and most important, result displayed in Table 10 derives then from the Swedish–USA comparison. As all the findings thus far reported in this section might lead one to suspect, the CSF model *can* here be accepted as giving a rather good fit with the data, and especially since the residuals show nothing of sociological interest: the American values are overestimated in two diagonal cells and the Swedish in three, with the other two being fitted almost exactly.

Once more, therefore, the Swedish case can be taken as undermining any idea of American exceptionalism. If we accept the data of Table 9 at their face value, we can say that the patterns of fluidity, or the relative mobility chances, underlying observed, absolute rates of intergenerational class mobility have been essentially the same in the USA and in Sweden over the middle decades of the twentieth-century. And if, on the other hand, we take seriously the reservations that we have made concerning the American data, and in regard to Classes I and II especially, then we may well suppose that more strictly comparable data would show Swedish society as being somewhat *more* fluid than American—a supposition which, it may be noted, is encouraged by the fact that it is in the diagonal cell for Classes I and II that the American value falls furthest below the CSF expectation.

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CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have returned to the old question of whether or not the USA has experienced exceptionally high rates of social mobility. Our treatment of this question has, however, differed from that of earlier writers in that, drawing on their various contributions, we have sought to recognize, and to do justice to its full complexity. We have, for example, noted that one can no longer safely proceed simply by setting the American experience against some supposedly uniform pattern of mobility which characterizes the older European, or even all other industrial societies; and further, that the phenomenon of mobility is one which not only *can* be conceptualized and analysed from a variety of standpoints but *has* in fact to be treated in a highly differentiated way if it is to be fully understood.

In turn, then, the data and results of analysis that we have reported have been themselves often complex, and we shall not attempt here to recapitulate our findings in any detail. But one major outcome may readily be stated: at the end of all our several lines of investigation, we have been unable to find convincing evidence in favour of American 'exceptionalism' so far as social mobility is concerned. In the light of the comparisons we have made there is no basis for claiming, for the twentieth-century at least, that American society has been distinctively open in the Tocquevillian sense—which we have interpreted in terms of relative mobility chances; and this negative finding still holds if the claim is restricted to the higher levels of the occupational hierarchy or class structure. Likewise there is no basis for claiming that American society is unique in the extent to which it has provided opportunities for upward mobility in consequence of the rapidity of its structural transformation (even if it may have done so to a greater extent than most societies); and again no special case can here be made out as regards 'long-range' mobility—as, for example, intergenerational or worklife ascent from working-class origins. We do not, we should make clear, wish to argue that the USA is *in no way* distinctive in its rates and patterns of social mobility. We would indeed doubt if that could be said of any country; and, as comparative research continues, quite genuine 'peculiarities' of the USA may well be expected to emerge. Our point is, rather, that from the English–American and Swedish–American comparisons that we have carried out, it is already apparent that the USA does not, or at least does no longer, stand apart from all other nations in the amount of its social mobility in any of the ways that have been previously suggested.

This central finding of our paper is, we would note, a highly consequential one. If it is accepted, a number of major problems present themselves—which we can here do little more than signal and place on the agenda for future work. To begin with, the question at once returns of how should one explain the persistence of the American mobility ideology—the conviction that American society *is* characterized by its unusual openness and abundance of opportunities for advancement? It could perhaps be argued that this belief, though assiduously promoted by public institutions, the mass media etc., is not in fact all that widely accepted among the American population; but, so far at least, a case to this effect has not been well established. Assuming that Americans indeed are, as Lipset and Bendix have maintained, distinctive in the affirmative ways in which they interpret and evaluate mobility, then we would agree with Blau and Duncan that an attempt to account for this simply through an appeal to a distinctive cultural and political context is less satisfactory than if such subjective differences could be linked to ones actually found at the level of social structures and processes. But the effort that Blau and Duncan themselves make in this latter direction is not one to which our own results can lend any support; and for the time being, therefore, the matter must be regarded as unresolved.

A further, related problem which likewise calls for re-examination is that of the place to be given to social mobility in explanations not only of the failure of socialism in the USA but, more generally, of the relatively low level of working-class mobilization and of class- (as distinct from group-) oriented organization and action. The implication of our findings must be that in this respect little significance at all may attach to mobility. It would, in other words, seem doubtful if American workers in the twentieth century at least have had less reason than those in other capitalist nations to feel alienated from their society because of the evident equality of opportunity that it offered; or that they have been less likely to pursue collective means of achieving

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their goals because of their superior chances of individual advancement via upward occupational or class mobility. Unless, then, a quite overriding importance is to be given to ideological and subjective factors (themselves not well understood), it would appear that explanatory efforts should now focus on other processes within American society that have had the potential to inhibit working-class formation: for example, following the leads given by writers such as Kornblum (1974) and Shalev and Korpi (1980), on the ways in which the racial and ethnic heterogeneity of the body of industrial workers, sustained by successive waves of immigration, has encouraged the development of collective action—and of collective identities—on more particularistic lines than those of class, and at the same time has facilitated employers' strategies of workforce fragmentation and 'divide and rule'.

Finally, and again relatedly, our finding that the USA does not have exceptionally high rates of social mobility must also carry implications for the large question of in what sense, if any, can modern America be viewed as a 'vanguard' society. On the one hand, political liberals—and especially those who are American themselves—have typically seen the USA as the foremost industrial nation (or, more recently, as the first post-industrial one); and many have further taken the USA as setting the pattern on which not only the economic, but also the social-structural, cultural and political development of other, less advanced societies is now focused. On the other hand, economic liberals—American and non-American alike—have regarded the USA as the leading example of a society founded on an individualistic, free-market capitalism, which they would wish other societies, caught in the toils of collectivism and statism, increasingly to emulate. From both these positions, the expectation would then be one of American exceptionalism—or at least pre-eminence—so far as the extent and the equality of opportunity is concerned. In the former case, the emphasis would be on the ascendancy of 'universalistic' values, especially as expressed in the priority given to achievement over ascription in social selection and in the acceptance of the rationality of technologically-driven change; in the latter, it would be on the unrivalled capacity of market mechanisms to undermine all forms of exclusiveness and to bring ability and opportunity together. But, from either standpoint, the USA should certainly display both greater absolute mobility and more equal mobility chances than either 'traditionalistic', 'class-ridden' England or 'socialistic', 'welfare-ridden' Sweden. The fact that it does not do so is then one which suggests deficiencies in the prevailing models of industrialism (or post-industrialism) and of free-market capitalism alike—to which, we would suggest, their liberal exponents should seriously attend.

NOTES

1. 'Among aristocratic people, families remain for centuries in the same condition and often in the same place . . . Since classes are highly differentiated and immobile, each becomes for its members a kind of little homeland . . .' 'Among democratic peoples, new families continually spring from nowhere while others disappear to nowhere, and all the rest change their complexion . . . As every class comes more to resemble the others, and to merge with them, their members grow indistinguishable from, and unrecognizable to each other.' (Authors' translation).
2. For the sources of the above quotations and more general discussion of the views of Marx and Engels on social mobility in the USA and elsewhere, see Lipset (1977) and Goldthorpe (1980).
3. But as an interesting forerunner, see Lipset and Zetterberg (1956).
4. Thernstrom's argument here turns on the possibility of differences in men's rates of upward worklife mobility before the birth of their children. If more men in the USA were thus mobile than elsewhere, then, he maintains, a finding of similar rates of upward and downward intergenerational mobility could be quite misleading, given that the baseline from which such rates are normally computed is the occupational level of fathers at some point *subsequent to* the birth of their children. For, in the circumstances hypothesized, 'A larger fraction of the sons of American white-collar workers *should* have been downwardly mobile, because fewer of their fathers were solidly established in the white-collar world for their full careers. Conversely, we would expect to find less upward intergenerational mobility on the part of the sons of American workers, because many of the more ambitious and intelligent workers would have been removed from the working class and drawn up into the middle class, leaving a diminished pool of talent at the working class level.' (1974:550).
5. The recoding of the English data was undertaken, with remarkable assiduity, by Wolfgang König. However, the authors accept responsibility for checking his work and hence for any errors that may be involved.
6. What we here refer to as the 'English' inquiry in fact covered England and Wales. For full details see Goldthorpe (1980).

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7. This is brought out in Kerckhoff, Campbell and Winfield-Laird (1985)—a study which, it should be noted, covers some of the same ground as the present one with generally similar results.

   Doubt about the classification of proprietors generally in the USA is occasioned by the fact that since 1970 the Bureau of the Census has adopted the practice of asking individuals who describe themselves as being self-employed whether their businesses are incorporated and, if so, has then treated them in the 'class of worker' coding *as private employees*—i.e. as employees of their own businesses. As well as reducing the number of those counted as self-employed, this procedure may well then also affect the composition of this category by tending to filter out larger proprietors.

   We had therefore various grounds for suspecting that mobility patterns associated with proprietorship would be more likely than others to reveal cross-national differences in advance of this being shown up by our empirical analyses.
8. Such inflation may be expected most confidently in the case of mobility into the higher non-manual stratum; so far as mobility into the lower non-manual stratum is concerned, offsetting tendencies can of course also be supposed in that this stratum is more narrowly defined.
9. The Swedish data derive from the national Level of Living Survey of 1974. For details see Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero (1979) and the further sources cited therein.

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