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Comments on Hurd and Johnson, "Education and Social Mobility in Ghana"

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I REGRET NOT having had the opportunity to respond at an earlier date to the recent article by G. E. Hurd and T. J. Johnson, but a lengthy absence in Nigeria made this impossible.¹ However, since their paper attempts a substantive critique of some of my earlier conclusions on education and social mobility in Ghana I think it only appropriate that I make some rejoinder.²

As to the originality of the authors' observations concerning the relationship between education and the Ghanaian occupational structure, the pattern of educational diffusion, the constrictive nature of the system of secondary education or even their research design I have no comment.³ To say the least, I am flattered but I am rather less charmed by what seems to me to be a misinterpretation of my data and conclusions. Indeed a closer investigation of the two articles would suggest that the two authors are indulging in the old academic pastime of setting up straw men.

First, Hurd and Johnson seize upon two phrases of mine, "fluidity of access" and "egalitarian culture," which when quoted out of context seem to give the impression that I was arguing for considerable equality of educational opportunity in contemporary Ghana. Indeed, the major justification for their additional study would seem to rest on this misinterpretation. The major contribution of the authors is, in fact, to demonstrate that the pattern of socio-economic recruitment into Ghanaian sixth forms and universities is more constricted than it is at the fifth form level. (With this latter point I cannot quibble since a similar unpublished study of sixth formers undertaken by myself in 1961 reveals exactly the same pattern.)⁴ In effect, the authors produce a series of findings that exactly parallel my own. To quote:

What we have documented so far then, is the extent to which the educational system

¹ G. E. Hurd and T. J. Johnson, "Education and Social Mobility in Ghana," *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 40, No. 1, (Winter, 1967), pp. 55-79.

² Philip J. Foster, "Secondary Schooling and Social Mobility in a West African Nation," *Sociology of Education*, Vol. 37, No. 2, (Winter, 1963), pp. 150-171.

³ See also Philip Foster, "Ethnicity and the Schools in Ghana," *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (October, 1962), pp. 127-135; with R. Clignet, "Potential Elites in Ghana and the Ivory Coast: A Preliminary Comparison," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. LXX, No. 3, (November, 1964), pp. 349-362; and Philip Foster, *Education and Social Change in Ghana*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, *passim*, esp. pp. 179-259.

⁴ This study, referred to briefly in Foster, *Education and Social Change . . . op. cit.*, p. 217, collected data on the socio-economic and ethnic background of sixth form students identical with that obtained from fifth formers.

in Ghana selects personnel to man the higher echelons of the modern economic sector from those parts of the country which are themselves within the modern sector; that is from the more developed south and from the larger towns.⁵

Hurd and Johnson then proceed to indicate that socio-economic background as defined by level of paternal education and occupation is also related to access to secondary schooling.

One can compare these findings with my earlier observations that:

Table 1 indicates a very definite association between paternal occupational characteristics and access to secondary schools. . . . The offspring of educated parents with urban backgrounds appear to have greater chances of obtaining access to secondary education than other groups.⁶

In other words, both studies show considerable inequality of educational opportunity in Ghana. For example, a simple computation from the selectivity indices presented in my original article reveals that a child born in a town with over 50,000 inhabitants has almost six times the chance of a child born in a community of under 5,000 to enter the fifth form; the offspring of a professional, higher technical, administrative or clerical worker has 58 times the chance of the child of an unskilled worker. Equally strikingly the child of a university graduate has 44 times the chance of entering a fifth form as the offspring of a man who has not attended school.

Apart, then, from questions as to what constitutes the most "appropriate" measures to use, the two articles generate almost identical data. There are, indeed, only two *substantive* points of difference.

First, the authors stress the fact that it is the child of a laborer rather than the offspring of a farmer who has the chances most stacked against him. Of course, this is true! A glance at Table I in my article indicates that the selectivity index for children of semiskilled and unskilled workers is 0.1 as against an index of 0.5 for farmers and fishermen. Why one stresses the position of farmers is that they constitute 62.8 rather than 13.4 percent of the population and there is some merit in singling out this substantial majority for closer attention. One could only wish (as throughout) that they had read tables and text more carefully.

Their second point is less trivial and concerns the heterogeneity of the farming population itself. Of course, nobody doubts that the children of cocoa as opposed to subsistence farmers will be overrepresented in the secondary school population. My own data also indicate a substantial proportion of children of part cash-crop farmers among the farming group (though I felt that in the case of my materials these were not so reliable as to lend themselves to statistical analysis). However, it is safe to assert that the more proportionally underrepresented a group the more "atypical" will be the background of students in secondary school drawn from that group, i.e. in this case, many

⁵ Hurd and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

⁶ Foster, "Secondary Schooling and Social Mobility," *op. cit.*, pp. 158 and 161.

of the children will be those of rather more substantial farmers.⁷ Needless to say, a few cocoa farmers are very wealthy, though Kilson's point that cocoa farmers as a whole constitute the "upper tenth" of the Gold Coast population (1958) is questionable in view of the actual data available to him at that time. A more balanced view, rather than to try to overplay the "elite" hand, in this case, would be to say that while cash crop farmers *are* overrepresented most of these are fairly small scale cultivators. They are not well educated; 65 percent have never been to school and a further eight percent have never finished primary school. If we assume that roughly half of the latter are illiterate (a not unreasonable assumption in view of what we know about reversion to illiteracy in the African context) then about 70 percent of my total sample of farmers are illiterate. In other words, they are rather less literate than the Ghanaian population as a whole but, I agree, probably more literate than the *farming* population as a whole. Assuming we had enough cases for analysis, we would also find that the children of unskilled laborers in Ghanaian secondary schools would be drawn from the "elite" among this latter group. Moreover, in western countries it would be equally demonstrable that the children of working class parents in academic secondary schools are drawn disproportionately from working class "elite" families. This is hardly surprising and in no way "undermines my major conclusions." What is distressing is that the authors having made this point confuse the issue by implying that these farmers constitute part of *the* Ghanaian elite (however we define this group) which is a very different thing. Neither their data nor mine speak to this latter point.

Since both articles reach the similar conclusion that there are considerable inequalities of opportunity in access to Ghanaian education, one might well wonder what all the fuss is about. There are two reasons for concern. First, Hurd and Johnson commit the cardinal error of confusing interpretations based on relative life chances with the interpretation of absolute percentages in a distribution. Second, they are rather confused about what they mean by such terms as "social class," "elite" and "culture."

Initially, it is quite clear that enormous differential educational opportunities can exist in a society while, at the same time, the bulk of places in selective educational institutions are taken by children from non-elite families. Let us examine this in the light of Hurd and Johnson's statement that: "higher education in Ghana functions *largely* (my italics) to place the children of the elite in high occupational positions."⁸ I am not quite sure from their statement what constitutes the Ghanaian elite since the authors never at any point define its composition, but one can only infer that they imply it comprises any individuals who stand above the median of the population with respect to any given trait be it education, occupation, or urban origin.⁹ This, of course, would in no way correspond to the definition of "the elite" provided in most of the

⁷ This point is developed much more fully in Remi Clignet and Philip Foster, *The Fortunate Few: A Study of Secondary Schools and Students in the Ivory Coast*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966, pp. 83 *et passim*.

⁸ Hurd and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁹ This, of course, renders the concept of an elite methodologically useless.

literature on African societies; here there is a stress on its exclusiveness in terms of size. I am not personally very sure of the usefulness of the term "elite" in operational research (it sounds intriguing but has little analytic cutting power) but let us use a "platform" definition of the elite that is common enough in research on African contemporary social structure: we shall define it as comprising all those adult males who have a secondary education or above. Despite the obscurity of Table 9, from Hurd and Johnson's own figures it would appear that in terms of my definition about *three quarters* of university students (the most exclusive group in the system) came from non-elite families.¹⁰ Similarly if one defines "the elite" in generous occupational terms (as all those in professional, administrative, higher technical and clerical occupations), then at least 63 percent of university students are again from *non-elite* families.¹¹ In other words, low aggregate rates of mobility and considerable inequality of educational opportunity are not incompatible with substantial representation of non-elite groups in selective institutions. This is precisely what I meant by "fluidity of access." In these terms, the writers' opinion that the educational system serves largely to perpetuate the elite is manifestly absurd; it gives the latter (however defined) clear educational advantages but also ensures that, at present, a substantial proportion of the future elite will be recruited from non-elite sources. A year or so ago a colleague and myself had occasion to write:

In earlier chapters we have attempted to show that, in the Ivory Coast at least, the secondary schools have been extremely effective in facilitating occupational mobility and potential elite membership. Of course, studies of this nature are always subject to two kinds of interpretation, depending on the "ideological stance" of the investigator. Initially one can argue in terms of the *relative* chances that different subgroups within the population will have of entering secondary school. In this case it can be said that patterns of inequality are very marked in the Ivory Coast. A southern Agni is about ten times more likely to enter some form of secondary education than a northern Senoufo. The chances of the child of a managerial or clerical worker are about eleven times greater than those of the offspring of a farmer. Those of boys and girls in the great towns of Abidjan or Bouake are three times greater than those of children in small communities.

Thus one can build up a picture of glaring inequality of opportunity, much of which has resulted from earlier patterns of colonial penetration and development. This is quite apart from the question of sex differentials and the fact that among girls inequalities are even more marked. Yet we would argue that anyone concerned with the role that schools play in facilitating mobility is misled by this kind of analysis. For it is evident that in *absolute* terms, recruitment patterns are still extremely open. Of Ivory Coast secondary school students (excluding African foreigners), almost 70 per cent do not come from the more advanced Agni and Lagoon peoples, over two-thirds are the children of farmers, and well over one-half come from the smallest towns and villages.¹²

Further, Hurd and Johnson in their anxiety to demonstrate that "social

¹⁰ Hurd and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

¹² Clignet and Foster, *The Fortunate Few* . . . , p. 202.

classes" exist in Ghana seem to fall into precisely the error that I was anxious to avoid in my own article. For the presence of inequality of life chances in a society does not necessarily predicate the existence of social classes on Western lines.¹³ Class has a "psychological" as well as a structural connotation as several generations of sociologists have been at pains to point out. When I speak of "egalitarian culture" I do not refer to objective inequalities of opportunity so much as the *beliefs* and *attitudes* that people hold about education. In Western societies these have been traditionally class linked (though less so now) but in Ghana I argue (perhaps gratuitously) they are not so ordered. Surely, this point has been made many times over by scholars concerned with Africa, and I seriously doubt whether Hurd and Johnson have really taken the trouble to read or at least to understand the second half of my paper (from page 166 onwards) which is an attempt to speculate on the nature of contemporary African society.

In my own article I was, of course, careful to suggest that the present situation might well be one of "class in the making" though I made some points that implied that this may not be the case. I could well be wrong but my critics are less cautious; they are prepared to assert that class rigidity will increase.¹⁴ I am afraid that neither their data nor mine could tell them that; they merely indicate that inequality of opportunity exists. Let us admit therefore, that we are all indulging in the pleasant task of speculating about future trends. Finally, in spite of the authors' gloomy prognostications (and I am enough of an egalitarian to regard them as gloomy) one bright little finding is available. This is Margaret Peil's recent comparison of the socio-economic background of cohorts of Ghanaian university students over the last decade.¹⁵ Here is the kind of cross-sectional material that we would all wish for! It does indicate that the basis of Ghanaian university recruitment at least has widened substantially in recent years. Of course, it says nothing about relative opportunities over time but it is evidence to be examined and not conveniently ignored.

¹³ If inequality of opportunity were the only criterion then clearly Imperial China or Ottoman Turkey or virtually any other type of stratified society could be comfortably lumped together into one category.

¹⁴ Hurd and Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹⁵ Margaret Peil, "Ghanaian University Students: The Broadening Base," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. xvi, No. 1, (March, 1963), pp. 19-28.