Social mobility in America and Europe: a comparison of nineteenth-century cities

Approaches to social mobility

'There is still a class of menials and a class of masters, but these classes are not always composed of the same individuals, still less of the same families; and those who command are not more secure of perpetuity than those who obey – At any moment a servant may become a master, and he aspires to rise to that condition'.[1] This view of social mobility in North America by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840 has been the predominant perception almost to the present. Only after the Second World War did two basically different arguments emerge. On the one hand, historians of social mobility in nineteenth-century American and European cities, such as Boston, Marseille, and Bochum came to the tentative conclusion that rates of upward social mobility were in fact higher in the United States than in Europe and that this was especially true for upward mobility from the working-class into non-manual occupations. In effect, their assessments corroberated the assertion which Tocqueville had made more than a century ago.[2] The explanation for these differences, historians argued, was to be found in the values of the European working class: a strong traditional commitment to the occupational heredity, or the beginnings of class consciousness, kept European workers from using chances of social ascent into non-manual occupations much more than American workers. On the other hand, Seymour M. Lipset and Reinhard Bendix have claimed that social mobility becomes similarly high in all societies, once a certain degree of industrialization and economic expansion has been reached.[3] The idea behind this argument is that rates of social mobility depend on economic development and changes of occupational structure, which both follow the same basic pattern in Europe and North America. Whilst the empirical evidence for this assessment depends on post-1945 studies of social mobility in America and Europe, there are grounds for projecting the argument back to the late nineteenth century. First, if economic development does lead to similar mobility rates, this effect should have emerged by the end of the era of industrialization. Secondly, studies of the trend of social mobility in the United States as well as in various European countries show the same long term stability of rates of social mobility since the late nineteenth century.[4] Hence, if rates of social mobility were similar after the Second World War, and if the long term trend was similar too, mobility rates at the end of the era of industrialization cannot have differed much.

The proliferation of local, mostly urban historical studies in recent years has produced new evidence on social mobility in America and Europe during the nineteenth century. This article attempts a systematic comparative analysis of the data on social mobility in these studies, focussing upon the opportunities of the common man, rather than access to élites or to the middle class.[5] The basic interest of the article is in contributing to a discussion of historical factors of social mobility, rather than the progressiveness or backwardness of any society. The comparative analysis is used to check which of the two main positions on social mobility outlined above – whose contrasts may have been somewhat overemphasized – comes nearest to the nineteenth-century reality. The article also discusses which of the two lines of explanation of social mobility (i.e. the argument about the values and mentalities of nineteenth-century workers, or the connections made between industrialization and subsequent occupational change) are more helpful for making comparisons between American and European society in the nineteenth century.

There is still no possibility of exploring and comparing rates of social mobility at the national level of these societies; and perhaps this possibility will never emerge for the nineteenth century as a whole. Even a comparison based on detailed city studies has to face many difficulties. Firstly, the cities chosen for investigation were not selected systematically for comparative purposes in the first place, and important urban types – the big industrial city, the administrative centre (large or small), and the non-industrial centre in agrarian areas – have been all too rarely investigated or not at all. Secondly, the available studies are often restricted to different, incomparable types of social mobility – to career mobility or mobility between generations, to overall rates of social mobility or to social ascent within or out of the working class. Hence, for each type of mobility, a much smaller number of city studies is available. Thirdly, definitions of occupations and social classes vary in these studies, and many of them use, though with variations, definitions of social class which conceal rather than help to follow up important changes of mobility. They do not always distinguish the petty bourgeoisie from white collar employees, for example, or modern industrial working-class occupations from traditional agrarian or proto-industrial workers, or the small self-employed artisan from the lower parts of the business community.[6] Fourthly, different populations are dealt with: sometimes, certain groups are explicitly excluded such as women, or blacks, or transient migrants; and sometimes the exclusion is hidden behind the choice of sources. Finally, many of the available studies are narrowly descriptive, yielding insufficient information on important factors in social mobility such as occupational structure and change, demographic development, migration, urbanization, mobility barriers and channels, or economic and political institiutions affecting social mobility.

Despite these problems, the available studies do allow for some quantitative comparisons to be made, which is crucial for this topic, enabling us to deal with gradual differences rather than with basic contrasts. In any case, to wait for more numerous and more sophisticated studies does not seem to make much sense. Further expensive and time-consuming projects of primary research may well represent wasted effort unless they can yield more innovative conclusions than might come from a comparison of the research already done. The latter ought to be attempted first. The initial part of this essay presents some descriptive conclusions about the contrasts and similarities of social mobility between American and European societies. This involves a somewhat complicated comparison, distinguishing between various aspects of social mobility. The basic distinction is that of mobility between generations, i.e. fathers and sons,[7] and that of career mobility, i.e. mobility within one life cycle. In each case they are dealt with first in terms of overall rates of social mobility, thereafter in terms of the social ascent of workers' sons (and workers), and downward mobility into the working class and manual occupations. The second part of the essay is concerned with giving explanations for the findings.

Rates of social mobility compared

The first, perhaps astonishing, conclusion to derive from the available research on social mobility between the generations in nineteenth-century cities is that no clear American pattern of the overall rate of social mobility emerges. There is no indication from the dozen studies of mobility rates between various social classes that the proportion of inhabitants who left the social class of their fathers was larger in America than in Europe (table 1). Americans in Boston, in Poughkeepsie, New York, in Waltham, Massachusetts, in Steelton, Pennsylvania, were not more mobile intergenerationally than Europeans in Copenhagen, in London, in the Swedish cities of Västerås, Halmstad, Örebro, or in the German cities of Cologne and Ludwigshafen. Moreover, no distinct American pattern emerges even if upward and downward social mobility are put in relation to each other. At first glance, the available research seems to give the impression that Tocqueville's view

Table 1: Social mobility between generations in nineteenth-century European and American cities

Year	Boston U.S.A.	Waltham U.S.A.	Poughkeepsie U.S.A.	Steelton U.S.A.	Indianapolis U.S.A.	Hamilton Canada	Copenhagen Denmark	Swedish Cities Sweden	London UK	Cologne Germany	Euskirchen Germany	Ludwigshafen Germany
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Proportion of mobile individuals												
1840										52	45	
1850						20[a]	39		32[a]			
1860						28[a]						
1870									33[a]	44	44	
1880		55	46									
1890	54						26					58
1900				49				58				
1910	56				35					55	46	
2. Relation of upward mobility to downward mobility[b]												
1840										1.3	0.6	
1850						1.1[a]	0.5		1.3[a]			
1860						1.5[a]						
1870									1.5[a]	0.7	1.2	
1880		1.0	2.4									
1890	1.0						1.2					0.7[c]
1900				2.1				2.3				
1910	2.1				0.9					0.7	0.8	

a) three classes only.
b) upwardly mobile to downwardly mobile individuals. Over 1: Upward mobility predominates. Below 1: Downward mobility predominates.
c) individuals with agrarian background excluded. Otherwise the number would be even smaller.

Note to table 1

The table gives 1. the proportion of mobile individuals in relation to the total individuals under investigation and 2. the relation of upwardly mobile individuals to downwardly mobile individuals. With the exception of Hamilton and 'Kentish' London, the table gives mobility rates between four social classes: the middle class, the lower midddle class, skilled workers, unskilled workers. If more classes were investigated, mobility rates were recalculated in order to allow crude comparisons. Any comparison, however, has to be made carefully, since the definition of the four classes vary. Structural mobility or any indicator of social mobility was not calculated since the marginal distribution of the standard mobility table in local studies does not indicate occupational change: too many of the fathers on whose occupations the tables are based lived elsewhere. Hence, columns 5 and 6 of table 2 which are based on marginal distributions are to be used with strong qualifications. Calculated from: column 1: S. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 89; column 2: C. and S. Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 67; column 3: H. M. Gitelman, *Workingmen of Waltham* (Baltimore, 1974), 66 (sample 1850–80); column 4; J. Bodnar, *Immigrants and Industrialization* (Pittsburgh, 1977), 134 (three small samples 188, 1896, 1905); column 5: J. C. Tully *et al.*, 'Trends in occupational mobility in Indianapolis', *Social Forces*, ILIX (1970–1), 193; column 6: M. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 166; column 7: T. Rishoy, 'Metropolitan Social Mobility, 1850–1950: the case of Copenhagen', *Quantity and Quality*, V (1971), 136ff; column 8: S. Akerman, in *Social Science Hist.*, I (1977); column 9: G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society. Kentish London 1840–1880* (1978), 113f, 122f. (Column 9 contains rough approximations calculated from tables which cover only particular social classes); column 10: H. Daheim, *'Berufliche Intergenerationen-Mobilität in der komplexen Gesellschaft', Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie,* XVI (1964), 117ff; column 11: R. Mayntz, *Soziale Schichtung und sozialer Wandel in einer Industriegemeinde* (Stuttgart, 1958), 154ff, column 12: W. von Hippel, 'Regionale und soziale Herkunft der Bevölkerung einer Industriestadt', in *Arbeiter im Industrialisierungsprozeß* (eds. W. Conze und U. Engelhardt, Stuttgart, 1979), 66, 68.

is corroberated and that the Americans who did not remain in the social class of their fathers moved up somewhat more frequently and skidded somewhat more rarely than the Europeans (table 1, part 2). Upward social mobility seems to have predominated more often and been more visible in American cities than in European cities. However, one ought to stress that the evidence is at least ambivalent. The difference might be due to the better quality of the sources used in studies of most American cities, but leaving this problem aside, one can argue that the relation of upward to downward mobility in almost half of the American cases is less favourable than in almost half of the European cases.

This leads to a third, less surprising, but very important conclusion on social mobility between generations: the extensive variety of social mobility on the two sides of the Atlantic. This is perhaps most clear for mobility across the line between the working class and white collar occupations (table 2). There are very low rates of social ascent of working-class sons in the German cities of Ludwigshafen and Euskirchen as well as in the American cities of Newburyport and Hamilton, and there are very high rates of social ascent not only in the American city of Boston, but also in the German city of Eßlingen (for skilled workers at least) and, also in the Danish city of Copenhagen and in the Swedish cities of Västerås, Halmstad and Örebro. It is interesting that this variety is not directly related to the degree of industrialization. The two most typical, rapidly expanding industrial cities among the investigated cases, i.e. Bochum and Ludwigshafen, Germany, do not show the high rates of social mobility which one might expect. On the contrary, they are among the cities with the poorest chances of social ascent, related to the small lower middle classes of the pure industrial city (table 2). Anyway, these variations cast doubt on whether there is any clear and homogenous European or American pattern of social ascent between generations. Some American cities must have been disappointing from Tocqueville's point of view, whereas some European cities must have appeared like little Americas.

A fourth, perhaps surprising, conclusion is that a distinct American pattern existed for downward mobility rather than for upward mobility. It seems that downward mobility from white collar family background to the working class was much more frequent in European cities than in American cities. The difference is unusually clear-cut at least among the cities which were explored (table 2, column 4). There is just one American city which comes close (but in only one year) to the European rates of downward mobility – this is Hamilton, Canada, which led the investigator, Michael Katz, to suppose that Canada as a nineteenth-century country was different from the 'American' pattern. All other American cities which have been investigated (and also Hamilton in another year) show much lower rates of downward mobility than the European cities. *It was the low danger of skidding from the father's social class rather than the promise of social ascent which characterized American cities.*[8] This would fit neither Tocqueville's view nor the interpretation by Bendix and Lipset.

The comparison of career mobility in American and European cities yields partly different conclusions. To begin with the overall rates of mobility between various social classes, only ten studies of this aspect exist so far. Once again, there is no clear American pattern of social mobility. In American as well as in European cities, between 10 and 25 per cent of the population moved within one decade between the four social classes which can be compared so far, i.e. between unskilled and semi-skilled workers, skilled workers, the lower middle class, and the middle class, without any clear relationship between rapid industrialization and high rates of mobility (table 3). Although two American cases have somewhat higher rates of mobility, one of them is a Canadian city, and the other, Steelton, Pennsylvania, has the lowest rate ever in another year. By chance, three of the available studies cover seaports. Even in the case of these cities with a similar economic structure no distinct American pattern emerged: Rotterdam had about the same rates of career mobility as Boston and Philadelphia. All this is true also if upward and downward career mobility is followed separately. Upward social

Table 2: Social mobility between generations and occupational structure in nineteenth century American and European cities

City	Upward mobility from manual and non-manual positions			Downward mobility from non-manual positions	Proportion employed in non-manual positions	
	from working class background	from skilled workers	from unskilled workers[c]		Structure	Change between generations[a]
	1	2	3	4	5	6
North America						
Newburyport 1860	–	–	7	–	–	–
Newburyport 1870	–	–	10	–	–	–
Hamilton 1850[g]	5	6	2	28	24	– 4
Hamilton 1860[g]	14	14	15	6	30	+ 2
New Orleans 1870	–	–	21	–	–	–
Poughkeepsie 1880	26	29	19	11	42	+ 3
Newburyport 1880	–	–	8	–	–	–
Boston c. 1890	41	37	43	20	59	+13
Boston c. 1910	41	43	39	17	55	+23
Indianapolis 1910	21	23	19	40	39	+10[h]
Europe						
Euskirchen D 1833–40	8	11	6	59[e]	20	–32
Cologne D 1833–40	10	11	7	47[d]	24	– 9
Frankfurt D 1846–51						
Marseille F 1850	14	–	–	–	–	–
Copenhagen DK 1850	21	25	–	33	44	– 2
Eßlingen D 1846–70	–	45	–	–	–	–
Euskirchen D 1870–7	18	19	16	24[e]	34	– 8
Cologne D 1870–7	15	19	12	47[d]	30	– 4
Euskirchen D 1906–13	17	21	10	45[e]	29	– 3
Cologne D 1906–13	18	23	14	43[d]	36	– 2
Bochum D 1900	12	10–18	6	–	25[f]	–
Swed. cities S 1910	27	40	21	36	36	+17
Ludwigshafen D 1876–1914	9	11	5	58	17	– 4[b]
Eßlingen D 1870–1914	–	39	–	–	–	–
Bielefeld D 1830–1910	18[i]	22	19	44[k]	31	–21
Borghorst D 1880–1911	16	19[i]	9	49[k]	29	–7

a) change of occupational structure between fathers and sons
b) non-agrarian change only
c) semi-skilled workers under category 'unskilled workers'
d) 'downward mobility' from farmers: 27 per cent in 1833–40, 25 per cent in 1870–7, 13 per cent in 1906–13
e) 'downward mobility' from farmers: 45 per cent in 1833–40, 14 per cent in 1870–7, 20 per cent in 1906–13
f) 1880
g) son's first job
h) farmers excluded
i) social ascent of cottage workers: 20 per cent in Bielefeld, 25 per cent in Borghorst
k) downward mobility from farmers: 66 per cent in Bielefeld, 68 per cent in Borghorst

Note to table 2
Newburyport: S. Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress: Social Mobility in Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), table 5 (for the comparison with the following studies based on marriage licence files, i.e. of men in their late twenties, I took from Thernstrom's data the social ascent in 1860 of the birth cohort of 1830–9, in 1870 of the birth cohort of 1840–9, in 1880 of the birth cohort of 1850–9); Hamilton: M. Katz, *People of Hamilton, Canada, West* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 144; Poughkeepsie: C. and S. Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 67 (son's last job); Boston: S. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 89 (son's last job); Indianapolis: J. C. Tully *et al.*, 'Trends in occupational mobility in Indianapolis', *Social Forces*, IL (1970–1) 192; New Orleans: D. T. Kearns, *The Social Mobility of New Orleans Laborers 1870–1900* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Tulane, 1977), 102; Euskirchen: R. Mayntz, *Soziale Schichtung und sozialer Wandel in einer Industriegemeinde* (Stuttgart, 1958), 154ff; Cologne: H. Daheim, 'Berufliche Intergenerationen-Mobilität in der komplexen Gesellschaft', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, XVI (1964), 117ff; Copenhagen: T. Rishoj, 'Metropolitan social mobility 1850–1950: the case of Copenhagen', *Quality and Quantity*, V (1971), 136f; Eßlingen: H. Schomerus, *Die Arbeiter der Maschinenfabrik Eßlingen* (Stuttgart, 1977), 276 (Machine building workers only); Bochum: D. Crew, 'Definitions of modernity: social mobility in a German town, 1880–1901', *J. Social Hist.*, VII (1973–4), 61; Marseille: W. H. Sewell, 'Social mobility in a nineteenth century European city', *J. Interdisciplinary Hist.*, VII (1976), 221; Swedish cities: S. Akerman, *Social Science Hist.*, I (1977); Ludwigshafen: W. von Hippel, 'Regionale und soziale Herkunft der Bevölkerung einer Industriestadt', in *Arbeiter im Industrialisierungsprozeß*, eds. W. Conze and U. Engelhardt (Stuttgart, 1979), 67f, London: G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society, Kentish London 1840–1880* (1978), 113f, 122f; Bielefeld and Borghorst: J. Kocka, K. Ditt, J. Mooser, H. Reif, R. Schüren, *Familie und soziale Plazierung* (Opladen, 1980), 11, 364, 371.

mobility predominated in American as well as in European cities (with the qualification that the social mobility of migrants is unknown on both sides of the Atlantic). Even the precise relation of upwardly mobile individuals to downwardly mobile ones was not more favourable in American cities (table 3).

The conclusions are somewhat different if we turn to career mobility across the line between the working class and the lower middle and the middle class. At first glance at least, the available research supports the view of Tocqueville. The chances of social ascent of workers were *clearly higher* in American cities than in European cities (table 4). In almost all European cities ten per cent or less of the workers reached lower middle class (rarely middle class) positions within ten years time (Preston 5 per cent, Bochum 8 per cent, Rotterdam 7 per cent on average, Oskarsham 10 per cent, Graz being an exception with 19 per cent on average). In most American cities ten per cent and more of the workers reached these positions during one decade (Boston 11 per cent on the average, South Bend 12 per cent on average, Hamilton 16 per cent, Atlanta 11 per cent, New Orleans 10 per cent of unskilled workers only, Omaha 22 per cent on average, Birmingham 18 per cent on average, Warren 16 per cent, Poughkeepsie and also Newburyport being exceptions with 4 per cent for all workers and 5 per cent for unskilled workers, respectively, on average). This is probably what was in the mind of these social historians who made the assessment that nineteenth-century workers had better opportunities in America than in Europe. The argument seems to be the more important since rates of downward career mobility into manual positions were about the same in American and European cities.[9] Hence, the somewhat higher rates of chances for social ascent in America were not offset by a stronger danger of social skidding.

An even more distinct American pattern emerges from the comparison of social ascent for unskilled and skilled workers on the two sides of the Atlantic. At least in the few cases which have been explored, there is rarely much difference between American unskilled and skilled workers in their social ascent across the line between the working class and the lower middle class. Sometimes unskilled workers were even more sucessful than skilled workers. In European cities, on the contrary, rates of social ascent across that line were much lower among unskilled

Table 3: Career mobility in nineteenth-century American and European cities (proportion of mobile individuals and relation of upward to downward mobility)

Year	Philadelphia U.S.A.	Boston U.S.A.	Poughkeepsie U.S.A.	Waltham U.S.A.	Warren U.S.A.	Steelton U.S.A.	Hamilton Canada	Rotterdam Netherlands	Bochum Germany	Graz Austria
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Proportion of mobile individuals										
1820–30	14									
1830–40	19	11						10		
1840–50	15	10								
1850–60	20	16	22	17				18		
1860–70			24	22			27			22
1870–80			23	17				14		23
1880–90		21				28			11	
1890–00					22					
1900–10						9				29
2. Relation of upward to downward mobility (upwardly mobile to downwardly mobile individuals)										
1820–30	1.4									
1830–40	1.9	4.7						1.6		
1840–50	1.4	2.8								
1850–60	1.5	5.3	2.8	1.5			1.9	1.9		
1860–70			3.0	2.8						2.0
1870–80			1.9	2.7				8.7		1.3
1880–90		1.7				3.7			2.0	
1890–00										
1900–10					2.2	2.0				1.3
average	1.6	3.6	2.6	2.3	2.2	2.8	1.9	4.1	2.0	1.5

over 1: upward mobility predominates
below 1: downward mobility predominates

Note to table 3

In this table I have tried to calculate mobility rates between four social classes: unskilled (including semiskilled) workers, skilled workers, the lower middle class, the middle class. Structural mobility or any other indicator of social mobility was not computed since the marginal distribution of the standard mobility table of a local study usually does not indicate occupational change because of the high rates and occupational differentials of migration. Hence, columns 5 and 6 of table 4 which are based on the marginal distribution ought to be used carefully. The table is restricted to career mobility within ten years. Only for this time span we do have enough studies.

Column 1: S. Blumin, 'Mobility and change in ante-bellum Philadelphia', in S. Thernstrom and R. Sennet (eds.), *Nineteenth-Century Cities* (New Haven, 1969), 173ff (rates of mobility between five social classes); column 2: P. R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston, 1830–1860* (New York, 1971), 98f; S. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 57; column 3: C. and S. Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers, The Ordering of Opportunities in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Poughkeepsie* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 60; column 4: H. M. Gitelman, *Workingmen of Waltham. Mobility in American Urban Industrial Development 1850–1890* (Baltimore, 66; column 5: A. E. Broadman and M. P. Weber, 'Economic growth and occupational mobility in nineteenth-century urban America', *J. Social Hist.*, XI (1977–8), 64 (results are compiled from four cohorts: 1870–80, 1880–90, 1890–1900, 1900–10); column 6: J. Bodnar, *Immigrants and Industrialization. Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870–1940* (Pittsburgh, 1977), 70 (second cohort 1905–15); column 7: M. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 150; column 8: H. van Dijk, *Rotterdam 1810–1880* (Schiedam, 1976), 152ff; column 9: D. Crew, 'Definitions of modernity: social mobility in a German town, 1880–1901', *J. Social Hist.*, VII (1973), table 1 (mobility between three classes only, hence low rate of mobility); column 10: W. H. Hubbard, 'Aspects of social mobility in Graz, 1857–1880, *Historical Social Research*, XIV (1980). (Hubbard has kindly allowed me to include in the table unpublished data of 1900–10 from his study of Graz).

workers than among skilled workers (table 4, columns 2 and 3). Hence, if America was the land of promise, this was especially true for the unskilled workers (or for skilled people who had become unskilled) more so than for any other social group.[10] It was hardly true for skilled workers who moved up into the lower middle class more often in Europe than in America.

Even if there is a distinct American pattern of superior rates of social ascent, two qualifications have still to be made, First, once again the variety among American cities is so extensive that the American pattern seems not to be very consistent. The difference between the most promising American cities, i.e. Omaha and Birmingham, and the least promising cities, i.e. Atlanta, Poughkeepsie, and Boston (in most years) is so large that the historian is tempted to deal with contrasts within America rather than with anything like an American way of social mobility.

Even more important is the fact that the cities and/or periods with low rates of social ascent in America were close to the European rates. This is true even if one drops the two most deviant cases, i.e. Poughkeepsie, New York, with its low 'European' rates of social ascent and Graz, Austria, with its high 'American' rates of social ascent. For the rest the differences which do occur are small, perhaps even merely technical differences, which do not make a strong point for superior opportunities in American cities.[11] Hence, if there are any spectacular contrasts among nineteenth-century cities, the dividing lines running across America and perhaps also across Europe were as important as the contrast between America and Europe.

To sum up, the bulk of the evidence does not support the view of distinctly superior opportunities in nineteenth-century American cities. Only downward mobility into the working class was lower in the US which is, however, not what the idea of superior opportunities really means. A clear American pattern of superior rates of opportunities could be found, if at all, only in a restricted sense, i.e. only for career mobility across the line between the working class and the (mostly lower) middle class. Such a pattern existed to a certain degree for the working class as a whole, though this conclusion is blurred by large variations among American as well as among European cities. The pattern emerges much more distinctly for the unskilled American workers when compared to skilled workers. The large gap of opportunities between unskilled and skilled workers in Europe did not exist in America. Subject to the qualification that our knowledge is based on few cases, this is where Tocqueville's observation in 1840 remained valid throughout the nineteenth century. One ought, nevertheless, to keep in mind that in America as well as in Europe, the majority of unskilled workers remained in their social class.

Explanation of the findings

We should not be surprised at finding basic similarities between American and European societies since both of them industrialized in about the same situation of the world economy and technological knowledge, and there were strong economic and cultural links between them, not least because of European settlement in America. What ought to be explained therefore is how differences of social mobility between American and European cities arose. It is still too early to offer any final and definite explanation, since the findings that have been presented may be modified by the study of further cities. One ought to stress also that all differences were a matter of scale, and represented simplifications of marked regional and local variations. Nevertheless some suggestions can be made. A first matter needing to be considered, for instance, is the significance of diverging occupational structures and developments in occupational patterns between America and industrializing West Europe.[12] A comparative history of occupational change does not exist so far even in its most basic sense. It seems, however, that nineteenth-century America witnessed more rapid occupational change than industrializing European countries. Occupational change proceeded more slowly even in a notori-

Table 4: Career mobility across the line between manual and non-manual occupations (outflow percentages in ten years)

City	Upward mobility from manual to non-manual occupations			Downward mobility from non-manual to manual occupations	Proportion of non-manual positions (%)	
	from the working class	from unskilled positions	from skilled positions		Structure at beginning of decade	Change within 10 Years
	1	2	3	4	5	6
North America						
Boston 1830–40	9	14	4	2	39	+ 6
Boston 1840–50	7	7	7	0	46	+10
Boston 1850–60	17	15	18	5	29	+ 9
Poughkeepsie 1850–60	6	6	6	1	35	− 1
Newburyport 1850–60	–	5	–	–	–	–
South Bend 1850–60	14[a]	–	–	–	41	−21
Hamilton 1850–60	16	16	16	15	34	–
Poughkeepsie 1860–70	4	4	4	8	34	− 7
South Bend 1860–70	10[a]	–	–	–	20	− 2
Newburyport 1860–70	–	5	–	–	–	–
Poughkeepsie 1870–80	2	3	2	3	34	0
Atlanta 1870–80	11	–	–	6	29	+11
New Orleans 1870–80	–	10	–	–	–	–
Newburyport 1870–80	–	5	–	–	–	–
South Bend 1870–80	9[a]	–	–	–	18	− 5
Boston 1880–90	10	15	6	10	39	+ 3
Omaha 1880–90	21	–	–	2	40	–
Birmingham 1890–99	15	12	14[b]	–	–	–
Birmingham 1899–1909	20	14	24[b]	–	–	–
Omaha 1900–1910	23	–	–	8	64	–
Warren 1870–1910	16	15	22	8	39	+ 7
Europe						
Rotterdam NL 1830–40	5	1	8	11	37	0
Rotterdam NL 1850–60	13	2	17	13	17	+ 3
Preston GB 1850–60	5	–	–	–	–	–
Graz AU 1857–69	22	9	31	12	45	+ 7
Rotterdam NL 1870–80	10	5	17	7	21	+ 6
Graz AU 1869–80	16	9	23	12	43	+ 1
Bochum D 1880–90	8	6	10	4	22	+ 5
Oskarsham S 1890–1900	10	–	–	–	–	–
Graz AU 1900–1910	18	12	22	16	43	+13

[a] Immigrant workers only
[b] without service workers whose definition is unclear

Note to table 4
Table 4 is calculated from: Boston: P. R. Knights, *The Plain People of Boston 1830–1860* (New York, 1971), 98f, S. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 57 (semiskilled under category 'unskilled'); Poughkeepsie: C. and S. Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 60 (semiskilled under category 'unskilled'); Newburyport: S. Thernstrom, *Poverty and Progress*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), 96; South Bend: D. R. Esslinger, *Immigrants and the City* (Port-Washington, 1975), 82; Hamilton: M. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975); Atlanta: R. J. Hopkins, 'Occupational and geographical mobility in Atlanta, 1870–1896', *J. Southern Hist.*, XXXIV (1968), 205ff; Birmingham: P. B. Worthman, 'Working class mobility in Birmingham, Alabama, 1880–1914', in T. K. Haseven (ed.), *Anonymous Americans* (Englewood Cliffs 1971), 194f; New Orleans: D. T. Kearns, 'The social mobility of New Orleans laborers 1870–1900', (Ph.D. thesis, University of Tulane, 1977), p. 45; Omaha: H. P. Chudacoff, *Mobile Americans* (New York, 1972), 87, 99 (it is not quite clear whether Chudacoff traces mobility across the line between manual and non-manual occupations); Warren: A. F. Broadman and M. P. Weber, Economic Growth and Occupational Mobility in nineteenth-century urban America, *J. Social Hist.*, XI (1978–9), 64; Rotterdam: H. van Dijk, *Rotterdam 1810–1880* (Schiedam, 1976), 145ff; Graz: W. H. Hubbard, 'Aspects of social mobility in Graz, 1857–1880', *Historical Social Research*, XIV (1980), table 11; Bochum: D. Crew, 'Definitions of modernity: social mobility in a German town, 1880–1901', *J. Social Hist.*, VII (1973), table 1; or D. Crew, *Town in the Ruhr. The Social History of Bochum, 1860–1914*, table 3.1; Oskarsham: D. Papp and B. Ohngren, *Arbeterna vid Oskarshamns varv kring sekelskiftet*, 30.

ously rapid developer such as Germany than in the United States. Moreover, the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century (as well as in the twentieth century) was characterized by a comparably small industrial sector and a comparably large tertiary sector especially because the active population employed in commerce, banking, transportation, and public utilities was relatively larger in the United States than in West Europe (table 7).[13] Related to the sectoral difference, it appears that the industrial working class was relatively smaller and that the lower middle class especially in the tertiary sector became relatively larger in America than in industrializing West Europe during the

Table 5: Occupational structure of the U.S. and West Europe: industry, commerce and transportation, 1860–1910 (percentage of total active population)

Year	Industry	Commerce, and transportation[a]		
	US	Industrializing West Europe	US	Industrializing West Europe
	1	2	3	4
1860	20	36	7	7
1870	23	33	10	8
1880	25	33	12	7
1890	28	35	14	9
1900	30	38	16	11
1910	32	40	20	14

a Commerce, banking, insurances, transportation, public utilities (excluding restaurants usually included in French and German statistics, but not in the American ones).

Sources: *Historical Statistics of the United States*, ed. U.S. Bureau of Census, Washington 1960, 74; *The Working Population and its Structure*, (ed. P. Bairoch, Brussels, 1968), 83ff. (Belgium, Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland); J.-C. Toutain, *La population de la France de 1700 à 1959* (Paris, 1963), tables 57, 60, 81, 136–7; W. G. Hoffmann, *Das Wachstum der deutschen Wirtschaft seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1965), 204ff. The table includes those European countries whose industrial sector in 1910 contained about 30 per cent and more of the total active population, i.e. Belgium, Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland. For further remarks cf. n. 12, below.

second half of the nineteenth century.[14] Hence, in the nineteenth-century American cities investigated so far, 42 per cent of the labour force was employed in lower middle class occupations compared to only 29 per cent in European cities.[15] These differences would lead one to expect somewhat diverging patterns of social mobility.

A second important difference between America and industrializing Western Europe lies in the decline of the traditional unskilled worker with his extremely low chances of social ascent. The transition from the pre-industrial and early industrial day labourer, who did non-mechanized work to the modern unskilled or semi-skilled worker employed in highly mechanized mass production, appears to have taken place earlier and/or more rapidly in the U.S.A. than in Europe. The basic economic precondition transition was mechanization and the emergence of standardized mass production.[16] Whatever the reasons were for this – the scarcity of labour in general and of skilled labour in particular in the U.S.A., the more innovative American entrepreneur, the more developed trade of mass produced consumption goods, the more open attitude of the America consumer toward industrial rather than artisanal commodities – the rise of the modern unskilled worker was an important factor of social mobility since his steadier work and life situation was more favourable for using educational and occupational chances and possibilities of social ascent. Therefore, more modern unskilled or semi-skilled work might have increased upward social mobility rates especially from unskilled work into the lower middle class. Since the European backwardness was only a matter of scale and there were substantial variations within the U.S.A. as well as among industrializing European countries, this factor brought about only gradual differences of social mobility.

A further important reason for different opportunities in America and Europe might be found by examining life-cycles. Research on age-specific upward and downward mobility during the nineteenth century has just started, and only a few, mostly local urban studies, exist. One might suppose that the somewhat higher occupational opportunities in America applied mainly to the age of about 40 and 50. After that, downward mobility (in relation to upward mobility) was probably the same or even stronger than in Europe since a larger proportion of Europeans seems to have retired in that age and since especially lower white collar Europeans were more reluctant to accept occupational downward mobility even under the condition of a deteriorating standard of living.[17]

A final reason for differences between America and Europe is a technical one. Differences in rates of social mobility might depend upon the quality of sources. Marriage license files, the main source for studies of inter-generational mobility, underrate the extent of upward social mobility since the generation of sons is explored in an early age, when chances of social ascent still lay ahead. Some studies, such as those of late nineteenth-century Boston and Poughkeepsie, which found particularly low rates of downward mobility, used better sources covering later stages of the life cycle of social mobility.[18]

To sum up, there are various reasons for not explaining the somewhat better career prospects of American urban workers simply by their weaker commitment to trades or to a working-class culture. First of all, there is a basic contradiction in this argument. In Europe those workers committed to corporativist ideas or to class consciousness, and those workers who experienced particularly rare social ascent, comprised different groups. The former, i.e. usually the skilled workers, were upwardly mobile as often or even more frequently than their American counterparts; whilst those European unskilled workers who experienced much less social ascent than American counterparts often had few commitments to any occupation or to working-class consciousness during most of the century. No doubt the values of European *skilled* workers made an important difference to politics and social life in Europe compared with America. However, the impact of this on social mobility is, at the least, not yet clear.

In any case there are other factors which can be adduced to explain higher rates

of social ascent among workers in America. As we have seen, and leaving aside the problem of whether American studies use better sources, occupational structures and development were more favourable to social ascent in America, especially for the unskilled, and the life cycle of occupational opportunity may have been more distinct in America with similar consequences. Other factors, such as the less rigid and less formalized stratification of American society, the more open attitude of the American middle class towards social success, might have been important as well.[19]

Summary and conclusion

This article departs from two contradictory albeit tentative arguments about social mobility in nineteenth-century America and Europe. These arguments have been set against evidence on social mobility in over 30 local urban studies. It turns out that neither of them is wholly wrong. There is more evidence for the argument that links similarities in rates of social mobility to similar paths of industrialization. No distinct American pattern of superior social mobility was found for most aspects of mobility between generations and for overall rates of career mobility. However, there was some, though restricted, evidence for the second argument about the superiority of opportunities in nineteenth-century America. Social ascent across the line between the working class and the lower middle class was somewhat more frequent in the U.S.A., at least for unskilled workers. The argument about differences in values between European and American society may have been a factor explaining this, in leading to certain differences in the social mobility of the common man, and even more so in access to the middle class and the élite on both sides of the Atlantic,[20] but the better explanation seems to lie in taking account of more favourable opportunity structures in American society. In respect of the unskilled and semi-skilled worker, America was not simply the land of more promising men, but the land of more promise. Apart from restricted trans-Atlantic differences, however, similarities, or at least similarly large variations in the social mobility of the common man were characteristic of societies on both sides of the Atlantic.

These conclusions raise the question of how to explain our expectations that nineteenth-century America was the land of superior opportunities. It might be expected, first, that transatlantic migration was a search for better opportunities to a large degree and we might well ask why this migration happened at all if migrants found almost the same chances in the United States as in Europe. However, recent research on outmigration from Europe has shown that migrants rarely shared the view of Tocqueville – the overwhelming majority wanted to leave unbearable economic circumstances, to find a living, or to earn more money in the same trade, rather than to use chances of social ascent in other occupations.[21] Secondly, one might expect – as Werner Sombart did – that the weakness of socialism in the American labour movement was partly due to better opportunities in America and that European workers were more radical because they had less chance of leaving their proletarian situation. However, social opportunities were just one factor in radical labour movements, and radicalism itself depended on perceptions of social mobility rather than the actual rates of mobility, which are interpreted differently even among today's social scientists, and were not known during the nineteenth century anyway. Finally, one might expect superior opportunities in America due to the 'frontier' – i.e. the existence of local societies in the making, without the traditional social barriers of European societies. Among the studies examined in this article there was only one American frontier city (Omaha, Nebraska), and this city showed very high rates of upward social mobility. The rural 'frontier' was omitted altogether.[22] However, if future research does find spectacularly high rates of social mobility in frontier districts, the result will be more important probably for differences within America and between rural Europe and rural America, where a majority of Europeans and

Americans lived for most of the nineteenth century. It will probably be much less important for the comparison of opportunities in urban areas since the studies already undertaken include not only many European-like cities in America but also new, expanding, frontier-like cities in Europe.

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Notes

1 A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Knopf, 1945), II, 180f. – I learned much from debates on earlier versions of this paper at the Erasmus University Rotterdam (1977), at the Braudel Seminar in Paris (1979), in Lyon (1979), at the North-West Forum on German Social History in Manchester (1979), at the meeting of West German Americanists in Berlin (1980). I also received helpful suggestions from Bill Hubbard (Montreal) and D. A. Reeder (Leicester).

2 S. Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 259ff.; W. H. Sewell, 'Social mobility in a nineteenth century European city, *Interdisciplinary Hist.*, VII (1976); D. Crew, 'Definitions of modernity: social mobility in a German town, 1880–1901', *Social Hist.*, VII (1973–4), 66f; D. Crew, *Town in the Ruhr. The Social History of Bochum 1860–1914* (New York, 1979).

3 S. M. Lipset and R. Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley, 1967), 13.

4 P. M. Blau and O. D. Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York, 1967); R. M. Hauser *et al.*, 'Structural changes in occupational mobility among men in the United States', *American Sociological Review*, XL (1975); A. Darbel, 'L'évolution récente de la mobilite sociale', *Economie et statistique*, LXXI (1975), 18ff; G. Carlsson, *Social Mobility and Class Structure* (Lund, 1958), 94ff; J. H. Goldthorpe, C. Llewellyn, C. Payne, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* (1980) 68ff; J. J. M. van Tulder, *De beroepsmobiliteit in Nederland van 1919 tot 1954* (Leiden, 1952), 94ff; G. Kleining, 'Struktur- und Berufsmobilität in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, XXIII (1971).

5 For the comparison of the access to the business elite and to higher education cf.: H. Kaelble, 'Long-term changes of the recruitment of the business élite: Germany compared to the US, Great Britain, and France since the industrial revolution', *J. Social History*, XIII (1979–80); F. Ringer, *Education and Society in Modern Europe* (Bloomington 1979).

6 An important effort to overcome the shortcomings of this definition of social classes was made by Kocka and the other members of the Bielefeld family history group. Cf. J. Kocka, The study of social mobility and the formation of the working class in the nineteenth century', *Le mouvement social*, CXI (1980), J. Kocka, K. Ditt, J. Moser, H. Reif, R. Schüren, *Familie und soziale Plazierung* (Opladen, 1980).

7 Comparisons that include mothers, daughters, or more than two generations are not yet possible for lack of almost any research.

8 It is not fully clear what sort of downward mobility, i.e. mobility between which social classes, made the difference since the social class schemes used by the studies of American cities are much too wide. From some European studies we know that the mobility between small independent masters and shopkeepers and the working class was by far the most important part of downward mobility. No doubt the 'downward' character of this mobility often is ambiguous and unclear. Hence, one has to be careful with the argument that a clear difference between America and Europe exists in this respect.

9 Downward career mobility into the working class was 9 per cent on the average in American as well as in European cities (based on table 4, calculated from the averages for each city).

10 However, unskilled workers did not become skilled workers more often in America than in Europe. It is interesting that in spite of the peculiar continuity or even reactivation of artisan guilds in nineteenth-century Central Europe, skilled work was not more open for unskilled workers in the U.S.A. The proportion of unskilled workers who became skilled workers was 7 per cent in Bochum, Germany, 11 per cent in Graz, Austria, against 7 per cent in Boston, 4 per cent in Atlanta, 9 per cent in New Orleans, 11 per cent in Newburyport, 11 per cent in Poughkeepsie, 12 per cent in Warren (for sources see note to table 3). American skilled workers seem to have used other techniques to keep unskilled workers off the trade.

11 Moreover, it is unclear what a detailed comparison of upward career mobility would tell us – a comparison which shows between which exact occupational groups upward mobil-

ity took place. If mobility from the working class into the class of small masters and shopkeepers makes the difference between America and Europe, the 'upward' character of mobility would often be ambiguous and the argument of superior American rates even more unconvincing. Available studies usually do not allow to check this aspect.

12 The following remarks as well as table 5 compare the U.S.A. with *industrializing* Western Europe since the comparative discussion of the findings of social mobility was based upon cities in *industrializing* West European countries, too. No doubt, the definition of 'industrializing West Europe' in table 5 by countries rather than by regions is not very satisfactory. However, statistical information for a regional approach does not exist. Calculations which include all West European countries show basically the same difference between Europe and America though to a weaker degree. Only in the twentieth century when industrialization became more widespread in Europe, was the peculiar way of European occupational development statistically clear for the whole of West Europe. (Cf. P. Bairoch, J.-M. Limbor, 'Changes in the industrial distribution of the world labour force by region, 1880–1960', *International Labour Review*, IIC (1968), 326f).

13 It would take too much space to print the data for all West European countries. Behind the overall numbers substantial variations exist. Some European countries come close to the American structure. However, one should take into account that the high proportion of the active population in commerce or transportation in some European countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, Britain and Norway reflects a European division of labour. Hence, a single European country cannot be compared to the whole of the U.S.A.

14 Roughly comparable statistical information exists at least for white collar employees. It seems that at least at the end of the nineteenth century, the proportion of white collar employees in the total active population was somewhat higher in the U.S.A. (1900: 12 per cent; 1910: 15 per cent) than in most European countries such as Belgium (1900: 8 per cent 1910: 9 per cent), France (1911: 12 per cent). Germany (1895: 11 per cent; 1907: 13 per cent), Britain (1891: 6 per cent; 1911: 7 per cent), Italy (1900: 2 per cent). Cf. for the U.S.A. and Germany: J. Kocka, *Angestellte zwischen Faschismus und Demokratie* (Göttingen, 1977), 43; for Belgium: *The Working Population and its Structure* (ed. P. Bairoch, Brussels, 1968), 149; for France: J.-C. Toutain, *La population de la France de 1700 à 1959* (Paris, 1963), *tableau* 66; for Britain: G. Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870–1914* (1977), 19; for Italy: L. Labini, *Saggio sulle classe sociali* (Rome, 1978), 157. Because of diverging definitions comparable data for the petty bourgeoisie could not be found.

15 One ought to stress that these data are not to be considered as representative for the U.S.A. and Europe.

16 For the European backwardness in mechanization cf. R. Samuel, 'The workshop of the world: Steam power and hand technology in mid-Victorian Britain', *Hist. Workshop*, III (1977), 48f; S. B. Saul (ed.), *Technological Change, the United States and Britain in the Nineteenth Century* (1970); H. J. Habakkuk, *American and British Technology in the Nineteenth Century* (1962); for the social implications of the rise of modern unskilled work cf. P. N. Stearns, 'The unskilled and industrialization. A transformation of consciousness', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, XVI (1976); for the comparison of specific industrial branches cf. I. Yellowitz, *Industrialization and the American Labor Movement, 1850–1900*, Kennikat Press 1977, 27f, 69f, 76ff; I. Yellowitz, 'Skilled workers and Mechanization: the lasters in the 1800's, *Labor Hist.*, VIII (1977); W. H. Schröder, *Arbeitergeschichte und Arbeiterbewegung* (Frankfurt, 1978), J. Vidalenc, *La société francaise de 1815 à 1848* (2 vols, Paris 1970f).

17 For lack of retirement in the U.S.A.: H. P. Chudacoff and T. K. Hareven, 'Family transitions into old age', in *Transitions. Family and the Life Course in Historical Perspective* (ed. T. K. Hareven, New York, 1978); *idem*, 'From empty nest to family dissolution: life course and transition into old age', *J. Family Hist.*, I (1979); for retirement in Europe: cf. J. Albers, 'Die Entstehung der westeuropäischen Sozialversicherungssysteme im Kontext von Industrialisierung und Demokratisierung' (unpubl. article, 1980) 46f; P. N. Stearns, *Old Age in European Society* (1977), 54ff, 142f; *Statistik des Deutschen Reiches*, vol. CIII (Berlin, 1897), 3, 121 (almost 90 per cent of the retired people [being heads of households] lived on their property or on pensions). Age specific upward and downward mobility: C. and S. Griffen, *Natives and Newcomers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 59ff; H. M. Gitelman, *Workingmen of Waltham* (Baltimore, 1974), 67, 100f (also property of the old); M. B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West*, (Cambridge Mass., 1975), 160ff (also property of the old). For the debate on old age poverty in the U.S.A: T. K. Hareven, 'The last stage: historical adulthood and old age', *Daedalus*, CV (1976); downward mobility and the lower middle class: Kocka, *Angestellte*, 134ff, 299f; G. Crossick, 'The emergence of the lower middle class in Britain: a discussion', in G. Crossick (ed.), *The Lower Middle Class in Britain 1870–1914* (1977), 30ff.

18 Among the urban studies of mobility between generations in America only the study of

Indianapolis is based merely on marriage license files and, hence, shows high rates of downward mobility (cf. table 2).

19 For the more open attitudes of the American middle class toward social ascent cf. S. M. Lipset, *The First New Nation*, (New York, 1963); Kocka, *Angestellte*.

20 Cf. H. Kaelble, 'Social mobility in Germany, 1900–1960', *J. Modern Hist.*, L (1978); H. Kaelble, 'Long-term changes of the recruitment of the business elite: Germany compared to the U.S.A., Great Britain and France since the industrial revolution', *J. Social Hist.*, XIII (1979/80).

21 C. Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants* (1972); M. Walker, *Germany and the Emigration 1816–1885* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); G. Moltmann (ed.), *Deutsche Amerikaauswanderung im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1976); H. Runblom and H. Norman (eds.), *From Sweden to America* (Minneapolis, 1976). See also the comparison of the standard of living in a European city (Birmingham) and an American city (Pittsburgh) in the nineteenth century by P. R. Shergold, '"Reefs of Roast Beef": the American worker's standard of living in comparative perspective' (unpublished article, 1979).

22 Cf. for strong contrast between rural Europe and rural 'frontier' America: I. Eriksson and J. Rogers, *Rural Labor and Population Change. Social and Demographic Developments in East-Central Sweden during the 19th Century* (Uppsala, 1978); J. Kocka *et. al.*, *Familie und soziale Plazierung*; M. Curti, *The Making of an American Community. A Case Study of Democracy in a Frontier Community* (Stanford, 1959); W. Hippel, 'Industrieller Wandel im ländlichen Raum', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, XIX (1979).