

Social Mobility in Italy

Author(s): Joseph Lopreato

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## RESEARCH NOTES

### Social Mobility in Italy<sup>1</sup>

In their comparative analysis of social-mobility patterns, Lipset and Bendix have pointed out that "the social mobility of societies becomes relatively high once their industrialization, and hence their economic expansion, reaches a certain level." This supports their hypothesis that "mobility patterns in Western industrialized societies are determined by the occupational structure"<sup>2</sup> rather than by political institutions, historical legacies, or other such variables. Specifically, they have found that "all the countries studied are characterized by a high degree of mobility. From one generation to another, a quarter to a third of the non-farm population moves from working class to middle class or vice versa."<sup>3</sup>

To this finding there has been one major exception, namely, Italy, where the over-all index of mobility was only 16 per cent, according to a 1949 study by the statistician Livi.<sup>4</sup> The Italian data have quite properly arrested the attention of students of social

stratification. For, if it is true that, as Colin Clark has stated in a similar context, "Italy is [intrinsically] a society of much greater hereditary stratification than any of the other countries examined,"<sup>5</sup> Lipset and Bendix's hypothesis cannot be considered validated. There is also the likelihood that, when the Italian study was carried out, Italy had not yet reached that "certain level" of industrialization and economic expansion. Finally, there is the compelling fact that the data for Italy, as presented, are not sufficiently comparable to those for other countries. Livi's intention had not been to study social mobility in Italy, but "seulement de proposer une méthode" of statistically measuring such a phenomenon;<sup>6</sup> consequently, he paid little or no attention to the desideratum of comparability in arranging his occupational categories. Perhaps for this same reason he worked with a sample of 636, which is probably too small to be an adequate national sample. In any case, the 1951 Census data indicate that the occupational distribution of Livi's study is very considerably skewed.

Lipset and Bendix, therefore, were well advised to exclude Italy at the crucial point of their comparisons.<sup>7</sup> Just the same, however, Livi's study has been the only source of mobility data in Italy, and scholars often have had to accept them at their face value. Hence, in comparing Italy to a large number of other countries, Miller concludes that Italy is one of several cases which have

<sup>1</sup> The findings reported in this paper are from a survey supported by a Fulbright research grant to Italy and by the Social Science Research Council, both gratefully acknowledged. I wish also to acknowledge the generosity of my friend and expert counselor, Professor Pierpaolo Luzzatto-Fegiz, who, as director of DOXA, the research institute which conducted the survey, took a personal interest in the research project and inspired his assistants, Drs. Salomon and Fabris, to do likewise. Finally, I am grateful to J. David Colfax and to Janet E. Saltzman, who have critically read an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 13, 73.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Livio Livi, "Sur le mesure de la mobilité sociale," *Population*, V (January-March, 1950), 65-76.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Clark, *The Conditions of Economic Progress* (London: Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 554.

<sup>6</sup> Livi, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

"distinctly lower rates of mobility than other nations for which data are available."<sup>8</sup>

The present paper briefly examines social mobility in Italy, presenting data with a view to achieving comparability with the major body of data discussed by Lipset and Bendix and with other, more detailed attempts at comparative analysis of social mobility.

#### METHODS

My data are from a national sample survey of 1,568 male family heads stratified according to age, occupation, region, size of community, and degree of rurality-urbanism of the community. The actual number of respondents presented in the analysis will, however, be somewhat smaller because of our decision to exclude all retired persons, the unemployed (students included), and all cases for which the occupation of both present and past generations is not known.

The interviewing took place between December 10, 1963, and January 15, 1964, and was carried out by DOXA (Institute for Statistical Research and Public Opinion Analysis), of Milan, which used 144 of its most experienced interviewers.

The occupations asked for by the interview schedule are "present" occupation for the son and "last held" occupation for the father. Several other procedures to ascertain the father's occupation had been tried in numerous pretests and had failed. Among these were his "principal" occupation, his occupation when he was about the same age as the interviewee at the present, and his occupation when the son was first employed. In the latter two cases, memory failure, lack of knowledge, and various other factors intervened to produce a very large percentage of "don't know" answers. The first technique was dropped for linguistic

reasons. It was found that many respondents inquired about the meaning of the word "principal," and definitions offered to them in terms of prevalence, duration, and importance introduced vitiating dimensions into the question. Competent Italian scholars advised, however, that "last held" could be considered synonymous with "principal" occupation on the basis that there is little mobility in Italy beyond a certain age. Pretests fully corroborated this position. As it turned out, however, according to field reports, the vast majority of the sample interviewers found it convenient, and unequivocal, to ask merely for "your father's occupation."

#### FINDINGS

The basic table presented by Lipset and Bendix shows that only 8 per cent of the Italian sample is upwardly mobile, in comparison to a percentage of 45 for Switzerland, 39 for France, 36 for Japan, 33 for the United States, 31 for Sweden, 29 for Germany, 22 for Denmark, and 20 for Great Britain. The Italian downward-mobility index of 34 is quite comparable to the corresponding indexes for the other countries, but it is more than four times higher than the Italian upward-mobility index.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1 presents the intergenerational shifts between manual, non-manual, and farming occupations. The data show that 20 per cent of the subjects with fathers in manual occupations have achieved non-manual positions; conversely, 26 per cent of those with fathers in non-manual occupations have declined to manual positions. My findings, therefore, are quite different from those published by Livi and discussed in several contexts in recent years. Indeed, today indexes of both upward and downward mobility are fairly comparable to the corresponding indexes for the other countries compared by Lipset and Bendix. Assuming, as is reasonable, that more recent studies of mobility in these other countries

<sup>8</sup> S. M. Miller, "Comparative Social Mobility," *Current Sociology*, IX (1960), 31. More recently, the same point has crept into the most popular text of general sociology in the United States. See Leonard Broom and Philip Selznick, *Sociology* (3d ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 211.

<sup>9</sup> Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.*, p. 25, Table 2.1.

would show no substantial changes from the indexes considered here, these findings eliminate the major source of evidence possibly adverse to Lipset and Bendix's hypothesis.

In order to increase the usefulness of my data, I now reorganize them in a more particular classification that attempts to provide comparability to more detailed schemes of occupational mobility than the one used by Lipset and Bendix. Table 2 presents the sample of respondents and their fathers divided into seven occupational strata. The ranking of the strata was suggested

are some of the salient findings summarized by this table.

1. In every origin stratum, except the ruling class, the most common destination is the occupational stratum of the father. That is, more subjects remain occupationally stable than move to any one other stratum. The rate of occupational "transmission," however, goes from a high of 63 per cent for the proletariat to a low of 40 per cent for the ruling class and for the petite bourgeoisie. Intergenerational movement, therefore, is quite considerable.

2. Not infrequently, this movement is

TABLE 1  
INTERGENERATIONAL MOBILITY IN ITALY

Son's Occupation	FATHER'S OCCUPATION						Total (N)
	Non-manual		Manual		Farm		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Non-manual ...	147	70	104	20	48	8	299
Manual.....	54	26	398	76	235	39	687
Farm.....	8	4	24	5	320	53	352
Total.....	209	100	526	101*	603	100	1,338

\* Details in this table and in the following one do not always add up to 100 per cent because of rounding.

by a comparative examination of these broad occupational categories based on such fundamental factors of stratification as income, prestige, power (declared), style of life, and education.<sup>10</sup> The following

<sup>10</sup> Information obtained in the interview on all these factors suggested that conventionally used occupational scales are, for Italy at least, grossly deficient. Such categories as "professional," "business," "white-collar," and "farmer" are particularly crude and too often bring together occupational types that are greatly heterogeneous in all relevant factors. The same can be said of such other frequently used expressions as "middle classes," "working classes," "lower classes," and agricultural workers." For an excellent critical discussion of occupational classifications, see Otis Dudley Duncan, "Properties and Characteristics of the Socioeconomic Index," in Albert J. Reiss, Jr., *et al.*, *Occupations and Social Status* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961), pp. 139-61.

to non-adjacent strata.<sup>11</sup> This is particularly the case with the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and even more the subproletariat and farmhands, 39 and 34 per cent of whom, respectively, have moved to the proletariat, while relatively small percentages of them have moved to adjacent classes.

3. The occupational shifts have been most marked across three major occupational lines: (1) that separating political, managerial, and professional occupations

<sup>11</sup> This multiple-stratum movement closely resembles the situation in the United States according to the classification used by Jackson and Crockett. See Elton F. Jackson and Harry J. Crockett, Jr., "Occupational Mobility in the United States," *American Sociological Review*, XXIX (February, 1964), 5-15.

from lower grades of the same; (2) that dividing unskilled occupations from skilled and semiskilled ones; and (3) that existing between farming occupations and other manual occupations.

In conclusion, my findings on occupational mobility in Italy indicate that, when efforts are made to achieve methodological comparability especially if mobility is measured across multiple occupational

TABLE 2  
MOBILITY IN ITALY

SON'S OCCUPATION*	FATHER'S OCCUPATION*														TOTAL
	I		II		III		IV		V		VI		VII		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
I. Ruling Class.....	16	40	12	10	4	2	2	1	3	1	.....	.....	.....	.....	37
II. Bourgeoisie.....	16	40	64	56	35	21	45	13	29	7	1	2	.....	.....	190
III. Petite Bourgeoisie....	3	8	18	16	65	40	52	15	26	6	4	7	13	8	181
IV. Proletariat.....	4	10	18	16	51	31	224	63	110	25	24	39	54	34	485
V. Peasantry.....	1	2	3	3	5	3	11	3	202	45	1	2	7	4	230
VI. Subproletariat.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	2	1	17	5	30	7	26	43	18	11	93
VII. Farm Hands.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	1	1	6	2	45	10	5	8	65	41	122
Total.....	40	100	115	101	163	99	357	102	445	101	61	101	157	98	1,338

\* I, National political leaders; large-scale proprietors and entrepreneurs; high executives and government officials; professionals with a university degree. II, Medium proprietors and entrepreneurs; medium executives and government officials; professionals without a university degree. III, Small proprietors (except farm) and entrepreneurs; routine grades of non-manuals; artisans with dependent employees. IV, Artisans without dependent employees; skilled and semiskilled industrial workers; domestics and other service workers. V, Small farm owners and other agricultural workers, except farmhands. VI, Manual laborers, street cleaners, etc.

4. Consistent with Livi's findings, the rate of exit from the ruling class, and therefore of elite circulation, is very high in Italy.<sup>12</sup>

5. Upward mobility from the bourgeoisie accounts for most of the movement into the ruling class, however, indicating in effect that elite recruitment is largely an upper-class phenomenon.

<sup>12</sup> In comparing Livi's data to those from thirteen other countries, Miller finds that Italy has the highest rate of movement from the elites (*op. cit.*, p. 49, Table XIV).

categories, the rates of upward and downward mobility in Italy today are highly comparable to those found within the past two decades in various other industrialized countries. The findings update the frequently cited data of the earlier study by Livi and lend substantial support to Lipset and Bendix's hypothesis relating occupational mobility to level of industrialization.

JOSEPH LOPREATO

*University of Connecticut*