



Upward Social Mobility and Political Orientation

Author(s): Joseph Lopreato

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union, with headquarters in the village, in which are grouped the workers from various *fundos* and *all of the modest sectors of the rural population from the wage-hand to the small proprietor*, including the sharecropper, the poor campesino, etc.”²² Communist organizing strategy, the formation of independent organizations which include all of the rural “modest sectors . . . from wage hands to the small proprietor,” adds a conscious element to further the general process of social interaction and diffusion of political consciousness that unites laborers and small proprietors in the areas adjoining mining centers.

CONCLUSIONS

The miners’ organizational skills and political competence, the proximity of the mines to the countryside, the sharing of an exploited position, and conscious political choice, enable the miners to politicize and radicalize the Chilean countryside. The

sense of citizenship and the necessity of having their own leaders that develops in the mining communities, where the miners themselves, rather than “other strata and agencies,” run their affairs, also expresses itself in the political leadership and influence that their communities exert in adjoining rural areas. Further, the miners can supply legal, political, and economic resources to aid the peasants concretely, and thus demonstrate to them the power of organization and of struggle in defense of their common interests against landowners. Where the miners have a strong political organization, peasant proprietors and agricultural wage laborers are equally susceptible to radicalism. Political men, such as the Chilean miners, who make an effort to organize or influence peasant proprietors spread over the countryside, relatively isolated and atomized, can provide a link between them. The miners’ leadership and ideology provide the peasants with a form of communication and sharing of experience that is necessary for them to recognize and be able to act upon their common interests.

²² Corvalan, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

UPWARD SOCIAL MOBILITY AND POLITICAL ORIENTATION *

JOSEPH LOPREATO
University of Texas

This is a study of the political consequences of upward mobility. Beginning with a brief review of major findings and a formal statement coordinating some explanations of those findings, the paper proceeds to examine the “European aspect” of the theory, namely, the relevance of “status discrepancies” to an explanation of political orientation among the upwardly mobile in one European country, Italy. Viewing status discrepancies in terms of consumption patterns and feelings of discrimination, it is found that this factor accounts for the political orientation of the upwardly mobile when it is conceptualized in terms of the latter, but not when conceived in terms of the former. The paper concludes with a few remarks regarding the possible causes of the heretofore unexplained ultra-conservatism of American achievers and with an attempt to state a more general theory of upward mobility and political orientation.

THIS is an exploratory study of the political consequences of upward mobility. The essay consists of: (1) a

brief summary of major findings in this area together with a formal statement coordinating given explanations of the findings; (2) a tentative test of one particular aspect of the theory; and (3) a concluding formal statement that purports to do fuller justice to the available findings in this area of sociology.

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THE STATE OF THE EXISTING THEORY

Concentrating on intergenerational movement across the manual-nonmanual line, students of social mobility have repeatedly found that upward mobility results in political "conservatism" for the majority of the achievers.¹ The explanation advanced for this finding is the alleged tendency of the upwardly mobile to emulate their former social superiors, otherwise known as the "pervasive influence of contact with superior status on attitudes and behavior."² Such tendency, however, varies between the United States and Europe, as represented by Germany, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Great Britain, and Italy. In both Europe and the United States the upwardly mobile are more frequently conservative than their class of origin. However, in Europe they are more "radical" (more likely to be Socialist or Communist) than their class of destination, whereas in the United States they are more conservative (more likely to be Republican) than their class of destination.³

Why such variations? Barring fleeting suggestions that both "rightist" and "left-

ist" political orientations may represent "alternative reactions" to the status discrepancies entailed by the experience of mobility,⁴ no attempt has been made to explain them. The tendency has been instead to take the American case as given, assume it to be the normal case, and then seek to explain the European case by reference to the American. In a generally convincing statement, Lipset and Zetterberg have speculated, for instance, that upward mobility in European countries entails greater status discrepancies, and hence greater difficulties in class readjustment, than in the United States. Specifically,

Given the much wider discrepancy in consumption styles between the European and American middle and working class, one would expect the upwardly mobile European of working-class origin to have somewhat greater difficulties in adjusting to his higher status, and to feel more discriminated against than his American counterpart. . . .⁵

An attempt to summarize briefly the logical structure of the preceding argument yields the following set of propositions:

- (1) If there is upward mobility, then the "newcomers" are likely to emulate the political behavior of the "old-timers"—the more prestigious—of their class.
- (2) However, if there is upward mobility, then there are also status discrepancies. Specifically, the newcomers are likely to encounter difficulties in raising a working-class consumption style to a middle-class level, and to feel discriminated against by the old-timers of the class.
- (3) The effect of status discrepancies is to weaken the influence of the emulation factor.
- (4) Status discrepancies are greater among middle-class Europeans of working-class origin than among their American counterparts.
- (5) Therefore, middle-class Europeans of working-class origin are more likely to retain a working-class political orientation and hence are more likely to be leftist than their American counterparts.

¹ Seymour M. Lipset and Hans L. Zetterberg, "A Theory of Social Mobility," in Lewis A. Coser and Bernard Rosenberg, eds., *Sociological Theory*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1964, (2nd edition), p. 456; S. M. Lipset, *Political Man*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1959, p. 257; S. M. Lipset and Hans L. Zetterberg, "Social Mobility in Industrial Societies," in S. M. Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1959, p. 70.

² Lipset, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

³ The findings for Germany, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and the United States are reported by Lipset and Zetterberg in Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.*, p. 67. For Great Britain, see R. S. Milne and H. C. Mackenzie, *Straight Fight*, London: The Hansard Society, 1954, p. 58. The Italian data, previously unpublished, are my own. They are as follows:

Party Choice	Nonmanuals		Manuals
	Old-timers	New-comers	
Communist, Socialist, Social Democratic	27	39	46
Republican, Christian Democratic	20	19	17
<i>Liberale</i> , Monarchic, Neo-fascist	15	4	2
None	38	38	35
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(233)	(104)	(291)

⁴ Lipset and Zetterberg in Coser and Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 454-456. Strictly speaking, of course, they are not alternative reactions but different degrees of the same consequence of mobility: political conservatism. Stated otherwise, upwardly-mobile Europeans maintain a political link with their class of origin more frequently than their American counterparts.

⁵ Lipset, *op. cit.*, p. 254. (Italics provided.) See also Lipset and Zetterberg, in Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

BASIS OF CONFIRMATION

Whatever its validity, the above explanation still leaves unanswered the crucial question of why upwardly-mobile Americans are even more conservative than those whose middle-class position is of long standing. Yet the factor of "status discrepancies" is highly suggestive and deserves empirical examination. This paper is primarily addressed to the modest job of examining the extent to which the factor of "status discrepancies" is relevant to an explanation of political differences in one European country, Italy. The data are drawn from a national survey of 1,569 male family heads interviewed by DOXA of Milan between December 10, 1963 and January 15, 1964.

The first step is to isolate the elements in terms of which the factor of "status discrepancies" is explicable. An examination of the above theory reveals that these elements are *discrepancies in consumption styles* and *feelings of discrimination*. They will be the focus of two sets of propositions that guide this study.

With respect to "discrepancies in consumption styles," we predict that within the middle class:

- I. (1) The newcomers (the upwardly mobile) have a lower consumption style than the old-timers.
- (2) As the newcomers attain the consumption level of the old-timers, they become comparable to them in political orientation.

With respect to "feelings of discrimination," the approach will necessarily be more circuitous. It is predicated on the assumption that people who suffer status rejection are likely to interpret it as an expression of a tendency in the stratification system to restrict inter-class relations. With this in mind, it is predicted that:

- II. (1) The newcomers are more likely than the old-timers to perceive restrictions in inter-class relations.
- (2) Among the newcomers, those who perceive obstructions to inter-class relations are politically more leftist than those who do not perceive such restrictions.
- (3) Finally, those who do not perceive impediments to inter-class relations are politically alike—whether old-timers or upwardly mobile.

I. *Consumption Patterns*. (1) The data

TABLE 1. PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF CONSUMER ITEMS OWNED, BY POSITION IN THE MIDDLE CLASS

Number of Items Owned	Position in the Middle Class	
	Old-timers	Newcomers
0-4	11	16
5-8	49	59
9-10	40	25
Total (N)	100 (233)	100 (104)

Note: χ^2 significant at the .01 level, using a one-tailed test of significance.

Items considered: automobile, refrigerator, washing machine, telephone, television, radio, vacuum cleaner and/or buffer, electric or gas stove, toilet with bath, running water.

in Table 1 concern the first prediction regarding variations in consumption style. They show that middle-class Italians whose fathers were themselves in the middle class do indeed enjoy a significantly higher style of life than middle-class individuals of working-class origin. Thus, considering a list of 10 consumer items, we note marked differences between the two groups: while 40 percent of the old-timers own at least nine of the items in question, only 25 percent of the newcomers are so fortunate. The evidence would seem to indicate that the upwardly mobile are having some difficulty in raising their style of life to a middle-class level, and our first prediction is therefore upheld.

I. (2) The second prediction reasons that if differences in consumption patterns are to be taken as indicative of the causes of differences in political orientation, it must be demonstrated that as middle-class individuals of working-class origin attain the consumption level of the old-timers of the class, they become comparable in political orientation as well. Some evidence to this effect has already been presented in a Swedish study by Zetterberg.⁶

My own information (Table 2) casts doubt on the alleged influence of style of life on the political orientation of the upwardly mobile. Contrary to expectation, the

⁶ Reported in Lipset and Bendix, *op. cit.*, p. 68. Related findings are reported for the United States by Patricia S. West, "Social Mobility among College Graduates," in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset, eds., *Class, Status and Power*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1953, pp. 465-480.

achievers in the middle class continue to surpass the old-timers of the class in left-wing party preferences even when a high level of consumption style has been achieved. This is not to say, of course, that variations in style of life leave political orientation totally unaffected. Among both newcomers and old-timers, an enriched consumption level is associated with a certain conservative tendency. However, such improvement is more likely to reduce left-wing orientation among the more established members of the middle class than among the new arrivals. The result is that the upwardly mobile actually increase their leftist lead over the oldtimers.

From the data presented so far, it is evident that, although the upwardly mobile do not enjoy the high life style of the old-timers of their class, differences in consumption patterns do not account effectively for differences in political orientation between the two middle-class categories. Having controlled for consumption level, we still find the achievers to be politically more leftist than their new class peers.

This finding is supported by another interesting set of data. Following convention in this area of sociology, I have conceived of the class structure dichotomously; I have accordingly assumed "the middle class" to be a homogeneous entity. This procedure is, of course, convenient, but it does not do full

justice to the reality of the case. What we term "middle class" represents in fact a rather wide spectrum of social differences. The findings in Table 1, for instance, suggest rather strongly that the newcomers are more likely than the old-timers to be in the lower reaches of the middle class. Indeed, dividing the class between those who exercise managerial or decision-making functions and those engaged in "routine" non-manual occupations, we find that, whereas 65 percent of the old-timers belong to the former and 35 percent to the latter, the corresponding figures for the newcomers are 46 and 54 percent, respectively.

If we now related these differences to differences in political orientation, it could further be shown that among newcomers as well as old-timers, high position in the middle class is associated with a conservative political orientation more frequently than low position. Nevertheless, after controlling for position in the class, the newcomers continue to be more leftist than the old-timers. This fact can best be appreciated from the following data which show the "routine" contingent among the newcomers to be significantly (0.02 level) more leftist than its counterpart among the old-timers:

	Routine Old-timers	Routine Newcomers
Left-wing	48%	74%
Conservative (N)	52% (50)	26% (35)

TABLE 2. PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION, BY NUMBER OF CONSUMER ITEMS OWNED AND POSITION IN THE MIDDLE CLASS

Political Orientation	0-8 Items Owned		9-10 Items Owned	
	Old- timers	New- comers	Old- timers	New- comers
Left-wing ^a	49	68	32	61
Conservative ^b	51	32	68	39
Total (N)	100 (84)	100 (47)	100 (60)	100 (18)

Note: χ^2 significant at the .05 level both within the 0-8 items category and within the 9-10 items category. Excluded from this and all following tables are those cases for which information is either unavailable or unclassifiable.

^a This includes Communist, Socialist, and Social Democratic parties.

^b This includes Christian Democratic, *Liberale*, Monarchic, and Neo-fascist parties.

Taken together, the findings in the present section suggest that if the factor of status discrepancies is relevant to an explanation of political orientation among the upwardly mobile in Italy, consumption level is too crude an indicator of that factor. It is more likely that the status discrepancies of the upwardly mobile consist of a significant gap between their class position and a set of cultural *intangibles* that are expected of that position. Put otherwise, it would seem that the *social distance* between the once-proletarians and the old-timers of the middle class is not easily bridged through occupational achievements and objective aspects of life style. Perhaps due to a long national tradition of aristocracy, Italian—very likely European—middle classes today are still heavily permeated by an upper-class atmosphere. As a result, they are keenly sensitive

to the nuances of class behavior, and the occupationally successful children of the working class may find it particularly trying to gain the social recognition and acceptance that their economic achievement would warrant. Whatever their present education, position, or wealth, one fact is not easily concealed: they were socialized within the working class. From there, they are likely to have brought into their new class situation evident traces of a "vulgar" upbringing that must be distasteful to the old-timers of the class, devoted as they are to the art of what an historical-minded journalist once termed "*domenichino* snobbery".⁷ Under the circumstances, the postulated tendency to imitate superior status is weakened, early political socialization asserts itself the more forcefully, and political affiliation with the class of origin is more readily retained.⁸

II. *Closure in Class Relations.* (1) The findings and discussion so far highlight the importance of feelings of discrimination as a possible influence on the political orientation of the upwardly mobile. Consider now the data in Table 3, which compare the achievers to the old-timers of the middle class on the basis of the following question: "In your opinion, do those who belong to a given social class tend to restrict their relations with persons belonging to other

⁷ *Domenichino* is the Italian word for that peculiar type of servant who in recent centuries enjoyed the privilege of accompanying his lord on his Sunday (*domenica*) walk. This unusual honor was the source of grotesque ostentation on the part of the *domenichino* in relation to other members of the populace.

⁸ For the influence of early political socialization on political orientation, see Herbert H. Hyman, *Political Socialization*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1959.

TABLE 3. PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF PERCEPTIONS CONCERNING RESTRICTIONS IN INTER-CLASS RELATIONS, BY POSITION IN THE MIDDLE CLASS

Class Restrictions Perceived	Position in the Middle Class	
	Old-timers	Newcomers
Yes	57	68
No	43	32
Total	100	100
(N)	(203)	(88)

Note: χ^2 significant at the .05 level, using a one-tailed test of significance.

TABLE 4. PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION AMONG NEWCOMERS, BY PERCEPTION OF INTER-CLASS RESTRICTIONS

Political Orientation	Class Restrictions Perceived	
	Yes	No
Left-wing	73	40
Conservative	27	60
Total	100	100
(N)	(41)	(15)

Note: χ^2 significant at the .02 level, using a one-tailed test of significance.

social classes?" The findings bear out the third prediction. Despite their actual experience of mobility, the upwardly mobile are significantly more likely than the old-timers of their class to perceive a tendency toward closure in the stratification system.

It may be noted that the research question was broadly stated. It did not single out any one particular class, such as "the middle class" or the "higher classes," for assessment concerning a possible tendency to restrict out-class relations. My underlying assumption is that the perceptions produced by the question reflect personal experiences. This, it would seem, is not a query that can be answered in the abstract. Again, although conceivable, it is hardly likely that a higher class would feel excluded by a lower class. Hence it is reasonable to assume that the achievers' responses reflect their experiences of discrimination suffered at the hands of the old-timers of their new class, both while moving from a working-class position to their present one and in the process of adjusting to the new position.

II. (2) Table 4 examines data relevant to the fourth prediction and further shows the pertinence of feelings of discrimination for explaining the political orientation of upwardly-mobile Italians. In keeping with the prediction, the table demonstrates that those newcomers who perceive tendencies toward closure in class intercourse are also significantly more leftist in political orientation than those who view social contact as unhindered by class differences. Among those who attest to class closure, preferences for parties of the left are almost three times as frequent as conservative preferences. Conversely, three-fifths of those who perceive free inter-class contact also favor the conservative side of the political spectrum.

II. (3) Table 5, finally, upholds the fifth prediction, demonstrating that when the newcomers do not perceive hindrances to inter-class relations—in other words when they are not the object of social rejection, according to my interpretation—they are almost exactly like the old-timers of their class in political orientation. In both groups, about two-fifths show a preference for parties of the left, while the other three-fifths choose conservative parties.

A REFORMULATION OF THE THEORY

The evidence presented in this paper lends plausibility to *one aspect* of the theory as it was stated above. The concept of status discrepancies, explicated in terms of feelings of discrimination, does indeed help explain the political orientation of upwardly-mobile individuals in one European country.⁹ The theory as a whole, however, requires and deserves more attention than it has received so far. There is at least one major difficulty in it that is especially worthy of clarification. One could hazard the impression that in its present form the theory reflects an American ethnocentrism. European achievers, it argues, feel rejected by their new class peers more than their American counterparts. That may well be true. But does

⁹ In the absence of empirical data, Miller has argued that it is uncertain whether the upwardly mobile are “the most resentful, frustrated groups in society.” S. M. Miller, “Comparative Social Mobility,” *Current Sociology*, 9 (No. 1), 1960, p. 16. Although the present findings are far from providing an answer to this question, they do suggest that middle-class Italians of working-class origin feel rejected by those whose middle-class position is of long standing, and that such feeling may be strong enough to retard their political socialization into their new class.

TABLE 5. PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF POLITICAL ORIENTATION AMONG PERSONS WHO DO NOT PERCEIVE INTER-CLASS RESTRICTIONS, BY POSITION IN THE MIDDLE CLASS

Political Orientation	Position in the Middle Class	
	Old-timers	Newcomers
Left-wing	42	40
Conservative	58	60
Total	100	100
(N)	(59)	(15)

Note: χ^2 note significant.

the lesser status difficulty of upwardly-mobile Americans explain the fact that they are more conservative than the old-timers of their own class? Obviously not. The question becomes all the more compelling if one notes that the American case stands alone against multiple European cases. In short, the theory behaves as if the European instances were to be explained away as exceptions to the American rule. The opposite, however, more nearly does justice to the logical substance of its postulates.

The normal case to which the underlying logic of the theory addresses itself is one in which the two fulcrums of the construct—“status discrepancies” and “emulation of superior status”—are both operative in producing a given political behavior. In Europe the known facts are indeed consistent with this logic: the upwardly mobile bestride class of origin and class of destination in their political stance. The case is different in the United States where the strength of the emulation factor seems to be so overpowering as to produce political “overconformity.”¹⁰ Why?

On this I can only speculate in this paper. The answer may lie in an alleged characteristic of American society widely discussed in American literature. In his essay on “Social Structure and Anomie”, Merton discusses some interesting implications of the “American Dream.” This ethos is presumably built on certain cultural axioms enjoining individuals to recognize that success can always be realized if one but has the requisite abilities and the perseverance to strive. By implication, the citizen ought not to blame anyone but himself in case of failure. According to Merton,

. . . the culture enjoins the acceptance of three cultural axioms: First, all should strive for the same lofty goals since these are open to all; second, present seeming failure is but a way-station to ultimate success; and third,

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that in a broader context, upwardly-mobile Americans do take a mid-course position. Blau, for instance, finds in a study of interpersonal relations that many beliefs and practices of the upwardly and of the downwardly mobile are intermediate between those of the “stationary highs” and those of the “stationary lows.” Peter M. Blau, “Social Mobility and Interpersonal Relations,” *American Sociological Review*, 21 (June, 1956), pp. 290-295.

genuine failure consists only in the lessening or withdrawal of ambition.¹¹

The point to be made here is this: given the extreme emphasis on success, combined with the individual responsibility for non-fulfillment, the fear of failure is likely to be a constant threat to one's sense of security. Conversely, the experience of social success is likely to give the achiever enormous satisfaction and a deep sense of psychological relief. So profound indeed is the sense of relief, so great the joy of having avoided personal disaster, that the achiever is quite likely to develop what Melvin Tumin has termed a "cult of gratitude," an attitude of deep appreciation toward the social order for making the present pleasures possible.¹² Such gratitude is then expressed through an "over-conformity" to the prescribed behavior of the middle class, specifically, by voting disproportionately for the party that is loudest in proclaiming the reality of the American Dream and the old American virtues: self-reliance, individualism, and faith in the existing social order.¹³

The fact that the United States has not fully digested the immense intake of European immigrants may, of course, add to this possible consequence of the cult of success. Handlin has suggested that most immigrants have accepted the United States as the land of opportunity. And so it has been, for them especially. Whatever their difficulties of acculturation, in the New World they found economic conditions that far excelled those in the old country.¹⁴

¹¹ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957 (second edition), p. 139.

¹² Melvin M. Tumin, "Some Unapplauded Consequences of Social Mobility in a Mass Society," *Social Forces*, 36 (October, 1957), pp. 32-37.

¹³ This "latent function" of the "American Dream" seems to be a reasonable complement to the latent functions discussed by Merton. *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951.

In view of the foregoing findings and considerations, I shall conclude with an effort to reformulate and expand the theory presented at the beginning of this paper. Let us begin with a necessary premise:

Premise: Political behavior among upwardly-mobile adults is in large part determined by early political socialization.

(1) If there is upward mobility, then there are status discrepancies and difficulties in gaining social recognition from the old-timers in the class of destination.

(2) If there is upward mobility, then the newcomers are likely to emulate the behavior of the old-timers—and thus more prestigious—of their class.

(3) Emulation varies directly with the emphasis on social success and achievement.

(4) The likelihood of retaining political links with the class of origin (avoiding resocialization):

(a) increases with the degree of status discrepancies, namely, rejection—real or imagined—by the old-timers in the class of destination;

(b) decreases with the strength of (1) the emphasis on achievement and (2) the tendency toward emulation.

Assuming now that,

A. status discrepancies (experienced social rejection) are greater among middle-class Europeans of working-class origin than among their American counterparts;

B. the emphasis on success and achievement is "excessive"¹⁵ in the United States but not in Europe;

C. emulation of higher status can be as disproportionate as the emphasis on success and achievement;

then it follows that:

(5) Middle-class Europeans of working-class origin are more leftist than their new class peers and more conservative than their class of origin.

(6) Middle-class Americans of working-class origin are more conservative than both their class of origin and their class of destination.

¹⁵ In the sense that it represents a "threat to one's sense of security."