

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND SOCIAL VALUES

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SOCIOLOGISTS face a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, they share the general concern about what makes for the good society, and they must study social objects which include social values. On the other hand, many believe that scientist must not set up values standards, since scientists are no more qualified to specify values than are any other citizens, and they believe that the few more emboldened among them who have done so have sometimes been punished by society. Talcott Parsons states the latter point openly (1), and I believe many other sociologists think of this consciously, while others have it in the back of their minds. So sociologists are torn between the desire, and the necessity, to study social values, which involves postulating the values, and the belief that science must be value-free and not subject to social pressures. What they usually do, in this dilemma, is to study the value-laden social objects, but fail to specify the values therein. The result, I claim, is some damage to their method, since all its features are not clarified, and some damage to their conclusion, since it is partly determined by their hidden value premise. Sociologists cannot be objective unless they indicate what social values lie imbedded in the social object they are studying.

Because he deals with social objects, an unavoidable element of which is some kind of social value, the sociologist cannot avoid studying social values. To study a social value properly, it must be specified and all its implications noted. This is what the sociologist tries to avoid, as it may get him into trouble with society, and it makes him look like a journalist. So he is faced with the dilemma of being required by his subject matter to study values and for desiring to avoid their study so as to avoid undesirable social consequences. The consequence is a conscious or unconscious burying of the value in terminology and methodology, so that it is involved without being perceived. This is more dangerous when unconscious, aside from the moral issue of dishonesty which is involved when secretion of an element of procedure is conscious, because the sociologist is not aware of all that he is doing—a fundamental requirement of science thereby being violated (2).

I shall illustrate the difficulty by analyzing some recent research on social mobility. It is difficult to criticize one's colleagues in matters

(1) "The Position and Prospects of Sociology as a Professional Field", paper delivered at the 1949 meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

(2) An earlier discussion of some consequences of this is to be found (1) in an essay on which I collaborated with Gunnar

Myrdal: Appendix 2 of *An American Dilemma* (New York, Harper, 1944); and (2) in my *Theory and Method in the Social Sciences* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1954), chapter on "Selection of Problems for Research".

involving values, especially when one believes that their intentions have been entirely honorable. Therefore, I shall not multiply examples, but restrict my analysis to one set of studies\*. The studies were chosen because they meet very high standards of technical excellence and because their authors are among the most thoughtful in the sociological confraternity. Our purpose is merely to show how, even in these excellent studies, the effort to avoid specification of social values results in distorting the conclusions. I shall attempt to demonstrate that some kind of values creep into the research inevitably, and that the failure to ascertain the relevant social values results merely in obfuscation.

Social mobility is basically a simple concept. It means the acquisition or loss of some socially valued characteristic or possession so that one's rank among one's fellow men is changed. The most important social values for mobility, one might agree with Max Weber, are economic position (based on wealth or income *and* occupation or economic role), political position (based on power) and honor (sometimes called prestige, esteem, or even status). Some might wish to add education, personal achievement, family background, style of life, consumption, skill level, security, social acceptance and participation, although others might claim that these are merely contributory to or resultant from the basic three values stressed by Weber.

Sociologists try to avoid any value implication in using the concept of social mobility (3). In the first place, they include in the definition the possibility of downward mobility as well as upward mobility. Actually, their factual description often ignores downward mobility, and contains the implication that upward mobility is a social good. Secondly and more important, they usually measure mobility in terms of an "objective" change in position from father to son (at the same age in order to eliminate the influence of promotions that often occur with increasing age). The specific change in position studied is usually the occupational one, and this is used to serve as an index of all mobility. Various occupational categories are used by different students. One of the simplest is that between manual and non-manual occupations used by many sociologists. The burying of a value premise in measuring mobility as the movement between manual and non-manual occupations can be illustrated by the work of Lipset and Bendix, in one of the most comprehensive and scholarly volumes on mobility to be published in the United States (4).

I hold that this simple definition and procedure does not eliminate the value premises necessarily involved in studying social mobility,

\* Seymour Martin LIPSET and Reinhard BENDIX, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1959).

(3) An excellent summary and technical criticism of American research on mobility and social stratification is to be found in Milton M. GORDON, *Social Class in Ameri-*

*can Sociology* (Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press, 1958).

(4) LIPSET and BENDIX, *op. cit.*

and those who continue to ignore the value premises are drawn into complexities which must be confusing to all who read the studies. Sociologists who uncritically accept the value position that social mobility in good, if they do not explicitly draw out its implications, are bound to be led into some misrepresentation—as will be shown. The very choice of indexes and categories must involve values, and failure to discuss these contributes to confusion.

Shift of occupation has many advantages as an index of social mobility, as Lipset and Bendix point out. It is specific and relatively easy to get information about. It is obviously a prerequisite or a result of a lot of other things involved in social mobility. For example, we rank occupations in terms of prestige, and accord that prestige to the persons who practice the occupation. Also, certain occupations—notably business management and public office-holding—give power to those who hold them.

Still, occupation is a part of the economic order, and a measurement of mobility in terms of occupation will automatically give economic forces the prime value. This becomes especially evident when only a few occupational categories are used. The number and position of the categories help to determine the amount of mobility measured: obviously the more categories there are, and the more “prominently placed” they are for crossing, the more there will be movement across them. Thus, by mere choice of number and positions of categories, the authors use a value assumption concerning the amount of mobility they want to show. The value assumption of Lipset and Bendix is therefore that there is little mobility, and what little there is is related to rate of industrialization rather than, say, to flexibility of structure.

Let us consider mobility solely in terms of the two broad occupational categories—manual and non-manual. We can then measure mobility as Lipset and Bendix do, as change in occupation, from father to son, from manual to non-manual and from non-manual to manual. But what causes this? Colin Clark, in his classic *The Conditions of Economic Progress* (London 1940), has provided the main answer: as an economic system makes increasing use of advanced techniques of production, then an increasing proportion of its working population moves from the primary extractive occupations and the secondary manufacturing occupations into the tertiary “service” occupations—in other words from the manual to the non-manual. What economic systems are now having the greatest *percentage increase* of capital investment in new productive technology? Obviously the previously underdeveloped countries which now have the most rapid *rate* of mechanization, particularly the Soviet Union and China. So, measured in this way, these countries are bound to have the greatest social mobility. Indeed, if there were not some recent discoveries in automation and there were not still some underdeveloped pockets within the United States, this country would have practically no social mobility measured in these terms, as

it is mostly mechanized and modernized already. From the standpoint of Colin Clark's law, it is not surprising—indeed, it is to be expected—that Western Europe has had at least as much mobility from manual to non-manual occupations as the United States in the past generation, even though it has lagged behind the United States somewhat in *level* of mechanization and has somewhat more rigid status barriers. Thus, those who use the two-category occupational measure of mobility have built in a value premise that Western Europe and the U.S. have the same amount of mobility, and that Russia and China have more. Any other measure or index would involve a different value premise which would lead to a different conclusion.

There are other groups of factors which influence the rate of movement from manual to non-manual occupations. Lipset and Bendix mention them but do not point out their value implications. First, there are the factors which contribute to the disappearance of those in the non-manual occupations, holding constant the economic need or "demand" for those in the non-manual occupations. The class differential in birth rate—that is, the tendency of upper class people to have fewer children than did lower class people—which was very frequent in Western society at least until recently—constantly created new openings in the more desired (non-manual) occupations. The Polish sociologist, Stanislas Ossowski, calls attention to another factor which has similarly created opportunities for upward mobility, "mass death, due e.g. to war, especially to civil war, or to mass emigration of certain sectors of the population" (5). Ossowski, an independent-minded professor at the University of Warsaw, may be excused from mentioning another type example—periodic purges of those in the higher status occupations for political reasons. These latter factors have also contributed to giving the Soviet countries (as well as Nazi Germany) among the highest rates of movement from the lower to the higher occupations, or social mobility. Is this mobility to be considered as having the same value as mobility arising from industrialization or from flexibility in structure?

Another demographic factor in social mobility is the age composition of the population. Let us imagine a society in which those who can achieve the more desired occupations usually have to be at least 40 years of age, and in which there happens to be a disproportionately small number of occupied persons older than 40. In such a society, the opportunity for upward mobility for any individual attaining the age of 40 is especially favorable, and a number of incompetent people therefore rise along with the competent ones. Once they attain these positions, they hold them, thus blocking upward mobility in the next age cohort, that has a normal or disproportionately large proportion of

(5) "Social Mobility Brought About by Social Revolutions", Working Paper Eleven submitted to the Fourth Working Conference on Social Stratification and Social Mobility, International Sociological Association, December, 1957.

the total population. Under these circumstances, upward mobility is not particularly of the most able, nor is it steady, nor is it associated with flexibility in the social structure. The circumstances—of unbalanced age composition and of a tradition of upward mobility primarily for those of a certain age group—are quite characteristic of certain parts of Western society today.

Social mobility is always measured in the mass; yet it is always individuals who do the moving. That is, there is a social selection process operating which offers the better occupational positions to some people but not to others. Each society has its own criteria for this social selection, which are matters of tradition and fashion. These seldom specify that only the most able should rise. For example, David Riesman has claimed that, in American society, those with “other-directed personalities” are now most likely to be allowed to succeed (6). In some other society, the winners are the viciously aggressive personalities. In so far as such bases of selection of the socially mobile prevail, one can at least raise the question as to whether social mobility is “good”. Lipset and Bendix demonstrate the greater opportunities for mobility for those who live in large cities, as compared to those who live in small towns or rural areas. Is the United States better or worse than some countries because it has a larger proportion of its population in large cities?

Even this most superficial analysis of the economic, demographic, and cultural factors which operate in the shift of occupation from father to son should raise some questions about the values involved. Similar analysis could be given for other indexes of social mobility—say in the availability of power or prestige or higher education—to those who have no expectations of acquiring these by social inheritance. The result would be somewhat different, since the measures of mobility are not completely related, as the Swedish sociologist Carlsson brilliantly argues (7). But whatever definition measure, or procedure for the analysis of social mobility is chosen, there are value implications. The choice of one requires the injection of different values than are required by the choice of another. For example, whereas Carlsson and Lipset and Bendix demonstrate by careful scholarship that there are no substantial differences between Western European countries and the United States in mobility rates from the manual to non-manual occupations, and even into business management, their findings might be quite different if shifts in power, prestige, or education provided their measure of social mobility. In a sense, by using such a measure, they have *chosen* to demonstrate that the United States is not more mobile than other countries “wrongly” assumed by many to offer less mobility. This is one source of the failure of different scholars to arrive at similar results, which is so confusing to the layman who wants to be well informed and so attempts

(6) David RIESMAN, with Nathan GLAZER and Reuel DENNEY, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1950).

(7) Gösta CARLSSON, *Social Mobility and Class Structure* (Lund, Hakan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1958).

to read the reports of the various scholars. It is a source of apparent self-contradiction in the writing of sociologists. Lipset and Bendix, for example, after according so much significance to occupational shifts, come to prestige and remark casually "a person can be mobile in the eyes of society without changing his job". It should be understood that these criticisms of Lipset and Bendix, who have written one of the best books on social mobility, apply equally well to all students of mobility who have not specified the value premises they have introduced into their definitions, measures, and procedures.

An alternative approach may be proposed for the study of social mobility. It may be called the specified-value approach because it would begin with ascertaining and specifying the social values that members of a society want to attain in their personal lives and in their social structure. If social mobility is perceived by people to be "good", then an important step in its study should be a more concrete determination of the values people expect to find associated with it. This would immediately involve the scientific advantage of not assuming that mobility means the same thing in all societies and in all groups within one society; the criteria would be the values of people themselves, and cross-national or cross-group comparisons could be made by comparing the percentages of people who attain their values. For example, if in one group the attainment of a certain level of purchasing power represents the highest personal goal and in another group the attainment of a certain level of education represents the highest goal, the sociologist would not have to make an arbitrary choice between them but could simply compare the proportion who had attained each goal. This does not mean that the sociologist would necessarily have to say that these goals are equally good. He might make a case, or do a study, that would show that one group has number of people who are happy, mentally healthy, etc., than the other group even though about the same proportion of each achieved its stated goal. The important thing is to make the social values explicit.

Mobility, of course, involves change, so there must be another step in our proposed approach. The proportions of a given group attaining any given social value—such as professional and managerial occupations, a college education, and annual income of \$ 5 000 (1946 price level)—can be compared over time. Since such data are more readily available than father-son comparisons, they permit a broader and hence more genuine measure of mobility. Even the subtle prestige criterion of mobility can be passably measured by the changing frequency of public awards and recognitions. By the means suggested here, mobility is always seen in relation to total proportions who attain a given goal, and we are not faced with the absurd situation in which a country is said to have low mobility because most of its population are already engaged in non-manual occupations and it is almost technologically impossible for any more to be so.

There is one great weakness in the approach here presented : upward mobility is inextricably mixed with downward mobility, and the sociologist can get only a *net* measure. The father-son comparison technique avoids this, as the number of those sons who have gone into lower occupations can be ascertained just as well as those who have attained a higher occupation. But the specified value approach offers a substitute that may be acceptable to some : just as positive values are measured by asking a group of people what they want for themselves (or what would make them happy, or some other such question), so negative values might be measured by asking people what they would most like to *avoid* (among avoidable things that could be listed). Answers would probably refer not only to the traditional low status variables (low income, prestige, power) but also to other negative values that would be just as meaningful in American culture. We might hazard a guess that these would include alcoholism and drug addiction, loss of job, loss of choice over many areas where "free men make choices". Some of these are measurable by indirect indexes, and a trend toward increase in the proportion of people experiencing any or all of them would be a measure of downward mobility.

A procedure such as this specified-value approach is not only easier to comprehend for the layman, but for the sociologist as well. The value implications of the definition, the measure, and procedure are laid bare, and therefore the hidden value implications of the usual approaches to the study of social mobility— of the sort mentioned earlier—would not be present to mislead the investigator. For example, if the proportion of desirable jobs were not increasing in a society, although some persons whose fathers had not held them were themselves able to attain them because of political purges and "mass death", this would not be counted as social mobility from the individual's standpoint. Upward social mobility would thus be measured as the percentage of *new* desirable opportunities being created in the society. The sociologist studies mobility because he thinks upward social mobility is a good thing (or a bad thing, this makes no difference), or because he knows the general public thinks it is important. But this he tends to avoid admitting to himself, as he is concerned about not being objective and about being "controversial" from the standpoint of public opinion. He avoids value specification, and gains a kind of pseudo-objectivity by choosing an approach to measuring social mobility like the father-son comparison of occupation. Many values get hidden in the concept and in the procedure of research. If upward social mobility is a good thing (or a bad thing), it would seem that the truly most objective way of measuring it would be in terms of specifying concretely the good things (or bad things). The full implications of the findings would then be readily ascertainable both by the sociologist and the layman who read the report.