

1973-03-13c: [CLASS] Class Stratification

The central issue in all study of social classes should be the status and the prospects of the individual at birth: what class he is born into, what class or classes he may be in during his lifetime. To talk about strata, or classes, as abstractions--as groupings which every society must be divided by definition (i.e., the way the functionalist description works)--is to render every individual a victim of a class definition: someone must "fill" the classes, and it matters not who fills them as long as they are filled and one gets on to showing how these classes work. There is, to be sure, a considerable element of value that enters into discussing the relationships of the classes, and interest in how great is the mobility between classes, but it is all carried on with the assumption that the classes are filled regularly by new recruits among adults and the problem for analysis begins at that point. Yet the main question, really, is how a young adult gets first classified.

This is certainly going to determine for most of them how they are going to remain classified all their life--which means, in effect, that social mobility will be dealing only with some minority percentage of the young adults in any society. In other words, the question of social class begins with a summary statement of how little social mobility there ever is, and then devotes itself to intensive analysis of that little bit. The sheer mass of intellectual effort to describe the mobility of a small minority seems to be a kind of intellectual resignation to "what must be", as if those who deal with the valuative elements in social class & social mobility are constrained by their knowledge of the functionalist description of society to accept that there will always be a series of strata and that most individuals will be on the lower strata and a few on the top, and that values are an heroically feeble element against this iron law. But when every measure that scholars of social mobility know and use shows that the condition of birth is the major determining element in what an individual is likely to attain, how can they avoid spending most of their time studying that factor? What they do study, currently, is in fact a peripheral consideration. What they should analyze are the laws of society that guarantee the perpetuation of class standing over time and the social-psychological conditions of the family that support those legal guarantees. They should say--before getting into the minority report on those individuals who do become socially mobile--what the hard legal and moral realities are that will prevent most individuals from ever being socially mobile. For, it has to be true that the locking of most individuals into their social classes is a function of laws and social morality mores which are historically determined things, or else they belong to a greater than human order of nature or providence. If they believe the latter, let it be said. If they believe the former, let them give the historical demonstration of how a given society happened to get into its peculiar legal/moral situation. But to assume that it is true--even to state statistically that it is true--that a given society is essentially socially immobile as far as the prospects of any young adult is concerned, but not to give as exhaustive an explanation as possible of why this true (exhaustive by categorical principle of nature or by protracted, pragmatic historical demonstration) is to be intellectually derelict.

So it is, I believe, that current sociology on social classes, which must deal with the value structure that determines the dynamics of any society, has consistently avoided dealing with the chief social value that determines the life prospects of all new members of society: condition at birth. Those who deal with social classes seem to adopt an attitude towards the young of "lucky devil, poor devil," that he was born of such parents. Dealing with those parents, they seem to say that there was a chance for some of them to have moved but few did, and so it must be. The connection between the two views is just not drawn. There seems to be the impression that the

same chance for social mobility will be given the young (no matter their status at birth) that statistics reveal to be the proportions of adults in a society. But this is incompatible utterly with the fact that if born low one is overwhelmingly likely to remain low. That is, the failure of the parents is visited upon their progeny. 90 per cent of the (let us say) 20 per cent of social mobility that does result among the young comes from those whose parents were themselves mobile so that just a tiny fraction of mobility is possible for those who are low born. During the course of their lifetimes, they are pitied in some measure, prayed for from the sidelines as they become educated and are exposed to the public ways to escape upwards, and when they emerge as adults on the same level as their parents they are stamped failures and then blamed for the low status of the children they give birth to. It is, at the very least, a shoddy excuse for concern for the rights of the individual of low birth to say that he is 99 per cent likely to end up as his parents were and has a 1 per cent chance to escape, and then condemn him as an adult as the one who gave his children their low status. If this kind of reasoning is to be allowed, then correspondingly the very well-off parents who give their children every possible advantage in life should be cursed for having prejudiced the possibilities of social mobility by blocking off the upper range of achievement for their progeny at the outset, and those progeny as successful adults cursed for not having made the grade in open competition with their peers. You cannot blame the low class adults who never had a chance to make it themselves, for condemning their progeny to low status, and at the same time applaud the high born and successful adults for passing on to their progeny high status, if the way in which the respect adults got to their positions, high and low, was statistically certain according to the legal/moral structure of the society. That which made the parents successful and their progeny successful, was largely the legal/moral structure. If there is to be any reform of the whole societal condition so that the young are more free than they are now from the conditions of their parents, then the legal/moral structure must be changed. And the essence of that legal/moral structure is the family as a diachronic unit.