

1973-06-12 [LIFE CHANCES] Status at Birth, Inheritance, and Life Chances

The chronological limits of this work have been set to illustrate a major change in life chances: in the middle ages one's life chances and choices were dictated by law, each person remaining in the estate of his birth for life; in the twentieth century, there are no legal limits at all to the life chances of the individual, and yet we find that in 90% of the cases one ends his life in the same social strata into which he was born. The so-called "social mobility" of our time, therefore, is something of an illusion.

It is one of the highest ideals of American democracy that there be equality of opportunity for all citizens. Yet if 90% of the people end in the same position where they began, there does not seem to be equality of opportunity. For, if all 21-year olds, "emerging adults" as they will be referred to in this work, had equal opportunities to fulfil life goals in the course of their lives, then they should distribute themselves over the whole range of possible positions in society rather than ending up in 9 out of 10 cases where they were according to the status of their parents.

One could have dark thoughts about this fact of social stratification in our society as being a conspiracy of the rich. Yet who can blame the rich, who have the means to give their children privileged position, doing so as much as the laws permit? Is this not a natural parental inclination? And if one considers that today there exists a minimum standard of living far beyond what was assured to the lower classes in the middle ages, one cannot argue that the very rich are causing utter deprivation to anyone.

And no one doubts that even the lowest class in society today has some who dream big dreams and succeed in realizing them, in a way not dreamable or realizable before quite recent times. And everyone, of all classes, has some sense of participating in the public life of the nation, in the form of voting--something once utterly reserved for the few. It is evident, therefore, that the life-chances of emerging adults today are infinitely greater than they were in the Middle Ages. Yet there remains the enigma of most people still following the paths of their parents. It is to account for this phenomenon of widening horizons of possibilities of life achievements for emerging adults, yet the fact of very little actual mobility resulting, that this study is devoted.

For each of the moments in time selected for analysis, three or four basically different levels of society will be represented by an imaginary composite emerging adult. The levels of society chosen will be those which most historians seem to agree are meaningful divisions of that age. After stating what percentage of the total population each representative "emerging adult" represents [and here I have to decide whether to make separate cases for men and women in each category], that person will be given a "rational life plan" [use Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, sect. 63], i.e., aspirations to operate within society during his life according to a feasible life plan. The first problem will be to decide if there are legal limits to any rational life plan; as we shall see, there were indeed such in the Middle Ages, but are none now. Next, one must decide what social customs in existence at the time put very practical limits on what an emerging adult might dream to achieve; even a lowborn person who achieved great wealth could not, in most ages, hope to penetrate the "old family élite" (although his son might finally make it.) Then, assuming that our emerging adult dreamed of achieving a status higher than he was born into, we must try to assess what practical barriers there were to doing so. In this way, then, we shall have assessed the actual possibilities of social mobility that a certain class had at a certain time.

We will find that most people, at most times, arranged their rational life plans in terms of preserving the status they had at birth, no matter how free they might have been from legal,

social and practical impediments to rise. The reason for this, principally, is that children rather unconsciously accept the status of their parents as the norm to live by. Even today this is true, in most cases, although not nearly as profoundly so as in times past. For, even though the lower classes today may possess private dreams of rising in status, they usually adjust their rational life plan to accomplishments that seem reasonably plausible. For to dream too highly is to risk losing what one has already, and so possibly to skid downwards in social status.

Considerations of the choices that emerging adults on a given level of society were likely to have throughout the centuries go beyond the consciously held ideas. There are a whole set of limiting historical circumstances, in terms of economic opportunities, educational facilities, and the like, which we can now see, in retrospect, prevented earlier ages from having the chances which we do now. One has to appreciate what was not there as well as what was, to have a truly sympathetic feeling for the life chances of other ages. These basic limiting circumstances will be regarded as establishing paradigm of universally accepted givens about the time in question. Because they were accepted by everyone, they functioned to stabilize society. Not everyone at any time would have accepted these fundamental premises of society, to be sure. And if enough people resented and rejected a portion of them and could band together to oppose them, then great upheavals were in prospect. [This is Kuhn's interpretation of political revolution according to breakdown of societal paradigm.]

Historians are wont to dwell upon those moment of great upheavals, when the order of things changed. Rightly so, for they are the pregnant moments in the history of Western civilization when a new order of things came into being. In this work, however, the moments selected for study have been times between the great upheavals, when, one might say, the new order betokened by the last upheaval had been stabilized. Having then a series of such moments of stabilized social order, or "normal times", one can compare the various life chances of emerging adults of one age and another and see what changes were actually wrought. In making these comparisons, reference must be had to the intervening upheavals that account for the changes, but it will not be the task here to try to explain causes of change in any comprehensive way. The best knowledge of historians today will be accepted as sufficient to explain causes, and this will be presented as simply and quickly as possible.

The real concern of this work is show how things changed in terms of rational life plans over the centuries in very large terms, to understand what overall direction there might be deduced from the series of examples. So, a philosophical and historical analysis of the problem will be saved til the second part of the book. Some of the conclusions will be of the most obvious nature--e.g., that everywhere the legal restrictions on rational life plans have disappeared--but in other ways the conclusions may have more subtle implications. So, the fact that parents' condition has re-mained overwhelming the highest correlative of the emerging adult's chance during all the centuries of Western civilization, and despite its "progress", calls for closer analysis.

This latter problem is, in fact, the primary issue at stake in this book. In every age examined, particular attention has been given to how the conditions of inherited status and wealth was correlated with the life chances of the emerging adult. The most important conclusion is that the further back one goes, the more dependent the emerging adult was upon inheritance from the family. His very survival, let alone his chances of maintaining an equivalent to his parents' status, depended upon what his parent bequeathed him. Society at large took no responsibility to guarantee a decent minimum of existence--although the wretched were cared for by the church or the state, on a charitable basis. This in contrast to our times, when the

immense range of social services and employment services provided by the state assure--or try to assure--that everyone will have a decent minimum existence no matter his physical or mental deficiencies, or the bad luck he might encounter. It is evident even that we are on the eve of a guaranteed annual income.

This means that the function of the family has changed dramatically in one respect: family wealth is no longer the main guarantee against oblivion, and the transmission of property to one's children not the only guarantee one can give of their survival. In times past, the emerging adult had to have the actual use of material benefits owned by his parents, if he were to maintain himself (chiefly this meant land, or the use of it); now, the emerging adult who has been given a college education can, without a penny in his pocket and no expectations of inheritance, make his way in life with reasonable chance of the good life and possibilities of soaring much higher than his parents did.

What this change in dependence upon the inheritance of property has caused in the attitude of the emerging adult towards the family is an important factor of social stability in our time. The emerging adult today can disregard expectations of inheritance where it would have been catastrophic for him to have done so in another age. And he need not think of how his children will get on; he only hopes to give them moral and intellectual up-bringing that will allow them to make their own way in the world. The role of family wealth, in short, plays no necessary role in the survival chances of the children (the state guarantees that), nor even--except for the very small percentage of the very rich--does it have much affect upon the children's chances for material comfort in life. That comes chiefly from the yearly income they achieve.

The psychological effects of family wealth being the main determinant in life chances in another time, as compared to their normally irrelevant role today (or so it seems), has altered the parent-child relationship over the centuries and close attention will be paid to the various stages of that change in the successive epochs to be analyzed. It obviously affects other, social relationships, such as to wider groups than the family and very much also in his attitude towards the state. The state, in some manner of speaking, becomes a foster-parent to the emerging adult of today, compared with the role of the true parent in older times, in guaranteeing a minimum decent life. But there is another dimension of the role of transmitted family wealth throughout history that must be considered, and one which must make us wonder finally about the continuance of large family fortunes in future times.

The situation can be viewed this way. If in times past the minimum life chances of every emerging adult were largely related to his inheritance, then social stability in general was guaranteed by transmission of family property, and family rights to hold certain jobs, over time. The very stability of society, or of the nation if you will, was resolvable into a bundle of discreet family estates being perpetuated over the generations. This is the other side of the coin of the emerging adult's life chances being locked into his inheritance: it means that society as a whole depended upon this system, taken in gross, to achieve stability. We know that that is not true today. The state has taken the responsibility for minimum conditions of decent life, and the enormous variety of job opportunities open to all gives the emerging adult a life choice that in another age was unimaginable.

So, family inheritance once served as the basic device of social stability, but no longer does so. Its public function in this respect has ceased to have meaning. But there are other ways in which great family fortunes, transmitted over time, had great importance for society. Above all, the amassing of capital to subsidize great commercial and industrial enterprises was a family business from the later middle ages at least until the later nineteenth century, and we can

scarcely conceive of the rise of the modern industrial economy without long generations of great family fortunes at the core. But here, too, one can begin to doubt that family fortunes mean very much for economic development any more. Capital is now raised chiefly by the state, from taxes imposed on all citizens, or by great financial and corporate structures that are run largely by a new class of technologically trained persons and not by the persons who own the largest share of stock in those corporations. Ownership is now distributed among thousands of individuals, and the use of the capital is now exercised by a legal fiction, the "corporation", run by professionals. Great family fortunes, in other words, have been divorced from the exercise of economic power; families may own it, but they do not run it. And it would make little difference if any family's large shareholding in a major corporation were to be disbursed among many people. In short, the serving of the public good in terms of capital amassing and investment is no longer a significant function of family wealth kept intact over generations. As far as the average emerging adult is concerned, anyway, family inheritance neither affects him personally nor does it serve indirectly, by economic functions of the great fortunes held by others, to help the common good.