

1973-06-17a: [LIFE CHANCES] Upper & Lower Strata Chessboards

The story to be told in the introductory part will be that which is commonly known about the social development of modern society in respect to the roles of the state, of economic development, and family influence over life. These three factors play differing proportions of influence in regulating life chances over time, and the general setting will be summarized before the vignettes.

The vignettes will then concentrate upon the trans-generational continuity that actually prevails, but in two different ways. With the upper classes, it will remain largely the specific influence of the family in terms of just how much inherited wealth is involved, and the influence of the group of families of the wealthy in organizing ways to control the upbringing of their children. With the lower classes however, the specific family influence is always lessened, since inheritance plays no significant role and the upbringing of the children which will affect their life chances is largely organized by the state.

In the upper classes, the name of the family remains a considerable item; in the lower classes it means nothing.

In the upper classes, there is considerable movement among various possibilities of leadership, since family businesses are not the rule; anymore but rather fluid wealth. In the lower classes there is also considerable lateral movement, since the state now provides the variety of jobs from which the individual might choose.

In the upper classes, the level of life is guaranteed by the private family inheritance; in the lower classes it is guaranteed by the state in the form of job opportunities, social services, and when needed unemployment compensation.

In the upper classes, therefore, trans-generational continuity is on a 1:1 basis in terms of name, standard of living, strata of function in society (but life within strata divorced from family); in the lower classes, trans-generational continuity is divorced from the name, and from the specific family, except in so far as all the children of all the families of a given strata are supported by state guarantees, and divorced from family's specific strata except in so far as there is no chance often to rise out of it (but within the strata considerable lateral mobility & difference of occupation).

In terms of education, the upper classes maintain private prep schools and colleges where their children are generally educated in the standards of their class; the lower classes are educated by public schools, where the emphasis upon the vocation is the most practical & the most functional in terms of the life chances.

I use the metaphor of the chessboard here to try to get some three-dimensional effect into the picture. The chessboard is the plane in depth upon which the various classes live their lives in terms of functional position. The whole confine of the chessboard is ruled over in the upper classes by the families at large: private schools; each taking care of the standard of living of its own without any state aid; allowing their children to choose among various squares that represent positions of leadership they will enjoy. The prerequisites for these positions of leadership are not specific, but general: development of knowledge in the broad sense, and personality. Everyone will finally find his place, and he can shift often if he wishes, and even shift late in life, since his standard of living is guaranteed more by his inherited wealth than by the income from his position.

The confines of the chessboard on the lower levels shows the influence of the state to varying degrees. On the middle-class strata, where the parents income is quite satisfactory due to high-income positions, it would be possible to leave the children entirely in the hands of state

schools and accumulate a small fortune to give them in a lump sum as an inheritance, but this is never done. The surplus beyond the necessities of life at the level being lived is given to educating the children so that they will have a good professional position the equivalent of the parents, and so make their own way from there. Whatever is left over the parents save for their own retirement years (now extending way beyond the average in earlier times). In this strata, then, the positions to be occupied are open to choice of the emerging adult, but they require very long & committed preparation, for the excellence in performing them will determine all the income they will ever have, and all the chances they'll have to provide for their own children's education. The standard of living is guaranteed always by the individual himself, for there is no inheritance of wealth. The danger of skidding is always great, and it is the greatest fear of the people who live in this strata. The state's role lies chiefly in the support of public education on the lower levels, and the subsidy of the public universities so that tuition is within the means of the parents.

On the lower middle-class level, there is no surplus income to educate the children beyond the public level, although there is the chance of the children working their way through college. Here, the role of the state is all pervasive. Even the parents are regularly threatened with complete reliance upon state support when unemployment rises. The myriad of positions on the chessboard are determined by general economic conditions, utterly beyond the control of the parents to affect for their children (even for themselves). There seems to be a wide choice of positions, for children do not follow parents in specific jobs to any considerable degree. But the choice is usually made on the basis of what is the most profitable at the moment of entering the job market--or even what is available.

Worked out in more detail of the vertically operating forces of state, economy, and family, we might get a box score like this; giving a rating of 1 to 3 in terms of determining influence: "