

1973-06-17b: [LIFE CHANCES] Life Chances, Human and Statistical

Life chances as used in this work might be defined as the likelihood of a certain individual's rational life plan being realized, which information is derived :from what we know statistically to have been the incidence of social mobility in his time. We will assume, that is to say, that the social mobility was the result of a calculated plan of the individual, predicated upon rational estimate of what the possibilities were. Most people of a certain class in a stable period do not, however, aspire to rise even when the chances are fairly open. For a rational plan must consider the risks of skidding as well as the chances of rising, and most prefer the middle road of security.

The aim is to humanize the statistics, one might say, by making a composite picture of the tensions within a given person that might correspond to the statistical chances of rising or skidding. This will actually correspond to the diachronic character of social strata, since the individual will be presumed to know the past and calculate the future, rather just exemplify the synchronous aspect of the individual's function in society and relationship to other classes of his time. It calculates the possibilities of change at the same time that it considers the desirability of security to keep what one has, which existed within individuals. It is perhaps too ingenuous a way to combine the problems of static and dynamic studies of social differentiation and social stratification, but it does not lack verisimilitude from any reasonable estimate of what might actually have happened in the minds of many people.

The element of social change which can be suggested by the tension within the given individual as he arrives at adulthood will be borne out by comparison of individuals in the same social strata in successive multi-generational periods.

A final problem of methodology: to try to imagine the actual inner thoughts, in some novelistic fashion, or to make objective statements from the outside in some objective essay fashion. Both have to be used, but on the whole the latter seems the most desirable, and the former used for heightened affect.