

1973-06-17c: [LIFE CHANCES] How to Imagine, How to Compare.

In describing a particular life plan, the statements about the likelihood of choosing a certain path because of its riskiness will indicate the frustrations that could occur. We are not concerned with how the best laid plans might go awry, except to qualify the generalizations about the likelihood of success with the briefest of references to dangers. But in another subtle way, thinking through the possibilities of a rational life plan for a given individual, the determination of what was rational has to be conditioned in large measure by the riskiness. Thus, to draw the line some place, I have had to exclude some things which must have been coveted from belonging to the rational because, even though possible to achieve, they were improbably so; while things at the other end of 'the spectrum, which were not particularly desirable, have had to be included in the rational life plan because they were largely impossible to avoid and therefore probable. The upper range, in the main, are the aspirations, and include the calculations of social mobility were were consciously realized; the lower range represents often things not consciously dwelt upon but accepted fatefully--such as legal enforcement of the class structure, lack of educational training, belief in a natural order that determined one's status, etc.

Both extremes will be determined in the first place as much as possible by recent work in social history and in legal history dealing with the family goods, marriage, and above all inheritance. Statistical studies and socio-economic analyses of family life, especially of the aristocracy, provide a framework for a composite characterization of the likely life chances of a given emerging adult of a given class at a given time, and I have translated those life chances into a life plan. It should not be thought that this life plan was a thoroughly thought-through scheme by the individual on his 21st birthday (although that day is more likely the one than any other when the new responsibilities of adulthood would give one to think of his prospects in life.) Everyone dreams of good things that might happen to him, and if there are pared off the fantasies about utterly fortuitous good chances, what remains is probably a pretty good estimate of what will actually happen to him if bad luck does not intervene and his industry is rewarded.

In the files on the super-rich there is some dictum about how unimaginable the luxury of the life of the wealthy is. This raises the problem of historical reconstruction, especially in so far as sensing the quality of the life of given classes at different times. This is one good reason not to get too involved with the daily life that a person might live in terms of luxury, servants, etc. It is much safer to assume that within each level the individuals accustomed themselves to the material limitations of their lives, and were more inclined to take pleasure from what they possessed than to complain about what they lacked. One usually does not miss what he has never had, though conversely may be outraged by losing that he once had. And also it is probably possible for those who are the most advantaged, if they are sympathetic persons, to imagine how it would be possible for those less privileged to find contentment in much less comfortable circumstances. For the very advantaged enjoy most of the things the less advantaged prize--a good piece of fruit, the delight of children, sexual gratification--and can imagine that if the package of good things enjoyed by less advantaged is much smaller than their own, the things in it/are of the same kind are, in principle, of the same quality. What is very difficult, however, is for the least advantaged to really comprehend some of the qualities of life enjoyed by the most advantaged. Particularly this is true in the refinement of taste that comes easiest to those who live all their lives in elegant, perhaps even great artistic, surroundings; the refinement and great breadth of thought that comes from superior education and regular association with the learned and the leading group of society. It is at this point that the effort to adopt a relativist point of view, and to say that one can be requited at whatever level of society one lives his life, begins to

falter. For it is my conviction that within each life there should be some good chance to see the world in all its visual variety, to know it somewhat in the wonder of its scientific construction, and to appreciate man's long history of cultural achievements. There is a very large world of thought, imagination, and appreciation that the least advantaged may never get to glimpse, while the least advantaged hardly are able to avoid being immersed in it. To think about the few underprivileged who do rise to great heights of knowledge and creative achievement in comparison with the few highly privileged who become dull clods, is to grasp at the exceptional and ignore the rule.

About times past, one can say that the monopoly of wider intellectual and cultural experiences by the upper classes was a necessity, since higher culture could not be maintained on a mass scale in a premodern society. The same cannot be said of our times, when equality of opportunity to have good exposure to wide intellectual and cultural horizons can be achieved for everyone; it is a deeply troubling thing if it is not. Let it be clear, therefore, that the attitude of detachment and acceptance of great differences in life chances that I have adopted in respect to times past does not govern my thoughts about the present or the future.