How Much Social Mobility?

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AS defined by Professors Lipset and Bendix, the term social mobility refers to "the process by which individuals move from one position to another in society—positions which by general consent have been given specific hierarchical values". Social ranking places political and social leadership at the top, followed closely by professional occupations where a high level of intelligence or long training is necessary. Superior positions are necessarily few and the bulk of the population must remain at the bottom of the social pyramid.

The crucial problem of social mobility is entry into or egress from the leadership class. The means of such entry vary from society to society. They may be physical prowess, wealth or intelligence. It is sometimes difficult to say whether in a particular case mobility is upward or downward, e.g., the transformation of craftsmen into skilled workers.

It is a merit of the study by Professors Lipset and Bendix that they have paid attention to the different aspects of social mobility. Their data are derived partly from a field study made by them for the labour market survey of Oakland in California but largely from other studies of social stratification and mobility. A distinctive feature of their study is that it presents a wide cross-national survey of social mobility in Western industrialised societies.

Parallel Patterns

The most interesting conclusion reached by the authors is that "the over-all pattern of social mobility appears to be much the same in the industrial societies of various Western countries .... Further, although it is clear that social mobility is related in many ways to the economic expansion of industrial societies, it is at least doubtful that the rates of mobility and expansion are correlated. Since a number of countries for which we have data have had different rates of economic expansion but show comparable rates of social mobility, our tentative interpretation is that the social mobility of societies becomes relatively high once their industrialisation, and hence their economic expansion, reaches a certain level".

The significance of these conclusions is, however, vitiated by the excessively broad categories used by the authors. The statement that social mobility in societies becomes relatively high after the level of industrialisation reaches a certain point, takes away much of the sharpness from their prior Generalisation, namely, that the mobility in different industrialised societies is broadly "comparable. Actually, the micro-social differences in the rates and patterns of mobility have become of crucial importance.

Micro-Social Differences

The basic criterion employed by the authors for distinguishing upward and downward mobility is the crossing of the line that separates manual from non-manual occupations. It is in this respect that social mobility in the different Western societies is parallel. A more detailed analysis, however, reveals that there are significant variations in the pattern of mobility between one nation and another. For example, the social origins of higher civil servants vary from country to country. The same is true of persons engaged in the professions. In Europe the social base from which these two groups arise is much narrower than in the United States.

Entrants into the ranks of political leadership, on the other hand, are more broadly scattered in Europe than in the United States. Similarly, there is a significant difference in the political consequences of social mobility in the two areas. In the U.S.A those who move upward tend to become more conservative in their political views than those born in the higher stratum, whereas in Europe the upwardly mobile tend to be less conservative than the high born. Downward mobility is connected with political conservatism in both places.

Cost of Mobility

Professors Lipset and Bendix challenge the general assumption that "rapid and increasing social mobility is a good thing because it increases the opportunity of the under-privileged and hence enlarges their freedom, while the corresponding reduction of privilege among the few does not jeopardize their position". They regard this view as a nineteenth century dogma which developed in more or less rigidly stratified societies, where increase in social mobility was equivalent to the levelling up of social differences. In our own time, however, excessive social mobility creates aggressiveness, frustration and rootlessness. The psychic, and social burdens of shifting from job to job may be too great even if mobility helps to maintain the myth of equality of opportunity which is a precious element in the American creed.

The chief argument for greater social mobility is that native talent in the lower classes should not be wasted by being prevented from attaining proper training for and social acceptance in roles of leadership or high professional positions. It is also held that mediocrity should not be favoured because it happens to be born high. The authors qualify their sympathy for these views with the statement that the quality of the talent produced by the lower classes should not be exaggerated. Equally important, they question the moral value and social utility of encouraging low-born talent to escape into higher social strata. Psychological studies are cited to prove that those who accept the low station to which they are born are happier and mentally healthier than their striving and climbing brethren who sacrifice present satisfactions for elusive gains in the future.
Inconclusive Argument

But the argument of the authors on the value of social mobility is inconclusive. On the one hand they seem to approve psychological and social stability but while disapproving of efforts of talented individuals born in the lower classes to climb up the social ladder and thereby contribute to social stability. Nor have they investigated the consequences that would ensue if talented individuals failed to rise in substantial numbers or the untalented did not fall. Such a situation might create acute social and individual instability.

Most of the nineteenth century optimists, whom the authors set out to correct, did not accept the socio-economic framework of their societies as unalterable and so believed social mobility to be useful because it disrupted the old social order and made for some sort of equality. Since the authors treat the American socio-economic-system as given, they are faced with a dilemma because their society has achieved a kind of dynamic equilibrium. The random and possibly excessive social mobility in the United States is the key to its over-all stability, even though it generates aggression, rootlessness, and other socio-psychic ills. If mobility is restricted the over-all stability might be threatened. Whether there is an intelligent solution to this dilemma is something the authors have not attempted to discover. One wonders if American and Western other social scientists have the inducement to do so at all. Professors Lipset and Bendix have indicated the hazards of non-conformity in social research.

The study has failed to probe deeply into the basic issues of social mobility in industrial societies. The mass of statistics and annotations fail in their purpose for lack of a clear theoretical perspective.

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Tata Iron & Steel

THE total approximate production of iron and steel of the Tata Iron and Steel Company Limited at their steel works at Jamshedpur during the month of December 1960 was as follows in metric tons:

- Pig Iron: 143,200
- Steel Ingots: 150,600
- Saleable Steel: 115,800