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From Origin to Destination

Trends and Mechanisms in Social Stratification Research

campus

Content

II. Special issues in current stratification research

This edited volume is meant to guide its readers through a sociological pathway from a person's social ›origin‹ to their - preliminary - ›destination‹ within a society. The position of the parental family - the origin - and the position individuals eventually achieve over their life course - the destina-tion - is usually expressed, particularly among European sociologists, by some notion of a social class position to describe a person's relative posi-tion in a given society - a concept which will largely be applied in the sub-sequent chapters of this volume. The comparison of an individual's class position at her or his origins with the class position achieved over the life course is of fundamental interest for sociologists. In fact, it goes to the core of sociological research since it not only informs about the amount of inequality at two points in time (or for two generations), but also enlight-ens about the opportunities for an individual to move between different class positions, therefore revealing the openness or rigidity of a given soci-ety. It is no surprise, then, that merely descriptive studies on social mobility attract much attention.

Sociologists distinguish between absolute and relative rates of social mobility. The former refer to observed mobility rates, i.e. to class changes individuals actually experience (e.g. a son or a daughter of a farmer be-comes a clerical worker), while the latter serve as a measure of ›social fluid-ity‹ and control for the fact that class distributions may differ due to changes in the marginal distributions of classes (e.g. declining farm sector, expansion of clerical occupations). For absolute mobility rates, the latest comparative study by Breen and Luijkx (2004) reports some gradual con-vergence among European countries towards a common level of absolute mobility rates for men as well as for women. However, this is a moderate trend towards convergence, which itself is "by no means complete" (Breen and Luijkx 2004: 49, see Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992 and Lipset and Zetterberg 1959 for previous influential studies). Much more dispute arises on differences in relative rates between countries and the development of relative rates within countries. On the basis of functionalist ideas, what might be labelled the "liberal theory of industrialism" (Kerr et al. 1960, Dunlop et al. 1975, Treiman 1970) stated that societies will experience an ongoing shift towards meritocratic selection processes which lead to a de-clining impact of ascriptive assets and an increase in the importance of achieved assets. Hence, effects of social origin on class destination are ex-pected to diminish over time. In contrast to this expectation, Featherman, Jones and Hauser (1975) formulated their renowned ›FJH‹ hypothesis on genotypical patterns of mobility (i.e. social fluidity), which are expected to be "basically the same" in industrial societies with a market economy and a nuclear family system (Featherman et al. 1975: 340).

In the mid-1980s, John Goldthorpe, Walter Müller and Robert Erikson initiated a large-scale Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Na-tions (CASMIN) to test the ›FJH‹ hypothesis. Based on cross-sectional data of the late 1960s to the mid 1970s from a selection of nine countries, they found basic similarities in the patterns of social fluidity - with a few excep-tions (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). However, at roughly the same time, Ganzeboom, Luijkx and Treiman (1989) published another large-scale study on social mobility from 1947-1986, including data from 35 coun-tries. Their results showed a strong increase in social mobility over time, largely supporting the hypothesis put forward by the liberal theory of in-dustrialism (Ganzeboom et al. 1989). In subsequent years, several studies focussed on patterns and developments of social fluidity (DiPrete and Grusky 1990, Jonsson and Mills 1993, Vallet 1999), adding to a more gen-eral picture of social mobility in industrialized countries that became less supportive of the FJH hypothesis. A new large-scale comparative study of social mobility in Europe using data from the last quarter of the 20th cen-tury, initiated by Richard Breen, aimed at providing a comprehensive as-sessment of recent trends in social

mobility. The results show that, in fact, models of no difference over time and between countries fit the data quite well (Breen and Luijkx 2004). However, Breen and Luijkx do report evi-dence for variations in social fluidity between countries, for different tem-poral trends in certain countries, and for decreasing variation between countries. The results, therefore, do not support either of the two trend hypotheses on social mobility - neither the liberal theory of industrialism, nor the hypothesis put forward by Featherman, Jones, and Hauser.

The comparative study by Breen and Luijkx (2004) looked at the devel-opment of social fluidity over survey periods. However, it can be ques-tioned whether this approach is indeed the most suitable one, or if it is more appropriate to study social mobility in a cohort perspective, assuming that social change affects mainly certain cohorts and, hence, social change takes place through the replacement of successive birth cohorts (Mann-heim 1954). Indeed, Breen and Jonsson (forthcoming) demonstrate for the Swedish case that all change found in a period perspective can be attrib-uted to successive cohort replacement, thus strengthening the argument for a cohort rather than for a period perspective. Likewise, Müller and Pol-lak (2004a) show for Germany how a cohort perspective is able to reveal certain historically specific conditions that affected only few cohorts in their social fluidity pattern, which would have remained undiscovered by a period approach.

The potential benefits of a cohort perspective on social mobility will be further elaborated in two chapters in this volume. Karl Ulrich Mayer and Silke Aisenbrey use data from the German Life History Study with nar-rowly defined birth cohorts. They replicate the general findings by Müller and Pollak (2004a) and point to specific cohort developments that are only visible with narrowly defined cohorts. For more recent cohorts, they are able to show that the trend towards more social fluidity in Germany has indeed reversed, for men and for women alike. Given the detailed structure of their data, they are also able to show that results of social mobility analy-ses are sensitive to the age at which an individual's destination class is measured.

Richard Breen and Ruud Luijkx test for two countries (Great Britain and Germany) whether the idea of social change resulting from successive cohort replacement can be extended beyond the Swedish case. For Great Britain, they find rather little change over time, in period as well as in co-hort perspective. Only farm inheritance becomes more pronounced, but since there are very few people in this sector it is of minor importance for the British social structure. For Germany, however, Breen and Luijkx are able to identify a moderate trend in periods towards more social fluidity, which, in fact, can be attributed - like in the Swedish case - to successive cohort replacement.