

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

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1 - The Fact

“Why should the successful executive break the emotional ties with his mother?” That was the first question proposed by one of the graduate business students during Prof. David Moore’s second class meeting of the spring term, 1960, at Michigan State University. In this class the first 75 pages of *Industrial Man*¹ were supposed to be discussed. This part of the book covers a large number of subjects. Only one, however, dominated the attention of that group of future executives during most of the 90 minutes of the class: the need of mobility drive for the successful executive.

When that first question was asked to the professor, the student was making reference to Prof. William E. Henry’s article in which he says: “In a sense the successful executive is ‘a man who has left home’. He feels and acts as though he were on his own, as though his emotional ties and obligations with his parents were severed..... In general we find the relationship to the mother to have been the most clearly broken tie... those men who still feel a strong tie to the mother.”² This statement shocked the students. And during the subsequent discussions they presented restrictions to the idea of the upward mobile executive, while it

¹ Warner & Martin (1959).

² William E. Henry “The Psychodynamics of the Executive Role”, in Lloyd & Martin (1959: p.32-33).

symbolized detachment of the family and of the friends, while it meant – for them, naturally – a cold and ambitious man, striving continually for higher positions and never looking back.

This was the fact. This was the behavior of about 40 future junior executives assembled in a class room. And this behavior proposes several questions. Why did they concentrate their attention exclusively to the problem of social mobility, when there were so many other problems to be discussed? Why did they presented so many objections to a single issue? In this paper we will try to answer these questions. After offering some introductory ideas as premises, we will try to develop our hypothesis and its underlying propositions. A more complete answer to the problem, however, will be possible only after further research, whose basis we will try to establish.

II - The Premises

As a first premise we may say that almost all statements a person makes have explicit and implicit meanings. The explicit meanings are under his control, not the implicit ones. When an individual attempts to assume a role, he is only partially conscious of his motivations. So, when the student proposed that first question, and when most of his schoolmates backed him up, they were actually expressing an attitude, whose implications were far out of their control. In that moment they were not arguing about details, but were unconsciously rejecting some of their basic values and beliefs. As we will see later, most of them were preparing themselves to assume the role of the successful executive, but not the role of the entirely mobile executive. “...the individual is at all times attempting to carry into action some general set of hypotheses, as to how he should act. These hypotheses are organized, with greater or less success, into some pattern of roles which the individual conceives as appropriate to him”.³ The role of the successful executive was appropriate to them, but they had many objections to the role of the “man who left home”, of the “man who forgot his old friends”, of the independent and self-directing man, detached from people and places, whose goals must be attained at any price. Certainly they did not deny the need of mobility drive for the successful executive. The struggle for increased responsibility, the necessity of moving constantly upward are typical

³ Henry (1956: p.34).

characteristics of the successful executive, and do not conflict with the value system of the students. But they could not agree with some of the consequences of the mobility drive. In fact, they left it fairly clear that they want to become mobile men, but not too much.

If our first premise has a psychological basis, the second has a sociological origin. The social conditions that prevailed when the presently successful executives structured their personality were quite different from the social conditions of today; decisive transformations took place within the corporations and the government; society adopted new beliefs and expressed them into new symbols; and, in spite of the characteristic heterogeneity and ambiguity of the American society, we may say that bureaucracy became one of the dominant factors of this century, while individualism and small entrepreneurship defined the nineteenth century. This change, the so-called Second Industrial Revolution, could be largely discussed and analyzed. In so doing, however, we will be out of the purposes of this paper, whose basic hypothesis we are able to propose now.

III – The Hypothesis

The behavior of that small group of students was probably only a symptom of a larger phenomenon. Social mobility has today a different meaning for the American middle class. Two basic changes happened in this field: the career perspectives held by many of the future junior executives changed, as well as the routes for success. Instead of small businessmen and farmers, we have a legion of employees forming the core of the middle-class; instead of entrepreneurship, we have occupation; instead of an individualistic perspective of social mobility, we have a bureaucratic one. The student of business is not yet a formal bureaucrat, but he already thinks almost as a bureaucrat. His value and belief system is already a product of the process of bureaucratization, which occurs not only in the government and in the large corporations, but in the whole society, and more specifically, in the whole system of interactions of the American middle-class.

The spirit of adventure, the sense of risk that former characterized most of the executives, is being substituted by an increasing need for security, as the society becomes more stable and more organized according to the principles of bureaucracy. When the

students protested against the idea of breaking the ties with their mothers, with their families, they were presenting a justification, a rationalization to their unconscious need for roots and stability. If they can not belong to the family, they will substitute it by the corporation, by the church, by the club, by the state.

Breaking the ties will be always a dolorous process, especially when we remember that probably the outstanding characteristics of the bureaucrat are the need for security and roots. They know that to be successful and even to be moderately successful (which is the actual goal of many, if not most of them) they will have to be occupationally, territorially and socially mobile men. Besides, since their childhood they were taught the importance of success. This is a typical characteristic of the American middle-class family. Success as a basic motivation force is one of its principal educational techniques. Upward mobility in the middle-class is always encouraged and strongly rewarded, not only in the training of the child by the parent and his school teacher, but in the later rewarding experiences he has when he strives for success as a mature person in an adult world.⁴ But “the mobile middle-class person very often must be able to sever all emotional ties from the family into which he was born, if he is to succeed in consolidating his social achievements in a higher class.”⁵ And this is increasingly difficult to do. Actually, in his early familiar formation, the junior executive faces a basic contradiction. Within his family he learns to use the social skills and symbols, the basic values and beliefs of society – but this learning is contradictory. On one hand, he learns the importance of success, the need of greater social achievement; on the other hand he is taught the outstanding value of being prudent, methodical, and disciplined. His father in general is no longer a small entrepreneur or a farmer, but often he is a salaried man, whose life is already “planned for him in terms of graded career, through the organizational devices of promotion by seniority, pensions, incremental salaries...”⁶ In reality, two conflicting systems of values and benefits are acting together with the American middle-class family: one emphasizes the need for individualism and strong social mobility; the other underlines the

⁴ Warner (1953: p. 88)

⁵ Warner, (1953: p.89).

⁶ Robert K. Merton. “Bureaucratic Structure and Personality”, in Lloyd & Martin (1959: p.70).

importance of security an roots. And all the facts seem to indicate that the later system is growing each day, as the bureaucratic system of production, distribution and control becomes the outstanding reality of modern life. Among many other evidences, this analysis is stressed by the fact that, in American society, success or failure is the result of the judgment of a specific social system — generally the corporation. It is the interaction of the personality of the individual — his values and beliefs, his interpersonal relations and his behavior in the job — with the values of the social system that will determine his success or failure. Success, then, becomes largely function of fitness. One of the conditions for achieving success is to be fitted to the organization. The executive no longer works on his own, neither does he independently create a new enterprise, but rather, he is an employee, working in a well structured organization. Now he must shape his personality, not only to the broad social environment, but to the values, beliefs, and patterns of interpersonal relationships that exist in a specific social system, where he works. It is clear that an individualistic behavior and an individualistic view of social mobility conflicts with such a system.

It is important to remember, however, that bureaucracy does not exclude social mobility from its system of values. On the contrary, vertical mobility is an outstanding value, since it does not imply the idea of disruption, insecurity, or risk. Success continues to be a fundamental goal, may be the fundamental one, but it must be planned, and achieved through a long career. In few words, what changed was the perspective of success and correlated social mobility, not its symbolic value.

Continuous change has been a characteristic of American society. With the great technological achievements of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century this transformation process became more rapid. Since then the routes to success changed. Today, most of the top executives achieved executive office working up within company. According to a research,⁷ in 1900, 29.5% of the American executives obtained office working in organizing corporation, 19.5% through investment, and only 17.9% working up within the company; while in 1950 the correspondent percentage are 6.0%, 7% and 50.8%. The shift of the factors was radical, the shift of the correlated belief system had to be radical

⁷ Mabel Newcomer, “The Big Business Executive”, in Lloyd & Martin (1959: p: 136).

too. To be a bureaucrat is today the main route to success; social mobility may already be planned and organized within a career.

Furthermore, this fact is confirmed by another actual change in the route to success. At one time occupation was the more utilized route to the mobile executive. He had to start at the bottom of the ladder. Today, “the occupational routes are not as open as they once were... in certain industries the chances for the worker to move out of his status into the lower range of management have almost ceased to exist.”⁸ Another route becomes the principal one for those who are socially mobile education. The junior executive, to be successful, must have a degree. College education becomes almost obligatory. The degree, for the students and their families, for the corporation and the whole society is much more than a simple certificate of acquired knowledge in a specific area: it is a symbol of achieved status and future success. And this symbol has a foundation in reality. In 1952, according to another research in which 8300 big business leaders were studied, 57% of them had a college education, while only 32% were college graduates in 1928⁹. The meaning of this change is clear: from a non-formally organized and planned route to social mobility – occupation –, we shift to an organized and planned one - education. This is a typical feature of the bureaucratic system. As Max Weber has already underlined in his classic writings about bureaucracy, on one hand “more and more specialized knowledge of the expert became the foundation for the power of the officeholder..... (On the other hand) the development of the diploma from universities, and business and engineering colleges, and the universal clamor for the creation of educational certificates in all fields make for the formation of a privileged stratum in bureaus and in offices. Such certificates support their holders’ claims for intermarriages with notable families... claims for assured advancement and old-age insurance, and, above all, claims to monopolize socially and economically advantageous positions.”¹⁰

⁸ Warner (1953: p. 111).

⁹ W. Lloyd Warner and James C. Abegglen, “The Social Origins and Acquired Characteristics of Business Leaders”, in Lloyd & Martin (1959: p. 105).

¹⁰ Weber (1946: pp. 135 and 141).

Finally we may say that the value and belief system, and the educational techniques of the American middle-class family (many of them certainly much older than the advent of bureaucracy itself) provide in many ways a very favorable field for the development of a bureaucratic system of values. For instance, one of its typical belief is that family ties, particularly the mother's love, is natural, instinctive; another one is that children's aggressiveness must be restrained; other characteristic belief states that children must be constantly trained, must be always moved carefully and can not be left alone. The coherence of such a system of beliefs with a bureaucratic one is clear. And this becomes more evident when we remember that "restraint, foresight, and moderation are characteristic of the goals and performance of the middle-class."¹¹

Before finishing the presentation of our hypothesis we want to underline that the concepts we used in this paper does not intend to have a value connotation. Certainly we do not pretend to be absolutely objective, but simply to present the facts under a sociological and not moral standpoint.

IV - The Propositions

Besides the two premises shortly discussed before, we must analyze in few words two major propositions, which lie behind the basic hypothesis of this paper. These propositions are already implicit in the development of our hypothesis.

First, personality is a function of social interaction. Among the factors that shape personality, that determine the value and belief system of an individual, that model his behavior and conditions his "weltanschauung", the social environment is the outstanding one. The internal consistency and the equilibrium toward which each individual tends, patterns his personality through a long process of repeated social experiences. In other words, the repetition of experiences during a long period of time will permit the development of a reasonable internal consistency for each individual. "The most important social influences are

¹¹ Warner, (1953: p.88).

his immediate family, neighborhood, and community environment.”¹² The person thinks and behaves as his group taught him. It is impossible to understand the behavior of an individual, without understanding his social background. While his system of interactions is confined to a small group, to his family, to his clan, his system of interactions and his culture is relatively simple. However, as soon as this system broadens its boundaries, his personality becomes more complex, and his standpoint becomes less particular and restricted.

The formation of personality is naturally the result of a long process. The organic or biological factors may have a part in shaping personality, but the basic conditioning factor is social. “In the interactive system individual-society, the individual is viewed as attempting to satisfy his desires within the society of which he is a part..... On the other hand the society makes demands and has needs that must be fulfilled. It demands at least outer conformity to its values and modes of living, and it punishes, by ostracism and social disgrace or personal distortion, those individuals who fail to attain a sufficient degree of that conformity.”¹³ Through this complex motivating process society transfers to the individual its values and beliefs, its mores and basic skills, shaping his personality.

Our second proposition is correlated. If personality is shaped by society, and if each society has always a group of symbols, through which it express its values and beliefs, “it is only through an analysis of the manner in which the person manipulates the symbols of conventional communication that one derives insight into personal motives.”¹⁴ In fact, the symbols existing in his society permit the individual to express his needs. Through the manipulation of symbols, he projects in the outside reality his personality, and, unconsciously, tries to conform reality with his values and belief system.

So, in studying the implicit motives of the behavior of an individual or of a group of individuals, we must know, first, the broader social structure in which this individual or group acts, its value and belief system, its system of personal interactions and its technological development; and second, we must find the symbols, meanings and material relationships

¹² Gardner (1959: p. 36).

¹³ Henry (1956: pp.6-7).

¹⁴ Henry (1956: p.4).

through which this value and belief system is expressed. In other words, we must study the whole system of interactions, and the way this system is interpreted by each individual. Applying these two theoretical tools, we shall have a more adequate insight into each individual and into his respective society. By analyzing the whole system of interactions, we will understand its basic symbols; by studying the way each individual expresses himself we will have a better insight into the whole society.

V – The Research

Now we already have a fact, some evidences, premises and propositions, which support and configure our hypothesis. This hypothesis, however, still must be proved. Actually, it is only a tentative statement, which will allow us to establish the basis of a further research. “To make scientific sense, all statements about any society and individuals in it must be founded on full evidence or must be dependent on hypothesis based on partial evidence, and these hypotheses must always be designed for further testing by properly controlled research methods.”¹⁵

Certainly, in proposing this research, we do not intend to go into details in this paper. We will only try to formulate the general techniques we should use, taking in account some basic concepts, borrowed from sociology and psychology. Among these concepts, we underline three, which will introduce us to the specific research methods.

The first one is the concept of social class. We will start from the assumption widely accepted that the value and belief system of each class is different, unique. So, besides the analysis of the whole class system, each class must be studied as a separate entity, as a single system of social interactions. For instance, our hypothesis is circumscribed to the American middle-class. What was said in this paper is appropriate to this class, and may be proper to another class only by accident.

Therefore, in our research, our first objective will be to determine the social class of the people we are dealing with. Most but not all the Michigan State University students belong to the middle-class. Accepting the classification of Lloyd Warner of six classes and

¹⁵ Warner (1953: p. 29).

three levels, we will rather restrict our research to the middle level – the “Common Man Level”, which accounts for about 60% of the American population. In order to determine the social class of each student we shall use the two methods used by Lloyd Warner - the Index of Status Characteristics and the Evaluated Participation, or at least the first one, if we want to simplify our research. The I.S.C. is a rating system based originally upon four social characteristics – occupation, source of income, house type and dwelling area – to which a fifth one was added – education – when it was used in *The Radio Daytime Serial: a Symbolic Analysis* research¹⁶ by Lloyd Warner himself and William E. Henry. The Evaluated Participation technique consists basically of interviewing people about the participation of others in the class system of the community. This is a more complex method, and less indicated to the present case. Actually would be practically impossible to interview the parents of the students. The method is indicated for the study of a whole community, not for a section of this community.

The second concept we will take into account particularly in this research is the concept of projection – an unconscious mechanism by which “the individual interprets reality to conform with the reality he expects, he sees in the outer world (and in himself) only what he wants and is able to see.”¹⁷ Actually, the individual is constantly projecting his values and beliefs, his needs and feelings through symbols. Since we use some simple devices, we will stimulate respondent’s projection, and then we will have material to analyze his personality.

As an especially flexible projective method (it may be adapted to a great number of different situations), the Thematic Apperception Technique would probably be the most efficient device to study the personality of a large number of students, and particularly their perspectives of success. This method uses several simple pictures. “The subject is asked to tell a story about each card, in which he says what has happened, what is happening, and what the outcome of the picture will be. It has been found that the personalities and social situations of the respondents are projected into the stories they tell.”¹⁸ Naturally the pictures are widely

¹⁶ Warner (1953: p. 60) and Warner & Henry (1948, p.14-15).

¹⁷ Henry (1956: p.7).

¹⁸ Warner & Henry (1948: p. 10-11).

ambiguous, in order to permit a large variety of stories. The T.A.T., however, presents a great difficulty. Its value depends upon the skill of the person who administers it, and it is not easy to find skilled people in this field.

The free association principle is the third concept we want to emphasize in this research. Men are always, consciously or unconsciously, to make irrational acts appear as pure results of their intellectual capacity. However, “if a person gives up the usual logical control he exercises over his thoughts and says whatever comes to his mind at the moment in the presence of a skilled listener, unconscious feelings and thoughts can be discovered.”¹⁹

Using this technique, we could interview the students, asking them several and uncorrelated questions. Certainly we would not ask them questions as: “Do you think that your social mobility perspectives changed?” Or, “Are your values already very approximated to the values of a bureaucrat?” Such questions would only make him rationalize his answers, and no insight would be possible. Instead of this we could make questions as: “Do you think that risk is a factor that business administration methods must try to eliminate?” Or, “What are your chances of initiating a new business?”. Or, “Do you hope to work most of your life for a single organization?” Or yet, “How would you define success for yourself?” Many other questions could be proposed. They would be interesting for our purpose, not because of the specific answers they demand, but as they give opportunity to the respondent to speak freely about the subject. The individual may even know that he is being tested, but, as in the T.A.T., he does not know how, according to which criteria, this testing is being done. So, his capacity of rationalization decreases, and his personality may be analyzed more deeply.

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¹⁹ Newman (1957, p.65).

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