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Comparing social mobility

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Students of social mobility do well to bear in mind the distinction between a category and a group. Most of their data are organized in categories that have been constructed to suit the purposes of the compiler. These may be irrelevant to the lives of ordinary people, who are more likely to enter into reciprocal relations with those they regard as fellow members of a group. The memberships that are important to them may be units smaller than a demographic category or have been ignored in the conduct of a census. When a new inquiry reports that, over a given period, a certain percentage of persons has moved to a higher category, that mobility may be in part the product of the individual actions of those persons, but it is likely to be in some part a product of their parents' investment in them, their education and the positive effects of growing up in a favourable environment. Upward mobility may also be facilitated when individuals combine with those they regard as fellow group members in collective action intended to overcome the obstacles facing them, or in some other way advance their shared interests. Groups can organize for mobility; categories cannot.

Those who, like the editors of *Ethnicity, Social Mobility and Public Policy*, would recruit a team to pool and advance knowledge about social mobility have to inspire collective action. They have to identify an objective that will attract their colleagues to adapt their individual career plans in order to contribute to a common endeavour. This is more difficult than it sounds. The initiators have to persuade a funding body that the venture will be worthwhile and a publisher that the resulting volume will be more than the sum of its parts. Support from the W.G. Kellogg Foundation enabled Loury, Modood and Telles to convene a workshop in Bath, England in 1999, at which first drafts of contributions were discussed, revised versions being subject to more consideration at a second meeting in Boston, USA the following year; nevertheless further work had still to be undertaken and the book took much longer to materialize than the editors would have wished. It looks as if this delay occurred because the objective of the exercise was not defined sufficiently sharply and as if, in a complicated field of research, the contributions of some participants could not be fitted together into as coherent a presentation as was originally envisaged.

The editors aver that 'ethnicity and race are causally related to social mobility'. In my view, 'ethnicity' and 'race' are not in themselves causes of social mobility but are popular names for clusters of factors that may help

explain differential social mobility. Each minority in each country is distinctive on many dimensions, possibly including those of phenotype, identification with an ethnic or national origin, religion, language, historical memory and socioeconomic status. Minorities are identified by proper names. Usually they are categories, but sometimes they are groups as well. There are genuine problems, both policy related and social scientific, in trying to find what the minorities that are popularly called 'ethnic' and 'racial' have in common of a causal character with others similarly classified. Since social mobility is a transcultural concept, the search for its causes has itself to be a search for more and better transcultural concepts. Some such concepts form part of the Becker model discussed here solely in connection with the labour market.

At the forefront of this endeavour are the contributions of scholars who have assembled directly comparable material. Model has analysed the available data concerning five categories of person present in both the USA and UK, both foreign-born and native-born. They are those with origins in the black Caribbean, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. To them are added foreign-born black Africans and native-born whites. Males and females are differentiated. Variations in age, education and, where available, data on length of settlement and command of English, are taken into account. Her main conclusion is that while minority workers in the UK fare nearly as well as their US counterparts in respect of occupational prestige and earnings, they are slightly more likely to be unemployed. US employers may have had more experience of minority employees and their attitudes may have been influenced by the earlier introduction of sanctions upon discrimination in the engagement of staff. Another study, by Teles, Mickey and Ahmed, attempts some further transatlantic comparisons. It stresses the significance for social mobility of asset levels, which vary with the intergenerational transmission of wealth and social capital. The high levels of home ownership among households of Indian and Pakistani origin in the UK are notable on this account. Two other critical variables can be those of having to live in a neighbourhood of high crime and the advantage ethnic minorities in the UK enjoy from living in a country in which healthcare is free at the point of use and unconnected to employment status.

Most essays describe, and attempt to account for, variations in social mobility within either the USA or the UK, making what reference they can to transatlantic comparisons, but some, including essays by the bearers of famous names, such as those of Glazer, Patterson and Parekh, help fill out the background to comparison. Prominent within several of the explanations of differential mobility is the concept of social capital, i.e. the many sorts of assistance and information made available through social networks. The information may include news of job opportunities or transmit group norms embodied in role models that boost achievement motivation. Social

capital is built up through forms of sociability that lie in between individual action and collective action. These forms include the reciprocal relations in which people help one another from a sense of obligation that may reflect an expectation that, should the need arise, they will be helped in return. Such relations are essential to group formation and maintenance. It also appears as if there may be cultural elements in social capital even if the data bearing upon this is not very systematic.

The spatial isolation of a minority can either help or hinder the accumulation of social capital. When it helps there is an ethnic enclave, like New York's Chinatown, (described by Zhou); when it hinders there is a ghetto. Research in the USA has found that an out-of-school African American youth has a significantly enhanced possibility of securing a job if he lives in a census tract in which there is a more than 50 percent probability that a randomly selected resident will be white. In such a tract, there will probably be more upwardly mobile black youths as well. Writing on why America's black-white school achievement gap persists, Ronald F. Ferguson notes that there may have been a shift in black youth culture at the end of the 1980s. The commercial take-off of rap music coincided with a decline in black teenagers' reading gains, leisure reading, and class attendance. Rap may have switched energies in directions that did not assist upward social mobility. This can be read together with Patterson's contention that the 'identity politics and ethno-racial mobilization' that have served African Americans well in their successful struggle for inclusion over the past four decades, may now 'be becoming a liability'.

Berthoud outlines how in the UK (where there are ethnic enclaves but no ghettos, as admirably documented by Peach) the family, in its various forms, serves as a building block of human capital. Supplementing this argument, Robinson and Valeny attribute the upward mobility of the Asians who arrived from Uganda in 1972 to their ability to seize the opportunities for self-employment in the British economy; they trace this to Gujerati culture and to their shared past experiences. Hout reports that in the US educational system Latinos remain behind whites but are advancing faster than are African Americans. The percentages of young African Americans graduating from high school, and of those entering post-secondary education, have both fallen. For a long time it has appeared as if immigrants in general are more highly motivated than are natives of comparable socioeconomic status, and that here there are cultural variables that as yet are not well understood. In general, these findings only confirm what we already knew or suspected, while, from the reviews by Modood and Skerry, it would appear that no clear conclusions can be drawn concerning the effects upon minority social mobility of transatlantic variations in political institutions and minority political mobilization.

The USA and the UK are both parties to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Under Article 2(2) of this they have an obligation to take ‘special and concrete measures to ensure the adequate development and protection of [disadvantaged] racial groups’. As this provision is currently interpreted, the only categories of persons in the USA and UK to which it might be held applicable are those of certain Native American peoples and ghetto-dwelling African Americans. Any advice from social scientists about the measures that might discharge this obligation should be based upon identified causes of disadvantage. Here I take issue with Loury, not on the pragmatic reasons for special measures, but on the philosophical justification for them. He contends that it is mistaken to hold ‘that only individuals and never groups can be the subjects of a discourse on social justice’. Believing that there are questions of social justice in societies sharply stratified along racial lines, he wants to identify ‘what’s wrong with liberalism?’ Allegedly, liberalism cannot cope with the continuing reality of racial inequality.

Loury argues not for compensatory measures (‘reparations’) but for establishing a common baseline of historical memory of past injury and its ongoing significance. He wishes to promote the study of racial stigma at the expense of the Becker-style analysis of discrimination. His criticism of liberalism is founded on a definition of race as ‘a human group defined by itself or others as distinct by virtue of perceived common physical characteristics that are held to be inherent’. As justice is an across-the-board standard, the principles used in its application to one case must be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, to others. Would Loury agree with Hickman that the Irish in the 17th century were a subordinated part of a racially stratified society? Was there past injury that is of ongoing significance? As for historical memory, it is sometimes said that the English cannot remember past injuries for which they were responsible and that the Irish cannot forget them; does this not have parallels in the way US whites and blacks remember slavery? Yet though shared memories can be important to collective action, their connection with social mobility is uncertain.

The Irish case, the data on black–white ‘mixing’ in the UK, the arguments for a ‘multiracial’ category in the US census, and the different attitudes of the increased number of foreign-born blacks in that country, should all call into question Loury’s culture-bound conception of race, and serve as reminders that social scientists will need better transcultural concepts if they are to uncover the causes of variable social mobility. As possibly causal factors, differences of ‘race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin’ (to use the words of the International Convention), derive from subjective judgements. The comparative analysis of social mobility has to rest on the criteria of socioeconomic status that are based on objective classifications, even if some, such as occupational prestige, are only

one step away from subjective assessments. At present, there is no good way to factor the former into the latter. The search for a solution to this problem might well be the objective of a further international workshop.

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