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Social Mobility

Contributors: Howard P. Chudacoff
Editors: David R. Goldfield
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Social mobility is usually defined as the movement of an individual or group of people from one social position to another. Such movement may involve mobility within a horizontal plane, as when an individual shifts **[p. 741 ↓]** from one religious group to another, marries or divorces, or changes place of employment but keeps the same occupational status. Horizontal social mobility is distinct from geographical mobility, which involves movement across physical space but not necessarily a shift in social position, though social mobility may accompany geographical mobility. Vertical mobility occurs when an individual or group rises or declines from one social stratum to another. This type of movement may be reckoned by changes in social position within an individual's lifetime (a process of career mobility), by comparing changes in attainment across generations (intergenerational mobility), or by relating some measure of social attainment by an age, ethnic, racial, regional, or other subpopulation to a similar measure for the rest of the society of which that subpopulation is a part (group mobility). Because different individuals, groups, and societies have varying definitions of social attainment and status, social scientists often have used empirical criteria such as occupation, income, and property holding to represent gradations by which to assess vertical and some types of horizontal mobility. As well, cities, with their dynamics of population, economic, political, and cultural structures, have provided the most common contexts for the study of social mobility.

In American urban history, a number of factors have affected the extent and directions of social mobility. From a perspective on individual mobility, a person's family (parents' socioeconomic class), race, ethnicity, religion, level of education (both formal schooling and occupational skill), and physical or mental capacity (or incapacity) have been important factors in determining social status and, consequently, chances for social movement. Other factors operate beyond individual characteristics and include the type of community in which the individual lives (egalitarian or authoritarian, for example) or the extent of the society's industrialization or modernization. Generally, it is believed that urbanization, with its increase in nonagricultural employment, emergence of new firms and occupations, and expanded institutions of formal education, prompted more dynamic social mobility, both upward and downward along various scales of measurement, than occurred in rural society. The combination of these factors has given cities particularly well defined social (class) structures.

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Cities thus provide various scales along which to measure social mobility, but the process of measurement is influenced both by how composite groups in an urban society define the status grades involved in a city's or community's social structure and by the particular researcher's assumptions about the scale along which social movement is considered. In the historical analysis of urban social mobility, occupations and occupational categories have served as common proxies for social status, principally because extant sources for large numbers of people, such as censuses, city directories, and other such listings usually do not provide income information but do contain occupational designations for individuals long dead. Occasionally, when information concerning the value of property owned is available, it too has been considered, but property ownership can be less reliable than occupation because individuals can misrepresent their actual holdings. While determining precise gradations between discrete occupations has proven to be elusive, historians have generally accepted six general occupational categories: unskilled, semiskilled, skilled, clerical, proprietor and managerial, and professional. And though the boundaries between categories are relative and sometimes blurred, such as between semiskilled and skilled and between managerial and professional, there is general acceptance of a major distinction between “blue-collar” occupations—those in the first three categories—and “white-collar” occupations—those in the second three categories. Meaningful mobility is said to have occurred when a person or group of persons show upward or downward movement between these two large categories.

American culture, born of optimism and an expanding nation, has nurtured the premise that ambition and hard work open the pathway to success. Urban life, with its bustle and complex economy, offered particular opportunities, at least so the story went. In reality, however, the route from low social standing to high was seldom trod. Those individuals who held the highest paying jobs and owned the most wealth usually began their careers with advantages of birth (affluent parents and/or family connections), gender (male), race (white), nationality (native born), and access to capital. In all eras, those individuals and groups who occupied the lowest rungs of the mobility ladder usually lacked some or all of these advantages. They might have experienced incremental improvement—say, from an unskilled to a semiskilled job or acquisition of a small parcel of property—or they might have utilized some extraordinary talent to earn huge (though often temporary) incomes in sports or entertainment. And in almost every

era, the number of **[p. 742 ↓]** people improving in job status outnumbered those who dropped from a higher to a lower rung. As well, even if an individual was unable to experience some kind of upward shift along the social scale during his or her lifetime, there remained a good chance that the individual's offspring, usually sons, could reach a higher status than their parents could. However, generally the rags-to-riches story was a myth.

A comprehensive social mobility, which is attainable for all members of a society, usually occurs in a context marked by egalitarianism and democracy. By contrast, closed societies, characterized by authoritarianism and rigid social structures such as slavery or castes, are characterized by limited or blocked social mobility. Historically, American urban society has manifested both situations. For most white ethnic groups, including the native born, the commercial expansion of the 18th and early 19th centuries, the industrialization of the 19th century, the growth of white-collar and service occupations from the late 19th century through the 20th century, and the rise of the postindustrial and information economy of the late 20th and early 21st centuries created numerous opportunities for socioeconomic progress. For some white groups, especially low-wage male and female workers, and most racial minorities, however, opportunities have been limited at best because exploitation and prejudice have narrowed or closed avenues of advancement.

While the study of the phenomenon of social mobility has revealed important patterns and trends in American urban life, several factors extenuate its significance. First, although occupation, as noted above, provides a relevant proxy for socioeconomic status, historians have struggled to understand fully the process of job recruitment in past urban societies. Presumably in a society relatively free from feudal or guild constraints, access to most occupations would be based on qualification and merit. This ideal, as noted above, has seldom been attained; yet, exactly how individuals selected and obtained their modes of work and why they might have shifted from one job to another has been a complicated process and not always clear. Though personal and family connections seem to have been more important than formal hiring practices in Philadelphia and other cities, at least until recent times, most blue-collar occupations were characterized by high turnover rates that often reflected both upward and downward mobility.

Second, most historical studies of social mobility have focused on the career, intergenerational, and group (ethnic, racial, etc.) experiences of men. Yet social mobility patterns of urban women have often taken routes that have been, and are, distinctive to their gender. A number of cultural impediments, both overt and subtle, have restricted women's social movement and until recently have blocked their entry into professional, commercial, and artisanal occupations. Except for two groups of women—widows and (the very few) independent adult women—which were both generally relegated to low social status, the social position of most women in the past was linked to that of a husband, father, brother, or other male. Thus women's mobility was not their own. In addition, the difficulty in determining the mobility pathways of women has posed challenges for researchers attempting to trace them over time, as women's sudden surname change resulting from marriage has confounded attempts to locate and link specific women in a succession of records such as censuses and directories.

Nevertheless, women, especially those living in a city, have exhibited various kinds of status change that reveal important qualities of their roles and identities. In the 17th and 18th centuries, some local governments allowed women, especially widows, to acquire and manage property. These women owned and operated a variety of small establishments that catered to urban consumers and carried some social prestige. In the era preceding widespread industrialization and the disappearance of many crafts, wives and daughters often worked alongside male artisans in their families. Sometimes these women learned important skills that enabled them to sustain the family economy when the main breadwinner became ill, was otherwise incapacitated, or was absent for military or migratory labor reasons. Similar patterns occurred in small commercial shops, where the male head of household acted as proprietor but shared managerial duties with his wife. Censuses and other surveys, reflecting the assumption that only a man could be gainfully employed, often overlooked women's functions in the larger economy. A woman also could attain higher social status by marrying someone above her on the social scale. In the late 19th century and early 20th, the expansion of mostly urban professions, such as teaching, social work, and nursing, furnished new opportunities for women to achieve social mobility. And, as higher education expanded in the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st, some women—though disproportionately fewer of them **[p. 743 ↓]** than men—were able to enter positions in

the highstatus professions, such as medicine and law, and in corporate hierarchies. An increasing number even made politics their profession.

Third, while there is no doubt that social mobility has been a core component of American culture, its place in the reality of experience remains debated. Historical studies of social mobility, especially as it occurred in the urban context, have posited that the frequency of upward movement, even those shifts that occurred in small increments, were sufficient to blunt the rise of radicalism that might have challenged the primacy of capitalism and the existing class structure. That is why, according to this interpretation, socialism or any kind of cooperative economic system failed to take hold as firmly as it did in other industrializing countries. So supposedly powerful has the mobility ideology been that even if a person was unable to rise socially, the hope for the person's group and, especially, the next generation would act to inhibit political unrest and prevent attempts to change the system.

Such an interpretation contains kernels of accuracy. Studies of mobility patterns of cities as disparate as Newburyport, Omaha, Los Angeles, Boston, Grand Rapids, Atlanta, and others have revealed that in a variety of time periods there was considerable consistency in the frequency and direction of occupational mobility, with challenges to capitalism that were minor at most. However, the underlying assumption that anticapitalism has been weak throughout American history remains undertested. Some analyses of the American urban working class, and even of some white-collar employees, have identified undercurrents of resistance to capitalism and have uncovered pockets of socialism in immigrant neighborhoods. As well, the ideology of mobility is not necessarily the explanatory factor for what might appear to be tamer political radicalism than existed elsewhere. Ethnic and racial conflict, the ubiquity of geographical mobility, and the myth of political democracy might have dampened protest against the state.

Finally, despite the importance of social mobility in both its ideal and real dimensions, its relationship to the concept of success may be somewhat artificial. The American success ethic derives from a middle-class emphasis on the link between economic gain, consumerism, and social status. Nevertheless, in previous eras, the road to higher income, more goods, and prestige had risk embedded in its pavement. Some of the most frequent downward mobility occurred among urban dwellers who tried

to rise from blue-collar to proprietor status but failed when their shops, saloons, or other kinds of establishments lost customers, accumulated too much debt, or simply lacked shrewd management. In addition, the transformations accompanying industrial and postindustrial economies pushed some skilled and white-collar workers down the occupational ladder as previously desirable jobs became obsolete. Thus, some urban groups and individuals valued manual skills and disdained white-collar employment. German carpenters and Italian masons might have transferred pride in their craft to the United States and considered an accountant's job demeaning, and they might have made certain that their sons carried on traditional skills rather than seek some new but uncertain occupation. At the same time, families might have sacrificed occupational opportunities for their children by saving to acquire property rather than investing in education. Social mobility is not everyone's ideal, and cultural preferences influence patterns of social movement.

It seems evident that the American success ethic, in which social mobility plays an important role along with consumerism, is a middle-class construct. For many urban groups, security, rather than the prestige that has accompanied material acquisitiveness, has defined success. In times when frequent swings of the business cycle threaten workers with the uncertainties of wage cuts and layoffs, and when small business failures are common, a secure job and the steady income it brings, along with a home of one's own, may have more relevance for success than climbing a precarious occupational ladder.

The subscription to the canon of social mobility, however, has had a strong influence on American culture. Inspirational and prescriptive literature has consistently validated the goal of material as well as mental and spiritual improvement, and those who have achieved substantial material achievement have exploited the mobility myth that poverty is no barrier to wealth to justify their success and to salve their consciences. Indeed, some individuals, such as Horatio Alger and Andrew Carnegie, claimed that poverty was a prerequisite, a quality that gave a person incentive to rise in status. Moreover, what constituted mobility depended upon personal and group expectations. While some people defined upward social movement only in terms of a major shift from blue-collar to proprietor or managerial status, to others a weekly wage and homeownership represented **[p. 744 ↓]** genuine improvement over an uncertain existence. Both variants, and a host of other alternatives, gave many urban dwellers a stake in the

American dream. Thus, though social mobility has pervaded popular ideology, urban history teaches that it has inherent complexities.

Howard P. Chudacoff

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