The Pattern of Upward Mobility in Australia*

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BESIDES being interesting in its own right, Australian society is a seldom tapped resource for understanding stratification and mobility in the United States and Britain. Like the United States, Australian society was constructed on a foundation of British institutions, formed a national self-image as a frontier society, experienced temporary derangement and lasting imprint from gold rushes, was successfully transformed from a colony to a stable and autonomous state, and maintained fiercely democratic values and political forms. In contrast, however, Australia has a small population – about six percent of the United States population on a land area nearly equal to the 48 contiguous American states. It was settled 150 years later and became independent 125 years after the United States, remained ethnically homogeneous and had no tradition of slavery, incorporated socialist values into its original constitution, and accepted organized labor as a leading segment of the political establishment from the start of the twentieth century. With such underlying similarities and contrasts, a comparison of Australian mobility patterns with those in Britain and the United States should illuminate mobility systems in all three countries.

The many comparative studies of vertical mobility now in existence are varied in at least two important respects, in concentrating either on rates or on modes and meanings of mobility, and in either isolating segments for comparison or seeking whole system characterizations. Scientific criteria of precision and reproducibility are most readily met in segmental studies of rates, and are most difficult to approach in holistic examinations of modes and meanings. But lacking a dialectic with the latter, narrowly focussed studies of mobility rates are uninterpretable and often misdirected. Believing in the importance of such a dialectic, we have essayed a relatively holistic characterization of the modes and meanings of upward mobility in Australia, making comparisons all the

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while with Britain and the United States and drawing on a wide range of evidence and speculation.

There can be no observation without preconceptions and no interpretation without an initial conceptual focus. A broad distinction between sponsorship and contest mobility systems (Turner 1960), devised in comparing Britain and the United States, serves as our initial focus. But we are less interested in fitting Australia into one category or the other than in using the types to highlight features of Australian society whose import we might otherwise overlook. The concepts are employed in the spirit suggested by Herbert Blumer (1930) as tentative instrumentalities rather than “natural ultimates”.

We shall first briefly describe the contrasting types, then examine whether Australian society meets assumptions underlying both types, look for indications of contest and sponsorship in Australian society, and finally explore cultural and social-structural conditions that buttress the unique blend of patterns that seems to prevail in Australia. In describing Australian society we must bear in mind that the shift in political control in December, 1972, after a long period of party continuity, may have unleashed far-reaching changes not reported in this paper. And stirrings in the Australian schools even before this date may have presaged a commonwealth-wide reorientation. Our analysis may apply best to the period before these recent developments, whose full import can not yet be adequately assessed.

Sponsored and Contest Mobility

Who becomes mobile and what effects mobility has on mobile individuals depend upon the nature of the social arrangements that facilitate and impede mobility and the meanings attached to mobility – i.e. on the social context of mobility. One way of approaching this social context is to search for widespread popular assumptions about the nature of the process by which mobility takes place. But popular imagery seldom rigorously separates what is from what ought to be, and is therefore a source of some direction and constraint on the formation and functioning of institutions in society. We expect these folk norms to be broad impressions rather than precise prescriptions, whose correspondence with the actual working of society is quite imperfect. But we assume that they do have pervasive effects, and that identifying such folk norms can help us to understand the dynamic interplay among phenomena that otherwise seem diverse and unrelated. The following capsule descriptions of the two norms are based on the original statement (Turner 1960: 856).

Contest mobility is a system in which elite status is the prize in an open contest and is taken by the aspirants' own efforts. While the “contest” is governed by some rules of fair play, the contestants have wide latitude in the strategies they may employ. Since the “prize” of successful upward mobility is not in the hands of an established elite to give out, the latter cannot determine who shall attain it and who shall not. Under sponsored mobility elite recruits are chosen by the established elite or their agents, and elite status is given on the basis of some