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Did social mobility increase during the industrialization process? A micro-level study of a transforming community in southern Sweden 1828–1968



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ABSTRACT

This article studies class attainment and mobility in a long-term perspective, covering the entire transition from a preindustrial to a mature industrial society. Using longitudinal individual-level data for men in a community of southern Sweden, we test different hypotheses linking changing patterns of social mobility and status attainment to the industrialization process. The data allows an analysis of Sweden's complete transition from an agrarian to an industrialized society, and thus to comprehensively address core hypotheses in the stratification literature. Both absolute and relative mobility increased, mainly explained by upward mobility becoming more prevalent. By looking at status attainment into different segments of the middle class and elite, we also see the increasing role played by formal education and meritocracy for the opportunities of people from low-class origin to advance socially. However, this development is more connected with the maturing of industrial society than with industrialization as such.

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1. Introduction

The long-term development of social mobility has been a major research issue for a long time within both sociology and economics. A key interest revolves around the extent to which social mobility regimes differed between countries at different levels of development or with a different institutional structure, and whether these patterns changed during and after industrialization (see, e.g., Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Ganzeboom, Luijckx, & Treiman, 1989; Grusky & Hauser, 1984; Lipset & Bendix, 1959). In turn,

these questions are also related to issues of social stratification more generally, and the extent to which these patterns are dependent on economic development (see, e.g., Treiman, 1976).

It is crucial to distinguish between absolute mobility and relative mobility. While there appears to be considerable differences in absolute mobility rates across industrial societies (see, e.g., the review in Van Leeuwen & Maas, 2010), Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) failed to find big differences in rates of relative mobility between countries at different levels of development. Their conclusion of the “constant flux” has later been supported by a number of studies, but also refuted by some others (see, e.g., Breen, 2008; Hout & DiPrete, 2006).

While most empirical studies relies on aggregated mobility tables from contexts at different levels of development (e.g., Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Featherman, Jones,

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& Hauser, 1975; Ganzeboom et al., 1989) or historical data from marriage certificates or population registers covering only the onset of industrialization (e.g., Dribe & Lundh, 2009, 2010; Dribe & Svensson, 2008; Maas & Van Leeuwen, 2002, 2004; Maas & Zijdeman, 2010; Van Bavel, Peeters, & Matthijs, 1998; Zijdeman, 2009), few studies examine this issue from a longitudinal perspective, covering the entire period from a preindustrial to a post-industrial society, thereby enabling a more careful control of the setting and of confounding factors (see, however, Van Leeuwen & Maas, 1996).

The aim of this article is to study class attainment and mobility for men in a confined geographic area over a period of more than 150 years. More specifically, using longitudinal individual-level data from a community in southern Sweden, we study how patterns of intergenerational social mobility and class attainment changed from the early 1800s until about 1970. This enables an examination of an uninterrupted time period in which Sweden transformed from a preindustrial to a mature industrial society. It also gives a rare opportunity to link specific local labor market and institutional conditions to class attainment and mobility, which allows us to formulate and test more specific hypotheses about this process.

The analysis contributes to what is arguably one of the most central topics in social stratification research, namely how structural changes in the labor market, brought about by industrialization, affects mechanisms of social mobility and status attainment. Few previous studies have been able to address this issue using longitudinal data for such a long period of time. In addition to more traditional analyses of mobility and status attainment, we also look at attainment of different middle and elite class positions separately (agricultural, white-collar, and managerial – which refers to positions of supervision or self-employment outside the agricultural sector) to find indications of a change from ascription to own achievement as the main determinant of social class.

2. Theoretical background and previous research

Industrialization brought about overwhelming changes in the structure of the labor market, with a massive growth in occupations within both the manufacturing and service sectors (Erikson, 1983; Schön, 2000). Across the Western world, the growing importance of the industrial sector occurred simultaneously as the share employed in agriculture declined. Hence, the process of industrialization, almost by definition, implied a considerable degree of occupational mobility, as new positions were generated alongside the disappearance of those previously occupied by individuals belonging to older generations (c.f. Lipset & Bendix, 1959). However, while changing employment from the agricultural to the industrial sector implies occupational mobility, the transformation of an unskilled farm worker into an unskilled industrial worker cannot automatically be considered as class mobility.

In analyses of social mobility, a distinction has usually been made between absolute, or total, (structural) mobility and relative (exchange) mobility (e.g., Featherman et al., 1975). While absolute mobility may increase

simply because the social structure changes, relative mobility is measured net of such structural changes. The analysis of intergenerational absolute mobility reflects the general social class structure of a population and how this changes across generations. Consequently, an increase over time in the share of higher positions in the social hierarchy by default results in upward absolute mobility. Hence, measurements of absolute mobility provide a description of the overall change in the social structure, and the share of individuals who remain immobile, or end up in higher/lower classes than their parents. On the other hand, relative mobility takes changes in the social distribution into account when measuring mobility, thereby providing a measurement of the chances of social mobility net of such structural changes. As a consequence, while absolute mobility expresses what people actually experience in terms of social mobility, relative mobility is better suited to address issues relating to inequality of opportunity and how individuals' life chances change across generations.

2.1. Absolute mobility

From a theoretical perspective, changing rates of absolute mobility are often explicitly linked to economic development. Often it is argued that increasing rates of absolute mobility resulted from either reaching a certain level or rate of change in terms of economic development. Davis (1962), however, suggested the opposite, that a certain level of absolute mobility has to be achieved in order for the transition from a pre-industrial to an industrial society to occur. As a consequence, industrial societies should have higher rates of absolute mobility compared to preindustrial ones. Lipset and Zetterberg (1956) argued that increasing absolute mobility during and after industrialization was linked to a changing occupational structure, which diminished the importance of occupational inheritance. Moreover, the increasing proportion of higher positions in the social structure of industrializing and industrialized countries disproportionately created upward intergenerational absolute mobility.

A large number of empirical studies have examined the link between industrialization, or economic development, and absolute mobility. Whereas results from several contexts suggest increasing rates of absolute mobility during industrialization or as a result of economic development (Erikson, 1983; Grusky & Hauser, 1984; Ishida, 2001), there are exceptions (Fox & Miller, 1965; Hazelrigg & Garnier, 1976).

One of the reasons underlying these mixed results is perhaps that the complexity of the shift from a preindustrial society to an industrial society is underestimated. In preindustrial societies, the importance of land for individual social status made inheritance and thus parental landholding of prime importance for status attainment (see, e.g., Dribe & Svensson, 2008). Similarly, in artisan occupations, sons often followed in their fathers' footsteps. The declining share of self-sufficient farmers during the early phases of industrialization has therefore been argued to potentially act toward increasing the rates of downward absolute mobility. More specifically, as high social status in rural contexts to a significant extent was linked to a rather

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