

Comparing Success

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Through a comparative study of France, India and the United States, Jules Naudet's book shows how certain "instituted ideologies" specific to each country are either a barrier or a resource when it comes to moving from a dominated social situation to a dominant occupational position.

Reviewed: Jules Naudet, *Entrer dans l'élite. Parcours de réussite en France, aux États-Unis et en Inde*, Paris: PUF (coll. "Le lien social"), 2012.

In recent years, social mobility has become a political and media object referred to in French by the code name "the social elevator" (an expression often preceded by the negation "the breakdown of"). Social mobility is also a canonical sociological object. It has gone by this label ever since Pitirim Sorokin's 1927 book on the subject¹ and has become an international specialism since the Second World War, mainly focused on methodological and statistical issues concerning the comparisons that can be drawn between variations in its quantitative presence at different times or in different places.²

Jules Naudet's³ book is based on a doctoral thesis defended in 2010 and he has also published several articles on related issues using the same empirical material.⁴ His work does not take either of the approaches mentioned above. Rather, he takes up one of the issues raised by Sorokin: the – potentially undesirable – effects of social mobility on those who

¹ *Social Mobility*, New York: Harper & Brother, 1927. Before him, reference was often made to the "circulation of elites" (Pareto). The title given to Jules Naudet's book is reminiscent of this expression.

² Dominique Merllié, *Les enquêtes de mobilité sociale*, Paris: PUF, 1994.

³ See the contributions listed http://www.booksandideas.net/_Naudet-Jules_.html

⁴ The corpus created and analysed by Jules Naudet includes approximately 150 interviews. Other texts in which he analyses them include: Jules Naudet, "L'expérience de la mobilité sociale: plaidoyer pour une approche par le discours", *Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, n° 112, 2011, pp. 43-62; "Mobilité sociale et explications de la réussite en France, aux États-Unis et en Inde.", *Sociologie*, vol. 3, n° 1, 2012, pp. 39-59; "Devenir dominant. Les grandes étapes de l'expérience de la mobilité sociale ascendante", *Revue Européenne des Sciences Sociales*, vol. 50, n° 1, 2012, pp. 161-189; "Se sentir proche quand on est loin. Mobilité ascendante, distance sociale et liens au milieu d'origine aux États-Unis, en Inde et en France", *Sociétés contemporaines*, n° 88, 2012.

experience it. In a manual first published in 1995⁵ (several updated editions have appeared since, the most recent in 2013⁶), I summarised that question as follows:

For the individuals who go through it, social mobility can be experienced as both liberating and heart-wrenching, and can create a situation of division, if not of schizophrenia, with the feeling of being outsiders on both fronts – in the group they left behind and more or less betrayed, and in the group they joined, to which they do not fully belong. Social relations are affected, both with family members or childhood friends and with people in the new milieu. This situation, comparable to that of migrants caught between two countries and two cultures, can be all the more painful given that mobility is often planned more by parents, who project themselves in their children's social success, than by the children concerned: loyalty and betrayal are therefore firmly interwoven. Being positioned as an outsider, feeling marginal and facing the difficulties of adapting can lead to greater lucidity and produce individuals who are more inclined to take a sociological perspective on the workings of social groups.

Organisation of the survey

Jules Naudet's research does not examine the quantitative variations in social mobility from one country to another, over time, or between generations. Rather, it assumes that situations of substantial upward social mobility exist, no matter how rare they might be, and questions the conditions that make these exceptional situations possible for those who experience them, as well as how the latter perceive these situations and justify them to themselves or others. This issue is not examined in a single socio-historical context, but comparatively, through three societies chosen less for their quantitative variations in terms of cases of mobility (although this does vary) and more for the different social representations that they offer. The countries studied illustrate different kinds of national contexts, which are liable to influence how the marked discrepancy between social origin (family and early socialisation) and social destination (adult life and occupational socialisation) is experienced, due to the different representations they allow.

The choice of the countries compared is justified as follows. The United States represents a society in which the dominant ideology values upward mobility, with the "meritocratic" model of the "self-made man". This open society contrasts strongly with the closed society in India, "marked by the weight of the caste system" (p. 5) despite public policy attempts to fight this. In terms of this open/closed line of thinking, France seems to hold an intermediate position, or at least one that is out of step, due to the continuing visibility of social classes and the tension between the egalitarian principles stemming from the Revolution and the "preservation of forms of distinction inherited from its aristocratic tradition" (*ibid.*). However, analysis of the link between national context and experience of upward mobility must also take into account many other features, such as the question of race in the United States.

Given these issues, it is not possible for the sample of people questioned about their experience to be random; first, because cases have to be identified that can be statistically

⁵ "La mobilité sociale", chapter XIII in Pascal Combemale, Jean-Paul Piriou (dir.), *Nouveau manuel de sciences économiques et sociales*, Paris: La Découverte, 1995, p. 351-368.

⁶ "La mobilité sociale", chapter V in Pascal Combemale (dir.), *Les grandes questions économiques et sociales*, nouvelle éd., Paris: La Découverte, 2013, p. 108-133 (quoted p. 132) or chapter 1 in Robert Castel *et al.*, *Les mutations de la société française*, Paris: La Découverte (coll. "Repères"), 2013, p. 6-32 (quoted p. 31).

very rare, and second, because it is what has been referred to as a “theoretical sample”⁷, created with a view to testing hypotheses rather than to providing a general description of a population. Jules Naudet therefore decided to use forms of networks allowing him to recruit respondents who fulfilled two criteria: originally from a “working class” social background (such as small farmers, labourers or employees) and now in a social position corresponding to the “High level managerial and intellectual occupations” label within the INSEE classification of social classes in France. Moreover, he endeavoured to also be able to control other variables, such as “race” in the United States (and, to a lesser extent, “colonial” origin in France) and sex (although in practice, the social reality forced him to abandon this in India).

For reasons related to the possibilities of both comparing countries and recruiting respondents through established networks (on the basis of occupational groups or their training establishments), he also created three occupational destination groups: “teachers and researchers in the humanities” (people with a doctorate, belonging to a university or research institution), “high-ranking civil servants” (selected by a recruitment competition such as for the ENA in France or having reached “Senior executive service” level in the United States) and people working in the private sector (with qualifications and in a senior management position) (pp. 56-58). This decision allowed sub-groups to be compared that were relatively homogeneous in terms of social destination. However, it should be noted that as advanced university training was one of the elements used to filter the sample, this system of observation necessarily excludes the possibility of considering alternative modes of access to upward mobility, aside from educational success and access to the establishments that train elites (figures such as Bernard Tapie or Zinedine Zidane could not be part of the sample, for example). It should also be noted that a substantial number of the respondents were historians, political scientists or sociologists, therefore likely to anticipate the researcher’s potential analysis of their situation.

Three ways of experiencing upward class change

The book provides rich and subtle analyses of the corpus of interviews conducted according to this observation strategy and the author identifies numerous studies related to the themes encountered (this wealth of references makes it regrettable that there is no summarising bibliography nor index at the end). Without going into the details, let us look at the main conclusions drawn by the study.

It begins with an introductory section looking at the theoretical and methodological questions raised and ends with a conclusion focusing on the notion of “instituted ideology” and annexes relative to the “lower castes” in India, which provide the interview guide used as well as a table giving the social characteristics of the respondents under the name they were ascribed in the quotes throughout the book. The central, and substantial, second section of the book (“National specificities of experiences of social mobility”) is divided into four chapters. The first three present in turn the results observed in India, in the United States and in France, while the last takes a more cross-cutting approach comparing how national specificities can affect the definition that respondents give of their social origin.

When first picking up the book, the reader would probably be well advised to begin by reading the three chapters focusing on each country. Let us give a general summary of the

⁷ See Barney G. Glaser, Anselm A. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1967.

analyses presented in these chapters, bearing in mind that they are in fact much more subtle (as each country can offer examples of reactions that are in fact more typical of another country).

In India, where the cases of social mobility observed are particularly rare and transgress the caste ideology, they are often the product of collective or political mobilisation, carried forward by the “Dalit” movement fighting against caste discrimination. The beneficiaries therefore often experience a feeling of debt towards the movement and remain attached to the roots of their original background and their family. They feel as if they have been placed in a position where they must act as spokesperson for their group of origin and support their family, to whom they often provide financial help. For them, it can be as if “it were the whole community rising through their success” (p. 101). It is interesting to note that these trajectories are often linked to conversion to Buddhism, which “symbolises a break with the Hindu tradition” (p. 103): radical social mobility, as a change in identity, implies a “stigma reversal” and is in itself a conversion.⁸ Maintaining these moral and political links with the social group of origin can come at the price of a certain social isolation in the destination group, leading some to hide their caste. One of the issues at stake in this dissimulation relates to having benefited from the political system of quotas (“reservation”), criticised by members of higher castes, which has allowed the respondents to enter into the elite university training programmes that then decided their occupational future.

In the United States (and despite how respondents were selected), social success seems less identified with educational success than in India or in France, and the trajectories of mobility are more diverse. The ideology of the “American dream” that presents the United States as “a land of opportunity” offers a “repertoire [...] that is often called upon in narratives about mobility” (p. 142). It allows those who have been successful to limit the scope of the break with their social origin by claiming its values without necessarily maintaining strong ties there. In the narratives, insistence on the possibility of reconciling two backgrounds or on the resources offered by personal knowledge of different backgrounds, make it possible for people to claim that they remain “rooted” in their background of origin. However, “flagrant differences” (p. 169) can be seen in what is said by Black respondents, who are more suspicious of the ideology of the American dream and have a greater tendency to define their background of origin in terms of race and to live with two frames of reference or a form of “dual awareness”. The themes of financial help provided to families and of continuing stigma brings them close to the discourse of the Dalits.

It is above all in France that we see a “definition of the self as being situated ‘between two worlds’”, a particularity “linked to the weight of social class in French society” (p. 189). The social mobility of the people questioned presupposed that they attended highly selective educational establishments, where they often experienced great solitude as they discovered social codes of which they were unaware. However, these establishments were also a space in which they became accustomed to these codes and where they found reasons to feel legitimate in their social success. Here, more than in the other national contexts studied, a feeling of “shame” towards the social background of origin came to light, as well as a more general feeling of being out of step with this background, presented in a fatalistic manner. Reactions range from the respondent who stated about his parents “I have never felt any shame because I completely dissociate myself from them” (p. 213) to the respondent who said regarding his

⁸ On the sociological generalisation of the theme of “conversion”, see Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963, chapter 3.

colleagues “I don’t feel part of this milieu” (p. 215) or the woman who admitted “Sometimes, I pity my parents”, regretting the fact that they had remained “almost strangers” (p. 212). “Adapting to this tension” (p. 217) therefore entails a form of “cobbling together an identity”, which can lead to the person dissociating “two narratives”: one recounting the story of brilliant occupational success and one recounting private life and lifestyle. Children of immigrants or from the colonies can experience this rift in a very specific way: “I am white in my head, but my skin is black” (p. 228).

Each of these chapters opens with a detailed case description (the story of one of the respondents), which helps provide an overview of the biographies of some of the respondents who contributed to Jules Naudet’s work. Similarly, three short research studies (one per country studied) open and inform the cross-cutting chapter on the definition of original social background. This way of using the interviews, which consists in taking them as a whole (rather than simply mentioning them through different fragments), allows the reader to better perceive the wealth of the material collated and gives these biographies their full value as remarkable adventures. Such a research project is an adventure in itself, leading the reader to want to reconstruct the main parts of the author’s experiences in these three countries. One brief moment can be mentioned here, which made a sufficient impression on the author that he included himself when painting the scene. Our protagonist is on the back of the motorbike of a university lecturer, who is driving them to his home through the streets of a large Indian city. Suddenly the author is surprised to see a pack of stray dogs escorting the motorbike. What happened? What does this tell us about Kancha’s relationship to his family of origin and the relationships he has with the inhabitants of his wealthy neighbourhood? The answers to these questions can be found on page 123 of the book.

Published in Books&Ideas on 17th July, 2014. Translated from the French by Lucy Garnier, with the support of the Institut du Monde Contemporain.

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First published on French in La Vie des Idées, 24th June 2013.