

Introduction

In 1927 Pitirim Sorokin, a former Russian revolutionary exiled by Lenin, who had become Professor of Sociology at the University of Minnesota, published the first major academic work on social mobility.¹ Drawing on research findings from a wide range of historical and contemporary societies, he attempted to find regularities in mobility patterns and processes over time and place. Perhaps the two most striking conclusions that he reached – and that still have resonance today – were the following. First, there was no evidence of any tendency for mobility either to increase or to decrease in a sustained fashion, only evidence of ‘trendless fluctuation’. Second, although in modern societies education had become the main agency of social selection, there was no reason to suppose that in this way a new age of greater social mobility was being brought into being. Selection by education could in itself serve to block as much as to promote mobility.

Sorokin was, however, well aware that the data at his disposal were of a limited and indeed quite fragmentary nature. They related for the most part to mobility in particular localities or industries or to mobility in the sense of recruitment into various elite groupings, such as those of political and business leaders or eminent scientists and literary figures. He lacked what he called ‘the statistical material’ necessary to put his arguments to a serious test at a population level.

In the years following the Second World War major progress in social mobility research was achieved. For the first time, studies of mobility were carried out based on representative samples of national populations – and in this regard Britain took the lead through research directed by David Glass from the London School of Economics in 1949. Further improvements have then steadily been made in the design of mobility surveys, in methods of data collection, and in the

¹ See Sorokin (1927). Sorokin (1959) is in effect a substantially enlarged second edition.

conceptualisation and measurement of mobility rates and patterns. And at the same time a greater understanding has been gained of the actual social processes through which mobility occurs or is impeded.²

While these developments brought growing numbers of sociologists into the research field – the twice-yearly meetings of an international Research Committee on Social Stratification and Mobility now attract several hundred participants – any wider interest in issues of social mobility for long remained only occasional and ephemeral. But, in the recent past this situation has rather dramatically changed. In Britain, then in the US, and by now in a number of other economically advanced societies, social mobility has ceased to be merely the subject of some rather esoteric academic research and has become a central political concern, while at the same time attracting a rapidly increasing amount of media attention. Anyone in doubt of these claims is invited to enter ‘social mobility’ into a web search engine.

Why has this change come about? Although there are some cross-national differences, a general underlying explanation can be given on the following lines. From the mid 1970s economic and social inequality, as measured in terms of income or living standards or by various indicators of quality of life, began to widen – initially and most sharply, it would appear, in Britain and the US but then more generally across most of the western world. In response, parties and governments across the political spectrum, whether unwilling to oppose this rising inequality or simply doubtful about the political possibility of doing so, have been drawn towards an essentially similar default position. It has been found attractive to suppose that a *greater inequality of condition* will become more acceptable if a *greater equality of opportunity*, leading to higher rates of social mobility, can be created. Families will then be less likely to appear as fixed in positions of advantage or disadvantage across generations, and inequality will be more readily legitimated insofar as it can in some way be seen as reflecting differences in achievement rather than the mere accidents of birth.³

² For reviews, see Goldthorpe (2005), Hout and DiPrete (2006) and Torche (2015).

³ On increasing inequality, see Piketty (2015), Atkinson (2015), Milanovic (2016). Perhaps the most striking expression of the political stance in question can be found in a speech by Tony Blair in which he claimed that mobility was in itself ‘the great force for social equality in dynamic market economies’ (*The Guardian*, 10 June 2002).

It has at the same time become a further matter of political consensus that in widening opportunity and increasing mobility, it is *education* that must play the crucial role. Governments can best take action, it is supposed, through policies of educational expansion and institutional reform, aimed at raising standards in general and at the same time reducing gaps in educational attainment between individuals of differing social origins. A movement can thus be set in train towards a new kind of social order in which individuals' access to more or less advantaged positions is above all determined by their degree of achievement within the educational system. The envisaged end state is what could be described as *an education-based meritocracy*.⁴

In short, given that rising inequality is the problem, the promotion of social mobility, and primarily through education, has been seized upon as the political solution of choice.

In the British case, the degree of continuity, within an otherwise rapidly changing political landscape, of governmental preoccupation with social mobility is especially striking. Under the New Labour administrations of 1997 to 2010, under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition that ruled from 2010 to 2015 and again under the Conservatives since 2015, increasing social mobility has been presented as a policy priority. The importance of achieving a more mobile society, and the role to be played in this by education, has been repeatedly emphasised in leading ministerial speeches – those of Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Nick Clegg, David Cameron and Theresa May being in fact more or less interchangeable in this regard. Over the same period official reports and 'strategy documents' on social mobility and its promotion, with a strong emphasis on education, have regularly appeared, often prompting parallel statements from parties in opposition. And issues relating to mobility have been the concern of various parliamentary committees and groups and other official bodies, perhaps the most notable being the Social Mobility Commission, established in 2010. This commission presents annual

⁴ The idea of an education-based meritocracy was introduced by Michael Young in his celebrated satirical dystopia, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958). Young became increasingly angry with politicians for ignoring the obvious point of his book and upholding meritocracy as an ideal to be pursued (see, for example, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2001). His fundamental objection to meritocracy was that 'It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.'

reports to Parliament with extensive policy recommendations and also publishes research papers.⁵

Now it might be thought that for social mobility to become a matter of such political prominence would be welcome to sociologists working in this field. Unfortunately, though, a disturbing situation has in fact emerged. A widening ‘disconnect’ has become apparent between sociological research on mobility – its conceptual and methodological approaches and empirical findings – and the discussion of mobility in political and policy circles. It was perhaps only to be expected that as issues of mobility became more politicised, research findings would be increasingly treated with some partiality – that is, in being ‘cherry-picked’ in order to support particular party positions and disregarded or denied where inconvenient. And this kind of practice can indeed be readily documented, as will subsequently be seen. But what is of far greater concern is that while in some of the more substantial official reports referred to above attempts have been made – even if not always successfully – to get to grips with the results of relevant research, little comparable effort is apparent in political speeches on social mobility or indeed in the various policy programmes that have been put forward. Rather, a basic lack of understanding of the results of this research and of their wider implications is all too evident. In consequence, much confusion has arisen in the way in which issues of social mobility are represented and policy objectives conceived and pursued; confusion – for the most part uncorrected or even amplified in the media – that then naturally extends into the discussion of these issues in the wider public domain.⁶

⁵ The main governmental reports are Aldridge (2001), Cabinet Office (2008), HM Government (2009a, 2011, 2012, 2017). Major party statements are Conservative Party (2008) and Liberal Democrats (2009). Other reports have been produced by an All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility and by a House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility. In addition to the Social Mobility Commission referred to in the text (up to 2015 known as the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission), other official bodies that have been active in the field include the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions (see HM Government, 2009b) and the Social Mobility Transparency Board, which was in existence from 2012 to 2016, and of which one of us (JHG), was a member. For further details of official involvement in and discourse on issues concerning social mobility, see Payne (2017: ch. 3) and Atherton (2017: ch. 3).

⁶ A complicating factor has been the entry of economists into the field of social mobility research – although with a more or less exclusive focus on *income* mobility. A pioneering study on income mobility by Atkinson, Maynard and

At the root of the problem is the fact that social mobility, however viewed, is a highly complex phenomenon – far more so than might at first appear. An understanding of it does therefore demand a serious engagement with the extensive research that has been carried out, and this in turn requires some knowledge of the methodology of this research and, in particular, *of the concepts and related techniques of quantitative data analysis* that are applied. In other words, a basic degree of numeracy and a capacity to think quantitatively are called for, and these are attributes that often appear to be lacking, or even sometimes to be scarcely welcome, in political circles.

In this book our main aim is to provide readers who have a general, non-specialist interest in social mobility with an introduction to, and guidance through, what has been learnt about social mobility in Britain from recent sociological research, and in particular from research projects in which we have ourselves been involved. At the same time, we seek to show where, and why, political and policy discussion of social mobility falls short of taking adequate account of this research. To anticipate, we may say that in this regard two recurrent themes will be the following: first, the failure, in considering levels and determinants of social mobility, to distinguish, correctly and consistently, between what sociologists refer to as absolute and relative rates; and, second, and relatedly, the inadequate understanding of what must be involved if education is to be the key means of increasing mobility and if the goal of an education-based meritocracy is to be realised – leaving aside all normative questions of whether or not this is a goal that should be pursued. We hope that, in the interests of more coherent political argument and more evidence-based policy, we will be able to contribute something to overcoming the disconnect between research and politics that we will demonstrate, or that we will, at very least, be able to bring about a greater critical awareness of its existence.

Trinder (1983) had for long no follow-up in Britain, but since the end of the 1990s some further research has been undertaken. And although this research is still far less extensive than that undertaken by sociologists, economists have gained generally closer relationships with, and seemingly greater influence on, government departments and other official bodies, including the Social Mobility Commission, than have sociologists. This in part reflects economists' long-standing involvement in governmental policy making but also perhaps an official tendency to view economists as more 'amenable' than sociologists, and to regard treating mobility in terms of income as politically safer than treating it in terms of social class, as sociologists prefer to do (see further Chapter 1).

In the remainder of this introductory chapter we indicate the bases and range of the research on which we will draw, and the approach we will take in presenting the findings that emerge; we also indicate some limitations that arise. We conclude by briefly outlining the overall structure of the book.

As earlier noted, a major advance in social mobility research was made when partial studies of various kinds were superseded by ones based on representative samples of national populations. In Britain, the LSE study of 1949 that pioneered this approach was followed up by one of a basically similar design undertaken from Nuffield College, Oxford in 1972, covering England and Wales, and by a parallel study carried out in Scotland. It has subsequently been possible to make further nationally representative cross-sectional analyses of mobility rates and patterns, although of a more limited kind, using data from social surveys designed in other research contexts or from official general purpose surveys.⁷

However, it is a fortunate fact that in Britain, more so than in most other countries, the opportunity exists to develop the population approach to mobility research in a further way of major importance: that is, through using the datasets of *birth cohort studies* – in the development of which Britain could again claim to have played a leading role. These are studies that collect information on children born into a population at the same time – usually, that is, in the same year – and that aim to follow these ‘cohort members’ throughout their entire lives: first, by means of interviews with their parents, and possibly also with teachers, so as to obtain detailed information on their family backgrounds and early personal and academic development, and then, as members move into adulthood, by means of interviewing them directly, at regular intervals, so as to obtain information on different aspects of their social lives, including their later educational careers and their employment and occupational histories.

While cross-sectional surveys, if repeated in the same form, allow rates and patterns of social mobility in a population to be compared across historical periods, birth cohort studies enable a further ‘over-time’ perspective on mobility to be gained. They allow one to see how

⁷ The LSE study is reported on in Glass ed. (1954) and the Nuffield study in Goldthorpe (1980/1987). Later analyses include those of Goldthorpe and Mills (2004, 2008), Paterson and Ianelli (2007), Li and Devine (2011) and Buscha and Sturgis (2017).

individuals' experience of mobility – or immobility – unfolds in the course of their lives, and to trace the social processes that are involved in the contexts of the family, the educational system and the labour market. Moreover, where, as in Britain, a *series* of cohort studies has been undertaken, it becomes possible for the two over-time perspectives to be combined. By comparing men and women at similar life-course stages in successive cohorts, one can investigate both the extent of any historical changes in levels and patterns of mobility and their determinants and at the same time see how any such changes find expression in the progress of individual lives.

Because of the major advantages offered by such cohort studies, the research on social mobility in Britain that we have ourselves undertaken has been based for the most part on their datasets and, specifically, on those of the three earliest cohort studies. The first of these started out from a sample of children born in Britain in one week in 1946 and has been followed by studies covering all children born in one week in 1958 and all children born in one week in 1970.⁸ The datasets of these studies are in the public domain, but we have carried out further extensive data preparation work in order to ensure the greatest possible degree of cross-cohort comparability in the key variables of interest to us.

In the case of the 1958 cohort, a supplementary project was undertaken in 2008 – that is, when cohort members were age 50 – in which a specially selected sample of 220 men and women were interviewed at length on different aspects of their current social lives but were also asked to give their own accounts of their life histories. At various points in this book there are display boxes containing brief case studies that are based on these accounts – primarily in order to illustrate not 'typical' but rather some of the less common and familiar trajectories of mobility or immobility that our quantitative analyses reveal.⁹

⁸ A further cohort study was launched in 2000 but its members are still not sufficiently advanced in their lives for anything to be usefully said about their social mobility. For a wide-ranging account of the British cohort studies, see Pearson (2016). Full details of the 1946, 1958 and 1970 studies are given, respectively, in Wadsworth et al. (2006), Power and Elliott (2006) and Elliott and Shepherd (2006).

⁹ For full details of the project, see Elliott et al. (2010). It should be noted that we use case studies derived from this project to illustrate results reported in Chapters 8 and 9, even though the analyses of these chapters are in fact based on

While the 1946, 1958 and 1970 birth cohort studies are our main data sources, we also at times draw on the datasets of other longitudinal studies of somewhat different design and on those of surveys of a cross-sectional character. All these sources have of course been exploited by other sociologists with interests in mobility, and we seek wherever possible to relate our own findings to theirs and to account for those instances – fortunately few – in which some degree of inconsistency or contradiction might appear to arise.¹⁰

We should further add that although our focus is on social mobility in Britain, it may often be relevant to view the British case against the background of the extensive research that has by now been carried out into social mobility in other modern societies. We therefore quite often include notes on how far our findings for Britain match up with those for other countries. It is, as it turns out, similarities rather than differences that are most in evidence. However, in this connection we can scarcely avoid the question, much discussed in political and policy circles, of whether on a comparative view Britain has to be regarded as a low mobility society. This is a question that we take up on the basis of a newly formed comparative dataset, and it proves to be one in regard to which the disconnect between political discussion and the findings of sociological research is again rather dramatically apparent.

Having indicated the nature and extent of the data sources on which the research we will review is based, we need next to give some explanation of the way in which we will seek to present the results of this research. As we earlier observed, social mobility is a highly complex phenomenon, and its understanding, beyond a very preliminary stage, requires a methodology that is adequate to this complexity. That which has developed over recent decades is essentially based on the quantitative analysis of large-scale, population-level data *through the application of multivariate statistical models*. What these models serve to do, at least as we would apply them, is bring out regularities that exist in

only the 1970 cohort. In all cases some details have been altered in order to prevent any possibility of identification.

¹⁰ With all birth cohort studies the problem of missing data is exacerbated by cohort attrition – i.e. by cohort members at some point dropping out of the study, although they may later return. To mitigate this problem we have worked for the most part with a dataset in which missing data are replaced through a statistical technique known as multiple imputation. This may appear as a form of statistical black magic, but for further discussion see Kuha (2013).

associations between variables of interest that would otherwise remain irretrievably buried within datasets: for example, and most obviously in mobility research, regularities in the association existing between individuals' social origins and their social destinations. Further, though, we can also examine how far this association varies between men and women or between birth cohorts or between men and women in different cohorts. And, further still, we can analyse the associations existing between individuals' social origins and their educational attainment and then between their educational attainment and their social destinations, and again in relation to other variables such as gender or birth cohort – and so on. The complexities of social mobility, and in turn of the important sociopolitical issues to which they give rise, can, we believe, only be satisfactorily treated through such statistical modelling, demanding though this may be. There are no shortcuts.

From this standpoint, we do, though, have to recognise the following problem. In papers on social mobility published in academic journals the statistical models applied would be formally presented and the results obtained from their application would be given in a highly detailed way, so as to allow readers to make their own professional judgments as to the reliability and validity of the analyses involved. But we are aiming at a more general readership with, we must suppose, a limited knowledge of, and very likely a still more limited interest in, more technical statistical issues. We have, therefore, to follow a much simplified approach. We aim to concentrate on what we take to be the most salient findings that emerge from our analyses, and as far as possible present these findings in a graphical form so that the messages they contain are directly apparent. Further, where resort to a tabular presentation cannot be avoided, we try not to confront readers with a large array of numbers but again seek to indicate the findings that are of main substantive importance. This approach, we would stress, *does* simplify – and in some cases, it might be thought, unduly so; there is certainly a good deal that readers will have in effect to take on trust. However, virtually all the results that we present have been previously reported in papers in academic journals with the full complement of technical information, and for readers who would wish to have a more detailed account of the procedures we have followed, we provide the relevant references.

We must finally note certain limitations of the research that provides the main basis of our book. These mainly derive from the fact that,

because of our concern to provide an account of social mobility within British society at large, we are not in a position to consider mobility in regard to relatively small groupings, such as, say, elites of various kinds or ethnic or other minorities. This is essentially a matter of numbers. Although the cohort studies on which we chiefly rely each cover several thousand men and women, this is not nearly enough to allow any reliable analyses to be undertaken of mobility relating to groupings that amount, at most, to only a few per cent of the total population. For such analyses to be possible, either extremely large samples have to be exploited – far larger than would be practicable with a cohort study requiring repeated interviewing – or specialised samples have to be drawn.

By following such approaches, research has in fact been carried out into what are taken to be distinctive issues associated with the recruitment of elites or the social mobility of ethnic minorities. This research is of evident interest and the issues pursued have their own importance. But we would in fact regard analyses of mobility of this kind as being best understood if placed in the wider context of research that relates to the society as a whole. Otherwise, the danger would appear to arise of excessive claims being made.

For example, it has been suggested that in present-day Britain the intergenerational exclusiveness of certain elites is so extreme that it could be seen as a matter of greater concern than inequalities in mobility chances existing within the rest of the population. As we will seek to show later, this is a questionable argument in that, once the full extent of the latter inequalities is recognised, it is far from clear that any major discontinuity between ‘elite’ and ‘mass’ mobility does actually exist. Again, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the degree to which the social mobility – or immobility – of members of ethnic minorities gives rise to special problems. In fact, the research that has most adequately addressed this question indicates that the rates and patterns of mobility of members of different ethnic groupings, and especially where individuals who are at least ‘second generation’ are considered, do, to a very large extent, conform with those that are found in the majority population.¹¹

One further limitation our book may be thought to have is that in general the most recent analyses we report refer to the experience of

¹¹ See Li and Heath (2016).