

# Epistemological assumptions on social mobility's analysis

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**Abstract:** The main objective of this article is to identify the hegemonic perspective on social mobility studies, the political assumptions of this, and present an alternative. This alternative would allow us to use the social mobility concept but regarding the study of the social class structuring processes. Particularly, we try to show how both alternatives have different explanations for social inequality on Latin American societies. A synthesis of the functionalist vision is presented, in association with the interpretative and political inferences that emerge from it. Then, an alternative proposal that allows us to consider social mobility in the field of class structuring processes, in which social policies have a key role by promoting different gradients of income distribution, with regressive or redistributed effects on class inequality. Class paths appear as the concept that joins these processes within a relational view of social classes.

**Key words:** mobility, social classes, political meanings, social inequality, social issue.

**Resumen:** El presente artículo tiene como objetivo general identificar la corriente que hegemonizó los estudios de movilidad social desde sus inicios, las implicancias políticas de la misma (en relación con la idea de igualdad), y a la par presentar una alternativa para no desechar la idea de movilidad social, pero insertarla en el estudio complejo, relacional y combinado de los procesos de estructuración de clase. De manera particular, buscamos dar cuenta cómo ambas propuestas tienen efectos diferenciales a la hora de explicar los procesos de igualdad-desigualdad en las sociedades latinoamericanas contemporáneas. Se presenta una síntesis de la postura estructural funcionalista sobre la movilidad social, poniéndola en relación con las inferencias (interpretativas y políticas), que se pueden hacer a partir de la misma y luego una propuesta alternativa para pensar la movilidad social en el ámbito de los procesos de estructuración de clases en los cuales las políticas sociales tienen un rol fundamental, al promover diferentes gradientes de distribución del ingreso, entre otros elementos, con efectos regresivos o redistribuidos sobre la desigualdad de clase. Las trayectorias de clase aparecen como el concepto que conjugarían dichos procesos, dentro de una mirada relacional de las clases sociales.

**Palabras clave:** movilidad, clases sociales, significaciones políticas, desigualdad social, cuestión social.

## Introduction

Over the last ten years in Latin America, social mobility studies have had a new leading role,<sup>1</sup> after decades in which the topic was not present in the academic debate of the social sciences area. In a context of political, economic and social changes, the idea of the social mobility not only took the spotlight in such field, but is also included in the political discussions (and in the social policies discussions) since it is a central value in regards to the social integration and cohesion.

This way, a positive assessment of the concept often appears –generally one associated to an equality idea of a society that guarantees opportunities and rewards for its citizens. This interpretation, naturalized and set from a “common sense” nature, carries implicitly a theoretical paradigm and a political interpretation of the social inequality that needs to be explicitly stated when used in the academic debate. The studies that have been carried out have performed their analyses exclusively on the relation between social origin (class, position) and the “destination” (class, position, generally occupational in nature).

However, without leaving aside the importance of such studies, and the processes they shed light to, we claim that it is necessary to set this kind of approaches in relation to the larger social processes the region is experiencing, and so understand the intergenerational social mobility processes in the context of the social order structuration processes (social spaces), in which different elements come into play, as we will see in the following paragraphs, and which allow accounting in a better way for the central social processes and relate them with other processes, e.g., the distribution of income, consumption, poverty, wealth, inequality.

To analyze such criticism it is necessary to take into account not only social mobility processes, but also the way these insert into the relation between the social order structure, the economic, social and political contexts and the dimensions that would allow accounting for the different equality-inequality patterns (Pla, 2012). Mobility, therefore, cannot be seen as an equality index since there is the possibility of the existence of highly mobile and highly unequal societies (Jorrat, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> The compilation by Franco, León and Atria (2007b) is a presentation of the main texts on stratification and mobility in this period, with works on Brazil (Valle Silva), Argentina (Mora and Araujo, Kessler and Espinoza); León and Martínez on one hand and Torche and Wörmald on the other, for Chile; Cortés and Escobar Latapí for Mexico; Pérez Saín and other for Center; and Gray Molina and other for the case of Bolivia. Other relevant productions have been proposed by Benavides (2002), Boado (2008), Cortés and Solís (2006), Costa Ribeiro (2007), Fachelli and López Roldán (2012), Núñez and Risco (2004), Solís (2004; 2011). In the case of Argentina, there has also been a renewed interest. During the previous two decades, only Jorrat (1987, 1997, 2000, 2005, 2007, 2011a) dealt with these topics. More recently, many authors have mentioned these topics. A good summary of such process can be found in AAVV (2011) and in IIGG (2011).

For this reason, we argue that the discussion on social mobility processes must be framed in a relational perspective of social order, where the mobility trajectories are seen as indices of processes in which the structure and agency are interwoven with the aforementioned factors, giving way to social spaces where objective positions are constructed along and with subjective positions. In order to carry out this task, it is necessary to specify the epistemological-theoretical perspective underlying the idea of social mobility because, even though much has been written on the topic, it appears to be invisible, even in academic spheres.

The rise and consolidation of social mobility studies took place within a specific epistemological field: structural functionalism. Summarized and far from thorough<sup>2</sup> this follows a development line that starts with Saint Simon, going through Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, and finishes with Talcott Parsons (Giddens, 1979). The underlying argument and which shapes such paradigm states that the needs of a social group overshadow the individual ones. This conception originates in Durkheim's concept of division of labor, which does not allow a place for conflict or social order struggles (Feito Alonso, 1995: 45).

Social stratification process appears then as a mechanism that guarantees the "need" of the social system that the most important positions of society are occupied by the "most" qualified and competent people, who, in return, will receive a reward, a larger distribution of the (scarce) social assets.

This conception on the relation structure-individual also implies a value of incentive to the effort for social ascent. If the needs of the social system overshadow the individual ones, how then is it determined who the best and more competent people to occupy the most relevant positions are? According to this conception, the process is executed through a competency mechanism, which starting from the equality of opportunities in the origin (judicial equality, equality in the opportunities in terms of liberal freedom), individuals bring into play different motivations that determine differential gradients of efforts. The higher the effort, the bigger the capability in such competence to occupy a more valued place in the social structure, and therefore, better rewards.

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<sup>2</sup> Information on these debates can be revised in Laurin Frenette (1989), Cachón Rodríguez (1989), and particularly in regards to the relation with social mobility, Pla (2013).

This vision, which recognizes its basic hypotheses in Parsons' work, overshadowed the social thinking during the two decades following World War II, a period called of "orthodox consensus" (Feito Alonso, 1995: 32). And in the 1970's<sup>3</sup> when the new-Weberian approach (Goldthorpe 1987, 1992) is added to the debate, and a little bit later, the same occurs to the neo-Marxist approach (Wright, 1997).

When discussing that social mobility theory is born impregnated with the presuppositions of structural functionalism, it is important to underline what its studies mean, what they have to say regarding the social processes going on in Latin American societies, in relation to central dimensions such as inequality, poverty, income distribution, etc. In this line, with this article we intend to provide a light review on the way social mobility studies are inserted in a hegemonic trend in postwar decades, and more specifically, to understand not only the stratification processes, but also the way these are used in our continent.

To do so, we will revise the conceptions around the emergence of social mobility studies, the way these are applied in Latin America, but also the theoretical implications such studies carry in respect to the place the continent occupies in the world.

Our objective is to identify the trend that provides social mobility studies with hegemony, the social implications of such trend (in relation to the idea of equality), and to present an alternative in order not to discard the idea of social mobility, but rather to insert it in the complex, relational and combined study of class structuring. In a more particular way, we intend to give an account of how both proposals have differential effects when it comes to explaining the processes of equality-inequality in contemporary Latin American societies.

### **Rethinking social mobility. Modernization and development Relational vision**

In the previous part it was mentioned that during the postwar decades the functionalist theory of social stratification had its hegemonic period. It is indeed in such same period, and under the same (epistemic) sphere of senses, that the (economic) development concept provides a central concept to explain the national processes

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<sup>3</sup> VII World Sociology Congress [Congreso Mundial de Sociología] in Varna, Bulgaria, is a turning point in this orthodox consensus (Cachón Rodríguez, 1989: 181). In it, a series of communications that may be divided depending if these are still within the theoretical field of the functionalism or question the validity of this field. Among the former, Jones, Sorensen and Rishøj are highlighted. Among the ones that questions the assumptions of the functionalism Daniel Bertaux is the most important. On the other hand, Goldthorpe states that there might be a "third" perspective represented by the Nuffield College in Oxford, and which we will deal with more extensively in the following paragraphs. At the same time, in old Europe after the X PCUS Congress, occidental Marxism is invigorated, particularly due to the Levi-Strauss structuralism and the re-reading of some classics such as Gramsci. This implies the analysis of some sociology fundamental topics from the view of the historic materialism: the economy, the State, the society, the labor.

and the international relationships between countries and regions. This concept was used to divide the world into two areas: “developed” countries (central countries), and “underdeveloped” ones (peripheral countries, particularly in Latin America).

What did this division mean in political and international relationships terms? If there were some developed countries and some others were “undeveloped” (on process of development), the latter must follow a path that would identify them with the former (Quijano, 2000). Such division is constituted as one of the expressions of the reconfiguration of global capitalist power and it is done based on the reconstruction of a Eurocentric pattern of knowledge that since the XVIII century became one of the main instruments of the world power pattern and capitalist domination (Quijano, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

In Latin America there were two approaches that surrounded this line: the modernization theory (Franco, León and Atria, 2007a) and the dependence theories. How does this domination mechanism work? In the case of the modernization theory, it was based on the division of humanity into “areas” and give them the “culture”, the condition of being the source and explanation of the differences between human groups regarding development.

This way, reaching development assumes the following cultural guidelines set by the developed areas, such differences became naturalized when there were taken for granted (Quijano, 2000). The central nucleus of this theory tried to explain the transition crisis from agrarian capitalism to industrial capitalism that most of the countries in the region were experiencing in the postwar period (Franco, León and Atria, 2007a: 27).

It is at this point when the idea of social mobility appears. Social mobility would be, in such division, the process that characterizes developed countries as it makes the “free” mechanisms of competence evident, in conditions of judicial equality, in order to achieve the different positions of a social system.

It is the status or honor what is at the base of social stratification, the actors follow the society's values and in order to meet the needs of the social system: it is not that individuals seek wealth, rather, this is a secondary reward for those who made an effort to live according to the society's needs, by doing this, more was given to their integration of the social system. The stratification has then an integrative and adaptive function, a moral function (Parsons, 1968)

This view is sustained in the distinction made by Durkheim between individual and collective conscience. Whereas the first refers to the private sphere of a person, the second refers to a more macro aspect and it is defined as the ways of behaving,

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<sup>4</sup> A thorough revision of this process can be found in Escobar (1999) and in Faletto (2009).

thinking and feeling that form a society and that are transmitted from generation to generation: it is about the normative orientation of the action in Parsons' structural functionalism (Feito Alonso, 1995).

Two of the main expositors of postwar social mobility studies, Lipset and Bendix (1963), maintained that differences in social mobility between countries are linked to the pace of urbanization and industrialization. There is a converging development guideline that assumed that once countries "enter" into an advanced type of industrialization (development), they tend to become more comparable in their institutional organizations and social systems. These are characterized by being open systems, particularly "meritocratic" (being the educational system the selection mechanism of the people for the positions).

It was Treiman who systematized the presuppositions of this trend<sup>5</sup> in relation to social mobility (and stratification) processes. Summarizing, such presuppositions may be condensed in the following basic points:

- The more industrialized (developed) a society is, the less direct influence from the occupational –status– position of the father over the position of the son,
- but also in educational formation, the higher the influence of educational qualifications, the more influence of the occupational status on revenues, the less the direct influence of education on revenues, the less the correlation between education and revenues.
- The more industrialized a society is, the higher the exchange mobility rate, particularly when the educative level is high, the distribution of communication means, the level of urbanization and geographic mobility.

This is to say, development and social mobility are related, being both of them characteristics of modern societies, which underdeveloped countries should aspire to, following the model and the guidelines of cultural values underlying. These to-be-imitated cultural guidelines would be the shared values that motivate individuals to make an effort (become educated) in order to reach higher positions, more socially recognized, in the social structure.

This perspective puts the spotlight on the individuals as the ones responsible of their own destiny, before a "free" system (free market, without political-institutional restrictions), the individuals draw social mobility paths through the efforts that take them to various achievements, unequally recognized, unequally rewarded.

Modern societies then not only are the economically developed ones, in which the market's economy takes the main place in the end as the vector of society, but also those where this predomination of the market's economy, of freedom in the

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<sup>5</sup> In the work "Industrialization and social stratification", in Laumann (1970: 221).

liberal sense, assumes the form of a shared system of values that regulate the relations between individuals and works as the framework, explanation and justification of social inequalities.

The origins of social mobility studies in Latin America took place at the same time as these postulates (Acevedo Rodríguez, 2009: 13). Between the 1960's and 1970's, social mobility and stratification comparative analyses were carried out, in particular in the cities of San Pablo, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Santiago de Chile and Peru.<sup>6</sup> Such studies were centered in the analysis, as we have already mentioned before, of the consequences of moving from an agrarian society to an industrial one, assuming that the emergence of the latter would lead to a modern society where the border between classes would blur, and society as a whole would acquire the nature of a continuum (Faletto, 2009: 224).

These arguments are supported, implicitly, in the modernization theory and associate these ideas to the ability to distinguish the structural transformation of the economies and the concomitant changes in the social structure as important elements of social stratification analysis, in the emergence, declining or disappearance of what could be called "functional groups", as well as the relations of power that are established between the different groups and classes (Faletto, 2009:226).

More concretely, it was mentioned that societies which were product of modernization would have an important predominant nature over middle classes, since the differences between classes would be weak and continuous, and there would be social mobility based on a principal element; education (Franco, León and Atria, 2007a: 28). Similarly, from this perspective, the middle classes were visualized and located as the agents of change toward modernization.

The specific studies on social mobility were then under the umbrella of the thought of modernization or functionalist structure. The idea of social mobility refers to a process, of stratification, where "free" individuals access the market, in search of different "positions" that are divided differentially according to the needs of the social system and that, as a consequence, are unequally rewarded.

The educational system (which also acts under the supposition of equal access), works as a selection mechanism for the different positions. Then mobility appears as equality. Uribe Mallarino (2005: 41-42) mentions that in this view, the existence of social strata does not imply the clash of classes that was central in the Marxist view. On the contrary, it is the talent and natural abilities, together with the effort and opportunity, along with the inherited position, the factors that explain mobility.

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<sup>6</sup> Costa Pinto (1956; 1959) and Bresser Pereira (1964) are the main representatives of Brazil. Germani (1963) in Argentina. In Uruguay, the highlighted studies were carried out by Solari, individually in 1956, and along Labbens in 1966. In Peru, Chaplin (1968) stands out. In the case of Chile, we find Raczynski (1971; 1974) and Hutchinson (1962) who synthesizes a comparative study of Santiago de Chile, Montevideo and Buenos Aires.



## **Rethinking social mobility**

As mentioned by Filgueira (2001, 2007), the first studies on social mobility in Latin America, which have already been mentioned, presented the particularity of registering precisely the positive effects of the economic and productive development on intergenerational social mobility patterns, and were also specially successful in recognizing the effects of immigration to the cities, the drop of occupations in the primary sector, the increasing degree of “salarization” of the economically active population, and the expansion of the educational system, processes of great interest at this historical moment.

However, the paradigm from which this was done was heavily biased by a liberal vision of social order, the distribution of power and prestige, and by an orientation centered in the observation of economic systems and the influence of the international context on the economic and social development of the countries.

With this, we state that an alternative paradigm to study social stratification processes must overcome the limitations of the classic paradigm, balanced toward market mechanisms and external conditionings, and to save the idea of “structure of opportunities”, i.e., the way opportunities for the access to social positions differentially evaluated are distributed. In a more particular manner, the way the macrostructural process are processed in the interior of each country through welfare policies. Why do we state this?

The relation capital-work, which gives structure to capitalist societies, is an (unequal) mediated relation, since its origins, owing to the actions of policies that shape the social sphere, the inequality inherent to the class system, articulating redistributive or regressive aspects that modify, positively or negatively, the distribution that is produced directly by means of the market.

Then (social) policies are designed to foster or preserve the inequity structures induced by the market (Nolan *et al.*, 2010), thus becoming one of the most relevant variables to understand the different opportunity structures. State interventions are not random, rather, they respond to a socially and politically validated conception, both in the definition of the recipients and in the social representation of everyday life, the range of variation and the content of such differences (of inequality) (Danani, 2005: 21). The gradients in the de-commercializing/commercializing element (Esping-Andersen, 1993) will be the ones that determine the differential impacts of class structure.

Bringing back such view does not only imply the incorporation of “one variable” to the analysis of social mobility (frequently performed by comparing “historical



periods” that refer to different political contexts but without contextualizing them), but rather account for the fact that there is not a linear relation between mobility and equality, that policies have stratification effects.

It is about the conception of social mobility processes from a relational view of the social classes (in opposition to the “gradational” centered in status, proper of the structural functional paradigm). To approach these processes from such view means that the different classes produce a dependency system and that their definition is given by the social relationships that are structured between classes: it is not that a class is “less” than the others, but that they occupy a socially differentiated and unequal position within a system, for instance, labor market. All social class definitions that are structured upon this idea, among which the Marxist and Weberian conceptions are located, coincide with the fact that unequal social structures form, at the same time, structures of interest (Feito Alonso, 1995: 31).

The Marxist and Weberian conceptions recognize the economic sphere as the space for the constitution of social classes, as the determining sphere in the social order: for some, classes are the results of the production processes, for others, of the opportunities of the subjects to value the resources they possess in the market (Longhi, 2005: 106).

Within these theories, the concept of social class allows locating the individuals in a determined place within a determined social structure and recognizing the relations and mechanisms of control, conflict and struggle that are generated among the different classes, the differentiability of positions and the conflict around it. From such a view, the social class gives an account of a temporal phenomenon of stratification.

In a more particular way, this view allows conceiving the social class as a social space characterized by an array of positions –different and coexisting- of the agents. The social class is not defined then by a specific property (such as the possession of the means of production), nor by the sum of properties in a cause-effect relation, but by the structure of the relations between all the pertinent properties.

This classification is constructed from the identification of the positions the agents occupy in relation to the economic, symbolic, cultural and social capital. Among these dimensions the social mobility processes are configured, which make the trajectories evident, however along with other components they may assume different characteristics. It is possible to observe the reproduction of class in intergenerational terms, but social spaces with larger capacities to acquire economic capitals (in the struggle for the distribution of income), this is, with a larger influence capacity in the distribution of income, or the other way around, according to the political components of the socio-historical context.

In this sense, social politics constitutes an intervention strategy, from the State, that takes part in the social relations and has configuration effects taken from the social structure. The incorporation of these dimensions enables the analysis of fundamental aspects of the social stratification, in the sense that these allow the delimitation of differentiation criteria, further away from the market, as well as the mutation of these into the historical process.

This is, it allows assessing not only the individual's mobility, but also processes of change in the social space which refer to massive processes that alter the destination of certain groups, classes or segments of society (Filgueira, 2007).

### **Social mobility from intergenerational trajectories of class and social space**

Generally speaking, the debate on stratification and social mobility has been approached from three paradigms, being the functionalist structural the one with the most hegemony and dissemination. Now, as Cachón Rodríguez mentions (1989: 528), functionalist sociology does not meet the conditions of the problems it deals with, and as a consequence, it is not the general scientific theory it intends to be. Because of this, there should be another sociology that takes the role of interpreting social mobility processes.

Its main objective must be to break with the presuppositions of functionalism, the political implications it carries along and to reorient the field toward a new paradigm, which by contrast with the four new supposed aspects: 1) reality is not transparent but sociology makes it something visible (interpretation); 2) society must be understood as a segmented market, the sociology of social mobility has to start from a labor market segmentation theory and not from a homogeneous conception of it; 3) the basic social facts of social mobility fundamentally affect social groups as such, whose condition varies in the structure of social positions; 4) different interrelated mechanisms determine the position of social groups and the individuals within them, as well as their possibilities of historically modifying their position (family, school, labor market, State, other).

Concurring with these elements there is a fifth factor that complements this critical vision. If the relations origin-destination had been thought from the idea of mobility, now they must be thought from the standpoint of class trajectory. If mobility was an integral part of social stratification (functionalist), social trajectories are part of the social classes (relational view, as stated before).

Not only does this mean that the sociology of social trajectories has to be part of a sociology of the social classes, but also that social trajectories are class trajectories. The sociology of the social trajectories should be part of a wider theoretical framework which considers the processes around it. This is to say, one of the elements that should

characterize the studies of class trajectories of social mobility from a perspective that challenges the assumptions of functionalism must incorporate a contextual dimension, relating class situation with strata creation, enunciating the different orders of power (economic, social and political) and analyzing the effect that, at certain historic moments, they exercise on the others.

Besides, in order to explain the processes of class structuring in each country, it is necessary to account for the insertion that each national context has abroad, for the “place” it occupies in the world system and the way the countries process such position, politically speaking.

This is, the study of social classes, social mobility and stratification processes cannot be explained only by means of the market's logic, but by the fact that these are introduced in a political intervention process that involves aspects –whether redistributive or regressive- oriented to modify the distribution produced by the market or designed to stimulate or preserve the inequality structure that it induces.

The hegemony of the functionalist view on mobility studies has led the sociologists who adhered to other perspectives to reject these views. However, none of these has been able to combine the social processes that really exist, people move, they transit differential trajectories, they constitute social spaces that are not static and where capitals not only have a different capital, but also a different assessment of it.

To converge with the mobility analysis from a class view (trajectory) implies to account for a phenomenon that exists, at the expense of social reproduction: the society of classes is not a cast society, it is a “mobile” society, in both its structure as well as in the worldview of the common sense the individuals go through, product of a political construction of its own.

The society of classes is mobility since the same idea has been constructed as a vector of symbolic equality. Studying these processes from a view of classes does not imply accepting this justification of inequality based on the equality of opportunities, but recognizing it and questioning it in order to understand the complex mechanisms class societies go through. In order to do so, it is necessary to rethink the theoretical paradigms from which phenomena are thought, mainly the political implications they have.

If social mobility is thought from the structural functionalist liberal view, one will observe individuals responsible of their own destiny, of both their “successes” and their “failures”, they are accounted for their destiny (justified by judicial equality, inequality is a product of unequal efforts and/or personal motivations), the place of the former is reaffirmed and the inequality of classes is legitimized.

To incorporate the analysis of the historic, economic processes and the way the internal politics of the countries is combined in governmental policies implies to denaturalize inequities, to question them and to hold the higher collectives accountable for. Also it implies to account for the different territorial configurations given in the continent, and for specificities in relation to central countries. It implies to put into play internal and external aspects and the way class structuration processes are articulated (macro micro).

The view on social mobility cannot be separated from a view of social classes, on the inequality, on the specific forms that these assume in each historic period (relative to other components, not only economic but also symbolic, cultural, social, etc.), on the way the policies operate on these trajectories, opening, cutting, closing, or confining paths. The view on social mobility cannot associate equality with mobility, not only because it hides the richness of the phenomenon, but also because it hides the unequal nature of the relation of classes in the capitalist system.

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