UPWARD MOBILITY, JOB MONOTONY, AND LABOR MARKET STRUCTURE

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My initial assignment for this paper was to discuss the conditions under which the quality of working life is of concern to workers. The assignment presupposes a definition of the term "quality of working life", and in considering that definition I found myself continually returning to the set of complaints which have preoccupied American workers in the last decade. Those complaints may seem in an international conference of this kind a somewhat parochial focus for a paper, but I have found it impossible myself to gain the distance required for a broader perspective. I do hope that you will find some of what I have to say relevant to the problems of your own work force, but since the concerns are in no small way responsible for the domestic traumas through which our country has been passing, you are probably more fortunate if you do not.

Essentially, this paper represents an attempt to understand the complaints of American workers in terms of a single set of hypotheses about the structure of American Labor Markets. The term hypothesis is used advisedly. The theory of discontent developed here is logically consistent: it is consistent also with the stylized facts of American labor history in the twentieth century, and more or less consistent with the conventional wisdom about what workers are complaining about. But neither the believed facts, which constitute input into the theory, nor the implications, which are the theory's output, have been subject to rigorous empirical examination.

I. Diagnosis of the Problem

The complaints which the theory attempts to treat are a set of complaints from low income, minority groups on the one hand; and a set of complaints from higher income, blue collar and middle income, white collar workers on the other.
These groups correspond more or less closely to those which sociology terms the lower and the working classes, although the inclusion of white collar workers stretches the conventional usage of the latter term. The discontent of these groups seems to be real enough. Among the lower class, it has made itself felt in urban riots and lesser forms of unorganized unrest, and in an increased political awareness and support for organized campaigns and protests. Symptomatic of the discontent among the working class have been political support for protest candidates such as Wallace, and the relatively high incidence of rejection of contracts by union rank and file. For reasons which will become apparent, I would also include here the pressures which lead to concerns about technological change and automation, which predominated in the late 1950's and early 1960's.

While the discontent of these two groups of workers is apparent, it is less clear what precisely that discontent is about. It was felt for some time that the basic discontent of the lower class was unemployment. While the rates of unemployment for statistical categories which are dominated by lower class workers, Negroes, Spanish speaking, slum neighborhoods, are indeed high, the research which a number of us conducted among these groups in the boom period of the middle sixties suggested that this discontent centered upon the quality of available jobs and that the high rates of unemployment were derivative of either the character of the jobs themselves (they had unusually high rates of lay-off and discharge) or of the workers' attitudes toward the jobs. This is probably not true in the recession labor markets currently prevailing, since even poor jobs are now scarce. But presuming the economy is brought back to what has been considered full employ-
ment in the past, the research suggests that the discontent of lower class workers should be considered the quality of employment opportunities.

I have argued in some detail elsewhere that this problem is best defined in terms of a dual labor market with a primary and secondary sector. Jobs in the secondary sector are distinguished by the fact that, relative to primary jobs, they tend to offer low wages, poor work conditions, little chance of advancement; to be managed by harsh, often capricious supervision, unrestrained by a cohesive set of work rules or a formal grievance procedure, and to exhibit great instability and offer little employment security. The problem of lower class workers is that they are confined to the secondary sector.  

In assessing the problems of the lower class, it should also be noted that the discontent has been concentrated in urban areas among second generation in-migrants from rural areas (in the United States and abroad), although in terms of all of the characteristics defining secondary jobs, those born and raised in the rural south or abroad probably have the worst jobs. The really poor seem to be more accepting of their lot.

When one puts these two facets of lower class discontent together, it suggests that perhaps the complaint might best be diagnosed as a lack of upward social mobility. The process of migration to the city gives a sense of mobility to those who move: the possibility of moving gives a sense of opportunity to those who remain behind. Discouragement and discontent are felt only by the children of those who originally moved, who now find themselves trapped in the jobs that, if they are not precisely those of their parents, closely resemble the debilitating aspects of their parents' work and fall miserably short of the jobs to which they aspire and to which their parents aspired for them.
The discontent of the working class does not seem to be associated with social mobility in this sense. It would be too strong a statement to say that they do not have higher aspirations for their children: they would be pleased and proud for their progeny to achieve great wealth or a professional status. But they are, on the other hand, relatively content with their own positions, and they would be satisfied to see their children follow in similar jobs and life styles. This feeling seems, moreover, to be widely shared by the children themselves.

The discontent seems rather to center on the precariousness of what has been achieved; to be an expression, not of frustration at an inability to advance, but of the fear of falling behind their present positions. Thus, in the early 1960's, the working class was preoccupied by the thrust of technological change; in the late 1960's, it was preoccupied by the threat to their life style and employment security, posed by black and other lower class groups pressuring from below.

This sense of insecurity is particularly apparent in contrast to the attitudes of professional workers (in sociological terms, the middle class). These are people who are also relatively satisfied with what they have achieved, who expect their children to follow in comparable careers, if possibly in a different profession. There is something of a problem for these groups that their children may not want to pursue professional careers. But the idea that their children might not be able to do so, or that their own professional status and associated economic and social styles of life might be threatened—which seems the forefront of working class thinking—is completely foreign to the thinking of professionals, at least of my acquaintance.
The other source of discontent among the working class is the quality of the work which they perform, particularly its monotony. It is always difficult to know exactly how to assess this problem; one never knows whether the middle class professionals who diagnose the problems of society are reading their own preferences into the attitudes of other workers. It seems to me that most discussions of this phenomenon do underestimate the capacity of human beings to mold themselves to, accept, and ultimately come to like, at least in the negative sense, that they are very uncomfortable outside even the most monotonous work environment. Nonetheless, the revolt of the rank-and-file, particularly the youth, and most spectacularly at Lordstown, Ohio, does suggest that monotony is a problem. If one cannot interpret the current revolt as indicative that older workers are becoming unstuck or even that younger workers will not eventually conform, at least one can argue that at the point in the life cycle when the adjustment to monotony must be made, there is increasing resistance to it.

To this list of working class complaints has lately been added a new concern: industrial health and safety.

II. The Underlying Causes

The continuing job anxiety of the working class, their concerns about monotony and health and the complaints of the lower class about the quality of their jobs and limited employment opportunity may be viewed as joint products of a single phenomenon: structural adjustments in the organization of work, attributable to the pursuit of employment security by industrial unions. In this sense, they can be traced to the labor legislation of the 1930's which permitted these unions to organize and which placed them in a position to negotiate employment security arrangements.
Two aspects of these arrangements are critical: first, they are negotiated on a decentralized basis between individual employers and representatives of their own employees. There is thus considerable variation in the amount of security which has been achieved, and, more importantly, a large sector of the economy, which under existing labor legislation has never been under real threat of organization, and hence, where there is no employment security at all. Second, in very few cases is the employment security which has been achieved absolute, and a good deal of attention has focused upon a set of rules for distributing scarce jobs and income among the labor force.

The decentralized nature of employment security arrangements and the incompleteness of unionization to which it is related act to aggravate the dichotomy between the sectors of the dual labor market. To the extent that unions have succeeded in stabilizing employment in the primary sector, what they have essentially done is to shift the cost—or part of it, anyway—from their constituents to the employer. The employer has, in turn, looked for ways in which he can shift these costs to other parts of the economy, and the existence of an unorganized sector with no deterrents to varying employment levels to fit demand has provided a means of doing so. Thus, primary employers avoid hiring new workers on their own payroll for unsustainable increases in demand and instead seek to transfer these peaks to employers in the secondary labor market. It should be emphasized that this is not simply a question of variation in demand over the business cycle—although it is certainly a question of that—but also of normal fluctuations in demand in the course of a year, from season to season, or randomly, from time to time, due to a hundred factors which may be peculiar to an
industry or an enterprise. Thus, employers under pressure from unions to stabilize jobs would be looking periodically to transfer demand, even in a full employment economy. There are a variety of institutional arrangements through which this transfer is accomplished. The most prominent are probably subcontracting and temporary help services. There are also ways in which employers can maintain a secondary sector within their own establishment, although this often requires the acquiescence of the trade union. Thus, for example, there may be certain departments of seniority districts in which employment fluctuations are concentrated. Such departments are particularly easy to spot in southern plants where they are reserved for black workers, although it often turns out that, once one knows where to look, an analogue can be found in the North, as well. "Yard," for example, serves this purpose in pulp mills: during peak demand, yard workers get temporary assignments to production departments. The "labor pool" plays a similar role in steel mills. Another common way of handling peak demand "in house" is to cycle people through the union probationary period, discharging workers and hiring replacements just before the probation is completed when they would become subject to the protection of the collective agreements.

Many of the other characteristics distinguishing secondary and primary jobs can be seen as derivative of this process of employment stabilization in the primary sector.\(^7\) The lack of clear, formal work rules and disciplinary standards, and the capricious and highly personal manner in which foremen are allowed to discipline workers was characteristics for most American industry before union organization in the 1930's and appears directly attributable to the weakness of trade unions in the secondary sector today. The lack of training and chance of
advancement can be traced to the temporary nature of employment opportunities which provides no incentive to the employer to invest in his work force (or, for that matter, for the worker to invest in himself)*. In fact, the employer's strategy in transferring peak demand to the secondary sector is generally to preserve the skilled aspects of the job in house and to transfer out unskilled tasks. When demand slackens off, the unskilled tasks are brought back to the primary establishment and assigned to skilled employees in order to provide enough work to meet employment obligations. Even the harsh working conditions that characterize the secondary sector are sometimes the byproduct of the temporary nature of the work and the short time horizon of the employer which deters investment in physical plant.

The aspects of primary work which seem to underly the complaints of the working class--job monotony and industrial safety--may also be seen as the byproduct of employment stabilization. The variety and complexity of work required to hold the interest of an employee in a job is a lot greater when the job is more or less permanent than when it is temporary. Thus, work is probably a good deal more monotonous for permanent workers in the primary sector than it was in earlier periods of history, when job tenure was shorter and less secure. Similarly, a number of the industrial health problems which have become matters of concern in recent years are the result of prolonged, continued exposure to materials, air, or noise, which are unlikely to affect in any important way a

*Training on-the-job generally represents an investment either by the employer in his work force or by the worker in himself. When employment is temporary, the employer certainly has no incentive to make such an investment. If the worker had an incentive, the employer might find it worthwhile to structure his work environment so that workers could train themselves; but in secondary work, not only is employer attachment temporary, but occupational and industrial attachment is, as well.
person who holds the job temporarily, or even over a prolonged total period, but intermittently.

But probably the more important factor in monotony and health, and certainly the basic explanation for the continuing anxiety about security among the working class, is the particular manner in which the issue of employment security has been resolved in American industry. Although the unions have consistently sought guarantees of security, they have only recently—and even now only in very limited sectors of the economy—begun to achieve anything approaching such guarantees. The automobile industry, with its supplementary unemployment insurance, is a large-scale example of a guarantee, but that is of income, not of employment. The other examples are of a less quantitative significance: IBM, Proctor & Gamble, the sugar refining industry. Elsewhere, the unions have been forced to settle instead, not for guarantees, but for arrangements for distributing scarce employment and income among the labor force. These arrangements make it more costly for the employer to lay-off and rehire, and in this way, act to deter lay-offs, indirectly tending to stabilize employment. It is these indirect effects which constitute the basis for the argument that the management of fluctuations in labor demand in the unionized sector fosters the development of secondary employment. But, for the work force, and hence, for the union, and in negotiations, at least for the firm, they act to shift attention from the management of employment fluctuations, per se, to the procedures for distributing the impact of these fluctuations among the firms' own employees.

The procedures which have developed rely heavily upon a system of job assignment by seniority. The details of the system vary substantially among plants, but the basic idea is that a worker's seniority is defined by his date
of hire, and the employer is obligated to permit senior workers whose jobs are temporarily or permanently eliminated to "bump" (i.e. displace) more junior employees from their jobs. Workers so displaced have rights to bump employees junior to them so that in theory—it does not quite work out this way in practice—it is the most junior employee who goes out the door. Seniority is also used to allocate promotion opportunities, although in the case of promotion, ability is frequently used in combination with seniority. In most American industry, the wage is linked to the job, and thus the rules for job allocation determine pay and income, as well.8

Through the seniority system, therefore, both the worker's employment security and his pay have come to be uniquely connected to a specific job assignment. And, thus, not only has movement between enterprises been reduced, but movement among jobs or work assignments within an enterprise has also been narrowly restricted. Any attempt to remove these restrictions is deterred by the fact that job definition is so closely connected to pay and security. Thus, in a sense, reliance upon seniority has generated a conflict between job security and work variety.

Finally, this conflict has been further aggravated by trends in industrial engineering which have biased the design of jobs toward narrowing and routinizing the range of tasks connected with each work assignment. There is no clear scientific basis for this trend in industrial engineering. The number of experiments suggesting that productivity is enhanced by job enrichment are sufficient so as to warrant at least a careful examination of the issue, but industrial engineering practice has been virtually unaffected by this possibility and, in fact, the profession has been largely uninterested in the propositions as an issue.9 This suggests that the idea of job simplification has some more
profound hold upon the imagination and it would be elegant to locate that hold in the relationship to job security. The idea, however, has an intellectual history which stretches back in engineering to Taylor's scientific management in the late 19th century, and in economics to Adam Smith in the late 18th century, and there is little that connects it directly to the stabilization of employment in the recent past.

What does seem to be related to job security, however, is the attitude of trade unions toward industrial engineering. On the whole, that attitude in the postwar period has been one of cooperation. The basic tools of industrial engineering—time and motion study, job evaluation, and the like—have in most establishments become the language of industrial relations. In a number of situations—the negotiation of the CWS Plan in steel is the most well-known—\textsuperscript{10} the unions have actively cooperated with management in the introduction and application of such engineering tools. In the garment industry, unions have actually originated campaigns attempting to induce employers to accept and apply industrial engineering principles. Where unions have not played an active role, they have generally acquiesced in management-initiated applications of industrial engineering precepts and have trained their own people to review management decisions in this context.\textsuperscript{11}

The degree of cooperation between labor and management in this area flies in the face of the comedy stereotype conflict between the time-motion man and the industrial worker. It is all the more remarkable in the view of the early history of the scientific management movement and the fervant antiunion bias of Frederick Taylor. It belies an inherent antagonism between the engineer's view of man as an extension of the machine and the essentially political and humanis-
tic view of the worker which is characteristic of union leaders. It also belies the fact that job simplification is believed by both the engineers and the unions to foster automation and technological change, a belief which would constitute a real, as well as a philosophical, basis for conflict.

For an explanation of the acceptance of industrial engineering which unions have nonetheless evinced, one must look to the role of seniority and the reasons for union reliance upon it. Seniority is not the only basis upon which jobs and income could be distributed. Alternatives include ability, qualifications, need, or work sharing. These are used in some parts of the economy but are nowhere near as prevalent as seniority. Why this is so is not altogether clear. But of considerable and possibly overriding importance is the unambiguous character of seniority. The distribution of jobs and income present union leaders with the task of choosing among the constituent members of their organization in a situation in which the gains of one group inevitably result in losses of the most serious kind to another group. Such a choice is a threat to the political position of the union leaders and has the potential as an issue for completely destroying the organization. The importance of this last point cannot be overestimated; it presents the nightmare of an anxious work force fighting with each other for limited jobs, which has historically been the major deterrent to the stability of American trade union organizations. The introduction of seniority resolves this issue once and for all; it is an objective criteria, easily defined, leaving no room for interpretation and, hence, barring manipulation by the union leader, the employers, or by one group of workers or another.

But the ability to use seniority in this way as an unambiguous role for the distribution of pay and security depends upon having an unambiguous job assign-
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...And this, in turn, creates an interest among union leaders in the kind of rationalization of the job structure which industrial engineering has introduced—an interest which, it may be noted, is as strong as the unions' interest in the principle of seniority itself. The use of seniority also presupposes that the requirements for performance of the job are sufficiently small so that virtually any worker can move into it: and this creates a union interest even in the kind of job simplification which increases the threat of technological change.

Thus, in sum, what is being argued is that the fact that security was limited and that unions were forced to worry about its distribution worked to further enhance monotony in the primary sector. The distributional rules which developed linked security to specific job assignments and encouraged the unions to acquiesce in the further narrowing of these assignments through industrial engineering and job simplification. Paradoxically, in acquiescing to the engineers, unions may have heightened the very insecurity with which they were attempting to deal, for the definition of a job in terms of a limited number of narrow, carefully defined tasks certainly enhanced the possibility that it could be mechanized out of existence. In any case, the fact that unions were unable to provide employment guarantees left the working class with continuing job anxiety and renders them extremely sensitive to pressure from below them in the social structure.

III. Solutions

The argument of the preceding section is that the root of the problems with which we are concerned lies in the job security arrangements negotiated by the industrial unions, which developed in the 1930's. This suggests that the cure is to be found in changes in those arrangements. One possible direction of change is a weakening of the unions' power, which would permit the degeneration of existing security arrangements. Such a solution would reduce the barriers between the pri-
mary and secondary markets and would enhance the variety of the work experience, presumably reducing monotony, and, possibly, enhancing industrial health. It would do so, however, at a substantial cost in terms of the security and anxiety of workers now in the organized sector and at great sacrifice to the procedures to insure equity and due process which unions have painfully built up in the workplace over the last thirty years.

The alternative is to look for more job security rather than less. In particular, if current difficulties among blue collar workers are caused by efforts to ration scarce jobs among the firms' work forces, it could be remedied by imposing a complete guarantee; by insuring, in other words, that there will always be employment for workers who have already been hired. The Japanese economy provides a model of such guaranteed employment in much of the modern manufacturing industry, and there is reportedly considerably greater freedom in job assignment than in similar American enterprises. In Japan, also, the employment guarantee has produced a pay system where the wage is based upon seniority and is largely divorced from the particular job. The limited domestic experience with employment guarantees also points to greater freedom in job assignments. Indeed, in the organized sector, such guarantees have generally arisen in an effort on the part of management to obtain precisely that freedom to vary work assignments.

Freedom of job assignment is not, of course, the same thing as job enlargement, but it is permissive of far greater experimentation with this and other means of reducing the monotony of work experience. If the earlier arguments are correct, moreover, the employment guarantee will free union leaders to press for changes in this direction. The development of such pressure would quite possibly
have to wait the growth of a new generation of union leaders, however. An acceptance of industrial engineering and its bias toward rigid and confining job assignments has been built into the ideology of American business unionism, and leaders who reject it are generally viewed by the movement's elder statesmen as immature, radical, or demagogic. It will certainly take a new generation of industrial engineers to respond to such pressure.

It is possible that collective bargaining is already evolving in the direction of employment guarantees. The logic of the supplementary unemployment insurance in automobiles and similar arrangements negotiated in allied industries is to make labor costs independent of lay-offs. If this is indeed the natural direction of evolution, then any one of a half dozen proposals which should increase union bargaining power—the repeal of 14B, the mandatory provision of unemployment benefits to strikers; increased limitations on employer election propaganda, and the like—should hasten the introduction of guarantees. Similarly, policies designed to reduce the cost of employment fluctuations to the employer and make him more willing to provide guarantees will have their effect. Of such policies, a renewed commitment to full employment is probably the most important. One can also imagine a variety of governmental insurance systems or reinsurance systems which protect the employer against extreme situations in which an employment guarantee would prove an intolerable burden. The case for such systems is probably strongest for those risks over which government policy is controlling such as defense-related employment or the threat of foreign competition.

It seems unrealistic, however, to expect extensive employment guarantees to develop through private collective bargaining. Existing labor legislation pro-
duces very great variation in union power across the economy. We have been very reluctant to tailor the laws to the realities of individual industries, and so long as a single code is applied more or less uniformly, it is very difficult to give unions the power to obtain guarantees in sectors where they are weak without creating intolerable concentrations of power in sectors where unions are already strong.

The alternative to efforts to foster guarantees through collective bargaining is simply to impose such guarantees by law. This might be done either by direct prohibition or by a system of fines (or enforced severance pay). To a certain extent, fines are already inherent in the experience rating provisions of the unemployment insurance system, and the kind of continuity of policy which is so highly prized in American politics could be preserved by strengthening these. Fines are, in principle, to be preferred to prohibition since they can be tailored to different situations without risking perverse incentives. For example, the penalty for discharge should probably be related to age and seniority, but any prohibition will create an incentive to fire the employee before he reaches the critical age or seniority date: with fines this can be avoided by making the fine a continuously increasing function of seniority (if it is linked to age, it will discourage the hiring of older workers). I am under the impression that something of this sort has emerged in France, as an attempt to monetize legal prohibitions on discharge.

The cost of all of these efforts to further stabilize employment in the primary sector will be increased pressure to transfer variation in demand to the secondary sector. And they must be reviewed in that light. To do this
adequately requires a much more elaborate view of the dual labor market distinction than we have thus far developed or have time to develop in the space which remains. It is perhaps possible to sketch in briefly the critical elements. These involve two basic points. First, the lower class workers seeking upward mobility with which this essay is concerned are not the only people in the secondary market. In this sector, also, are youth whose intermittent work patterns are connected with their preoccupation with school and leisure time activities, and who have a great deal of flexibility in their income needs and in the timing of their work activities. A number of working women whose first commitment is to their family responsibilities are also found in the secondary market, as are first generation immigrants working to accumulate a fixed sum of money and planning to return to their place of origin. For these people, the kind of short-duration jobs generated by the efforts of primary employers to evade permanent commitments during temporary peaks in demand are not a major problem, particularly if the economy is at full employment so that new jobs are appearing as older ones run their course. Thus, so long as one can separate out and free the disadvantaged workers for whom confinement to secondary jobs is not a part of a socially acceptable life pattern, the existence of a secondary sector, per se, need not constitute a social problem.

Second, employment in the secondary sector is not composed solely of the temporary employment peaks transferred from the primary market. A number of secondary jobs are of inherently short duration: seasonal jobs in some parts of construction; seasonal agricultural work; resort, hotel and kitchen jobs, and so on. Other secondary jobs are relatively permanent but, for one reason or
another, are adjusted to a transient labor force: menial jobs in hospitals, for example. It is possible to stabilize many of these employment opportunities; a number of the inherently short-duration work can be built into some continuous employment experiences through the development of hiring hall arrangements of the kind which unions in the construction and maritime industries use to give continuity in employment to their members. Existing labor legislation tends to penalize such arrangements—the construction and maritime unions are protected more by their own skill monopolies than by the law—but it would be possible to compensate for this either by substituting governmental arrangements, as has occurred on the New York waterfront, or by changes in labor law. Much could be done to change the jobs which are already stable—and some which are not—by amending existing legislation to encourage organization by employees in agriculture and in the public and nonprofit sectors.

What these considerations suggest, in short, is that both the composition of workers in the secondary sector and the composition of jobs are susceptible to rearrangement through public policy. It may be possible to reduce through policy the number of jobs now in that sector, not simply to a level where disadvantaged workers are no longer required to fill them, but actually to a level where the remaining force of workers, for whom a short-term job carries no social stigma, is large enough to handle the increased spill-over of temporary work which more stringent employment guarantees in the primary sector would create.

Finally, mention should be made of the behavioral problems of disadvantaged workers now in the secondary sector. The preceding discussion has proceeded as if the secondary sector was a phenomenon related exclusively to the character of
jobs. This, however, is clearly an oversimplification. Experience with manpower programs over the last decade suggests that many workers have considerable trouble adjusting to the requirements of primary jobs when such jobs become available to them. At least one of their problems is the monotony of work in the primary sector, and this particular barrier should be reduced by the reforms proposed above.

But many of these difficulties appear reflective of a lifestyle off the job, in their homes and neighborhoods. In this sense, the home environment and the work environment are adjusted to each other: it is impossible to know from looking at the current situation which came first, and it is undoubtably true that the fact that the one is embedded in the other makes it difficult to change either. Nonetheless, it is also true that we know quite a bit about how to change the work environment both through attaching financial rewards and penalties to certain employment characteristics and through institutional changes. I personally am impressed by the ingenuity of enterprises in inducing workers to respond to their needs when management feels a compelling reason to be ingenuous. I tend to discount all of the discouraging experience of the manpower and poverty programs because they were not accompanied by any strong pressures upon employers. Where such pressures in the form of riots or civil rights suits did exist, the results have been more encouraging. Still, it is ultimately a matter of faith that workers will respond, and respond in a relatively short space of time, to changes in the work environment; a matter of faith, I should say, and also a matter of judgment as to where, in the face of uncertainty, the greatest social costs of certain policies lie. In the United States, the social cost of changing the economic and institutional environment faced by a private employer is never adjudged small,
but it must be smaller than attempting to tamper directly with the home and family or of ignoring the poor and underprivileged to whom the American ideal has promised so much.

In closing, it would seem important to point out in this time when it is becoming fashionable once more to argue that the significant characteristics of men are determined by heredity or by events in early childhood, that the difference between the working class and the lower class, and between secondary and primary work, are consistent with quite a different story. However frozen certain behavioral traits may be by early experience, much of the behavior associated with work undergoes fundamental changes quite late in life. In virtually all social classes, work histories in adolescence involve a very weak labor market commitment, and an erratic pattern of work and attendance which appears to be embedded in leisure time activities. Middle class and working class youth then settle down in their twenties to a pattern of regular and very routine work. This settling down appears to be associated with marriage and family formation, and to be something which happens not to an individual alone, but at about the time when most of his close friends are doing the same. Among lower class youth, this transition frequently fails to occur and the failure of the transition to a stable job is accompanied by a higher rate of failure in family formation, as well. It seems plausible, therefore, that what is involved are a series of reinforcing events. It may not be enough, in other words, to find a stable job in order to make a transition to a stable work pattern. It may be necessary to find such a job at the time one is getting married. It may also be necessary at the time one's friends find such jobs in sufficient numbers to reinforce the new lifestyle which the job requires, rather than to work against it.
For the lower classes, there are just not enough stable jobs to make the probability of all these events happening simultaneously very high. If this is what is going on, then an increase in the number of stable jobs may alone be sufficient to free disadvantaged workers from the syndrome in which they are trapped.
FOOTNOTES

1 See, for example, the definitions in Herbert Gans, The Urban Villagers, (New York: The Free Press, 1962), pp. 242-254.


5 For an explicit treatment of this theme, see Claude Brown's autobiography, Manchild in the Promised Land, (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

6 Cf. among the many recent articles on this, Barbara Garson, "Luddites in Lordstown", Harpers, June, 1972, pp. 68-73.


8 See Doeringer and Piore, Internal Labor Markets, op. cit.


Summary

This essay constitutes an attempt to explain patterns of economic and social mobility. The central thesis is that critical to an understanding in regular channels of such mobility is the recognition that social movement tends to occur in chains of jobs, which form career paths such that individuals starting in the initial job in the chain will tend to follow one of a limited number of career paths, or conversely, jobs will tend to attract workers from a limited number of points of origin. The chains may also include schools, neighborhoods and types of families. Such chains tend to exist in both a very narrow, and specific sense, and also on a more general level. Thus, on the narrow level, there exist chains of specific jobs in an industrial plant (lines of professors). In certain communities, workers in those chains are drawn from specific jobs and neighborhoods. On the general level, one can speak of middle class homes, leading to middle class schools and into middle class jobs and distinguish these environments and the mobility patterns which link them together from working class and lower class mobility patterns.

These mobility chains are to be understood in terms of incidental, automatic learning. This is the process through which people tend to acquire a set of traits appropriate to the environment in which they are living or working automatically, simply by the fact that they are around and incidentally to the activity in which they are directly engaged. The paradigm of this process is training on-the-job in the process of production. That process is automatic in the sense that it occurs without the consciousness of the individuals involved so that it is often termed learning by osmosis. It is incidental to the activity in which the individual is directly engaged and to which the institution is devoted, i.e. production. Similar learning occurs at home where it is incidental
to family life and leisure time activities and in the school, where it is incidental to formal classroom instruction.

The learning process involves the acquisition of productive traits. These range from very concrete skills such as the performance of identifiable manual motions or kinds of mental reasoning to more amorphous behavioral traits such as the punctuality and regularity of attendance. The ability to lead others or to follow instruction and accept supervision. This diverse set of traits, however, all appear to fall under the definition of behavioral patterns which can and will be reproduced automatically in response to given stimuli in a particular type of environment. The same behavior patterns may, however, result from one of two different kinds of traits: specific traits which are a direct response to the stimulus given the environment, or general traits, a rule (or set of rules) which enable one to deduce from the environment and the stimulus what the correct response may be, although that particular combination of circumstances has never been encountered before.

The learning process itself appears understandable in terms of psychological learning theory and what sociologists term socialization. The traits are really habits of behavior and thought acquired through a process of reinforcement and changed by extinction. The reinforcements generating the habits may be the economic and physical pressures inherent in any environment, but seem to depend also upon the acquired tendency of people to pick up habits by imitating the behavior of those around them and by conforming to group norms where such norms exist and are discernable. In the case of imitation, the speed with which the habit develops depends upon the number of people displaying the behavior associated with it and the frequency of contact with those people. Conformity depends upon the cohesiveness of the group which tends, in turn, to be a function of the homogeneity of its members and the turnover among them.
Given the character of the environment, the speed with which the individual adjusts to it, i.e. acquires traits appropriate to effective operation within it, depends upon the traits which each brings with him. If these traits are congruent with those required by the new environment, then obviously no adjustment is required. If the traits are in conflict, then they must be extinguished before they can be replaced and this prolongs the adjustment process. When conflicting traits are innate or very firmly rooted, adjustment cannot take place and the individual may be completely barred from entry into the environment. Adjustment may also be forestalled when the individual must operate simultaneously in two environments requiring conflicting traits as, for example, when he holds two different kinds of work or his home environment is very different from his work environment. The work of extinction in one environment is then overcome by reinforcement in the other. To the extent that traits are acquired (rather than innate), however, and workers move through environments sequentially, the traits which an individual carries with him will depend upon the previous environments through which he has passed, and, given the character of the new environment, the sequence of past environments thus becomes the major detriment of the adjustment process.

This process of learning, or adjustment, is one which carries costs, both to the individual and to the institution in which it occurs. The costs to the individual arise because learning depends upon the reinforcement through the administration of pleasure and pain. The cost to the institution is generated by the tendency of the individual to disrupt the environment in which he is operating until he has accommodated to it. The existing of these costs suggests that it is possible to understand the construction of mobility chains in terms of the calculus of cost minimization of conventional economic theory. Such an approach, however, tends to neglect several critical aspects of the learning process.
First, it is possible to construct mobility chains along which there is no cost of movement. There are really two types of such chains. One such type would be a chain in which there was essentially no difference between the traits required at two stations along it. For many purposes, it would not pay to recognize stations which were essentially alike in this sense as distinct, but distinctions should be recognized and are of some importance where, for example, one station is a school and the subsequent station is a job.

The other case in which there is no cost to movement along mobility chains is that in which contact between individuals at different stations overlap although there is no conflict in the traits utilized. In this case, it is possible for people at one station to acquire the traits at the next station by imitating those around them so that by the time the movement actually occurs, they are already adapted to that environment. Learning through imitation in this way is painless for the individual and, since it precedes movement, also for the environment.

Second, the same learning theory which suggests that workers adjust to environments also suggests that environments will adjust to workers and will do so in such a way as to reduce the cost of movement between them. An adjustment of the environment to the individual is implicit in the idea of learning by imitation. The idea that a new individual automatically attempts to copy the behavior of the older people in the environment implies that the older people also have a tendency to copy the behavior of the new entrant. When the new individual is alone, and the group of older workers is large and cohesive, the influence of the latter upon the former will far outweigh the opposite effect. But when the new entrants are large or relatively cohesive, their influence will tend to be substantial. This implies that when new flows of manpower between
two environments are opened up, there is a tendency for the recipient environment to evolve toward a closer resemblance to the donor environment. In certain cases, there are natural backflows between environments, and where this occurs, the donor environment will tend to evolve toward the recipient environment, as well. Backflows also create the possibility for automatic learning in one environment prior to movement. Certain obvious and inevitable backflows are that of workers to their home environments where they exert an influence both upon the productive traits of their contemporaries and those of their children. These effects—the evolution of donor and receiving environments toward each other and the backflows—will tend to reduce the initial cost of movement between two environments; and when they are large and rapid, they may swamp any initial cost calculations.

This last point that environments evolve toward each other as individuals move between them—that, in a sense, the individual mediates between environments—is an important independent insight. It suggests the mechanism through which work might dictate the structure of leisure time activities. But it also implies that the influence can operate in the other direction, and the home environment dictate the structure of work. Which of these effects in fact prevails depends upon what other variables besides the characteristics of the individuals within them determine the structure of the environment or, to put it somewhat differently, how the adjustment of the environments to new individuals is constrained by other factors. It is to these questions that we turn in the next essay.