The Subjective Meaning of Mobility and Its Implications for Policy Solutions

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Over the past 30 years or so, my work has proceeded along several different but related arcs complementary to the research that economists and quantitative sociologists, such as Raj Chetty and Scott Winship, have contributed. Their work on economic mobility has given us a lot to consider with respect to the intergenerational life chances of low-income individuals and households.

I bring to these questions a strong interest in the *subjective meaning* of mobility. This includes the interpretations ordinary people have of their movement up and down the class ladder; of why this fate has befallen them; and their "moral understanding" of why their life chances diverge from those around them, who differ by generation, race, or social class. Second, as a qualitative researcher, I have tried to contribute to our understanding of how the behavior of families and households have facilitated or impeded the realization of these mobility dreams. I will offer some observations on what kinds of policies make a difference and what kind of differences matter most to the man and woman on the street.

At the outset, I note that in the communities of low-wage workers and near-poor families I have studied for decades, very few ever imagine that they could go from the bottom to the top; hence, the odds of such a rocketing rate of upward mobility is not on their radar. Rather their goal is more modest: to consolidate whatever gains they have achieved and hold on to that stability, to inch forward on their own steam, and above all, to see their children do better than they have.

The subjective understanding of mobility is important not only because it colors the sense of how actions or decisions will impact the individual or their families, but because when we can add up all of those perceptions across millions of people, it affects the public's openness or resistance to policy solutions that we might advocate for improving mobility. The public tends to assign a very different moral weight to the status or conditions of individuals if they think that the odds are against them than if they think those individuals have an equal shot at the brass ring. If your fate is dependent on your own efforts, rather than the opportunities and conditions that block even the most diligent, then we focus attention on values and are often indifferent to the outcomes of adults, even though we care a lot if their actions punish the next generation.

When the fate of millions is, instead, conditioned by structures over which they have no control, the public is more willing to invest in amelioration or, in our better moments, the dismantling of systematic barriers to intergenerational mobility. Of course, a lot of it depends on whether people recognize those blockages to begin with. When I began my research for *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (1988), I was very surprised to learn how little social scientists could tell us about the understanding ordinary people had of economic cataclysm of the 1930s. Very few Americans toward the bottom of the economic ladder understood that there was something called the Great Depression descending on them. Wives knew their husbands were out of work; everyone knew that the factory nearby was shut down. But widespread understanding that something we now call the calamity of the Great Depression was surprisingly lacking. Few poor households had radios. Access to newspapers was stratified. And this fact colored understandings about who was to blame for any given person's persistent unemployment. Even something as enormous as the Great Depression did not necessarily generate an understanding in the general public about the nature or presence of structural barriers.

Mobility is one of the most mathematical topics in the social sciences, but it is also freighted with moral sentiment. And here I use the term "moral" as Émile Durkheim did, to indicate the ways in which a culture assigns a normative significance to patterns of ascent and descent (1964). This is particularly true in the United States. Our culture has always been preoccupied with mobility. As Max Weber argued long ago in his classic study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, individuals read economic success or decline as indicators of their own or others' moral worth (1958). Our culture has a strong tendency to treat positive outcomes as a reward for hard work and superior skills, while treating setbacks as indicative of laziness, lack of striving, or inferior ability. With this, mobility not only reflects economic well-being, but it has profound effects on feelings of self-worth and claims to dignity.

The first book I wrote on this subject that gained a large popular audience, *Falling from Grace* (1988), was concerned with how people who lost well-paying jobs during the last major recession in the 1980s and landed new jobs that were vastly lower in prestige and income dealt with explaining this unhappy fate to their spouse, children, neighbors, and friends. They had not just lost jobs, they had lost their social identities and claims to honor. For most of them, dealing with job loss was an uphill slog against a culture whose default assumption is individual agency, a cultural script that often overlooks brute facts like double-digit unemployment, and the tendency of employers to treat displaced workers as spoilt goods.

As the adults in the middle class spiraled down, their children felt a sense of shame and bewilderment at the abrupt material losses. This was compounded by the knowledge that their parents seemed no longer in control of the family's destiny. Middle-class parents and children are surrounded by a belief system that dictates that they are the masters of their own fate. This culture preserves a very valuable sense of agency and motivates them to avoid disaster. But when fate did not cooperate, there was no refuge from self-blame for the adults and a persistent sense of insecurity among the children.

American culture, however, is not so monolithic as to dictate that this is the only way to understand an economic free fall. Some groups of displaced employees that experienced these losses were left with a stronger sense of personal integrity but a weaker sense of agency. These were the members of occupational groups that plummeted down the class ladder as a mass because they were fired, and who interpreted their losses as consequences of heroic sacrifice or victimization that was not individual but collective. They did not see themselves to blame, but they were also inclined to hope as a group that someone else would rescue them. They believed that the public would somehow come to recognize this sacrificial mode and somehow restore their livelihoods and virtue.

Those studies of downward mobility and the middle class commenced in the Reagan-Era recession that gave us a double-digit unemployment rate. That downturn reached into the heart of the middle class. These were people who expected stability, who expected to work in the same firms for decades and instead discovered a new, rude reality. While those expectations are very much a thing of the past, I imagine the experience of downward mobility in the Great Recession, while no less disturbing, is experienced more as a frustration than a shock.

These middle-class preoccupations tend not to be so salient among the working poor, for whom the task of managing scarcity is paramount and volatility is a way of life. As psychologists have noted, people are much more concerned about avoiding losses than obtaining gains. We really hate to lose what we already have, and even contemplating the possibility of loss creates tremendous anxiety. One implication of this, perhaps, is that intergenerational upward mobility is less important than the phenomenon of intergenerational downward mobility for social stability. Downward mobility and economic precariousness loom very large in the popular consciousness. A second implication may be that while social mobility matters for many people, it is less a question of long-distance mobility, such as moving up from the bottom to the very top, but rather moving up small distances during the good years and avoiding sliding backwards.

In "twin" books, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (1999) and *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market* (2006), I chronicled the fate of minimum-wage workers who were in poor households when they entered my sample in the mid-1990s over the succeeding eight years. I saw about a third of them move out of poverty to something approximating the blue-collar middle class or the lower rungs of the white-collar world.

Four routes were taken by the most fortunate of the groups in *Chutes and Ladders.* In the first pathway, economic growth created expansion, even among minimum wage employers, which opened up internal promotion ladders in the firms where my subjects were already working. They seized every chance to move up. Line workers were able to become first-run management in new shops opened by expanding franchise owners.

The second route involved moving from low-wage service jobs to much higher-wage union jobs, whether they were more skilled or not. Public-sector jobs were most valued. Union employment offered good wages and, more importantly, a suite of benefits unknown to fast food workers or retail employees. Looking for unionized employment was something of a holy grail for these Harlem workers; jobs in the post office or the Metropolitan Transit Authority had been critical to the middle-class status of the older members of their families, and where they could secure jobs of this kind, they took every opportunity to do so.

The third route entailed firm-hopping, especially after accruing more education. I was stunned to discover what a high proportion of the low-wage workers I studied continued to go back to school after the age of 25. It often took them 10 and maybe even 15 years to complete college, yet they continued to struggle toward that end. And it was a struggle, particularly on the financial side. Low-wage workers had to amass their own financial aid. Measurements of college completion over a six-year period don't begin to capture that continued effort.

Finally, the fourth route to mobility involved changes in the composition of the household. Cohabitation that results in income pooling doesn't always make a positive difference, but it can—as can formal marriage. When children in these households got old enough to go to work, the earner-to-dependents ratio in the family improved. In these instances, the target subjects in my study didn't actually experience any personal mobility at all. But because they were members of households that changed along these lines, they experienced a higher standard of living. At least until the adult children broke away to form their own households, these families could pool their income and move up out of poverty.

The experience of these most fortunate households was noteworthy because researchers did not expect workers who started off in a minimum-wage job as adults in Harlem to see that much improvement in their lives.

Not everyone in *Chutes and Ladders* was a success story. One-third of the people I followed in Harlem from the mid-1990s to 2004 moved from entry-level jobs in the fast food industry to retail jobs that were less stigmatized and slightly better paid, but not enough to take them very far above the poverty line. They ascended into a category I became very interested in. I called it the *near poor,* which was 100 percent to 200 percent above the poverty line. The near poor welcomed a higher standard of living, but their hold on it was precarious. An illness in the family, disruption in childcare, an unreasonable landlord, domestic abuse—any of these problems—could and did push the near poor back below the poverty line.

Finally, the remaining one-third of the people I followed slid into deep trouble. Although they started out in minimum-wage jobs, over the succeeding eight years, they bumped along the bottom of the class structure. Moving in and out of severe poverty, they faced long bouts of unemployment, engaged in informal employment, and lived in marginal housing. Eviction, frequent moving, and doubling up was common amongst them as was domestic abuse, substance abuse, and depression.

The difference between the most successful people I followed out of this fast food industry and that middle group, the near poor, came down to policies that helped stabilize and hence consolidate gains as adults. What were those policies? As Victor Tan Chen and I detailed in *The Missing Class* (2007), they included childcare, sick pay, job protection in the face of family emergencies, and flexibility in work hours. These were the policies that mattered the most in keeping people in the labor market and keeping them from falling down the class ladder when family emergencies did strike.

I want to conclude by commenting on the regional differences in mobility reported by Raj Chetty. He notes that the likelihood of upward movement from the bottom to the top is greater in some places than others and notes that segregation, educational equality, civic engagement, and other factors explain the divergences. Rourke O'Brien and I published a book in 2011, *Taxing the Poor: Doing Damage to the Truly Disadvantaged,* that observed similar regional differences in morbidity, early mortality, teen pregnancy, and high school dropouts. These regional patterns held for blacks and whites.

O'Brien and I found a very strong correlation between these negative outcomes and regressive taxation. Where states develop a heavy reliance on sales tax, including food tax, and a low reliance on progressive tax, especially income and property tax, we see high levels of poverty and Chetty sees relatively low levels of upward mobility. The problem of taxing inequality, for the poor, emerges at the local and state level because the federal tax structure is uniform. In many parts of the South, state and local taxations compound one another such that tax even on food can reach as high as 12 percent in many Southern communities.

History has imposed a persistent divergence within the United States by region. In the aftermath of the Civil War, radical reconstruction in the South ushered in a 12-year period of progressive taxation that funded publicly supported educational and medical institutions to serve the freed slaves. Those progressive policies were all repealed in the period when Reconstruction ended, a period that is referred to by those who detested radical reconstruction as the Redemption Period. A series of laws were enacted in many Southern states—from super-majority rules to referendum requirements and, in some instances, state constitutional amendments that limited spending—to reverse the tax provisions that had been so repugnant to whites, especially white land owners, in the South. Enshrined in state constitutions, those Redemption Period laws are still there. They put a very sharp block on raising revenue for education, or anything else, through any instrument except regressive taxation. That is what Bill Clinton and other progressive Southern governors discovered when they tried to raise taxes in order to improve educational outcomes nearly 100 years later.

Accordingly in the South and increasingly in the West after Proposition 13, sales taxes rose sharply over the last 30 years. This had the consequence of robbing the poor of the income they needed to improve their lives.

Public policy matters in setting the stage for mobility, as this audience knows all too well. Policies that impact unemployment and underemployment, that facilitate or retard the ability of earners to stay in the labor market, that see the working poor keep their earnings (the Earned Income Tax Credit) or lose those precious resources (to regressive taxation, reliance on fees, etc.) make a difference. If, at the end of the day, we are able to foster the chances that someone born into the bottom quintile can move up to the top, we should celebrate. Until then, I would be willing to declare this a land of opportunity if we can just facilitate more modest movement up the ladder and the stability needed to stay there. ■

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