



Inequality, Mobility, and Social Change in Contemporary Societies

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ABSTRACT

Rising economic inequality and declining social mobility have become defining features of contemporary societies, reshaping how sociologists, economists, and policymakers interpret social change. The study synthesizes theoretical and empirical scholarship on inequality and mobility, tracing the field from classical stratification research to contemporary cross-national and administrative-data studies. It examines how inequality is measured, how intergenerational mobility varies across national contexts, the role of social and cultural capital in reproducing advantage, and how structural forces such as welfare regimes, globalization, and labor-market restructuring condition life chances. The study concludes that inequality and mobility are mutually constitutive processes embedded in institutional design, and that addressing declining mobility requires attention to both the distributive and the relational dimensions of social life. It highlights the need for institutional and policy responses that address both unequal resource distribution and the social mechanisms that reproduce advantage across generations.

Keywords

inequality, social mobility, stratification, social capital, welfare states, globalization

1. Introduction

Recent discussions on the social sciences have shifted focus from opportunity and resources, and from the legitimacy of social difference, to center inequality and mobility. In the last few decades, increased income and wealth inequality in many industrialized societies has led to renewed calls for thinking about the potential for meaningful upward social mobility when people start from different social and economic positions. Inequality is now not just defined as a difference in economic outcomes. It is now studied as a complex phenomenon with social dimensions that affect health, education, society's trust in institutions, political engagement, political legitimacy, and life prospects. One area in which the "equality of opportunity" principle has been especially prominent in these debates is the need to address inequalities in the starting position. It separates out inequalities that result from personal decisions made by individuals from inequalities that result from factors outside their personal control, such as family background, inherited wealth, neighbourhood conditions, gender, race, and educational opportunities (Roemer, 1998). In this context, inequality is particularly troublesome if opportunities for children are determined by their parents' resources, rather than by the effort or ability of the individual. Studies on intergenerational mobility also find that perceptions of social structure openness and of upward mobility prospects affect public attitudes towards redistribution (Alesina et al., 2018). Often the message that circumstances can be overcome through talent and effort can be communicated in the language of meritocracy. But this has been challenged empirically over the years. Even in an unequal society, success might still be defined as the outcome of personal achievement, but where opportunities for valued pursuits are highly unequally distributed, by the standards of the average person, success is still largely a function of inherited advantage. In fact, the belief in a meritocratic system may be stronger or even stronger in settings where there is high inequality, which also establishes a paradox: unequal results are understood as fair competition, not as structural privilege (Mijs, 2021). Other critics argue that meritocratic institutions can also help to maintain the power of the elite, and increase insecurity among middle- and working-class groups (Søbjerg, 2012). The advantages that can be seen in educational and occupational institutions. Across the country, elite employers routinely gauge candidates based on measures of educational status, cultural familiarity, interpersonal style and "fit" into their organizations, effectively turning social status into professional opportunity (Rivera, 2016). In the same kind of jobs, the members of privileged families may be rewarded with greater pay, better sponsorship, and faster promotion prospects than their working-class counterparts (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Therefore, mobility is not well captured by educational attainment and entry into the labour market; it needs to be considered as the result of unequal returns to social origin. These processes have been exacerbated by more general changes in the political economy. Increased nonstandard, temporary, and insecure work has undermined secure occupational trajectories and shifted risk in the economy from the institution to the individual worker (Kalleberg, 2009). Meanwhile, political choices around taxes, regulation, labor institutions, and organized interests have led to increasing income and influence polarization among the economically powerful (Hacker & Pierson, 2010). Inequality, therefore, is not a mere by-product of technological or market transformation, but it is also created and preserved by institutional arrangements and political decisions. In a similar manner, sociological study has also progressed from a one-dimensional approach to class. Analysis of contemporary class structures is increasingly informed by the interplay of economic, social and cultural capital, influencing not just material resources or networks, but identity, lifestyle and access to influential institutions (Savage et al., 2013). Responsiveness to inequality by the public also relies on perceptions of opportunity and who deserves what, and whether inequalities are perceived to hinder or facilitate real opportunity (McCall, 2013). From this moral perspective on inequality, the moral implications go beyond income inequality to issues of dignity, recognition, social suffering, and human rights (Therborn, 2012). There has already been a large body of research on social inequality and in turn social mobility, but these are typically investigated as distinct research programmes. Research on inequality tends to be tackled by analyzing income, status and resources, and life chances inequalities, while studies of mobility tend to concentrate on the nature of movement between social positions, and the intergenerational transmission of advantages and disadvantages. This separation is one that hinders the understanding of how social inequalities influence mobility opportunities, and how mobility processes,

in turn, reinforce or reconfigure social inequalities. Further, the theoretical frameworks, measurement methods, institutional accounts, intergenerational research, and cultural mechanisms are still scattered throughout the literature. Thus, there is a need for an integrated review that addresses inequality and mobility as mutually constitutive processes and sheds light on the production, distribution, and inheritance of unequal outcomes. Filling this gap can lead to a more holistic framework for making sustainable social change policies. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

1. To examine the theoretical and empirical relationship between economic inequality and social mobility in contemporary societies
2. To identify the structural, institutional, cultural, and relational factors that shape intergenerational mobility and reproduce social advantage or disadvantage
3. To assess gaps in existing research and propose future directions for studying inequality and mobility, particularly in middle-income and less-developed countries

2. Theoretical Foundations: Class, Capital, and Durable Inequality

Contemporary work on inequality and mobility builds on a long sociological tradition concerned with how societies stratify individuals into unequal positions and how those positions are transmitted across generations. The study of occupational mobility emerged in the 1950s with the structural attainment models, which introduced the empirical template of considering the family origin and educational level together to explain the educational level at the end of the process, with the intervening educational steps being represented by the intervening variable (Galán-Vivas, 1968). In this early quantitative tradition, the issue of mobility was primarily one of statistical association, but provided the foundations for subsequent more theoretically ambitious explanations of the construction and reproduction of class positions. This work was later reintroduced, and developed into an explicit class-based analytical framework by comparative scholarship which contended that movements should be understood in terms of relative rates of movement between discrete classes rather than by continuous occupational prestige scores. This view sparked a persistent and fruitful debate on how industrial societies tended to become more fluid as they became more modern on the one hand, and how rates of mobility remained largely stable despite a lot of change in the absolute positioning of occupations on the other (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). The structural theories have been complemented by cultural and relational theories which have proposed that systemic inequalities also occur via the inequitable distribution of less tangible cultural resources and competencies that may not be as obvious as financial resources but have similar impact. The idea of 'cultural capital' refers to the values, sensibilities and ways of 'showing oneself' that are learned at home which can then be used as currency in educational and occupational institutions, often seemingly meritocratic, but in reality, acting as a meritocratic system that privileges those who are already provided with the 'right' cultural attributes. (Bourdieu, 2019).

A complementary relational perspective argues that inequalities do not stem from lack of resources or culture for the individual but from social agents' creation of enduring categorical divisions, such as gender, race, citizenship, or organizational membership, that determine access to valued resources without taking into account individual merit. In this approach, inequality can be seen as a result of exploitation (where one group benefits from the labour of another) and opportunity hoarding (where networks exclude others from access to valuable resources), both of which are part of the routine, unremarkable functioning of organisations (Tilly, 1998). This relational framing has been found to be influential, just because it is a shift from the attributes of disadvantaged groups to the boundary setting practices of disadvantaged organisation and dominant groups. New more comprehensive syntheses of the stratification field have attempted to combine these three different analytical approaches into a single analytical kit for analyzing how race, gender and class shape social hierarchy in a variety of institutional contexts, which have argued that none of these mechanisms alone is enough to explain

the persistence of inequality across so many different contexts (Grusky, 2019). A second and perhaps even more foundational theoretical current takes a different tack and focuses on substantive freedom in a move away from income or class position toward the real freedom available to people to live the life they value (Sen, 1999). This capability-based perspective has been influential in shifting the debate on inequality from income to opportunity, agency and functioning and in the development of composite measures of human development which aim to capture capability in a society-wide perspective. All of these theories imply that studying inequality, and mobility, cannot be limited to an economic distribution perspective it is also an issue of cultural transmission, institutional categorization and the varying capacities of people to use resources to create actual life opportunities.

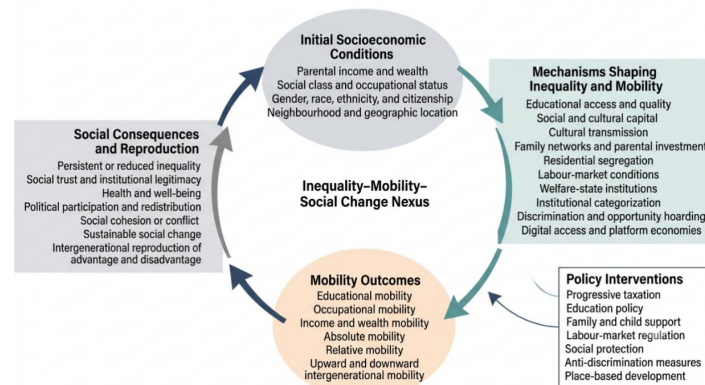


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the inequality–mobility–social change nexus

The figure 1 illustrates the cyclical and intergenerational relationship between socioeconomic inequality, social mobility, and social change. Initial socioeconomic conditions, including parental resources, social class, identity, and place of residence, influence access to education, networks, labour-market opportunities, welfare institutions, and other mobility-shaping mechanisms. These mechanisms produce different educational, occupational, income, wealth, absolute, and relative mobility outcomes. The resulting outcomes affect social trust, health, political participation, social cohesion, and the reproduction or reduction of inequality across generations. Policy interventions can modify these processes by influencing institutional mechanisms and mobility opportunities.

3. Measuring Inequality and Mobility

The methodological breakthroughs in measuring have been decisive for empirical advances in this area because the conclusions that can be drawn about degree of openness or closedness of a society will vary and depend on the measures used. Early U.S. economic research on the persistence of economic mobility employed intergenerational earnings elasticities, measures of how well a child's income is predicted by his or her parents' income levels; important research that utilized this approach identified much greater persistence in economic mobility than other work in the field had anticipated, spawning a series of replications across other national contexts (Solon, 1992). But this transition from mobility to persistence was evocative of the public, because it directly attacked 'equal opportunity' in market economies, which were strong beliefs held by many. Subsequent methodological research has questioned the importance of how experts in economics and sociology measure the degree of mobility across countries; and the results have been quite surprising, as the degree of mobility inferred from income elasticities is different to that inferred from class-transition tables, and hence countries' acceptability as mobile or immobile has shifted largely depending on the window of income elasticity calculations or the number of years on which the income average is based (Blanden, 2013). The methodological sensitivity is not a purely academic and technical curiosity, but substantive with consequences for cross-national policy learning, as different national measurement traditions can lead countries to come to quite different policy conclusions about which peer countries to learn from. In terms of the social

sciences, the relative importance of mobility as a multidimensional concept has also been highlighted, with absolute mobility (whether people are better off than their parents in material terms) and relative mobility (whether their destination is still determined by their origin, while keeping the overall occupational structure unchanged) both receiving attention, alongside the concept of structural mobility, which refers to mobility due to change in the occupational structure, rather than due to any change in the overall openness of the system. But a synthesis of the two traditions of measurement - economic and sociological - yields a more comprehensive and policy-relevant picture than either measurement tradition alone (Torche, 2015). The main purpose is to go beyond a single monetary measure and trace the conceptual and political origins of the movement away from using only per-capita income to indicators of health, education, and living standards together, for which there is a greater consensus that development is not just about income growth (Mahlert, 2022). Alongside these conceptual developments, there have been influential arguments that mitigating inequality is not a technical issue, but a political and policy choice; that is, it is possible to devise a variety of actions on both the demand and supply side, ranging from taxes through minimum wages to social insurance, which have the potential to reduce measured inequality without forgoing aggregate economic growth (Atkinson, 2015).

4. Intergenerational Mobility in Comparative Perspective

Studies examining the geography of opportunity in the United States, however, identify factors across the region from residential segregation and the quality of schools to the stability of families and social networks that account for differential local outcomes, as well as national-level policies (Chetty et al., 2014). The geographic approach was a useful way to rethink mobility as a place-based phenomenon, and to launch a new research agenda of identifying what place-based characteristics are causal and positively affect children's outcomes. Because absolute mobility can be tracked across birth cohorts for a much longer historical period, studies would subsequently look at the trends of the relative chances of children out-earning their parents when they reach the same age as they do. Subsequent analysis of absolute mobility, defined as the likelihood of children outperforming their own parents of a given age, would reveal a sharp and unabating decline since the mid-twentieth century for children of subsequent generations of Americans, even during periods of positive overall economic growth (Chetty et al., 2017). This discovery has not been limited to the academic world and has had a profound impact on policy and public discussions on the decline in the "American Dream" and on the question of whether greater total wealth has been distributed broadly. Cross-national evidence also shows that higher income inequality is generally associated with lower intergenerational mobility, indicating that unequal outcomes can weaken equality of opportunity across generations (Corak, 2013). Historical and surname-based approaches also have been used to increase the number of generations in which this empirical evidence applies, going back hundreds of years in some cases, as specific, rare surnames track family lines even after individual family fortunes go up and down. This study indicates that social mobility rates in the underlying trajectory are significantly lower and, indeed, much more resistant to short term policy interventions, than conventional single generation studies would suggest, reflecting the underlying influence of deep, multigenerational factors on social status long after any given policy intervention (Clark, 2015). In contrast, but in many ways in parallel, British sociological studies provide a long-run documentation of the development of class structure and class mobility throughout the twentieth century in a national context of considerable economic structural change and at the same time of persistent class inequalities, with the warning against interpreting apparent rise in absolute mobility as reflecting a rise in underlying openness (Goldthorpe et al., 1987). Comparative European scholarship has also looked at cross-national variations in the fluidity of mobility regimes, finding a variation in fluidity attributable not just to the general level of economic development, but also to the institutional context the generosity of social protection, the structure of educational systems and so on in which these regimes are embedded (Breen, 2004). In the light of this mass of sometimes suggests that there is no single trend across the advanced economies of either increasing or decreasing mobility, but rather a complex mix of educational expansion, labour market

polarization, immigration and shifting family structures which differs significantly across countries and for younger birth cohorts. Evidence across advanced economies does not point to a single pattern of rising or declining mobility; instead, mobility is shaped by educational expansion, labour-market change, family background, immigration, and institutional differences across countries and birth cohorts (Hout, 2015). Table 1 shows a comparison of the major empirical studies of intergenerational mobility in various national and historical settings. It demonstrates the relative mobility between places, institutions, method of measuring mobility, and time. The table also indicates the gap between an improvement in living standards and a change in social status.

Table 1. Comparative evidence on intergenerational mobility

Study	Country or region	Main focus	Key finding	Relevance to the study
Chetty et al. (2014)	United States	Geographic variation in upward mobility	Mobility differs substantially across regions and neighbourhoods	Demonstrates that opportunity is strongly shaped by place
Chetty et al. (2017)	United States	Absolute income mobility across generations	The proportion of children earning more than their parents has declined markedly	Shows that economic growth does not necessarily produce broad mobility
Goldthorpe et al. (1987)	United Kingdom	Class structure and occupational mobility	Absolute mobility increased, but relative class inequalities remained persistent	Distinguishes structural change from greater social openness
Breen (2004)	Europe	Cross-national differences in social fluidity	Mobility patterns vary according to education systems, welfare institutions, and labour markets	Highlights the importance of institutional context
Clark (2015)	Historical and cross-national cases	Long-term persistence of social status	Social status may persist across several generations	Suggests that mobility is slower than conventional two-generation studies indicate
Narayan et al. (2018)	Developing countries	Educational and economic mobility	Mobility is constrained by rural–urban divisions, education gaps, and unequal family backgrounds	Extends mobility research beyond high-income countries

5. Social Capital, Networks, and Educational Reproduction

Recent studies have revealed that the extent of economic connectedness the proportion of lower-income individuals who, on a community-by-community basis, have friends within the higher-income group is one of the strongest predictors of upward mobility in the United States beyond a number of traditional socioeconomic indicators, including local school quality and family structure (Chetty et al., 2022a). Along with this finding, the issue of mobility policy has been reframed from just thinking about income transfers and school funding formulas to actually increasing the opportunities for social contact

between classes. A companion study investigating determinants of this connectedness revealed that low cross-class connectedness was not directly due to a lack of contact across classes, because contact across classes is often present despite the opportunity, in shared institutions like schools and workplaces, but instead due to ‘friending bias’ which is the persistent tendency for people to form close ties with like-minded individuals even when opportunities for cross-class contact are large. This indicates that there are relational barriers that are often more subtle and not so apparent that perpetuate inequality even in ostensibly integrated spaces (Chetty et al., 2022b). These two studies together imply that policies that focus solely on residential or school integration might not be sufficient unless they are additionally intended to promote cross-class friendship. A key domain in which social and cultural capital continues to be translated into enduring concrete and positive future benefits is education. Comparative studies of educational achievement have tried to test theories of social capital as a collective resource produced by supportive family and community relationships, against a more critical view of cultural capital as a mode of class reproduction driven by unequal access to legitimate cultural capital and resources, and found evidence to support the idea that both theories provide different and complementary perspectives on the achievement gap, and that as such, neither replaces the other (Rogošić & Baranovic, 2016). The constraints of using school attendance as a mobility lever, as found in contemporary sociological reviews of British research on the relationship between education and social mobility, point to the issue that the improvement of social mobility solely through access to school does not necessarily lead to more equal life chances, unless there is an equivalent improvement in the quality of schooling and in the resources provided to support disadvantaged students (Anders, 2020). Ethnographic and survey research on the middle and upper classes has added detail to the evidence regarding the ways parents in privileged socioeconomic statuses invest time, money, and social capacity, with a focus on how they funnel opportunity into the children of privileged households, from enriching their education to carefully selecting their schools to socially networking with influential people throughout their lives (Putnam, 2016). This set of work has indicated that, even when formal obstacles to opportunity are eliminated, informal parental investment practices can produce much of the same pattern of advantage in other ways.

6. Structural and Institutional Drivers: Welfare States, Markets, and Risk

The amount of inequality produced in the first place in the market and the amount of market-generated inequality which is redeemed through redistribution depends on institutional context conditions. Advanced welfare-states were grouped into what has come to be known as liberal, conservative-corporatist and social democratic institutional types, with the latter being the most comprehensive in terms of social security, and these types were shown to have systematically different welfare-state outcomes in terms of inequality and social mobility otherwise economically similar industrialized countries (Esping-Andersen, 1990). This typology has proved to be a common template for understanding how countries with similar gross domestic products can experience such divergent levels of post-tax, post-transfer inequality and intergenerational mobility rates. This comparative institutionalism is complemented by sociological theorising on the transition to a risk society, which suggests that traditional class-based solidarities and forms of ‘lifelong attachment’ have weakened and that risk factors faced by individuals before have become individualised, thereby placing the psychological and financial burden of risk on the individual. (Beck, 1995). The rise of a new class-like phenomenon was noted in contemporary labour markets: the precariat, a social class of people who were involved in a largely unstable and insecure employment that involved multiple or discontinuous working experiences and lacked an identifiable stable occupational identity or career trajectory was identified as an axis of new stratification, only partly captured by traditional class schemes defined around stable full-time work (Standing, 2011). It has been particularly influential in discussions on non-standard employment and the gig economy, where traditional ways of measuring occupational class do not reflect the “precarious” nature of work. The institutional and labour-market conditions that affect inequality and social mobility are summarised in Table 2. It highlights that mobility is far from being just a matter of personal qualities and education, but is also shaped by the social environment and the availability of

Table 2. Institutional and labour-market drivers of inequality and mobility

Driver	Main source(s)	How it shapes inequality	Effect on mobility
Welfare-state regime	Esping-Andersen (1990)	Taxation, social transfers, and public services redistribute market income to different degrees	More generous systems can reduce the influence of family background
Labour-market insecurity	Kalleberg (2009)	Temporary, nonstandard, and unstable employment shifts economic risk to workers	Weakens stable career progression and increases downward-mobility risks
Individualization of risk	Beck (1995)	Social and economic risks are increasingly treated as individual responsibilities	Reduces collective protection and exposes disadvantaged groups to greater insecurity
Precarious employment	Standing (2011)	Workers experience unstable jobs, uncertain income, and limited occupational identity	Restricts long-term planning and weakens upward mobility
Educational institutions	Esping-Andersen (1990)	Unequal access to quality education reproduces differences in skills and credentials	Shapes the extent to which education can offset social origin
Social-protection systems	Esping-Andersen (1990)	Benefits, unemployment support, and family policies reduce or reinforce economic vulnerability	Strong protection can prevent downward mobility and support intergenerational opportunity
Labour-market regulation	Kalleberg (2009); Standing (2011)	Employment rules affect wages, contracts, bargaining power, and job security	Stronger protections can improve mobility by stabilizing employment pathways

7. Globalization and Global Inequality

But globalization of the economy and globalization of the technology have changed the level and the geography on which inequality acts and goes beyond the nations. The network society claim that informational capitalism has reshaped production, finance and communication on global networks based on the circulation of information and capital around the globe instead of a fixed territorial state, creating new hierarchies between those who are able or not to participate in networked value creation as a result of their skills, education and connectivity (Castells, 2011). This networked framing has proved particularly helpful when explaining the differential outcomes between cities and regions, and how globalisation has led to such dramatic success in some and deprivation in others, whilst being geographically close. Although rapid growth in large emerging economies has reduced some income differences between countries, inequality within many countries has increased substantially, particularly in several developed economies, where the gains from economic growth have been distributed unevenly (Milanovic, 2016). This global perspective is complemented by a comparative analysis of intergenerational economic mobility in multiple developing regions that benefits from new cross-country harmonisation of household survey data across dozens of countries, in which mobility is still much lower than in advanced industrial economies, and the unequal impact of education and a persistent rural-urban divide are highlighted as key drivers of the gap (Narayan et al., 2018).

8. Economic Inequality and the Politics of Redistribution

In the wake of this sociological mobility work, economists have documented and theorized the increase in the concentration of income and wealth at the extreme of the distribution, on the basis of newly available tax-record data over most of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A key historical argument on long-run capital accumulation is that, over long time periods, the rate of return on capital will be higher than the overall rate of economic growth, leading to long-term accumulation of wealth that tends to be increasingly concentrated on a small share of the population, driven by the same processes that occurred in previous historical eras before the mid-20th century when inequality narrowed considerably (Piketty, 2014). This long run historical perspective has led away from the purely cyclical perspective on inequality, and focused instead on a structural perspective that is related to the textbook equation of steady state returns to capital versus growth. High inequality can also reduce economic efficiency, restrict access to opportunity, concentrate political influence, and weaken trust in democratic and economic institutions (Stiglitz, 2012). Extreme inequality has also been criticized as being merely an unfortunate byproduct of efficient markets, rather than being significantly the result of specific and contestable economic and political policies that generate higher aggregate costs that can be distributed across various dimensions of the economy, political processes, and democratic institutions such as lower taxes, weaker antitrust enforcement, deregulated financial markets, and the politicization of the rule-making process by concentrated economic power that result in a polarization of income and wealth in favor of the concentrated interests.

9. Consequences, Policy Debates, and Prospects for Change

The impact of high inequality and low mobility is not just about material deprivation; it also has social, cultural, and public health impacts, affecting entire populations. There is robust cross-national evidence that relative social position, separate from the absolute level of a nation's income, generates real, measurable social costs, both in terms of reported poor health and in terms of social harms such as mental illness, obesity and violent behaviour (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011). This body of evidence has led to public health conversations changing paradigm from a purely “individual” and “behavioural” focus on chronic disease to a focus on the social determinants of health. As a result of this growing body of evidence, it is now in the interests of international policy makers to take steps to reconnect the relationship between work and social mobility as a workable social elevator, once considered as a given in many advanced societies, where this once reliable connection has been eroded (OCDE, 2018). More recent historical-comparative scholarship has further broadened this conversation about policy, in tracing how societies in very different periods and regions have justified and organized their system of inequalities through the evolution of political ideologies and property regimes and arguing that the inequalities of the present are not natural or inevitable, but the product of contestable ideological choices, choices that were made deliberately in the past, and remain genuinely open to democratic renegotiation of today's era (Piketty, 2020).

10. Cross-Cutting Themes

Reading the literature on inequality and mobility together reveals several cross-cutting tensions. The first is about the difference between absolute and relative progress. A society can have an increase in relative living standards, but have no change or even an increase in the correlation between the parental background and the socioeconomic status of the adults. These measures are usually confused in public discussion, assuming that income growth also implies higher relative mobility. While national averages are useful for comparison over time and across countries, they can mask significant regional and neighbourhood-level mobility variations. The quality of schools, residential segregation, employment availability, public services, and socio-integration offered across classes can differ widely within countries. Economic theories focus on wages, taxation, status inequalities and labour-market institutions, sociological theories focus on social networks, cultural capital,

organizational closure and status reproduction. Neither point of view alone is enough. Material resources affect the opportunities available to individuals and families, and relational and cultural mechanisms have an impact on the ways in which those opportunities get transformed into educational, occupational, and social advantages. Thus, a holistic understanding of inequality and mobility necessarily needs an integrated approach that links the macro-level institutions and local level contexts, and individual-level experiences.

11. Directions for Future Research

There are several important directions in which inequality and mobility studies should be extended in the future. The first step is to bring macro and micro levels together by comparing institutions at the micro level geographically. Second, it is necessary to pay more attention to the digital technologies and platform-based economies. Digital networks can broaden information, education, employment, and cross-class access and interaction, but can also deepen segregation by algorithmic sorting, unequal access to the internet, and employment insecurity through platforms. Research efforts are thus required to see whether connectivity in digital space helps to mitigate or exacerbate social divisions. Third, future research needs to combine distributive, relational and cultural mechanisms instead of considering them as mutually exclusive explanations. A combination of methodological approaches, such as mixed methods and longitudinal research, may help in better understanding the interaction between economic resources, social networks, institutional practices, and cultural expectations along the life course. Future research should give greater attention to middle-income and less-developed countries, where evidence on inequality and social mobility remains limited. Such studies should examine how informal employment, family networks, migration, education, and weak social-protection systems shape mobility across generations.

12. Conclusion

Several key conclusions are central to understanding social change in contemporary societies. First, inequality and mobility are two distinct concepts; their empirical relationship is deep, in the sense that high and increasing inequality correlates with declining relative opportunities for social mobility, in particular in situations where advantage is provided through cultural capital, social networks, residential and educational segregation, not simply income. Secondly, mobility is a multidimensional phenomenon, and its characteristics can differ significantly across countries, regions, and historical eras, driven by the institutional structure of welfare states, labor markets, and education systems as much as by the efforts and talents of individuals. Third, the integration of the world also fills in some historical differences between countries while at the same time improving the situation of certain countries, whether it be in terms of economic development or economic backsliding, in others. Third, the integration of the world also fills in some historical differences between countries, while at the same time improving the situation of certain countries, whether in terms of economic development or economic backsliding, in others. Finally, the aforementioned evidence from both sociology and economics indicates that policy interventions, including taxes, education, family support, labor-market policy, and anti-discrimination policies, have the potential to affect mobility, although there is still a lot of structural momentum in the transmission of advantage across generations. The results highlight the ongoing relevance of investigating inequality and mobility together as two forces that interact in learning how societies allocate opportunities and distribute risks and negotiate the prospect of sustainable social change.

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Volume 01, Issue 02

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