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Q2(c)

What is social mobility? Critically examine the classification of 'closed' and 'open' models of social stratification

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Stratification and Mobility: Concepts

Stratification and Mobility: Concepts - equality, inequality, hierarchy, exclusion, poverty and deprivation; Theories of social stratification - Structural functionalist, Marxist, Weberian; Dimensions - Class, status groups, gender, ethnicity and race; Social mobility - open and closed systems, types, sources and causes.

Core demand of the question

- Define social mobility as movement of persons or groups across strata
- **Critically examine closed and open models of stratification:** ascription versus achievement, caste versus class ideals
- Show that real societies mix the two and that openness is often ideological
- Use **Marx**, **Weber**, Sorokin and Indian caste-class material

Revision summary

Social mobility is movement across strata in one life or across generations.

Sorokin and later class analysis distinguished types of mobility, including structural change.

A closed model centres ascription, endogamy and birth rank.

An open model centres achievement, education and market class.

Real societies mix the two, as Indian caste-class studies and Western elite closure both show.

The classification is a useful type, not a complete map.

Introduction

Social mobility is the movement of persons, families or groups from one position in a stratification system to another. The movement may be upward or downward, and it may occur in one life or across generations. Pitirim Sorokin made mobility a central topic. Closed and open models are classroom types of how such movement is supposed to work. A critical examination treats them as models, not as full photographs of any living society.

Body

What social mobility covers

Vertical mobility is a change of rank. Horizontal mobility is a change of position without a clear rise or fall, such as a move from one job to another of similar standing. **Inter-generational mobility** compares parent and child. Intra-generational mobility tracks one career. Structural mobility occurs when the whole occupational system expands, as when industry creates new white-collar posts. Exchange mobility is a zero-sum swap of winners and losers. **Karl Marx** expected class polarisation more than a large middle rise. Later class analysis, including John Goldthorpe's work, measured actual rates. In India, the story of mobility is tied to education, reservation, migration and the informal sector.

Closed and open models

A closed model of stratification treats position as ascribed by birth. The ideal type is a caste or estate order with endogamy, ritual barriers and little legitimate individual climb. A slave order is even more closed. An open model treats position as achieved through talent, education and market success. The ideal type is a class or meritocratic order in which the child need not repeat the parent. Weber's class, status and party already warn that honour can stay closed while markets look open.

The classification is useful as a first cut. It is weak if it is used as a simple contrast of "traditional India" and "modern West". M. N. Srinivas's Sanskritisation is group mobility inside a supposedly closed caste order. Dominant castes hold land and votes. Andre Beteille showed that class, caste and power do not always coincide. Industrial Britain had class closure through property and elite schools even while it preached openness. Reservation policy in India is an attempt to force openness in public employment against ascriptive closure. Marriage markets still close many paths that classrooms open.

A critical view therefore says that closed and open are poles on a scale. Every complex society mixes ascription and achievement. The ideology of an open society can hide inherited cultural capital, as Pierre Bourdieu argued. The ideology of a closed society can hide money and local power. Mobility studies must measure rates, barriers and group strategies rather than rest on the two labels alone.

Flow diagram

Social mobility -> Vertical and horizontal

Social mobility -> Inter and intra generational

Closed model -> Ascription caste estate

Open model -> Achievement class market

Real mix -> Closed model

Real mix -> Open model

Conclusion

Social mobility is movement across ranked positions in one life or across generations. Closed and open models name ascription and achievement as poles. They help teaching, but living systems mix caste honour, class property and state policy. Criticism begins when the labels are mistaken for whole societies.

Facts & figures

Inter-generational mobility

Comparison of a child's adult position with the parent's position.

Sanskritisation as group mobility

A collective status strategy inside a system often labelled closed.

Bourdieu on cultural capital

Inherited tastes and credentials that make an apparently open contest uneven.

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