Book Reviews

Class and Its Meanings

Social Standing in America. New Dimensions of Class. RICHARD P. COLEMAN and LEE RAINWATER with Kent A. McClelland. Basic Books, New York, 1978. xiv, 354 pp. $15.95.

The major part of this book reports on a large-scale interview study of samples of respondents in Kansas City and Boston that attempts to clarify how people rank each other in terms of social standing. Though going much beyond them in methodological sophistication, the work stands under the shadow of studies of social standing by Lloyd Warner and his students in the '40's and after. In fact, one of its major aims is to determine whether conceptions of social standing have changed in the last few decades.

When asked "What does social class mean to you?" one-third of the respondents invoked only income as the standard of assessment. Such a response was especially strong among men of low-to-average income. In the sample as a whole, income emerges as the most important factor, with jobs judged to be next most important and, perhaps surprisingly, education trailing far behind. As the authors put it (pp. 219–220), "General social standing increases with slightly more than the square root power of income status, the one-fourth power of job status, and the one-tenth power of education status." In other words, wide variations in schooling have very little effect on the status assigned to an individual. A person with four years of college has only one-fourth more general standing than someone with an eighth-grade education—unless the additional schooling has also paid off in a better job and a higher income.

Perhaps even more interesting than the high saliency of the income variable in people's assessment of social standing is the finding that income status increases proportionately with amounts of income until what respondents consider an average standard of comfortable living has been reached. In other words, and contrary to the economists' general rule of decreasing marginal utility of income, every dollar gives as much additional well-being and social standing as the last one—up to the point defined by the respondents as a comfortable level. The average comfort point defined by the respondents, incidentally, is one that roughly 80 percent of the American population has not reached. Beyond the comfort point, however, the principle of marginal utility takes over; a person who has 50 percent more income than a person who earns at the level considered comfortable is judged to be only 40 percent better off in terms of social standing. Above the comfortable level, status no longer increases proportionately to income on a one-to-one basis but in proportion to the square root of income.

Moving to occupation, that is, the second major determinant of social standing, the authors note that it seems to play a less important role than formerly in determining social standing. When evaluating and ranking jobs, the interviewees tended to evaluate jobs primarily in terms of the degree of autonomy afforded the job holder and the degree of security the job provided. In other words, respondents did not feel that there were great differences between blue- and white-collar jobs that paid equal wages, but they ranked highly owners of a store, landlords, and self-employed professionals—that is, those who were seen as having autonomy and control over their lives.

Both Bostonians and Kansas City residents of all levels ranked education far behind income and occupation in influence on the social standing of people. This seems accounted for by the fact that they predominantly looked at education as a means rather than an end; it is seen as a preparation for what is really important to achieve: a high income and a good job. Moreover, there seems also to be a disillusioned feeling that in the contemporary world education may be a deceptive asset in that it does not always lead to the higher standing it promises. All in all, for every four respondents who mentioned more money as the mark of higher standing than their own, only one mentioned a superior education. In fact, envied talents or personality traits were as often associated with higher social standing as was a better education.

In addition to income, occupation, and education, the respondents used a variety of other factors to assess standing. Factors such as family background, manners, speech patterns, breeding, personal appearance, and taste were brought forward, more frequently, of course, by those in the upper echelons. The authors subsume such notions under the rubric "social identity and life style" and assert, without, however, giving numerical estimates, that these dimensions of status are judged to be ingredients of a person's standing. They conclude, but without proof, that "Americans *want* status to involve these considerations; they want standing to derive from a social evaluation of the whole being, with less attention paid to money than they believe it currently receives" (p. 91).

Combining into general status profiles the results of respondents' answers to the different questions about hypothetical families, and admitting that respondents were not furnished with data about housing, neighborhood, voluntary group participation, and education of the wife as well as of the husband, all of which might have modified their responses, the authors arrive at a hierarchical scheme of status groups that is not very much at variance with that found by Warner. People fall into five major groups (which include a number of distinct subgroups): upper-class upper, upper-middle upper, middle-class middle, working-class middle, and lower. The authors reiterate that assignment to these classes depends in very large measure on income so that a doubling of income brings a 49 percent increase in general status whereas a doubling of schooling brings only a 7 percent increase.

In the last part of the book, the authors shift gears and move from the study of subjective assessment of social standing to a different order of inquiry. They now try to find out what objective resources people make use of in order to reach a given level of income. The sample used for this purpose is entirely different from the earlier sample, so no comparisons are possible. In this part of their research, the authors move from the model provided by Warner to the status-attainment models of Otis Dudley Duncan and his students that have come to dominate stratification research in recent years.

The results of the second study differ in a somewhat paradoxical manner from those of the first. While income is the most important component of assessed social standing, schooling turns out to be the most important cause of or resource for actual social standing. Even though judgments made by people in their placement of individuals rely primarily on in-

come as a criterion, about 65 percent of the variance in the objective economic standing of the men in mid-career in the second sample can be accounted for by resources they accumulated at the time they began their work careers—that is, by family background and schooling.

While it is apparent that this work as a whole adds considerably to knowledge about the subjective assessment of stratification in America (the data using objective measures only replicate earlier findings), its utility is significantly decreased by its atheoretical approach. Theoretical analysis, ever since Max Weber, has distinguished between status variables and class variables. The former are anchored in the sphere of consumption and life-styles, the latter in the sphere of the market for goods and labor. The present authors, however, use class, status, and social standing interchangeably and thereby muddy the waters when constructing their hierarchical scheme of general status profiles.

Moreover, the authors cling persistently to a view of social class or social standing in which life-styles and life-chances are simple correlatives of position in a structure analogous to a simple layer cake. This obscures a central fact about systems of stratification, namely that people in the higher position have the power largely to determine the fate of those placed in lower strata. Warner's and the authors' Panglossian approach veils the central fact that in all class societies the resources and the power of the high and mighty are largely a function of the lack of power and resources of the downtrodden. One hardly needs a profound knowledge of the social sciences to realize when the Bureau of the Census informs us that in 1974 the poorest fifth of American families received 5.4 percent of national income and the top fifth received 41 percent that there is a relation between these data. But such reflections do not arise in studies of social standing that limit themselves to "what people say" or to the analysis of background variables in status attainment. As I have argued elsewhere, students of class and stratification ignore structural variables, such as class antagonisms and power relationships, at their peril. Without recourse to the theoretical formulations of Marx, Weber, and their contemporary successors, we might get, as in this case, fine descriptive findings, but we shall hardly advance a theoretical penetration of the veiled mystery of class societies.

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Niche Overlaps

Food Webs and Niche Space. JOEL E. COHEN. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1978. xvi, 190 pp. Cloth, $14; paper, $6.95. Monographs in Population Biology, 11.

In opening up new areas for intensive study the Princeton Monographs in Population Biology have been widely influential. Cohen's monograph, like its predecessors, is the first work on a subject rather than the last. Though most ecology textbooks discuss food webs, there have been few attempts to investigate their structure and its consequences. Perhaps many have been bewildered by the apparent complexity and lack of pattern in what they observe. Cohen quickly states that his aim is not to provide "a compendium of everything worth knowing about food webs." His major contribution, rather, is to show that their complexities do not preclude the existence of interesting patterns for descriptive and theoretical study.

The pattern shown by nearly all food webs is that they can be represented by interval graphs. In interval graphs the predator's choice of prey can be expressed as intervals, possibly overlapping, along the real line. The noninterval pattern requires at least four predators (say, A, B, C, D) and occurs, for example, when the only overlaps in diet are between A and B, B and C, C and D, and D and A. Such a pattern cannot be represented in one dimension as overlapping intervals (one per species), though it can be represented in two dimensions.

That food webs are usually interval is a curious, perhaps even obscure, property to which to devote a book. Yet such properties, being unsuspected, are less likely to be artifacts of the ways in which the data were collected.

The exact definition of interval and noninterval graphs, the choice of webs from the literature, and their analysis occupy the first three chapters of the book. The most important chapters are the next two, which ask: Why are interval webs so common? The first step in dealing with this problem is to examine attributes that food webs possess other than being interval. The second involves the demonstration that random webs constrained to possess these attributes contain a larger fraction of noninterval webs than those found in the real world.

Cohen produces seven models; each has one or more attributes (for example the number of prey species for each predator) equal to those in the real web under analysis. Each model makes predictions about the expected number of niche overlaps to be found, and comparing such predictions with the observed values permits the seven models to be evaluated. For each of the models a random sample of artificial webs is produced and analyzed. Even for the samples based on the models that describe the data the best, the artificial webs have an excess of noninterval webs over what is observed in nature. Real food webs are not random structures.

This section analyzing web attributes and the models based on them is the easiest one to criticize. This comment is not meant to detract; if the criticisms are valid they are also explanations for the rarity of noninterval webs. There are at least three factors that might affect the result.

First, a property that is interesting in its own right: the 4:3 ratio of predator to prey species in community webs. Cohen groups webs into two classes, sink webs, which are portions of communities consisting of particular predators and all their prey, and community webs, which are relatively more complete, consisting of all the major species in a habitat. Sink webs have more prey species than predator species, but since these webs exclude the predators' predators the total number of predators will be too small. Sink webs are also less grouped; community webs often contain "species" that are groups of species. This grouping of species varies with trophic level as one might expect: the lower the trophic level the greater the grouping. In the literature Cohen has searched birds are usually named to species, insects and plants are usually simply categorized as such. Even when (as in the description of the willow forest community) the lower trophic levels are not lumped together, the list of vertebrates (seven in this example) would seem more complete than the list of plants (only three). These biases must surely contribute to the apparent excess of predators.

Second, in the models some features are allowed to vary that in the real world are partly fixed by a number of factors. Cohen's models permit loops of the kind A eats B eats A, A eats B eats C eats A, and so on. These do not occur in the ecological data, except through typological error, and there are many reasons why they should not. The probability that random webs will contain such loops is quite high.

Third, the models are not constrained by the number of trophic levels and so can occasionally possess many more levels than are found in the data.

How any of these three factors affects