

MEDDELELSER OG OVERSIGTER

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN DENMARK: AN EXPOSITORY REVIEW OF KAARE SVALASTOGA'S PRESTIGE, CLASS AND MOBILITY*

I. Introduction

The student of stratification in the United States and in other large, complex societies is often hampered because he tries to analyze a complicated, largescale organization which is criss-crossed by many variables interfering with his perspective on the total system. Factors like race, religion, ethnicity, geographical area, and sectional differences loom large and tend to complicate and to distract the investigators from a view of the *societal* stratification system. One compromise approach is to make a community stratification study.

But some critics of stratification studies conducted in the United States have drawn attention to the fact that one must view the societal system as distinct from the community stratification hierarchy. These observers have quite correctly pointed out that the local system is *not* the national system. In studying Yankee City, Middletown, or Plainville one is not studying the United States, although West, for example, asserts at the conclusion of his study that Plainville is the United States. Although we probably know more about certain aspects of the way in which class and other stratification factors operate in American society, we still lack the kind of overall perspective on the United States which Professor Kaare Svalastoga's *Prestige, Class and Mibility* offers us on Denmark. It is most fortunate, therefore, that Professor Svalastoga has turned his attention to the study of the stratification system of an urban, industrialized, democratic society and in a sense offers the first detailed analysis of both prestige and mobility in Danish society.

Some critics might point out that because of its small population (approximately four and a half million), Denmark is actually a large metropolitan region. But there are a number of fundamental differences between a metropolis and Denmark, the most important of which is the fact that Denmark is a sovereign nation with a history of about a thousand years as a functioning member of the community of nations.

II. Description of the Research

The study of social stratification in Denmark was undertaken as part of a research program stimulated by the International Sociological Association. Svalastoga used modern methods of probability sampling, employing a two-stage systematic sample in which one adult Dane in every 915 was interviewed. The interviews averaged about three-quarters of an hour for the 3128 respondents who participated in the study. An account is given concerning sample design, stratification, sampling units, respondents, and non-respondents and also some of the techniques of interviewing. The refusal rate was six per cent; the other sources of non-response accounted for about eleven per cent of the total sampled population. A complete text of the Danish version of the interview guide is included, as well as an English translation of this document. The readers who desire to analyze in detail the data of the study, and also those who may wish to compare their inter-

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pretations with those of the author, are supplied with a mass of tables with detailed information. In point of fact, one hundred and eleven tables and eleven figures, charts, and graphs are included in the full documentation offered the reader.

The first major step in the research was to conduct a study of occupational prestige ratings. A sample of about 1200 persons ranked 75 occupations by the use of a cardsorting technique. On the card was printed the occupational title, the type of school examination usually required for the position, and the number of subordinates involved in the occupation. Respondents were instructed to place the cards in one of five piles and they were specifically instructed not to rank the persons as to how they thought they ought to be ranked, but according to the ranking the occupations would receive by members of Danish society in general. Svalastoga reported that he found the cardsorting method held the interest of respondents better than the use of direct questioning of ranking by means of an interview schedule. He also found a high degree of consensus; all the subcategories of persons, whether distinguished by sex, age, place of residence or occupation rated the occupations according to the same prestige hierarchy. It was also noted that the findings were similar to those made by other investigators in the United States and in England.

Svalastoga found that persons whose occupations were ranked low were more likely to devalue the prestige ranking of all occupations. He also reported that persons who occupy the middle positions on the continuum are more likely to be more objective in their social perspective on the ranking of all occupations. Similarly, persons who resided in middle-sized communities (population from 2,000 to 19,000) were most discriminating in their judgments. This finding was attributed to the fact that residents of communities of this size probably have a personal knowledge of more persons who hold the greatest number of different occupations than do residents in rural or metropolitan communities.

The student of comparative stratification will be interested in the author's observations that Danes are more conscious of titles and utilize them more frequently than do residents of the United States or England. One objective index of the greater usage of titles is the fact that titles and not first names of persons are used as a secondary means to alphabetize names in the telephone directory.

A majority of the Danes conceive of Denmark as having three major strata but the use of only three strata made it difficult to make a refined analysis of mobility. Therefore the researcher divided each of the three major strata into three subcategories (upper, middle, lower) which produced a nine layer stratification structure. The next problem was how to relate this nine layer structure to the occupational prestige ranking system which was defined operationally "as a score on a continuum derived by assigning values from 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest) to the rating categories used by a sample of raters". In point of fact, because the top three layers and the bottom strata had few or no cases in them, it was necessary to combine categories arbitrarily. Thus Svalastoga employed a five strata stratification system in his study of class differentials and mobility. The author concluded that the most important single factor determining social status is education.

A large section of the book is devoted to differential class behavior in which the author tested "the general theory that social status predicts social behavior, and that this prediction is improved by taking certain aspects of a person's occupational activity into account." In order to decrease the variance in intrastratum behavior the author tried to control on three additional factors: (a) degree of

occupational independence, (b) frequency and range of formal interaction required by the occupation, (c) occupational security. The operational indexes used to measure these variables were rather crude; furthermore, the index of occupational security – namely, whether persons were paid by the month or by the week – was employed for only one of the five strata. The author then proceeded to examine how a variety of factors are associated with stratum position: income, conspicuous consumption, associational participation, education, class identification, political preference, and others. A definite rank order was found for many of the variables, and the author was careful to point out the exceptions. At the conclusion of this analysis the author offered a description of the characteristics of the five major strata. The top stratum, the elite, was found to be a homogeneous category of persons comprising about three per cent of the population. The group comprised an occupational and scholastic elite who participated in more associations and more frequently held offices in the associations. The bottom stratum of the hierarchy was mainly unskilled urban workers and a minority of rural laborers. Svalastoga found that the urban and rural segment of this lowest stratum differ as to political preference. A preference for egalitarian political parties was more pronounced among the urban, unskilled workers, and this category, as one might predict, was the “stronghold of working class sentiment.”

Social mobility was the focus of several interesting analyses and was defined as “change of status or rank.” By definition the author excluded a discussion of horizontal mobility in which there might be a change of position without a change of rank. Two forms of mobility were distinguished: career mobility and generational mobility. It was reported that social ascent is more likely during the ages of twenty to thirty. In general, mobility is not great, for “highly fluctuating careers are extremely rare among Danish males.” The typical Danish male may have a gradual increase in rank in the two decades 30 to 50 years of age and on the average, the peak of his career is reached in the early fifties. The study of generational mobility was weakened by the necessity of relying upon the memory of the respondents and the limited number of observations which were available. Therefore Svalastoga concentrated his attention on mobility patterns between two generations, and concluded, “It seems safest to predict either invariant or slightly increasing mobility rates over the next generation whereas sharp changes or a downward trend does not seem likely.”

The author concluded his discussion of mobility by examining some of the determinants of mobility: structural changes (the distribution of occupational positions), demographic factors, changes in abilities and in educational opportunities, and attitudinal factors. The observation was made that size of the country may have an influence upon mobility opportunities, and Denmark, being a small country, had less opportunities than a large country. Svalastoga asserted that differential fertility was not as important a determinant of mobility in Denmark as had been suggested by students of mobility in the United States. He pointed out that the Danish fertility data are not complete enough to make a definitive statement about fertility differentials and the role they play in mobility. A number of interesting findings were reported, such as that respondents stated that the influence of the peer group was the most important factor in stopping their schooling. This was particularly significant for the lower strata. Svalastoga reported that seventy-one per cent of those persons who had not received any advanced scholastic or craft training stated that peer group customs were a factor in deflecting them from more education. Only fifty-two per cent of this group mentioned inadequate finan-

cial means to pay for additional training as a factor in limiting their education. The influence of the peer group seems to be an area that is worthy of more detailed study in research on the determinants of mobility.

Svalastoga also explored attitudinal changes as a determinant of mobility. He employed some interesting questions in this area such as, "Are you satisfied with your own position in society?" "If by pushing a button you could get any occupation in life whatsoever, which would you choose?" Unfortunately the answers to these questions are presented only for the total sample and for the categories of male and female. Thus some of the more intriguing relationships – such as correlations by prestige position or by class identification – were not presented.

The investigator also considered what he labeled "conformity factors": height, speech, literary and artistic tastes, party preference and he reported that these variables are related to generational mobility. For example, a male is more likely to be upwardly mobile if he tends to be tall, speaks in an "educated" manner and has conservative party preferences.

III. Critique

Svalastoga's analysis of stratification in Denmark recalled to this reviewer another sociologist of Norwegian descent, Thorstein Veblen, who was also a keen student of social stratification. Students of Veblen's work have pointed that his incisive analysis of the American class system was sharpened by the fact that he was a marginal member of American society. In reading Svalastoga's book the reviewer wondered whether the author's detached observations on Danish society may be due, perhaps in part, to the fact that Denmark is the country of his choice. Is it possible that the naturalized citizen brings to the study of his adopted land a mixture of affection, understanding and, above all, objectivity which native born citizens do not have?

The student of stratification who compares Veblen and Svalastoga must add that the two writers are far apart in their purposes and in their methodology. Veblen was a mordant social critic, essentially an essayist, who wanted to influence the nature of American society, but he was pessimistic about his ability to do so. This contrast between Veblen's and Svalastoga's approach is clearly pointed up by Max Lerner's observations about Veblen: "Of course, he did not give a factual survey of the culture. As an artist he picked his symbols and organized his analysis around them." Svalastoga, on the contrary, is not an artist but a social scientist who made precise and disciplined observations which can be repeated by others who have the training and interest to do so. Unlike Veblen, Svalastoga *did* make a careful factual survey of Denmark. Veblen was a social critic who had as one purpose arousing an interest in social change. He was not a professional revolutionist nor was he a political pamphleteer; anyone who reads a page of his writing can easily see that Veblen's style would have little popular appeal. One must quickly add that Svalastoga's style – clear and matter-of-fact – also has little popular appeal. But one must realize that he was writing for an audience of specialists, and the problem of communication is quite different from that of the writer who plans to attract a wider audience.

On the one hand, we have Veblen the essayist offering stimulating ideas, broad assertions, and conclusions which are not always buttressed by detailed facts. It should be added that this observation is not meant to derogate Veblen's tremendous learning and scholarship. On the other hand, Svalastoga employed careful

means of gathering comparable data on a cross-section of a society, and then carefully coded, measured and organized his data according to a constructed scheme of analysis. Veblen and Svalastoga thus represent two different styles of social science. Svalastoga is aware of the shortcomings of his methods and points them out to the reader at various places, but he is basically committed to an empirical approach to his materials. Even the most severe critic must concede that his techniques are very explicit and the interested student who has the required technical training can replicate his study or conduct a similar study in another setting. This cannot be said of the works of Veblen. In a sense the works of the two men represent the old and the new approach in sociology.

The author is extremely careful in his presentation and analysis of his data. In his final chapter, "Problems for Further Research," he suggests that "What is needed is a universally applicable deference unit" and he then makes the very big jump and states that sociologists and social psychologists need to be able to utilize ratio scale measurement techniques. Before sociologists will be able to use ratio scales in a correct way there are a number of problems in the use of ordinal scales which need to be solved. The author points out in his discussion of the measurement of occupational prestige that by rigorous statistical standards it is improper to employ means and standard deviations with ordinal scales. It seems more realistic, therefore, to expect that some of the basic measurement problems will have to be solved before the more complex ones involving ratio scales can be understood or solved. This is not meant to suggest that social scientists interested in measurement should cease their efforts to apply more rigorous techniques to available data.

The author's primary way of dealing with his subject matter is to offer definitions of the phenomena and then to convert these definitions into operational indexes by asserting that these specified indicators are the phenomena under observation. Some might argue that it would have been more productive if he had spent more time conceptualizing what he wishes to before he operationalizes his concepts, for example, prestige.

Svalastoga's methodology is positivistic in orientation, but his sociological theory is based primarily on writers who have been called functional theorists, such as Kingsly Davis, Wilbert Moore, and Chester Barnard. The author has tried to make explicit in operational terms what he means by functionalism, but there are still a number of important issues which he has not recognized. Of course the book is not a treatise on sociological theory, but there seems to be a certain naiveté in his acceptance of functionalist theory. He refers to "the principle of optimal balance" but his sociological evidence is not very convincing. He does not make clear how the major components of the Danish social system are inter-related in a system of optimal balance and particularly the way in which the system of social stratification contributes to the optimal balance. These are difficult problems on which it is hoped other students of stratification will throw some light.

Svalastoga's concern with stratification is not to change the existing social order for his primary interest is to describe and to analyze the *status quo*. Thus he takes a neutral position on the fact that some kind of a system of stratification is found in all societies. He does make the important distinction between egalitarianism as a political ideology and equality as a real condition in society. In the reviewer's judgment, he does not confuse the fact that on the one hand, stratification is universal (the criteria may vary, of course) and on the other hand, at

different historical times, and in varied contexts one finds widely different kinds of stratification systems. Thus from the standpoint of everyday political discourse he does not get involved in defending or detracting from the *status quo*. He simply accepts the system as given because he does not conceive of his work as bringing about specific changes in the Danish stratification system.

Svalastoga's interview guide contained many interesting questions, which could have been used to overcome one major shortcoming in the analysis, namely, a failure to present data "on the definition of the situation," or the "humanistic coefficient." His close adherence to a very strict operational methodology seems to make him content to report on how often a characteristic or behavior is found, and to avoid discussing the particular meaning which an event or behavior may have had. It is regrettable, for example, that the author did not exploit more fully by means of multi-variate analysis the questions which he had on status sensitivity, social integration, social participation, and morale.

Related to the above criticism is the fact that the author is content to employ social categories, and not genuine groups in his analysis. The first sentence in the book reads: "A group is constituted by the presence of observable interaction among its members." Yet the analysis is confined to standard social categories: age, sex, residence, and the strata which are artifacts of the research. It would have added considerably to our understanding of the class system in Denmark if the author had made, for example, cross-tabulations of a number of items with the question as to whether the respondent felt that he himself belonged to a definite social class. Svalastoga relied completely on the prestige rating and did not attempt to analyze in depth some of the most interesting questions on status sensitivity and class identification.

Analyzing his data in this fashion might have lead the author to ask questions which are more social-psychological, and which would add considerably to the meaningful texture of the study. His data on class-aspiration and how lottery money would be spent could have been handled in a more imaginative manner. He finds that the lower strata are more likely to say that they would use their lottery winnings to invest in their own business. It would have been interesting to learn whether this tendency towards middle class behavior is correlated with other middle class attitudes and behavior on which the researcher had excellent information.

Students of Danish society might argue that there are aspects of stratification which are overlooked. For example, although rural-urban cross-tabulations are presented for a number of characteristics, the distinctive character of the rural way of life in Denmark, as a factor in stratification, is not fully explored. There are problems related to linguistic and nationality differences which are not covered, probably more because of the need to focus upon the major contours of the system than because of the shortsightedness of the investigator. The specialist of various aspects of Danish culture and society should reserve judgment of the sociologist who attempts to view the nation as a total system and overlooks nuances of structure which, while know to the specialist, may not be significant if one is studying the society as a functioning social system.

One important problem in survey research, of which the author makes mention, but makes no systematic attempt to investigate, is the degree to which the class or status position of the interviewer may influence the responses obtained from respondents. Svalastoga presents a table showing a statistical comparison of the national sample and the interviewing staff from which we learn that the inter-

viewers were more likely to identify themselves as middle class, to express a non-socialist party preference, and to be much more active in public affairs, as speaking at a meeting or writing to a newspaper. It is regrettable that the author did not exploit more systematically the fact that 112 of the interviewing staff filled out the questionnaires employed in the study. It would have been a very easy operation to determine whether the class position of the interviewer was in fact a biasing factor. In a research report which is so complete in so many other respects the author failed to add to our knowledge of this area of fundamental importance to techniques of research. If we consider the interview as the starting point of good survey research, it is important that more attention be paid to the interview as a social situation, and the way in which different kinds of interviewers working in different social contexts may affect the results obtained. The author offers his opinion that some of the study's findings are more likely to be influenced by interviewer expectation than others. But he makes no attempt to support his opinion by showing how interviewers with different expectations did obtain different kinds of responses concerning mobility, aspiration, morale, etc.

There are a few minor points which are distracting to the serious reader. There are, for example, numerous typographical errors which a careful proofreader should have caught. Secondly, the index is not as complete as it might have been. Finally, there are many errors in grammar, spelling, choice of words, and the like. One should realize, however, that the book is not written in the author's native tongue.

Here is a book which in this reviewer's opinion will stand as a model of empirical sociological research for a long time to come. The care, accuracy, and completeness of reporting warrant the highest commendation. If sociology is to attain maturity as a science, these characteristics must become the hallmark of all quality research. The reviewer has attempted to point out earlier in this review some of the shortcomings of the study, but is of the opinion that the strengths outweigh by far the deficiencies. Indeed some of these defects are a reflection of the status of empirical social science in general. This is not, however, a pioneering study in a theoretical or methodological sense. The author has mastered the craftsmanship of empirical sociology and he has applied his skill to an important problem in the study of the structure and dynamics of a society. This represents a very high achievement in any field of scholarship.

*Gordon F. Streib.**

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