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FP/EW

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Professor Peter Townsend,
Department of Sociology,
University of Essex,
Colchester,
Essex.

Dear Peter,

Thank you for sending me a copy of your fascinating paper. I haven't before come across an attempt to predict a system of inequality based on age categories. I wasn't altogether sure whether you saw your generational model as a supplement to orthodox class analysis or an alternative to it. Assuming the latter, certain problems did occur to me, as they no doubt have also occurred to you.

In the first place, to argue that age will be the main determinant of reward seems, on the face of it, to forecast the diminution of the role of the market as the central mechanism of income distribution. But since age itself could clearly not have this function the assumption is that there will be an increasing degree of 'fit' between various age categories and the division of labour. The assumption must be in fact not simply that the best paid jobs are staffed by the young (which is plausible) but also that to be young is to be in a well paid job (which is startling).

For this to come about there would have to be, firstly, a rough match between the 'second generation' labour force and the number of those occupations which the market rewards best (say, Hall-Jones I and II). In the event of a large surplus of second generation men over such positions, many young men would have to enter less privileged jobs, so destroying or at least weakening the connection between age and reward. Secondly, and more crucially, the model implies a radical re-structuring of secondary and higher education, since as organized at present it is certainly not geared for the mass training of youth for professional/managerial/technical positions. As there are no signs of any such educational revolution it seems a bit premature to speak of an incipient second generation elite. Your Table 10 (giving the 1971 figures on age and income) indicates that the third generation (40-64) are still distinctly better off than the second generation (21-39). But perhaps you have time-series data to show that the extent to this advantage has been steadily decreasing? Without data of this kind the case would appear to be a bit shaky.

cont/...

Perhaps a stronger case could be made out for arguing not so much that generation will replace class as the main type of stratification in the future, but rather that the pattern of middle class life cycle earnings will become more similar to that of the working class, in some respects at least. Not that the rising incremental scale will be replaced by the 'wages plateau', but that the age at which income begins to decline, and the extent of its decline, will become more similar for both classes than at present.

Presumably, too, the status and identity problem which this decline is said to bring about would be particularly acute for the middle class third generation, given the close link between self and occupation which characterizes much white collar work.

This sounds a less exciting thesis than the straight generational one, but is perhaps a bit easier to defend.

Yours,

Frank.

Frank Parkin.

PS I'm sending you a copy of my piece on Yugoslavia under separate cover.