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SOCIAL IMMOBILITY IN THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

"**Any child can grow up to be president." So says the achievement ideology, the** reigning social perspective that sees American society as open and fair and full of opportunity. In this view, success is based on merit, and economic inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability. Individuals do not inherit their social status; they attain it on their own. Since education ensures equality of opportunity, the ladder of social mobility is there for all to climb. A favorite Hollywood theme, the rags-to-riches story resonates in the psyche of the American people. We never tire of hearing about Andrew Carnegie, for his experience validates much that we hold dear about America, the land of opportunity. Horatio Alger's accounts of the spectacular mobility achieved by men of humble origins through their own unremitting efforts occupy a treasured place in our national folklore. The American Dream is held out as a genuine prospect for anyone with the drive to achieve it.

"I ain't goin' to college. Who wants to go to college? I'd just end up getting a shitty job anyway." So says Freddie Piniella,[1] an eleven-year-old boy from Clarendon Heights, a low-income housing development in a northeastern city. This statement, pronounced with certitude and feeling, completely contradicts our achievement ideology. Freddie is pessimistic about his prospects for social mobility and disputes schooling's capacity to "deliver the goods." Such a view offends our sensibilities and seems a rationalization. But Freddie has a point. What of Carnegie's grammar school classmates who labored in factories or pumped gas? For every Andrew Carnegie there are thousands of able and intelligent

workers who were left behind to occupy positions in the class structure not much different from those held by their parents. What about the static, nearly permanent element in the working class, whose members consider the chances for mobility remote and thus despair of all hope? These people are shunned, hidden, forgotten—and for good reason—because just as the self-made individual is a testament to certain American ideals, so the very existence of an "underclass" in American society is a living contradiction to those ideals.

Hopelessness is the most striking aspect of Freddie's outlook. Erik H. Erikson writes that hope is the basic ingredient of all vitality;[2] stripped of hope, one has little left to lose. How is it that in contemporary America a boy of eleven can feel bereft of a future worth embracing? This is not what the United States is supposed to be. The United States is the nation of hopes and dreams and opportunity. As Ronald Reagan remarked in his 1985 State of the Union Address, citing the accomplishments of a young Vietnamese immigrant, "Anything is possible in America if we have the faith, the will, and the heart."[3] But to Freddie Piniella and many other Clarendon Heights young people who grow up in households where their parents and older siblings are undereducated, unemployed, or imprisoned, Reagan's words ring hollow. For them the American Dream, far from being a genuine prospect, is not even a dream. It is a hallucination.

I first met Freddie Piniella in the summer of 1981 when as a student at a nearby university I worked as a counselor in a youth enrichment program in Clarendon Heights. For ten weeks I lived a few blocks from the housing project and worked intensively with nine boys, ages eleven to thirteen. While engaging them in recreational and educational activities, I was surprised by the modesty of their aspirations. The world of middle-class work was entirely alien to them; they spoke about employment in construction, factories, the armed forces, or, predictably, professional athletics. In an ostensibly open society, they were a group of boys whose occupational aspirations did not even cut across class lines.

The depressed aspirations of Clarendon Heights youngsters are telling. There is a strong relationship between aspirations and occupational outcomes; if individuals do not even aspire to middle-class jobs, then they are unlikely to achieve them. In effect, such individuals disqualify themselves from attaining the American definition of success—a prestigious, well-paid job—before embarking on the quest. Do leveled aspirations represent a quitter's cop-out? Or does this disqualifying mechanism suggest that people of working-class origin encounter significant obstacles to social mobility?

Several decades of quantitative sociological research have demonstrated that the social class into which one is born has a massive influence on where one will end up. Although mobility between classes does take place, the overall structure of class relations from one generation to the next remains largely unchanged. Quantitative mobility studies can establish the extent of this pattern of social reproduction, but they have difficulty demonstrating how the pattern comes into being or is sustained. This is an issue of immense complexity and difficulty,

and an enduring one in the field of sociology, but it seems to me that we can learn a great deal about this pattern from youngsters like Freddie. Leveled aspirations are a powerful mechanism by which class inequality is reproduced from one generation to the next.

In many ways, the world of these youths is defined by the physical boundaries of the housing development. Like most old "projects" (as low-income public housing developments are known to their residents), Clarendon Heights is architecturally a world unto itself. Although smaller and less dilapidated than those of many urban housing developments, its plain brick buildings testify that cost efficiency was the overriding consideration in its construction. Walking through Clarendon Heights for the first time in spring 1981, I was struck by the contrast between the project and the sprawling lawns and elegant buildings of the college quadrangle I had left only a half hour earlier. It is little more than a mile from the university to Clarendon Heights, but the transformation that occurs in the course of this mile is startling. Large oak trees, green yards, and impressive family homes give way to ramshackle tenement buildings and closely packed, triple-decker, wooden frame dwellings; the ice cream parlors and bookshops are replaced gradually by pawnshops and liquor stores; book-toting students and businesspeople with briefcases in hand are supplanted by tired, middle-age women lugging bags of laundry and by clusters of elderly immigrant men loitering on street corners. Even within this typical working-class neighborhood, however, Clarendon Heights is physically and socially set off by itself.

Bordered on two sides by residential neighborhoods and on the other two by a shoe factory, a junkyard, and a large plot of industrial wasteland, Clarendon Heights consists of six large, squat, three-story buildings and one high-rise. The architecture is imposing and severe; only the five chimneys atop each building break the harsh symmetry of the structures. Three mornings a week the incinerators in each of the twenty-two entryways burn, spewing thick smoke and ash out of the chimneys. The smoke envelops the stained brick buildings, ash falling on the black macadam that serves as communal front yard, backyard, and courtyard for the project's two hundred families. (A subsequent landscaping effort did result in the planting of grass and trees, the erection of little wire fences to protect the greenery, and the appearance of flower boxes lodged under windows.) Before its renovation, a condemned high-rise building, its doors and windows boarded up, invested the entire project with an ambiance of decay and neglect.

Even at its worst, however, Clarendon Heights is not a bad place to live compared to many inner-city housing projects. This relatively small development, set in a working-class neighborhood, should not be confused with the massive, scarred projects of the nation's largest cities. Nevertheless, the social fabric of Clarendon Heights is marked by problems generally associated with low-income housing developments. Approximately 65 percent of Clarendon Heights' residents are white, 25 percent are black,[4] and 10 percent are other minorities. Few adult males live in Clarendon Heights; approximately 85 percent of the families

are headed by single women. Although no precise figures are available, the City Housing Authority acknowledges that significant numbers of tenants are second- and third-generation public housing residents. Social workers estimate that almost 70 percent of the families are on some additional form of public assistance. Overcrowding, unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse, crime, and racism plague the community.

Clarendon Heights is well known to the city's inhabitants. The site of two riots in the early and mid-1970s and most recently of a gunfight in which two policemen and their assailant were shot, the project is considered a no-go area by most of the public. Even residents of the surrounding Italian and Portuguese neighborhoods tend to shun Clarendon Heights. Social workers consider it a notoriously difficult place in which to work; state and county prison officials are familiar with the project as the source of a disproportionately high number of inmates. Indeed, considering its relatively small size, Clarendon Heights has acquired quite a reputation.

This notoriety is not entirely deserved, but it is keenly felt by the project's tenants. Subject to the stigma associated with residence in public housing, they are particularly sensitive to the image Clarendon Heights conjures up in the minds of outsiders. When Clarendon Heights residents are asked for their address at a bank, store, or office, their reply often is met with a quick glance of curiosity, pity, superiority, suspicion, or fear. In the United States, residence in public housing is often an emblem of failure, shame, and humiliation.

To many outsiders, Freddie's depressed aspirations are either an indication of laziness or a realistic assessment of his natural assets and attributes (or both). A more sympathetic or penetrating observer would cite the insularity of the project and the limited horizons of its youth as reasons for Freddie's outlook. But to an insider, one who has come of age in Clarendon Heights or at least has access to the thoughts and feelings of those who have, the situation is not so simple. Part One of this book, very simply, attempts to understand the aspirations of older boys from Clarendon Heights. It introduces the reader not to modern-day Andrew Carnegies, but to Freddie Piniella's role models, teenage boys from the neighborhood whose stories are less often told, much less heard. These boys provide a poignant account of what the social structure looks like from the bottom. If we let them speak to us and strive to understand them on their own terms, the story we hear is deeply disturbing. We shall come to see Freddie's outlook not so much as incomprehensible self-defeatism but as a perceptive response to the plight in which he finds himself.

Although the general picture that emerges is dreary, its texture is richly varied. The male teenage world of Clarendon Heights is populated by two divergent peer groups. The first group, dubbed the Hallway Hangers because of the group's propensity for "hanging" in a particular hallway in the project, consists predominantly of white boys. Their characteristics and attitudes stand in marked contrast to the second group, which is composed almost exclusively of black youths who call themselves the Brothers. Surprisingly, the Brothers speak with relative

optimism about their futures, while the Hallway Hangers are despondent about their prospects for social mobility. This dichotomy is illustrated graphically by the responses of Juan (a Brother) and Frankie (a Hallway Hanger) to my query about what their lives will be like in twenty years.

JUAN: I'll have a regular house, y'know, with a yard and everything. I'll have a steady job, a good job. I'll be living the good life, the easy life.

FRANKIE: I don't fucking know. Twenty years. I may be fucking dead. I live a day at a time. I'll probably be in the fucking pen.

Because aspirations mediate what an individual desires and what society can offer, the hopes of these boys are linked inextricably with their assessment of the opportunities available to them. The Hallway Hangers, for example, seem to view equality of opportunity in much the same light as did R. H. Tawney in 1938—that is, as "a heartless jest . . . the impertinent courtesy of an invitation offered to unwelcome guests, in the certainty that circumstances will prevent them from accepting it."[5]

SLICK: Out here, there's not the opportunity to make money. That's how you get into stealin' and all that shit. . . . All right, to get a job, first of all, this is a handicap, out here. If you say you're from the projects or anywhere in this area, that can hurt you. Right off the bat: reputation.

The Brothers, in contrast, consistently affirm the actuality of equality of opportunity.

DEREK: If you put your mind to it, if you want to make a future for yourself, there's no reason why you can't. It's a question of attitude.

The optimism of the Brothers and the pessimism of the Hallway Hangers stem, at least in part, from their different appraisals of the openness of American society. Slick's belief that "the younger kids have nothing to hope for" obviously influences his own aspirations. Conversely, some of the Brothers aspire to middle-class occupations partly because they do not see significant societal barriers to upward mobility.

To understand the occupational hopes of the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers—and the divergence between them—we must first gauge the forces against which lower-class individuals must struggle in their pursuit of economic and social advancement. Toward this end, the next chapter considers social reproduction theory, which is a tradition of sociological literature that strives to illuminate the specific mechanisms and processes that contribute to the intergenerational transmission of social inequality. Put simply, reproduction theory attempts to show how and why the United States can be depicted

more accurately as the place where "the rich get richer and the poor stay poor" than as "the land of opportunity." Social reproduction theory identifies the barriers to social mobility, barriers that constrain without completely blocking lower- and working-class individuals' efforts to break into the upper reaches of the class structure.

Once we have familiarized ourselves with this academic viewpoint, we shall switch perspectives abruptly to the streets to consider how the Brothers and Hallway Hangers understand their social circumstances. How do they view their prospects for social upgrading, and how does this estimation affect their aspirations? What unseen social and economic forces daily influence these boys? How do they make sense of and act upon the complex and often contradictory messages emanating from their family, peer group, workplace, and school? In examining this terrain, we shall touch upon many theoretical issues: the role of education in the perpetuation of class inequality; the influence of ethnicity on the meanings individuals attach to their experiences; the causes and consequences of racism; the relationship between structural determinants (e.g., the local job market) and cultural practices (e.g., rejection of school); the degree of autonomy individuals exercise at the cultural level; the destabilizing roles of nonconformity and resistance in the process of social reproduction; the functions of ideology; and the subtlety of various modes of class domination. Our emphasis throughout, however, will be on the occupational aspirations of the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers, how these aspirations are formed, and their significance for the reproduction of social inequality.

Such an agenda can be addressed most thoroughly by a methodology of intensive participant observation. To do justice to the complexity and richness of the human side of the story requires a level of understanding and distinction that questionnaire surveys are incapable of providing. The field methods employed in this study are not unlike those of most sociological ethnographies in which the researcher attempts to understand a culture from the insider's point of view. But my methods are unique in some ways because of my previous involvement with the community. Having worked and lived in the neighborhood for three summers directing a youth program, I was already close friends with many Clarendon Heights residents prior to the beginning of my research. Without this entree into the community, as a college student from rural New Hampshire I would have faced massive problems gaining the trust and respect of my subjects. As it was, acceptance was slow, piecemeal, and fraught with complications. But with the hurdle of entree partially overcome, I was able to gather a large amount of sensitive data, most of it during a twelve-month period of participant observation in 1983 when I lived in the community.

This study concentrates not on Freddie Piniella and the other boys in my youth enrichment program, but on their high school–age role models whose aspirations are better developed. Only Mike, my oldest charge in the first summer of the youth program, later became a member of the Brothers and thus is included in the study. Nevertheless, my roles as community worker and researcher

were never entirely distinct, and the dependence of the latter on the former is clearly illustrated by my first "interview," which was undertaken, strangely enough, not in Clarendon Heights but in my college dormitory.

One evening in late February 1983, Mike, with whom I had maintained a steady relationship since his graduation from the youth program a year and a half earlier, phoned my room. I had been down at the Heights that day and had stopped by his apartment, but Mike had not been home. His mother and grandmother had lamented to me about his poor performance in school, and I had offered to help in any way I could. On the telephone Mike gradually turned the conversation to school. He said he was doing fairly well, but he had failed English. I said I would help him prepare for tests, at which point he mentioned a report on Albert Einstein due in a few days. He had not had much luck researching the topic and hoped I could help. We arranged to meet the next day near the university. After reading an encyclopedia article on Einstein and photocopying it, we got something to eat in the college dining hall and went up to my room. While I did some reading, Mike worked on his paper at my desk.

Before I knew what was happening, my first unstructured interview was under way. Mike suddenly began talking about his future, about, in fact, his occupational and educational goals and expectations. The ensuing conversation lasted an hour and a half and touched on many subjects, but in that time Mike described the high school's curricula, spoke of his own experience in the Occupational Education Program, expressed his desire to work in the computer field, and graphically communicated the role of the achievement ideology in the school. His computer teacher, Mike mentioned, assured the class that a well-paid programming job could be secured easily upon graduation. When I asked Mike about all the unemployed teenagers in Clarendon Heights, his response manifested his own internalization of the achievement ideology: "Well, you can't just be fooling around all the time. Those guys, they was always fucking off in class. You gotta want it. But if you work hard, really put your mind to it, you can do it."

Thus began my formal research, which was to involve me deeply with the community during the next year. The data focus on the fifteen teenage boys who constitute the Brothers and the Hallway Hangers. Much time was spent with these peer groups during all four seasons and at all hours of the day and night. The simultaneous study of both groups was a difficult undertaking because of the animosity that exists between them and the consequent aspersions that often were cast upon me by members of one group when I associated with the other. In the end, however, the effort was well worth the trouble, as the comparative material that I managed to gather is of great importance to the study.

Field notes, a record of informal discussions, and transcripts of taped, semi-structured interviews with each boy (individually and, on occasion, in groups) make up the main body of the data. In the few instances where interviews were not taped, the dialogue is not verbatim. Rather, it is my best rendering of what was said, which was recorded as soon after the discussion as possible. To round

out the research, discussions with some of the boys' parents and interviews with teachers, guidance counselors, and career counselors also were undertaken.

This ethnographic account provides an intricate picture of how poverty circumscribes the horizons of young people and how, at the societal level, the class structure is reproduced. Before turning to the boys of Clarendon Heights and their families, friends, workplaces, and school, however, we must review the work of a number of social theorists who have tackled the problem of social reproduction. If we are to understand what we see on the streets, if we are to make sense of the forces that act upon these boys, and if we are to generalize from their experiences in any meaningful way, we must situate our work in a broader theoretical framework by letting theory inform our data and, ultimately, by allowing our data to inform theory.

NOTES

1. All names of neighborhoods and individuals have been changed to protect the anonymity of the study's subjects.

2. Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 154.

3. Ronald Reagan, "State of the Union Address to Congress," *New York Times*, February 6, 1985, p. 17.

4. Part One, written in 1984, refers to African Americans as "blacks."

5. R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 110.