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The individual and the collective

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Most empirical studies of social stratification and inequality remain confined to the micrological level, while their very aim is to construct and to test macrological statements. The first part of this paper discusses the main hypotheses that are implicit in this research tradition and that do not allow the transition from micro to macro. Based on recent findings in this field, the second part outlines a macrosociological theory of stratification, which allows the possibility of deducing micro as well as macro propositions that remain unexplainable by micrological theories.

Introduction

Some sociologists rightly think that social stratification constitutes not just part of sociological theory but also its very core. Based on our representations of social hierarchies, their emergence, crystallization, and the way they are changed by social actors, we can deduce statements on social relations that are supposed to be of macrosociological nature. However, empirical research in this field – such as the studies of Blau and Duncan,[1] Jencks,[2] Featherman and Hauser,[3] Muller and Shavit,[4] and more recently those of Vallet[5]– comes under a quite different category of syntax. For theoretical and even ideological reasons, whose understanding is a subject matter for the sociology of sociological knowledge, these studies usually remain confined to the micrological level. The multidimensional definitions of the micro and the macro have been pointed out elsewhere.[6,7] In essence, microsociology refers to the sociology of the individual, in isolation from his interactive groups. The macro level refers to the generality of persons in a situation. I would like to explore here some of the deficiencies of these definitions and try to construct and to test macro-level statements. In so doing, I will mention some requirements for the transition from the micro to the macro and additionally outline a model of stratification connected to a macrosociological theory that is still to be designed despite the significant advances achieved over the last three

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decades particularly in the works of Boudon,[8] Sorensen,[9,10] Coleman,[11,12] Cherkaoui,[6,13] and Goldthorpe.[14]

Implicit hypotheses of the micrological theory of stratification

A sociologist operates on the micrological level when he seeks to set up empirically the existence and measure the strength of the relation between the educational attainment and the occupational status of individuals. Whatever statistical analysis is used, this statement remains on the micro level inasmuch as it assumes that individuals are independent from each other in the same way that educational levels and professions are independent.

According to this hypothesis, the decision of an individual aiming at a specific university degree has no effect on the decisions of others, and does not influence other people's projects. This generalized decontextualization is typical of microsociology. It is true that the researcher is sometimes compelled to accept such reductionist hypotheses, especially when he has not himself designed the empirical data of his research, and when he carries out secondary analyses; we cannot, however, accept that what can be held as the exception should be the rule. It is unrealistic to assume that the choices individuals make with regard to education and jobs are independent from each other. The researcher must keep them in mind all the way through his investigation, but, this forces the sociologist of social stratification to keep asking the recurrent question: are the micro-level statements valid on the collective level?

As rightly pointed out by Coleman,[12] studies on social mobility and stratification are obviously unable to suggest answers to such basic questions as whether the implementation of a public policy reaches its objectives. But before embarking on the debate over the relation between macrosociology and public policy, which macroeconomists are used to, I would like first to draw the attention to the central issue.

Let us consider the works on stratification such as those of Blau and Duncan, Jencks, Featherman and Hauser, Vallet, and Goldthorpe's[15] first investigations (Goldthorpe's last ones being closer to the thesis I am advocating[14]). Most of these studies try to account for occupational status as if it were an individual variable similar to an attitude or an opinion. In general, research seeks to identify the individual, social and educational factors that determine this dependant variable, the purpose being to show that the family social status influences the educational level of individuals, which in turn influences their occupational status. To this end, we construct data on individuals that are considered as the unit of observation and analysis. The sample is selected in such a way as to be representative of the labour force. But in so doing, we base our research on numerous hypotheses.

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(1) Access to a job and occupational mobility are analysed as if they were a change in opinion or attitude dependent only on the will of the actor and his resources. However, if these variables are significant and must be taken into account to 'explain' recruitment and professional promotion, these two job-related factors are obviously often the result of market competition among many job applicants. Opinions and attitudes are accounted for on different grounds. Additionally, a change in an individual's attitude or opinion does not necessarily affect other people's. It may happen that a voter prefers candidate A to candidate B two months before the elections; on the eve of the voting day, however, he may change his or her mind and switch to candidate B. This change is a phenomenon well known, analysed and taken into account in forecasts. Most often, especially when a voter is not an opinion leader, it is assumed that this change has no impact on the vote of others. Nevertheless, occupational change is subjected to such huge constraints that the scope of decision-making gets very narrow.

(2) Occupational status is regarded as if it comprising an unlimited number of job opportunities, while it is in fact a scarce commodity. Indeed, when the interviewee is asked what job he will choose, the question assumes that the interviewee is really in a position to choose any job even if the job market is over-saturated. One can conceive that, in an opinion survey, three quarters of the respondents can share the same position on a political continuum from the extreme right to the extreme left. One can also imagine that half of the consumers prefer commodity A to any other. Yet, it would be absurd to assume that in a real society the same percentage of people could all become professionals.

    It is worth pointing out that the same phenomenon is encountered in surveys relating to the choice of a spouse, despite the obvious fact that the number of potential spouses for each individual is not unlimited. A son of a farmer dedicated to ploughing the land can only expect a very limited number of potential spouses. A son of a top executive with a large social network living in a metropolitan city and attending university can hope for a larger number, but has, on average, fewer potential spouses than a person from the middle class. This theorem stems mechanically from social position-oriented considerations as demonstrated by Blau.[16] Social homogamy is more significant at the two ends of the social scale than in the middle.

(3) Access to a job and occupational mobility are perceived and analysed

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as if they were purely individual decisions. They are tentatively 'explained' by identifying individual and social determinants – e.g. educational attainment, sex, parent's social status – and by studying the causal structure that links the independent variables to the dependent one. However, if the attained social status depends on the individual's preference for a specific job, it is also dependent on the employer's decision, the whole set of jobs he can apply for and other constraints that determine the market structure that he will have access to. Clearly, it would be fallacious not to take into account the interdependence of individual choices as a fundamental fact if we claim to operate on the macro level. Explicitly, this interdependence is as follows. The choice of a job relies on:

(a) The set of jobs that the individual can apply for, and from out of which he chooses one. This finite set depends on such individual characteristics as school and university education, professional experience, social resources that he can mobilize, and the degree and type of information that he has on the job market.
(b) The individuals who are equally interested in this job, who are likely to get it, and who compete with him over it. Whatever important competencies and resources a person enjoys, he can never monopolize supply in the market; there are always individuals equally competent and resourceful. Of course, the number of individuals competing for the same job can be more or less large according to the above-mentioned criteria. Thus, it is likely that applicants can go through a process of self-selection or even over-selection depending on the view they have of the job. A brilliant medical doctor, but with limited social resources in the French university-hospital system, realizes that she only has a very flimsy chance of pursuing a career leading ultimately to heading a department. In quitting, she leaves the position to the more affluent candidates, reduces the number of job applicants, increases the probability of success for the affluent and confirms the self-fulfilling prophecy.
(c) The interest of the employer in these individuals. The applicants can comply or fail to comply with the organization's recruitment criteria. The recruiting organizations take into consideration the individual competencies required for the job prior to recruiting. A degree is just a signal of the individual's competence and possible aptitude to adapt to the job and to learn further on the job training. The jobs are classified prior to recruitment based on

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a qualifications scale corresponding to job productivity, as described in the job competition model of Thurow.[17]

(d) The interest of other organizations in these job applicants. In this case, it is a matter of interdependence of organizations. Suppose I am an applicant for a post of university professor. The positions under competition in my speciality rely directly on the distribution of other positions in the same speciality in other universities, just as they rely on the jobs under competition in other specialities in the same institution as well as in other universities and research centres (institutional, disciplinary and organizational interdependencies).

This list, intentionally limited, does not exhaust the whole set of postulates that underlie the microsociological approach to social stratification. It shows the major simplifications undertaken by the sociologist on the microsociological level, assuming all things are equal and stable elsewhere and that all the other individuals keep their social positions. He seeks to understand the means that the individual uses to choose a job or improve his social status. This is also the case when we maintain, for example, that the father's occupational status influences the son or daughter's educational attainment, which in turn determines their occupational status. But macrosociological research cannot overlook the interdependence structure of the job market, according to which the individual action directly depends on the distributions relating to the competitors, the jobs, and the objectives of the organizations; this has been illustrated in the works of Boudon and Thurow.

One of the main reasons that has led some sociologists to oppose the reduction of social facts to mere individual phenomena lies precisely in the irreducible nature of the interdependence of the individuals and the specificity of the emergence of social facts. Since the teachings of Montesquieu[18] and particularly Durkheim[19] and Weber[20] some sociologists have considered interdependence as the key concept of macrosociology. It is not the size of the social system that matters but rather the particular nature of the relations of its components. Economists have rightly pointed out the fundamental significance of interdependence in the equilibrium theory as suggested by Walras, and thus accounted for some paradoxical phenomena that the standard economic theory fails to make intelligible. Among such paradoxes, one can number the independence between savings and the absolute level of income, the identification of the 'demonstration effects' by Duesenberry,[21] and the tolerance to inequality analysed by Hirschman.[22] Duesenberry shows that, contrary to expectations, savings remain constant over a long period of rising income. This puzzling paradox is explained by taking into consideration, not the absolute level of income, but the ratio of

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current income to previous peak income. He also demonstrates that consumption expenditures are influenced by comparisons with others persons' consumption, thus pointing out the interdependence of preferences for goods depending on the individuals' reference group; people accept more easily inequalities when they compare their situation to that of others belonging to the same social status. A change in the social position of an individual affects the expectations of others with the same social characteristics. Becker and Murphy[23] suggest modifying the general model of the standard economic theory by integrating the interdependence of individual's preferences, thus rediscovering the propositions of the theory of relative deprivation.[24]

Surveys resting on samples whose unit is the decontextualized individual inevitably lead to overlooking interdependence. Even if these surveys allow descriptions of occupational distributions, they do not lead to the identification and the definition of parameters specific to the job market structure since individuals are considered independent from each other.

Landmarks for a macrosociological theory of stratification

Hindrances in the way of the going from micro to macro explanations

Let us first examine the issue of the links between microsociology and macrosociology in social stratification. Suppose that a correlation between educational attainment and income is found by analysing statistical data collected on the individual level. Could we assert, on the grounds of this result, that a policy for the reduction of education inequality will have an impact on the income inequality on the collective level? In other words, could we shift right from the microsociological level to the macrosociological one? Or should we design procedures allowing for such a transition?

Let us simulate some possible cases by simplifying the social processes, which are actually a lot more complicated. Suppose that a society is made up of three social categories C_1, upper class, C_2 middle class and C_3 lower class. Let us also assume that at time t_0 there exists a strong positive correlation between educational attainment and income, and that category C_3 individuals have, on average, the lowest level of educational attainment and income. Let us call this initial situation S_0. Suppose further that political decision makers are sensitive to the issue of social justice, and that they develop an educational policy geared to the reduction of the educational handicap of category C_3 by increasing particularly the size and the number of scholarships, and by creating new syllabi and tracks that are supposed to be better adapted to the social conditions and demands of category C_3 individuals. Let us assume that this public policy yields good results and that the educational attainment of class C_3 individuals improves substantially. Will this

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policy, aiming at the reduction of the school handicap of class C_3, have an effect on the reduction of educational inequality at the collective level and could it also affect income on that level?

Perhaps it could if the educational attainment of individuals from different classes were independent from each other. It looks reasonable, at first sight, that one' person's project to pursue postgraduate studies bears no effect on the decision of one's neighbour to quit school upon obtaining the secondary school degree. However, this kind of reasoning may hold true just in a few cases, but it is not often well grounded. Educational inequality could remain unchanged despite a dramatic increase in educational attainment of individuals from C_3. We can think about two cases corresponding to two hypotheses on the educational system. The first one postulates its homogeneity while the second one stipulates its stratification.

Suppose first that the educational system is homogeneous. If individuals from classes C_1 and C_2 decide to increase their educational demand and, therefore, improve substantially their educational attainment to hedge themselves against a downward educational mobility, the educational inequality between classes will remain stable over time. At the end of the cycle, we can note a double translatory movement of the two inequality structures of education and income of S_0 at t_0. The new situation, S_1, would reproduce exactly S_0. Nothing would change and the strength of association between educational attainment and income would have the same value in S_1 as in S_0. Public policy would then have failed. Such findings would have been identified in some sociological studies such as those of Bourdieu[25,26] and Glaude.[27] However, an in-depth analysis of more thorough longitudinal data indicates that this is not the case.[13] But even if the reproduction of inequalities holds true to some extent, is it necessary to interpret it in terms of a conspiracy or manipulation of the educational destiny of class C_3 children by the dominant groups of the dominant class, as Bourdieu thinks? Such a theory is pointless.

If, on the other hand, the educational system were stratified, educational inequality would persist even if we witness, on the overall statistical level, a less significant correlation between family social class and educational attainment. Suppose that the educational attainment of class C_3 individuals increases, it may happen that those belonging to C_2 and *a fortiori* to C_1 change their strategy by getting more involved in better valued educational tracks – that is, those incurring higher costs and where risks of failure are higher. Some longitudinal data from the French secondary school system tend to confirm this hypothesis. For quite some time, the C_1 students would engage indiscriminately in the literary track as well as in the scientific one. Following the democratization of the literary track, they preferred to run more risks by engaging in the mathematical track. The same holds true of higher education.[13]

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The second case, S_2, corresponds to a real decline in the educational inequality. We should, in fact, consider a situation in which the educational attainment of lower social class individuals would increase more strongly than those of higher and middle class ones. In other words, the growth rate of C_3 educational attainment would be more important than those of C_1 and C_2. The public policy would be a real success. Would this reduction in educational inequality have a positive effect on income distribution? This does not seem obvious. If this general increase in educational attainment had no influence on income on the collective level, we would experience the most undesirable consequence of a meritocratic policy: income would be much less correlated with educational attainment in S_2 than in S_0, allowing other independent variables such as social resources to play a significant role in getting the best jobs and thus shaping the income distribution. This would indicate that the job market is not homogeneous but rather socially segmented.

It is, furthermore, highly probable that, in a situation characterized by a high supply of graduates in the labour market, the employers change their recruitment criteria and require, for the same jobs, employees with much higher qualifications than ever before. Moreover, since wages are more dependent on the job than on the diploma, it is normal to expect that, in such a case, the wages remain constant despite diploma inflation. It is also possible that employers consider that the qualifications required for the new jobs resulting from technological change must be higher. The diploma inflation can be interpreted in different ways. However, whether we are in a situation of full employment or not, recruitment will take place in accordance with the waiting-line rule: individuals with the highest diplomas are recruited first. In the case of unemployment, the least qualified are affected first. The employers' skimming policy will stimulate future job applicants to invest further in education in order to be entitled to the front positions on the waiting list.[17]

The third case of this simulation, S_3, corresponds to the twin decline in education and salary inequalities. On the social level, relative educational inequality would decrease in that the disparities between C_3, C_2 and C_1 would be reduced, although all the classes might have experienced an increase in the educational level of their members. Less wage inequality would, in turn, be witnessed: the disparities in wages among the classes would substantially be reduced. Nonetheless, on the social level, a decrease in the average wage would be observed. In this case, social change would respond to the Pareto optimum and to Rawls' justice principle with regard to educational attainment but would breach both criteria when it comes to salary. This situation S_3 would be preferable in a Pareto sense and would be superior to the initial situation S_0 since nobody would be in a worse situation in S_3 than in S_0 and since not only one individual but also all the classes would have a better state in S_3 than in S_1 regarding educational attainment. The distribution

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of educational attainment would also meet Rawls' ethical justice principle since there would be overall improvement, which would benefit mostly the underprivileged individuals of C_3. The change in the wage structure of S_3 would benefit nobody, and would even worsen the situation of individuals belonging to C_1 and C_2 social classes and would infringe Pareto and Rawls' criteria.

The fourth case of the simulation, S_4, which is the most optimistic one, corresponds to an increase in the educational attainment and wage as well as a decline in education and wage inequalities. S_4 would, in turn, meet the Pareto criterion and Rawls' justice principle. The members of the three classes would increase their educational attainment and their wage, but the growth rates of these variables would not be similar. C_3 members would register the highest growth rate followed in decreasing order respectively by C_2 and C_1 members.

It is clear that the statistical data of classic surveys do not allow for the testing of these hypotheses. It is then necessary to construct other evaluations that take into account the structure of the job market as well as a representative sample of wage earners and of job applicants prior to, and after, the implementation of an educational policy.

I have deliberately taken the example of the relation between the educational attainment and the wage, which are much easier facts to analyse than the job or any other collective phenomenon resulting from the aggregation of its components that sometimes leads to unresolved problems. The overall wage can, in fact, be considered an increasing function of the individual wage. But such a hypothesis will prove false in almost all the cases where the collective phenomenon cannot be expressed by a linear function of individual data.

Suppose we want to study the influence of social integration on employment. Let us limit the definition of integration to its structural dimension, that is the links between the individuals and the social networks characterizing them. Whatever the measure of this integration on the individual level, it will be impossible to aggregate the different individual measures to get to the macrosociological level, in so far as simple addition is by no means justified and does not represent any sociological phenomenon. We can even assert that it dissolves the propriety of the group and that it reduces the sociological aspect to the psychological one. Finally, it is important to note that aggregation will turn out to be impossible if the function that links integration to behaviour differs from one individual to another, as Coleman[11, 32] has shown.

General model of micro-macro transitions

By way of illustration, I propose to translate through Figure 1 the previous propositions relating to a macrosociological theory of stratification. It combines the sets of macro and micro variables as well as the mechanisms of transition, just

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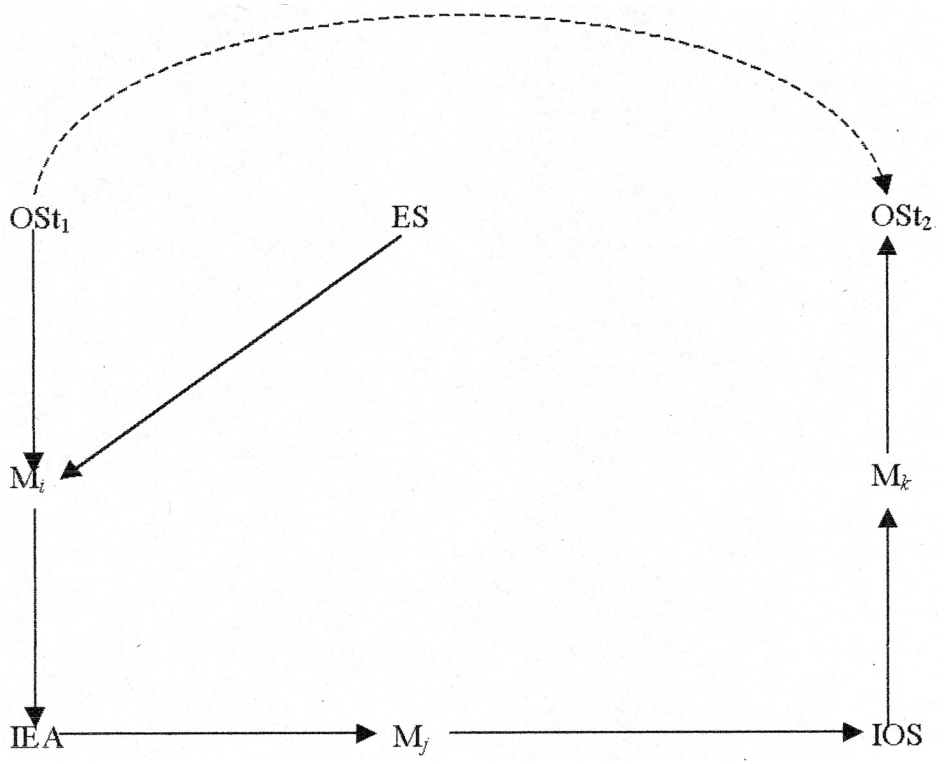


Figure 1. Relations between macro level (OSt_1, ES, OSt_2) and micro level (IEA, IOS) and mediations by mechanisms (M_i, M_j, M_k). OSt_1 = occupational structure at point in time t_1, ES = educational structure, OSt_2 occupational structure at point in time t_2, IEA = set of variables relating to the individual educational attainment; IOS = set of variables relating to the individual occupational status; M_i, M_j, M_k = mechanisms allowing for transitions.

as it observes the principles of methodological individualism and meets the necessary conditions of explaining macro phenomena, which are not the mere consequence of the aggregation of individual decisions.

Figure 1 schematically represents the relations and transitions between sets of macro and micro variables. We have kept just the most important sets of variables that feature in all the studies of stratification or mobility and discarded others such as the change in educational system over generations for simplification purposes. For the same reasons, we have also assumed the autonomy of the educational system from the social structure and the meritocratic character of the society under study. In other words, we have supposed that the occupational status depends only directly on educational attainment and indirectly on family social class. Finally, in this diagram, we have not taken into account the set of variables relating to individual characteristics, such as sex and intelligence quotient.

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Such simplifications do not violate the principles of macrological theory of stratification. The propositions likely to be deduced from this theory will not be altered even if we do not accept these reductionist hypotheses: it is enough, in this last case, to increase the number of relations between variables. To mention but one example, let us consider the hypothesis of a meritocratic social structure as shown in the diagram. We could easily discard it. The network of causal relations describing this type of non-meritocratic society should encompass another arrow linking OSt_1 to IOS via M*j* in addition to the ones already featuring on the diagram. This relation expresses what is commonly called the structure of dominance characterized by the fact that the children's social status depends not only on their educational attainment but also indirectly and directly on the father's social status.

Let us focus on the three basic propositions that link the macro to the micro, the micro to the micro, and finally the micro to the macro.

First, the individual's educational attainment depends jointly on the occupational and educational structures at time t_1, educational structure being the set of variables relating to the educational system, including school and university hierarchies and the social supply of education. No congruence is assumed between the educational structure and the social structure: in other words, the two distributions of persons between classes and between educational levels are not necessarily similar. The non-congruence between both structures is actually a general fact, as rightly indicated by Boudon.[8] The transition of the two sets of macro variables, OSt_1 and ES, to the set of micro variables, IEA, the individual educational attainment, is made possible thanks to M*i* mechanisms that express the interdependence of decisions relating to the educational demand of the individuals from different social backgrounds as well as the principles governing the actor's decision with regard to his educational projects. These principles are those of instrumental rationality and cognitive rationality, the latter being clearly defined by Boudon[28] and others.

The first principle is that of expected utility. It is a common denominator in almost all the social sciences. It purports that the actors – be they parents or students – are able to calculate the difference between the benefits and costs linked to all the available options and that they choose the one with the greatest positive difference. They are thus able to choose to carry on or cease their studies depending on the additional cost and income expected from pursuing studies. This prospective result is obviously grounded on the information the actors have on the relation between educational attainment and income. One assumes that the individual will carry on his studies provided he knows that by investing in education the jobs available to him will be more numerous and better paid. The same will apply if the expected income is higher than he would get were he to enter the job market right away.

Regarding the second rationality principle, the actors possess the required

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information on the relation between educational attainment and jobs. However, they are not adequately equipped to assess reliably the risks based on their past and present school performances, their age, the difficulties of their school project (e.g. whether or not to continue studies, choosing a highly selective track rather than a less risky one) and the probability of success of that very project. In short, according to this principle of cognitive rationality, the information the actors hold is neither perfect nor homogeneous: some can decode the manifest and latent operating principles of the educational system and some segments of the job market; whereas, others have only limited competencies to perform such intellectual endeavours. They perceive, in an ambiguous manner, the social and psychological consequences of further studies and upward social mobility on themselves and their family. The socially and culturally privileged individual who holds great expectations feels closer to his family, while the underprivileged who experiences upward educational and social mobility feels distant from his family background. As regards this second principle, non-monetary costs and benefits are not overlooked, and all the actors' arguments are contextualized without having to assume that these actors are virtuosi in economic computations. We can thus explain, all things being equal (e.g. educational achievement, age, and other variables), why some socially underprivileged individuals prefer to curtail their educational and social ambitions and stay close to their family rather than run the risk of severing all relations with it if they were to achieve strong upward social mobility. Girard[29] has analysed the fundamental relations between age, social class, school achievement and educational projects that Boudon[8] has formalized and upon which Cherkaoui[13] has designed a dynamic model of school survival.

Secondly, job selection is based on educational attainment. Although we strictly operate on the micrological level, we still assume that both variables or, more precisely, the set of variables, are linked by mechanisms such as the interdependence between individuals, the social network, and the structure of the job market. By not taking into consideration such mechanisms, we make one of the aforementioned mistakes whereby the individual can choose out of an infinite set of jobs the one that he would like to exercise. The mechanisms make intelligible several paradoxical phenomena. They allow for the explanation of the fact that, with family status being the same, some individuals from underprivileged social strata – immigrants' children for example – reach less high occupational statuses than others, although they have at least the same educational attainment. In general, the issue of the existence of M_j mechanisms is not raised, in so far as the two sets of variables IEA and IOS are located on the micro level. Coleman (Ref. 11, pp. 164–167 and Ref. 12, pp. 8–10, 643–646) does not make them explicit in all his charts that link micro and macro levels and that I have drawn upon to construct the diagram.

Thirdly, the transition from individual choices (micro level) to the new

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occupational structure (macro level) goes through the M_k mechanisms that particularly translate the adaptation processes of these choices to the new social structure at t_2. Nothing indeed entitles us to assume that the individual choices generate spontaneously and necessarily social equilibrium. After all, it is common to observe an oversupply in some jobs and undersupply in others. Besides, as individual choices are in principle heterogeneous, it is logically impossible to directly aggregate them so that they generate a social structure.

It is worth pointing out that job choices do not imply that the actors know these structural changes and that they take them into account. They can hardly ever anticipate them. If they could, there would be no more need to assume the existence of M_k mechanisms between the individual choices and the social structure at t_2, because they will be integrated to M_j. If social structures were transparent, easily understood, and taken into consideration by the actors as a parameter in their calculations, the social structure at t_2 would be the mere aggregation of the individual choices. We would never observe any lags in job demand and supply: equilibrium would be spontaneous. We can then accept the idea that, once the individual choices have been made, the social distribution of the individuals will occur in terms of these change adaptation processes and that the new occupational structure will emerge as a result of the interaction between individual choices and the process of different markets.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this diagram requires mechanisms between any pair of variables. Whether these variables are macro or micro, whether or not they belong to the same level, their relation becomes intelligible only when the mechanisms between them are clearly identified and analysed. This generalization has the merit to protect against any resort to the explanation by black boxes, this being possible when the theory reaches a high enough degree of maturity at least to allow us to identify these black boxes and submit them to subsequent research.[30]

This diagram mirrors such type of theories as the ones developed by Boudon, Thurow, Sorensen, Cherkaoui or Goldthorpe rather than those of Blau and Duncan, Jencks, or Featherman and Hauser. The diagram allows us not only to deduce the propositions congruent with the micrological theory of these empiricist sociologists of stratification but also to make possible macrological conclusions that remain unexplainable by a strictly micrological theory. One of these propositions is that, despite the positive influence of educational attainment on occupational status and the decrease in educational inequality, stagnation and sometimes even aggravation of social inequalities over generations are commonly observed in meritocratic societies. Finally, it makes it possible to outline a solution for a theoretical problem: the definition of the general conditions required for the transformation of the social structure by individual actions as proposed by Cherkaoui[13] concerning the redefinition of the hierarchy of school tracks in the French secondary school.

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A macrosociological theory of stratification is then possible, desirable and necessary. This paper does not claim to delineate such a theory even if it has the ambition to set some landmarks and to show the way. Its aim is far more modest, consisting of enumerating some central problems of the theory as well as of the empirical research. We have demonstrated that the theory of stratification remains hampered by rituals of traditional surveys and methodological approaches that have proven to be valid elsewhere but deficient here. However, no progress can be hoped for without empirical studies based on a methodology grounded on the principles of macrosociology. As shown in this article, simulation is an efficient procedure that allows the identification of possible cases of relations between the variables under study. Its use in mobility studies has certainly been crucial to obtaining significant results. But it cannot substitute for empirical data to assist us in assessing the realism of our ideas. Nonetheless, the costs incurred by some necessary changes in the classic empirical survey to serve the purposes of constructing a macrosociological theory are not high. Suffice it to add some questions to translate the principle of generalized interdependence, the structure of the job market and some social mechanisms. In one of his articles, Lazarsfeld[31] states that macrosociology is on the eve of codification. We share this view.

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