"Intergenerational Mobility in Britain, France, and the U.S. Since 1850"

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March 24, 2010

Abstract

Since the 1970s, a consensus has emerged among sociologists that rates of social mobility across generations do not differ substantially within a large set of developed countries. A much older literature dating back to Tocqueville, Marx, and Sombart in the nineteenth century, however, contended that mobility was much higher in the U.S. than in Europe and that this difference helped shape differences in attitudes and political outcomes between the U.S. and Europe. We have assembled data on intergenerational social mobility for three countries -- Britain, France, and the U.S. -- that extend back to the middle of the nineteenth century and allow us to assess whether the similarity in mobility across these countries today masks substantial differences in the past. We find that the U.S. was indeed considerably more mobile than either Britain or France through the end of the nineteenth century and that this difference was associated with easier U.S. educational access and higher geographic mobility, but that social mobility differences narrowed over the twentieth century as U.S. rates declined.