Narratives of the experience of upward social mobility in France, in India and in the United States

Jules Naudet
OSC-Sciences Po
The sample

- 3 countries: France, India and the United-States
- A total of about 150 interviews with people from a working-class background who achieved high positions
The example of the US sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Includes African-Americans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University (associate professors and professors in social and human sciences)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Including: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Public Service (Senior Executive Service Officers)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Including: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Sector</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Including: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Including: 12</td>
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Theoretical assumptions of the research

• One major assumption: the sociological differences between the group of origin and the approached group create tension

• Consequence of this tension: upwardly mobile persons need to find ways to resolve it or to alleviate it

• How do people deal with this tension?
  ➢ Two steps in the analysis:
  1° Typologies of the modes of adjustment to the tension
  2° Identification of repertoires and narratives that are specific to each country
Narratives of success in India

- Maintaining tight links with the group of origin
- Importance of the Dalit movement
- « Paying-back to society »
- References to the struggles led by Ambedkar
“I am no longer poor, I am teaching in university and I could say I don’t want to get involved in any social activity, in the movement. I could do that. But if I do that, what would I think of myself? What would have been the purpose of getting so much education? If Babasaheb Ambedkar had said “Ok, I got a good education, now I am gonna live a comfortable life” then all we people would not be here out of the village. So he had sacrificed everything and therefore we could come up to here. Now it is our duty to pay back to society. So we should not say: “I am somebody different, this and that. I took distance with my people.” I am here because of him. I should not forget that. And therefore if I am here it is because of all these people who fought before me. They fought for me; I will also fight for them.”

Pankaj, son of landless labourers, mahar, Assistant Professor in Economics, University of Mumbai
Narratives of success in the United States

- Downplaying the differences between the two groups
- Representations of a classless society
- The American Dream ideology and the fiction of a pure meritocracy
“Certainly, in this country, from the time people step off the boat or the plane, you just try to better yourself. And certainly it’s not betraying. It’s just the fulfilling of what everybody wants. And it’s not just people that came here. It’s everybody!”

Silvio, son of a construction worker and of a textile worker, Master of Public Affairs, Senior Executive Service
Narratives of success in France

- Class borders seen as very rigid
- The importance of social distinction: mastering the « codes »
- Difficulties of adjustment and social isolation often mentioned
- Being caught in between two worlds
I have not found my place. I am displaced. I feel I am not in my place. But this is not at a professional level. At this level, there are no problems. I am very much aware of my professional worth. It’s in the private sphere that I feel ill-at-ease. And this is linked to my social origins. [...] I don’t have the same values. I was not taught the same values as these people. But that you don’t realize immediately. My wife on her side never realized it. It was out of her understanding.

Gilles, son of a manual worker, ENS, ENA, Top civil servant
Conclusion

The national construction of social hierarchies

- A strong interdependence of class and status in France
- The importance of economic capital in the United States
- Caste and counter-cultural ideology in India