7 | **Daniel Bertaux**

Social Genealogies Commented On and Compared: An Instrument for Observing Social Mobility Processes in the 'Longue Durée'

Introduction

M odern science has helped us to understand that it is impossible to know 'das Ding in sich (the thing in itself)'. We can imagine its existence, i.e. construct mental images of it (mental representations which, as we have learned more recently, are very narrowly dependent on language and the '*épistéme*' of the time; see Foucault, 1970). But it is only through particular *instruments* of observation that we can get to 'know' some of its properties.

Instruments of observation are imagined and developed through the active (subjective) efforts of scientists trying to decipher some of the enigmas of moving realities; and first of all to *describe* some of their features. The focus is ultimately on discovering relations; but good (relevant) descriptions, 'thick descriptions' as Geertz (1973) puts it, are usually a prerequisite for the discovery of meaningful relations and processes.

Descriptions of the 'object' or processes being studied are to a large extent shaped by the instrument of observation itself. The instrument *is* not the whole image; but it certainly does shape it. To resort to a metaphor: even if the thing in itself is something as concrete as Praha's oldest bridge cróssing the Vltava river, every photograph of it will only show a representation of it from a *specific point of view*, at a specific *moment* of its life, recorded under a specific *light* with a specific *camera* on a specific type of *film*. This is not to say that a particular photograph of the bridge is not objective. It *is* objective; but no more and no less than an infinity of other photographs of the very same bridge, taken from different spots under different lights at different hours with different lenses and films.

The same holds true, I am afraid, for all social-historical processes, including what is still conventionally called 'social mobility'. However this 'thing in itself' is defined, it is made up of social-historical processes that nobody has ever *seen* with his/her own eyes; for such things are not to be seen (this one, however, is part of everybody's experience). Depending on the way one looks at it, this

process may be understood as the result of the testing and sifting, by institutions, of individuals, and their distribution into the stratification system (Sorokin, 1927); as the replacement of generations within class structures (e.g. Glass, 1964); as the process of (individualistic) status achievement (Blau and Duncan, 1967); as the competition of families, having at their disposal very uneven levels of various kinds of 'capitals', to place their own children as best as they can within a two-dimensional social space (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970/ 1977, 1964/1979; Bourdieu 1979/1984); or as the metabolism of a particular form of society nourishing itself selectively from the various kinds of human energy it constantly (re)produces and qualifies (Bertaux, 1977). Whichever way one constructs an image of this huge, complex, highly differentiated process, using conceptual categories that are as many tools for thinking, all these images will have in common that they point to an object, an overall social-historical process, which cannot be observed directly.

The sociology of social mobility research has however come dangerously close to confusing the representation (a particular representation) and the 'represented', the referent: the social-historical processes themselves. Its core scholars have come to believe, and to spread the belief, that statistical representations are not only one of the ways to represent the social-historical processes under scrutiny, but the *only* scientific, objective form of representation of such processes; as if they could mirror themselves directly, through statistics, on to the plane of objective representation.

It is indeed fortunate that we should have not one, but at least two or even three 'objective' (read: statistical) ways to picture the outcomes of the distributive processes of human beings: mobility tables, path diagrams and flow charts of (standardized) life courses. This diversity introduces at least some doubt about the monopoly of scientificity that each one claims for itself. There is an ongoing debate between the mostly European, 'class' approach (see e.g. Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992) and the American–Australian path analysis approach, which is built around the concept of occupational prestige. It seems to this author that the 'class' approach is more appropriate for societies that have inherited certain structural, 'class' features from their feudal past; whereas the path diagrams probably work better for societies whose pure market economic relations have eventually reshaped all the other spheres of social relations into markets. The third approach, i.e. the statistical mappings of those human flows that are made up of individual trajectories, looks very promising (see Blossfeld et al., 1989; Mayer and Tuma, 1990; Courgeau and Lelièvre, 1992; Becker, 1992), but ways to reduce the complexity of the data remain to be developed.

The sociological study of social mobility has made and will make much progress thanks to these statistical approaches. But perhaps the time has come also to try and compose a picture from another viewpoint, so as to complement the statistical images we have already. A new instrument of observation will yield a new view of mobility processes, a view that might also renew the *substantive*

discourse of sociology; for it is an observable fact in the history of science that scholars tend to focus their thinking on those properties of the object they can *observe*, leaving other properties unthought. The road towards the substantive widening of this field, therefore, necessarily passes through the development of new instruments of observation (Bertaux, 1991).

A New Method: Social Genealogies Commented On and Compared

The objective of the method that will be presented here, that of 'Social Genealogies Commented On and Compared' (SGCC), is precisely to answer the above-mentioned necessity. This method has been worked out over the last 10 years by various scholars (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981c, 1988; Bertaux, 1982; Andorka, 1990; Thompson, 1990; Battagliola et al., 1991; Bertaux and Thompson, in press), and rests upon the collection of data about *social genealogies* (to be defined later) and *family histories*; hence it is oriented towards the 'family' entry into the universe of social mobility processes. As such it has perhaps an 'old-world' flavour: it fits better in societies where family ties are strong, where they function as channels for the mobilization of resources (economic, human, cultural, relational resources) in the family-centred process of 'placing' the descendants on desirable social trajectories. In a society where parents feel hopeless because an institution other than the family (e.g. the Church, the Army, the Party) has the monopoly of people's allocation, the social-genealogical approach might appear much less efficient. But in human societies where parents, grandparents or members of the family group do project some of their identity on to their descendants (because the society's cultural model allows and invites them to do so), then the family, or rather the 'genealogy', entry seems fully relevant.

1. The 'Family' Entry to Social Mobility Processes

With a technique that allows observation in some depth and over the 'longue durée' (the long cycles of generations succeeding each other) – the *family-related* aspects of mobility processes – one cannot pretend to study *all* the aspects of human distribution, not even all of those that surveys leave in the dark.

For instance, one of the most fascinating areas for the understanding of 'mobility' processes should be the (explicit and hidden) *rules of competition* in various sectors of activity of the social division of labour. In a modern society, very different *games of competition* are probably played in such sectors as large industrial, oligopolistic firms; middle-range firms; small businesses; banking; teaching; research; armed forces; churches; civil service; professional sports; show business and other types of *situs* (sector of activity). It is plausible to imagine that each *situs* has its own *rules of the game of competition*, which can

only be learned the hard way, by playing the game itself; for the metarule of social life seems to be that the most important 'real' rules are kept secret, especially by those who enforce them. If knowledge goes with power, keeping strategic knowledge from spreading is a very powerful way of keeping one's power.

Neither surveys nor family histories as such seem to be of much help here; what it would take would be rather a kind of ethnosociological approach, such as, for instance, the one we used in trying to understand the rules of the game in the particular world of the artisanal bakery in France (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981a, 1981b; Bertaux-Wiame, 1982). In this particular research, a combination of the available morphological statistics – of interviews with key informants and of life stories of bakery workers, bakers and bakers' wives – collected until a *saturation* point was reached, allowed us to put forward a coherent and consistent vision of the inner workings of this sector of activity, which offers to the young bakery workers it employs genuine opportunities to move into self-employment through (very) hard work. One may however assume that other sectors of French society work in very different ways, and that *each* would require a particular study.

Nevertheless, even in this area of study one can sense the importance of family influence. One might for instance expect a strong influence of the family of procreation's *situs* on the orientation of children's educational orientation and professional choice; for, while the expectations of status achievement that are projected on to children are obviously related to (parents') social status, the *concrete resources* they are able to pass on to their children, especially the key resources of insider's information about the rules of the game and interpersonal connections, are clearly *situs*-bound. The few available inquiries into *situs*-inheritance indeed show that it is quite strong (see e.g. de Singly and Thélot, 1988).

This is only one instance of the importance of what could be called the *family dimension* of mobility processes. This expression should not be understood to refer only to the influence of family of origin upon the children's destinies: the latter phenomenon is part of the picture, but not the whole picture. 'Family dimension' also refers, for example, to such issues as whether it is individuals or *families as such* that move up or down the social ladder, or that migrate (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1981c), or to the extent to which occupational trajectories get influenced by family factors such as spouse's trajectory (Thompson, 1990), or to the roles women play as wives, mothers, etc. in shaping their kin's destinies.

The crux of the matter lies in the relations between generations within families, as seen from a mobility perspective. If one assumes that a couple is by itself not a family, and that it takes children, that is, the interaction of *two* generations, to make a family, then the dynamics between these two generations are at the centre of family life. In a modern society, where status is not ascribed but 'achieved' by individuals using their own skills, but also whatever resources

their parents and kin can mobilize to help them, the largely undecided issue of children's destinies is always to some extent a focus of attention, worries, strategies, efforts and mobilizations. To *what* extent is a matter that depends on group norms and family values: some social groups are more achievement-oriented than others, and within the same groups families also differ as to their priorities in the use of scarce resources. Sociologically speaking, some of the key concepts here might be the *transmissibility* of the various kinds of resources: economic, cultural, relational, informational, 'locational' (geographical-residential) and moral resources (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1988; Bertaux and Thompson, 1993b).

Moral, cultural and other kinds of transmissions take place in the 'longue durée', mostly during infancy and school years. They operate little by little, in everyday practices that often escape consciousness, and with slow-motion effects that only become visible after periods measured in years and even decades. This temporal dimension makes them difficult to observe directly; but one may collect 'family stories', that is, testimonies of members of the same family about their (past or present) family life and its norms, values, habits, conducts, projects, strategies, transmissions and conflicts. Together with life stories, such 'family stories' should contribute to an understanding of 'what is made of children' and, to paraphrase Sartre, 'what (children and eventually grown-ups) do of what has been made of them'.

That family values are crucial in developing, for example, an orientation towards entrepreneurship has been amply documented already (for one of the most interesting examples see the relationship that Paul Thompson has established between the contrasting ways children are brought up in various fishing communities in Scotland, on the one hand, and the success or failure of such communities in adapting to rapidly changing technologies and markets on the other hand; Thompson, 1983). One may also, in an inverse 'structuralist' way, study the effects of a family business on the destinies of successive generations, and document how sons, nephews, sons-in-law or sometimes daughters who had other dreams, eventually get 'captured' by the economic availability and moral necessity of perpetuating the family business (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1988; Amiot, 1991). The tradition of *case studies* (Platt, 1990) provides here an excellent, albeit little-used, model for the development of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

The strongest points of good case studies are their ethnosociological density – for example, Geertz's 'thick description' – and the wealth of ideas, hypotheses and concepts that come out of them. Their weakest point, at least in the light of the scientific epistemology that still largely prevails in sociology, lies in the difficulties of generalizing from case studies. Even if such taken-for-granted core methodological concepts as 'representativity' and 'generalization' deserve closer examination, it has to be acknowledged that the kind of intensive and local knowledge that is produced by case studies is as ill-suited to extensive

generalization as the extensive information yielded by surveys is ill-suited to in-depth understanding of concrete, local patterns of culture and what is called here 'rules of the game'.

It is to try and go beyond this contradiction between the extensive and the intensive, the quantitative and the 'qualitative' (read: non-quantitative) approaches, that the method proposed here has been developed. Its purpose is to combine the qualities of the two approaches so as to grasp the family-related processes that shape human destinies both in their concreteness and in their frequency, in their historical manifestations, cultural differences and sociological consistency.

2. The Relevance of Family Transmissions in Urban Society

Kinship relationships over several generations are usually studied in rural societies that are (relatively) highly stable. In such societies, the life path is to a large extent predetermined by birth. Family of origin, gender, birth order and the pressure of norms narrowly restrict the range of 'choices' in occupation, marital partner, residence, way of life. The only way to escape one's preconstrained destiny is to leave the village.

The city, the metropolis, the urban environment are however becoming the natural milieu of human beings. In most of the world today, cities are made up by and of markets: labour markets, credit markets, housing markets, marriage 'markets', goods markets; and also markets for health services, for schools, for entertainments, etc. The concept of the market, however, does not really capture the sociological truth of urban living, which is that in societies shaped by markets, *people themselves* are on the market, trying to exchange whatever they have to offer in order to make a living, find a partner, make their life better, move up or merely to survive. To qualify such a context, the expression of *generalized social competition* ('concurrence sociale généralisée') may be more useful than the market concept.

Within such contexts of protracted generalized competition, kinship ties take on new meanings. Families become essential as places where physical, intellectual and moral energies get differentially produced and renewed, as units for strategic thinking and resource mobilization, and as protective nets against harsh competition. To caricature: without a good home, children will fail in the competition for good school grades; youths will fail in the quest for a good job, or for a valuable partner; adults, men and women, will not be able to stand the pressure of work relationships and to play the game of the struggle for life.

Modern realities are of course much more complex than this over-simplified picture would have it. The point however is that the harder the generalized competition, the more important will be the resources that individuals (and nuclear families) can receive from their parents and kin, be they economic resources, cultural resources, physical resources, connections or other kinds of trump cards in the tough game of urban life. The latter, rather than suppressing the role of kinship ties, may simply be redefining it.

Hence the importance of the transmissions, between generations, of various kinds of resources (Bernard and Renaud, 1976); and the value of an instrument that would allow one to observe such transmissions in the 'longue durée'. The instrument should focus on the processes of transmissions in various social milieux; to explore each case in depth; but to pick up cases and study them so as to make the case studies comparable and complementary with each other so that, in the end, one would be able to say something about the whole process which each case study illuminates only partially. In doing case studies one should quantify what can be quantified, in order to make room for statistical treatment if and when it proves meaningful (Gribaudi, 1987).

This is the general philosophy of the method. There are no doubt several ways to implement it. For instance, one could reconstruct through interviews the 'family histories' of a representative sample of nuclear families in a given society; this is the approach Paul Thompson has been exploring (Thompson, 1990). The one we are going to describe here is slightly different: it enlarges the unit of observation from one to several nuclear families related by kinship ties; as for the construction of the sample it rather follows the route of 'theoretical sampling' mapped out by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

3. From EGO-centred to Socio-centred Genealogies

In the method of Social Genealogies Commented On and Compared, the unit of observation is not an individual, but a set of life trajectories of individuals (and nuclear families) connected by kinship relations. The basic idea is to define the unit of observation so as to include several generations (at least three), and to have roughly as many persons/couples on each generation; in short, to define 'rectangular' genealogies.

The genealogical idea is central to the cultural models of most preliterate societies, where kinship relationships constitute the core matrix of all social relationships. It has also played a central role throughout the whole history of Europe; but because of its focus on 'blood' and 'ancestors' it has been rejected by the universalistic and individualistic values that form the core of western modernity's cultural model (L. Dumont, 1977, 1983).

The paradox is that what makes traditional genealogies inadequate for the sociologist is their focus on *one* individual. Their usual form is the 'family-tree' of one person, EGO; it looks like an inverted pyramid made up of increasingly numerous layers of ancestors: parents, grandparents, great grandparents and so on. The symmetrical form is the 'généalogie descendante', whereby all descendants of a given person, usually some king, lord, or perhaps robber baron, are traced down, making up an upright pyramid with EGO at the vortex.

Both these forms may be called ego-centred genealogies. Each one of us, each individual *is* the tip of two such twin pyramids, the one made up of her/his ancestors, the other made up of her/his (real and virtual) descendants. *Each* person on a genealogical tree is actually a point where two such inverted pyramids touch each other at their vortex. If all such ego-centred genealogies

were actually drawn for a given society, the real structure of objective kinship relationships over generations in this society would be made explicit. Although kinship is made up of simple elements, i.e. alliance, filiation and siblinghood, the resulting effects of their combinations are very complex. But what is important for our purpose is that when one tries to imagine how such a network would look, the pyramidal shape of traditional genealogies loses its salience, it appears as a mere consequence of their focus on individuals (EGOs). In what may be called a *socio-centred genealogy*, generations made up of unlimited numbers of (mostly paired) individuals are seen to succeed each other, their members establishing links of marriage between themselves and raising children that will in turn form couples and procreate.

4. The 'Window': Definition of the Unit of Observation

One of the core ideas of the viewpoint developed in the previous section is that the unit of sociological observation of family-related mobility processes should not be the individual, not even the nuclear family, but a portion of this unlimited texture of kinship ties that link together the members of one population. In order to register both the effects of social change on individuals' and families' destinies *and* the transmissions within families, the unit of observation should comprise at least three generations in depth, and take up a roughly rectangular (or trapezoid) shape, thus mirroring the replacement of generations in the society at large. Hence the question: how to carve, on the texture of kinship relations, a *window of observation* that would take up such a shape? What could be a rectangular (or trapezoid) genealogy?

There are probably several answers to this riddle; only one will be proposed here. Let us start with a couple of middle-aged adults, referred to hereinafter as the Couple of Father and Mother, which will be at the centre of the 'window'. We shall include in this window the children of this couple, the parents of the Father and the parents of the Mother; we will also include the Mother's siblings, their spouses and their children (Mother's nieces and nephews); and the same on Father's side. In this way there are, on the middle-generation level and on the younger-generation level, enough couples and individuals to afford a comparison and avoid focusing on one lineage only (Figure 1).

With such a definition (Bertaux, 1992a), however, the level of the older generation contains only four persons (two pairs of 'grandparents'), too few to bring enough relevant information. One solution would seem to be to include in the window the siblings of those four persons (Grandfathers and Grandmothers). This solution, however, is not the best, since the descendants of these siblings, although linked 'upwardly' through their parents to the rest of the core Couple's kinship network, will not establish links with it anymore; their lineages will go their own ways.

A better solution consists in including the *parents of the spouses* of Father's or Mother's siblings. Although such couples seem very remote from the central
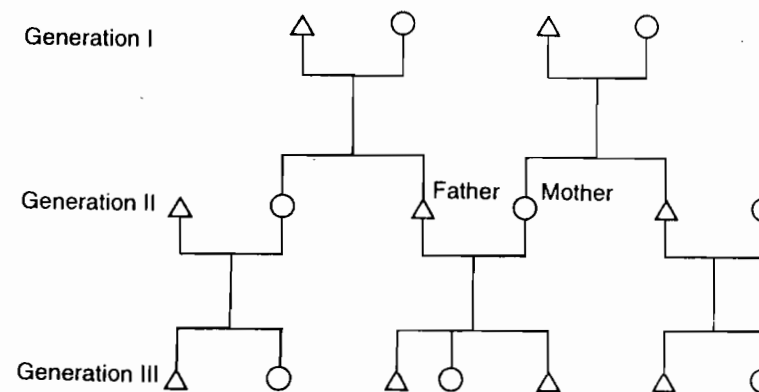
Figure 1. Window of Observation for Viewing Three Generations

Couple (they are *three* links away: sibling/alliance/ascendancy) they are indeed grandparents of the Couple's nephews and nieces. From all the lineages of descent issuing from each of those added couples, *one* will each time link by marriage to the core network at the middle-level generation. If $(f + m)$ is the number of siblings of, respectively, Father and Mother, and if all get married, then the number of couples in the middle generation will be $(f + m + 1)$; and the number of couples in the older generation will be $(f + m + 2)$. If we are in a society in which the average number of surviving children is about 2, then the unit of observation carved by the *window* thus defined will indeed mirror the general process of generations succeeding one another. If the number of surviving children is decidedly higher, then one may increase the middle level by including also the siblings of the spouses of f or m's siblings. These new sets of siblings are somehow orthogonal to the sets of f's and m's siblings; their children are cousins of the core Couple's nieces and nephews.

As for the ratio between the number of individuals in the middle and the youngest generations, it depends on the number of siblings: if the average birth rate is n children per couple, this ratio will be of $n/2$. If $n = 2$ children per couple, the window will select the same number of persons on the last two generations. If $n = 6$ surviving children per couple, as was the case not so long ago and still is the case in some developing countries today, the window will select three times as many persons in the younger generation; but this growth will only mirror the overall demographic growth of the society. Of course it should be understood that since the focus is on the shaping of social trajectories, the youngest generation to be included in the window should be the one whose orientations of the life courses are already visible; for children who are still in their pre-teenage years, the range of possible futures is usually too wide to provide useful information.

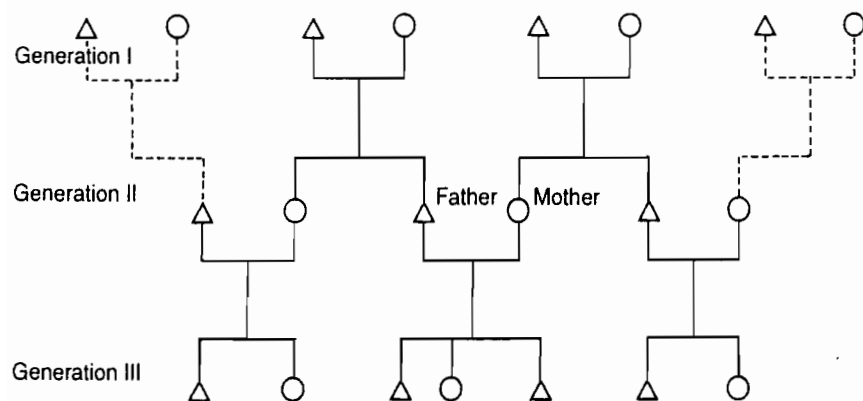Other definitions of the window of observation are possible; two possible

Figure 2. Extension to the Window of Observation in Figure 1

extensions have been mentioned above. The definition proposed here attempts to mirror as much as possible the processes of transmissions between generations in the society at large. It respects the overall demographic proportions between the two younger generations but not between the older ones. In theory it might seem that starting from a fourth, 'oldest' generation should solve this problem; in practice, however, this is not always feasible. But one has to be pragmatic: the goal is not so much to respect a predetermined blueprint, but to collect interesting, i.e. substantively meaningful, data. In the following we shall call Social Genealogy the unit of observation carved, on the unlimited socio-centred genealogy of a population, by a window of observation such as the one described in Figure 2.

5. The Data Collection

What one wants to know about the unit under observation may be listed as follows:

(a) *the life trajectories* of the individuals it includes (see e.g. Bertaux, 1980, 1986). These life trajectories however have to be collected in a comparative perspective, i.e. not only as individual trajectories, but also as life trajectories of individuals as siblings, as members of the same generation, as parents (whose trajectory profiles influence the shaping of their children's trajectories) and as spouses (likewise influencing their spouse's trajectory). They should also include those life projects that could not be realized, since those are crucial, for example, in helping to map the 'champ des possibles' that lay before each individual: unfulfilled projects help to delineate the borders of such 'champs' (fields of realistically possible life courses);

(b) descriptions of *family microcultures*, and of processes of intergenerational *transmissions* between generations within families; as well as failures of

such processes, for there are resources which are made available by the parents to their children, but not reappropriated by the latter;

(c) whenever possible, descriptions of the local *social contexts* within which strategies were developed and implemented, opportunities were seized, transmissions took place, trajectories got shaped, destinies were decided.

It is out of such materials that sociological hypotheses will be progressively developed; it is on and with them that grounded theorizations may eventually be built. If the materials thus collected are rich enough it does not matter so much that all regions of the 'window' could not be fully investigated, or that the window itself is rectangular where it should be trapezoid. The goal is primarily to identify, describe and understand phenomena, rather than measure accurately their frequency: the *contents* of fieldwork observations appear more important than the exact *form* of the unit of observation actually investigated.

What is nevertheless crucial is to include *several* lineages in the window. Not that the history of *one* single lineage would remain uninteresting: it is indeed the right tool to get at transmissions and other intergenerational relations; it helps to develop a picture of how individual and group trajectories got embedded in local contexts (the definition of what is 'local' is of course relative to the cultural model of the family itself: it may be a village, a town, a region, the nation or networks extending beyond the borders of nations). It is also at the level of such histories of lineages that one may witness not only the differentiation of siblings' trajectories, in itself a fascinating phenomenon, but also systemic effects, i.e. the *interactions* between siblings' trajectories (Hareven, 1982). And it goes without saying that it is at this level that the central place of women in shaping their kin's trajectories can be documented: family life was and still is to a large extent the sphere of women.

But the risk in focusing on one single lineage is of forgetting about contexts; for instance, what is remembered as the bold initiative of some family member, once replaced in its local historical context, may appear as a timely and not unusual response to new external opportunities.

The *comparison* of lineages' histories within a single Social Genealogy helps greatly to reduce this risk. Behind this affirmation lies the assumption that lineages which get connected through a marriage run somehow within similar contexts; but this assumption is indeed very often justified. Sociological research has long shown that people subconsciously look for, and do find, life partners who are similar to themselves, i.e. have similar educational, cultural and sometimes social backgrounds, and similar life projects (Girard, 1981). How many marriages took place, in not so ancient times, between a young woman and her best friend's brother, or her brother's best friend? Hence one may expect, and one indeed finds in socio-centred genealogies, parallel-running lineages. In France for instance, there will be cases of rural families whose children have moved to cities to work as labourers, often with a project of eventually becoming self-employed. The chances are that young migrants from the same region will

meet each other in the city and get married. Thus a Social Genealogy will yield several parallel histories of lineages, with just the right proportions of similarity and difference to make comparison fully meaningful.

6. The Basic Biographical Data

For every person included in the window of observation, alive or dead, one should record a number of *basic biographical data*. These obviously include name, gender, year of birth, place of birth (name and type of settlement); school achievement; the main steps of the occupational career, including for each transition the dates, or person's age, and circumstances, e.g. 'stopped being employed when first child was born'; year of marriage, birth year of children, years of divorce and remarriage if any; main events of the spatial trajectory and age at migration; year of death, and cause of death if 'non-natural' (e.g. casualty in war, civil war, repression, epidemic, suicide, etc.).

Such basic biographical data can be used in various ways. The first is at the level of the case study of the Social Genealogy itself. Basic biographical data, when written for each person directly in a diagram such as the one pictured in Figure 2, yield a very rich picture. The diagram can be made more readable by using conventions, such as a vertical time dimension; each event, such as birth or marriage, will then be placed on its corresponding horizontal (millennium) line (Figure 3). Mentioning, for instance, occupations on such a diagram allows the researcher to perceive instantly some of the most obvious transmissions of *situs*, as when the three sons of a carpenter become carpenters, or building contractors, and his two daughters marry men from the building trades. What appeared so far as a network of *persons* mating and giving birth to new persons, becomes a set of linkages between *occupations*; the persons as individuals recede into the background, and *occupations* (which connote social positions) come to the foreground. Adding basic biographical data to the diagram, including not only occupations but educational levels and residential places, transforms it completely. The diagram becomes like a little mirror, in which societal processes reflect themselves: migrations from rural settlements to urban contexts; development of industrial and service sectors; general rise of educational level; professionalization of women and continuity of their occupational careers after marriage; declining rates of birth; general rise in the frequency of divorces, etc. But it also becomes a magnifying lens through which one can observe how occupations in one generation lead to new but related occupations in the next one; or how families with similar backgrounds made differential uses of new opportunities. On the network of kinship relations, several networks of relations thus get superimposed, which express underlying transmissions of *situs* and status in a general context of societal change. While statistics capture general trends, and life stories appear to focus on particular life courses, social genealogies allow us to observe how general trends and particular lives interact with each other. Collective events and processes do shape lives, but they do not
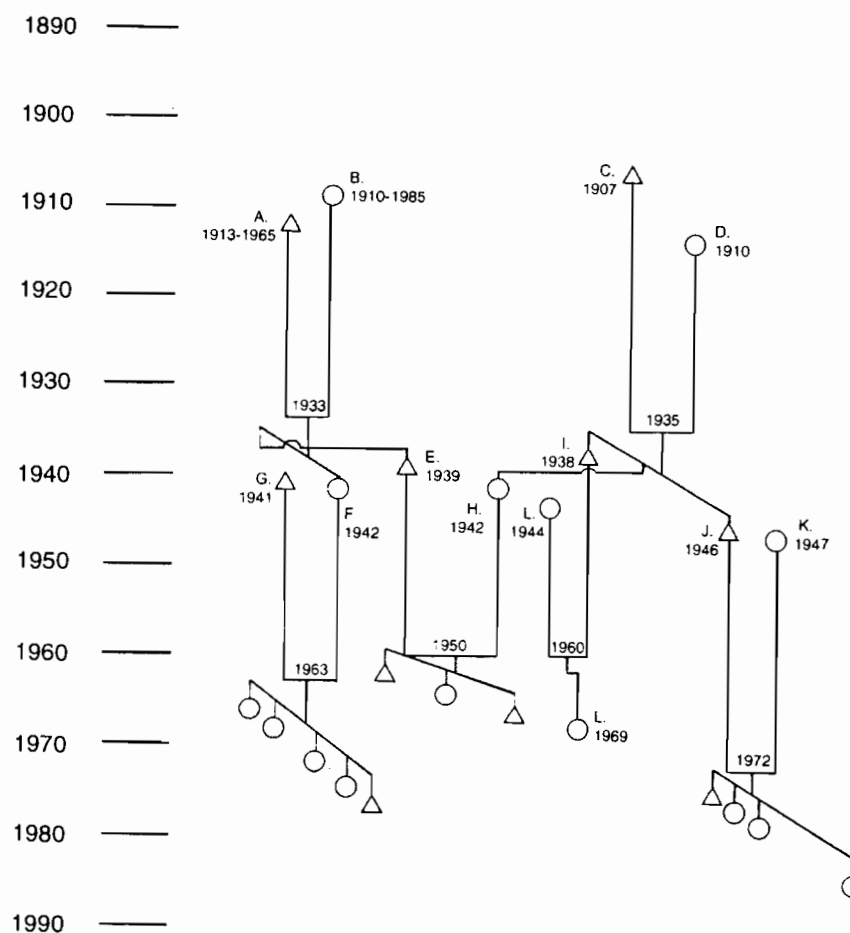
Figure 3. Diagram for Representing Basic Biographical Data

float above society: they are made up by and of the actions and interactions of real, concrete, identifiable persons, either as individuals pursuing their own private interests or as carriers of institutional roles.

The basic biographical data may also be coded and processed by computation, as in the 'event history' approach. One should however be aware of at least three basic differences between this kind of data and usual survey data:

1. The issue of the degree of statistical representativity of the sample needs close examination, as the unit of observation is not an individual but a whole cluster of individual lives. If the EGOs of social genealogies have not been chosen at random (for instance, if they are a scholar's students, as in Bertaux, 1982, or Andorka, 1990), a comparison of the social composition of each generational

level with general censuses is required. Once detected, imbalances may be corrected by selective weighting, or by adding specific case studies through field-work research (as, for example, Andorka did for Hungary when he realized that none of his students came from a family of farm labourers). From the point of view of representativity Social Genealogies have an interesting property: through the inclusion of uncles and aunts into the window of observation, they allow us to reach out for the life trajectories of members of previous generation who did *not* have descendants, thus correcting a built-in bias of classical surveys on inter-generational social mobility, whose samples necessarily omit childless persons in the previous generations. This feature takes on added significance when child-lessness is not a random phenomenon but a social-historical one, concerning whole groups: witness, for example, in Québec, the key social-historical role of Catholic priests, and nuns, who were long in charge not only of 'paroisses' but also of the education, health and even local government of the French-Catholic Canadians; or elsewhere, the generations decimated by war before they had the time to bear children; or those men and women who were victims of harsh politi-cal repression in their young years; or the phenomenon of emigration, by which sizable parts of a generation disappear from retrospective reconstructions based on samples of the next generation. In all these cases the construction of social genealogies allows us to restore the original place, existence, life trajectories and especially the influence of these men and women, provided that at least one of their kin remained within the population under observation and had children.

2. The second difference between classical survey data and Social Genea-logies' basic biographical data has to do with the nature of the data: to code and process the individual data yielded by Social Genealogies *as if* they had come from a random sample of individuals would be to miss their main feature, which is *relational*; witness, for example, the differentiation between siblings' trajec-tories, which by itself opens up the way to meaningful comparisons, and further-more may be assumed to result from *systemic* processes. Techniques of data-processing for Social Genealogies data will have to be built around this very specific property, lest they miss what appears so often in case studies of Social Genealogies as one of their most interesting properties, i.e. the possibility of de-veloping comparisons in a systematic way.

3. The third difference is that, while a single social genealogy may contain several dozens of individual trajectories about which basic biographical data are given, these data have not been obtained – unlike in surveys – by addressing ques-tions directly to all concerned individuals, but merely to a few and sometimes only one member(s) of the kinship network. Hence the question: how valid, how reliable, are those kinds of data, as compared with classical survey data? There is a gain of productivity to be made by asking a family member to give data about other members of her/his kinship network, and there is often no other way to proceed (for instance, if the persons are dead); but it may imply some costs in validity and reliability.

This last point deserves further study. Many classical surveys do ask re-spondents to give data about, for example, their father's occupation when they themselves were aged 14, their mother's education and so on: it is a common assumption in developed societies that most people will know the answer to such simple questions. But how many *other* facts do they know, or are they expected to know, about their kin? If we call the extent of such knowledge about kin the '*champ mémoriel familial*' (family memory field), how wide and accurate is this field on average, in a given society? How much does it vary according to gender, age, generations, social milieux, education, spatial or social mobility, and other factors? We know of no systematic research on this issue (see however Bertaux and Thompson, 1993a, 1993b; Muxel, 1993). But the very concept of constructing social genealogies encompassing dozens of life trajec-tories, including some of people long dead, by interviewing merely a handful of informants in the kinship network, rests on the assumption that through the interactions of family life, people do develop some kind of a 'champ mémoriel familial' relative to their kin. The experience of constructing social genealogies progressively reveals the contours and characteristics of those *champs mémo-riels*, for unlike in surveys, the interviewers ask the interviewees to provide information (notably basic biographical data, but also stories) about a *maxi-mum* number of their relatives.

Our experience shows that, as a rule, middle-aged or aging women appear usually to have not only a wider but a much richer 'memory field' than men, sometimes knowing more about their husband's own family than he does himself; that in urban contexts the upper-class families, aristocracies and well-established bourgeoisies develop a (collective) family memory which is much wider and richer in social facts, stories and myths than the working-class or white-collar families or mobile families (Le Wita, 1988); that older persons know and understand much more than younger ones.

Such expected but not yet fully documented findings may be carrying far-reaching meanings, if one discards the commonsense explanations in terms of gender, education and age. For instance, it may not be gender per se, but the tradition of ascribing women to the sphere of 'family life', i.e. the sphere of production and reproduction of human being themselves, in contrast with the ascription of men to the sphere of the production of things, that may account for women's more extended knowledge of kinship relations. To this rule of gender division of labour, men producing goods, women producing life (the latter sphere is what we have called elsewhere 'anthroponomy'; see Bertaux, 1977, 1992b) there have been many exceptions, but more often than not they confirmed the rule until recent times. The overall pattern may explain why, in constructing social genealogies, whether in Québec, France, England, Hungary or Russia, one consistently finds that the best informant, the one with the largest and richest '*champ mémoriel*', will usually be a middle-aged or aging woman. But the question arises of whether this phenomenon will continue

unchanged. As for written genealogies based on specific research, they seem, by contrast, usually the outcome of the genealogical interests of retired men.

Young people, whatever their gender, usually do not know much about their kin. They are future-oriented and have as a rule little interest in the past of their own family. They are not good 'on-the-spot' informants; but if asked, as students, to search for basic biographical data and stories about their relatives, including collateral lineages, they will bring back much data and stories, tracking down aunts and cousins in remote places and bringing data and stories that no outsider could ever dream of collecting. This phenomenon is well known, as are its pedagogic qualities; with the method proposed here, however, it can be harnessed to contribute to sociological research (Bertaux, 1982; Andorka, 1990; Elliott, 1994; other scholars in Northern Ireland, Slovenia, Venezuela, Mexico and China are currently repeating the experiment).

In upper- and middle-class families, the richness of family memory appears often as the sign and direct consequence of much more tangible (property) transmissions. But this long span of collective memory in propertied families has turned into its opposite in post-revolutionary societies, such as the Soviet Union or China, where membership of the former upper class not only needed to be dissimulated to the authorities but also hidden from one's own children and grandchildren.

The quality and quantity of basic biographical data and family stories that one can expect to extract from one person, either in one interview or by enlisting her/his cooperation over some duration, depends therefore on several factors which deserve further study, if only because they are sociological phenomena in their own right. In practice however there have been very few cases where one could *not* find relatives of the first person approached (EGO) who would not know enough to allow one to construct a social genealogy encompassing several generations in depth and several lineages in width. Our own experience in France, Québec, and now Russia, shows that a middle-aged person usually knows the basic biographical data of about at least a dozen relatives who may be her/his siblings, parents, grandparents, children, spouse, spouse's siblings or siblings' spouses; and quite often also some of his/her uncles and aunts, and their children. Two or three interviews in older generations are thus enough to collect and cross-check the basic biographical data for 12 to 20 or so persons, which is about the right size for a case study of a social genealogy.

7. The Family Stories

Even if one wanted to do so, it would be impossible to get from informants the basic biographical data without getting at the same time comments and meanings attached to the events of a given person's life trajectory: why or how did it take the course it took, what happened, how and why; what the person (or her/his parents) wanted but failed to achieve; in short, what really did happen and how it happened to happen. Because people are not things but human beings, their

existence through time, their life trajectory, the issue of this life's *meaning*(s) is immanent to the life itself; questions about the factual events of a life will immediately raise the question of what these events *mean*. Sociological research, dealing with phenomena which are not natural but cultural, also needs to develop interpretive and reflexive frameworks, which are of course not exclusive of, but complementary to, the use of statistical data. Within such an interpretive framework, which considers people as (at least potential) *subjects* and their actions as meaningful to them, the stories and 'comments' which informants volunteer to help make sense of their own or their kin's life trajectories are precious to the researcher (Gaulejac, 1988). To reject such stories because they are 'not objective'(but what *could* be an 'objective' story?), because they are 'subjective', unchecked, value-loaded, mythical, would simply amount to applying the criteria which are good for survey research to another, quite different method of observation; what if standardized surveys about careers were considered useless by sociologists because standardized questionnaires do not offer respondents any room for explaining what really happened to them? The truth is that each approach has to be judged in its own terms. It is for instance obvious that basic biographical data, which register facts but not meanings – sociological as well as psychological ones – are *not* the last word as far as objective knowledge of 'what really happened' is concerned. Listening to the comments and stories that are volunteered, one soon realizes that by adding those admittedly subjective data one understands much better what happened to individuals and families. Here as elsewhere, subjectivities contribute to the progress of objective knowledge.

For the sociologist, the real significance of collecting family stories which comment on basic biographical data lies in their potentially sociological contents. When encouraged through interviewing to describe the strategies that underlay a life-shaping decision, or the moral microclimate of a given nuclear family, and especially the *context* of a given event in their own life or that of one of their relatives, informants develop first-degree interpretations which are rich in sociographical information and often loaded with sociological insights. In attempting to explain why they or another person did what they did, or to make sense of life events, informants are often led to describe contexts as game-like situations, and to make explicit some of the underlying rules of these games; whether the event shows one of such rules in action and the constraining consequences it had on a life course, or whether the individual, as player in a game, understood the rule in time to use it to his/her benefit.

Such descriptions often recall Balzac's novels, where the social games of acquiring wealth, status or power are played with the resources of energy, seduction, cleverness, information gathering and manipulation of others, political alliances, and where the ignorance of the real rules of the game(s) is fatal to the innocent; and Balzac certainly was a great connoisseur of mobility games. Hence, by insisting that his/her informant describe contexts of biographical events, and by

collecting family stories in this light, the sociologist taps existing fields of local knowledge about the rules of social games, i.e. first-degree interpretations that may prove very valuable for the development of grounded theorizations.

This is not to say that all comments and stories that are told about oneself or one's kin are accurate; they are oral sources and should be critically examined as any source must be (Thompson, 1988). They do contain myths, but myths need to be known, for they are real through their consequences (Burchardt, 1990; Byng-Hall with Thompson, 1990; Peneff, 1990b; Samuel and Thompson, 1990). Their value for the research needs to be measured by reference not to the (utopian) 'objective story' that nobody will ever know, but rather to the level of understanding that an outsider could reach *without them*, i.e. by looking only at the basic biographical data.

This topic would deserve at least a whole paper in itself; let me point out only one key property of those family stories, or 'comments' (hence the expression 'Social Genealogies Commented On'): the more mobility there is in the history of an individual, nuclear family or kinship network, the more useful are such comments about life trajectories. If the basic data on a Social Genealogy diagram show lineages of peasants tilling the same piece of land for generations and intermarrying; or lineages of workers taking a job, generation after generation, in the same textile mill; or lineages of teachers, doctors or artisans, then the sociologist may feel he/she understands what has been happening: a mere *reproduction* of the parents' social status through the direct intergenerational transmission of the trade. Even such a simple assumption may appear a misinterpretation on closer examination, i.e. by listening to family stories and pushing their interpretation further (see Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame, 1988). But the further away lineage trajectories are from such ideal-typical reproduction or 'immobility' patterns, the more family stories are needed to help understand what were the 'real stories' behind the observed mobilities and discontinuities. Cases of strong upward mobility that cannot be explained by education, of status mobility through marriage, of clear downward mobility, of long-distance migrations; cases of strong differentiation between the social trajectories of siblings; of drastic *situs* change or other unexpected twists in individual lives; in short, all trajectories that include mobilities, change, discontinuity and rupture require added understandings that usually cannot be guessed correctly by looking only at the basic biographical data. And it is through such family stories, which so strongly stimulate the sociological imagination, that the substantive domain of this field of sociological research may be widened.

Prospects

Practitioners in the sociology of social mobility processes have been so used to satisfying themselves with the aggregate social statistics yielded by nation-wide

surveys that they may have forgotten the taste of concrete social-historical descriptions and narratives. We hope to have shown that other methods, by looking at the same social-historical processes from another viewpoint, will provide new knowledge and open the door for substantive developments.

We have focused here on factors internal to families, such as transmissions between generations, differentiation of siblings' trajectories, or the crucial role that women play as sisters, wives, mothers, aunts and grandmothers in shaping the lives of their kin. But there are other built-in blind spots of nation-wide surveys that can be investigated by means of the kind of local knowledge that is yielded by case histories of families. Let us list a few of them here by way of conclusion.

Nation-wide surveys yield data that are averaging out differences, between, for example, regions, that may be of considerable importance. Why is it for instance that some underdeveloped villages, towns, cities, regions or countries remain stagnant (in vicious circles of stagnation that seem impossible to break) while others which would look very similar morphologically begin developing new skills, tapping new markets, building new industries, sending migrants overseas and seeing the virtuous circles of positive feedbacks grow and proliferate? (Contini, 1995). Representative surveys will necessarily lump together the very different courses of such socio-historical processes of differentiation; but if Social Genealogies are collected properly, i.e. with an orientation towards the contexts external to the families, the processes of differentiation of human communities will become visible, if not fully documented.

Take now those groups of people which, because the social status of their families of origin has been destroyed by a revolution, or because their main living is made from illicit activities, need to protect themselves from the statistical eye of the State. Take the cohorts who come on to the labour market in times of recession, and try to survive outside formal occupations – and thus out of reach of statistical surveys. Take women's multiple contributions to the shaping of the life courses of their siblings, husbands, children and grandchildren through ways that remain largely invisible to statistics. These are three very different but relevant processes that call for knowledge of the 'real stories', and hence for the collection of Social Genealogies mentioned by the informants.

The data and stories thus collected should all be used within a given sociological framework with the purpose of reshaping and enriching it. We do not believe the primary task of the sociologist is to understand the histories of individuals or families better than they do themselves. While hard work is needed to build up a consistent case study of a Social Genealogy Commented On, particularly in developing a second-order interpretation on the basis of first-order comments as proposed by the informants, one should never forget that the ultimate aim of the sociologist lies beyond isolated case studies: the sociological focus is ultimately on the 'blanks' *between* individuals, between

families, between generations. It is in these 'blanks' that the processes of *transmissions* between generations, and *generalized competition* between families, take place. And it is these processes, and the local contexts in which they develop and which they transform, that need to be reconstructed and understood through comparisons, if one is to identify the rules of the very diverse games of generalized social competition whose outcomes permanently shape the life trajectories of individuals and families.