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Economic change and occupational stasis: Puerto Rico as a case study of stratification and development

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Abstract

This article analyzes individual-level determinants of occupational status among adults in Puerto Rico to evaluate the applicability of theories of stratification to developing countries that are highly integrated to more industrialized nations. Drawing on microdata from the decennial U.S. census for Puerto Rico, the analysis focuses on the relative importance of labor cohort membership and education for occupational status among employed adults. Puerto Rico's occupational structure reflects only partial convergence with that of developed countries but shows no bifurcation in its status distribution since the 1970s. Net of education, no strong inter-cohort differences in occupational status are found. The evidence does not support the implications of dependency and world systems theories, but is only partially consistent with classical theories of social stratification.

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1. Introduction

Research in economics and in sociology has documented a link between inter-country economic and political integration and rising aggregate income inequality within countries (Alderson & Nielsen, 1999; Beckfield, 2006; Williamson, 2002). Despite these findings and a general sociological interest on the effects inter-country relationships have on status inequality, little is known about how economic development and

inter-country integration are related to occupational status. With a view to expanding the literature on development and inequality, I ask if historical timing of entry into the labor force, as proxied by labor cohorts, induced observable constraints on the occupational status of employed adults over the course of Puerto Rico's economic development during the post-war era, and whether observed occupational status patterns are consistent with the expectations of sociological theory on the relationship between status inequality, development, and economic integration.

Conceptualizations of occupational status draw a distinction between the process of occupational recruitment and the distribution of occupational status (Haller & Portes, 1973; Hauser, Dickinson, Travis, & Koffel, 1975). Recruitment emphasizes social and historical

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conditions that channel individuals into specific slots in the occupational structure, whereas the distribution of occupational status refers to variability in the quality of jobs into which individuals are recruited. Sociological research has documented an association between economic development and greater complexity of occupational structures (Gagliani, 1985), which in turn is plausibly associated to dynamism in the process of recruitment, to higher average occupational status, and to a reduction in its variance. However, stratification scholars have recently documented how developing countries differ systematically in their stratification patterns (Ishida, 2008; Torche, 2005) from nations that underwent industrialization during the 19th and 20th century (Breen, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). While an improvement on earlier work that relied on less precise measures of status and on sub-national samples (Farrell & Schiefelbein, 1985; Psacharopoulos & Velez, 1993), current research on economic development and status inequality can benefit from a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between economic integration and changes in the occupational status of individuals in the work force during the process of industrialization.

Puerto Rico's linkage to the United States, characterized by openness in trade, investment, and migration, qualifies Puerto Rico as a case of full integration. Its labor markets are therefore an ideal setting in which to examine the expectations of sociological theories concerned with the consequences for occupational status of pursuing economic development under conditions of economic and political integration with more powerful and more developed countries or regions of the world economy. Additionally, since Puerto Rico has undergone economic and social change in a shorter time span than most industrialized nations, the experience of great variation across cohorts in economic circumstances provides a unique opportunity in which to evaluate labor cohort effects on occupational status.

The analysis exploits variation in the historical conditions that characterize Puerto Rico's economic development to evaluate the presence of cohort-by-period differences in occupational status among employed adults in Puerto Rico. Following Glenn (2005), cohorts refer to a set of social actors that have shared a common political, social, demographic, or economic event. In this instance, a cohort refers to a group of individual adults that entered the work force during a specific set of years in the course of Puerto Rico's economic development, years for which the macro-economic and occupational opportunities encountered by those individuals could be said to be the same or similar. Periods

refer to census years in which labor cohorts are observed. The findings strongly suggest that the historical moment of entry into the work force has a limited, yet important, impact on subsequent status. While entering the work force between 1950 and 1970 (the height of Puerto Rico's industrialization) provided distinct advantages, such effects were mediated by educational attainment. By implication, neither stratification theories, expecting convergence in the dynamics of occupational status under extreme integration, nor dependency and world-systems theories, expecting inter-country divergence in occupational status, provide adequate explanations of the effect of development on status inequality. More generally, I argue that the limitations highlighted in these theories by evidence from Puerto Rico challenges scholars of stratification and inequality to formally consider the specificity of the determinants of individual occupational status under political and economic integration.

Puerto Rico's open border with the United States might be considered sufficiently atypical that little can be generalized from its analysis to other developing countries. Nonetheless, its exceptionalism among developing countries is overstated. Countries such as Ireland, Jamaica, and the islands of the British and French Caribbean have undertaken export-led development strategies, and have had open migration flows with their more industrialized colonial counter-parts for extensive periods of time during and after the end of formal colonial status (Byron & Condon, 1996; Kirwin & Narin, 1984; Mjøset, 1993). Moreover, Puerto Rico's development policies, as various scholars have noted, served as a model for other developing countries that adopted similar industrialization strategies—emphasizing openness to foreign capital while exporting surplus labor (Schrank, 2003; Wade, 1990; Weisskoff, 1985). Puerto Rico provides fertile ground for the evaluation of theories of inequality and development, and findings from Puerto Rico will further our understanding of the effects of export-led development policies.

2. Explaining economic development and occupational status

Two broad sociological traditions have implications for how economic development through integration affects occupational status: stratification analysis, and world systems and dependency theories. Despite much research into the general validity of these views regarding development and inequality, how economic integration affects occupational status remains an open question. For a country that is fully integrated economically, these theories have disparate predictions regarding

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