

A Useful Inequality or a Reproduced Privilege? A Political Science Reappraisal of Social Stratification in American Functionalism in Light of the Moroccan Case

¹Rhizlane MICHRAFY, ²Mohammed Khalid BRANDALISE RHAZZALI, ³Lahcen EL ASSAOUI,
⁴Mounya ALLALI, ⁵Hanane EL BARAKA

¹Hassan II University of Casablanca, Morocco

²University of Padua / FIDR Interuniversity Research Centre, Italy

³ Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Béni Mellal, Morocco

⁴University of Eastern Piedmont "Amedeo Avogadro" / FIDR Interuniversity Research Centre, Italy

⁵Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Béni Mellal, Morocco

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900241>

Received: 20 September 2026 ; Accepted : 25 September 2026 ; Published: 07 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Every hierarchical society must, at some point, justify why some individuals occupy higher positions than others. In 1945, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore addressed this question in terms of functional necessity, arguing that inequality was indispensable for attracting the most competent individuals to the most demanding positions. Melvin Tumin countered with an equally influential critique, arguing that such a justification primarily served to preserve the advantage of those already occupying dominant positions. This article offers a political science reinterpretation of this foundational controversy and its main extensions, from Parsons to Merton and Lenski, and subsequently from Lipset, Zetterberg, and Glass to Blau and Duncan.

The study is based on documentary analysis, drawing on a critical and integrative review of the American and British functionalist literature. An analytical framework constructed from Weber and Mills is used to examine, for each paradigm, the source of legitimacy attributed to social stratification, the mechanism invoked to explain the persistence of inequalities, and the relationship between scientific description and normative justification, all within the broader debate on distributive justice articulated by Rawls. This framework is subsequently confronted with an independent body of Moroccan literature addressing political elites, administrative recruitment, and occupational mobility.

The findings show that criticism of the functionalist justification never eliminates the question of the legitimacy of inequalities; rather, it merely shifts its terms, from functional necessity to individual internalization, then to comparative mobility, and finally to its statistical objectification. The confrontation with the Moroccan case reveals the persistence of a gap between the formal affirmation of merit and selection mechanisms linked to social origin and networks of allegiance. Social mobility, no more than its statistical measurement, is therefore sufficient on its own to establish the legitimacy of the social order.

Keywords: social stratification, functionalism, political legitimacy, meritocracy, comparative political science

INTRODUCTION

Any reflection on social justice must eventually address an old question: according to what criteria can a society legitimately distribute positions and advantages among its members? This is precisely the question of distributive justice, at the heart of political philosophy since the foundational work of John Rawls, who sought to define the principles according to which an unequal distribution of social goods may be regarded as just (Rawls, 1971).

This question remains fully relevant today, as demonstrated by the contemporary literature on distributive justice, which continues to examine the principles capable of legitimizing the distribution of resources and social advantages, particularly on the basis of the criteria of merit, need, and equality (Siemoneit, 2023).

Postwar American scholarship provides a precise and enduringly influential answer to this question, which this article seeks to examine and put to the test from a political science perspective, by asking what this answer reveals about the mechanisms through which power and the social order are legitimized.

In 1945, two young American sociologists, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore, published a paper barely seven pages long that nevertheless left a lasting mark on the theory of social stratification. Entitled *Some Principles of Stratification*, the article argues that inequality is not a defect of the social system but a functional necessity, indispensable for encouraging the most competent individuals to occupy the most demanding positions (Davis and Moore, 1945). The paper quickly became one of the most frequently cited works in American sociology, despite decades of often severe criticism (Hauhart, 2003).

The response came soon after. In 1953, Melvin Tumin published a critique that became almost as famous as the text it challenged. He disputed the idea that stratification actually serves society as a whole. According to Tumin, it primarily serves to preserve the advantage of those who already occupy dominant positions by limiting subsequent generations' access to the same opportunities (Tumin, 1953). More than seventy years later, this debate has still not reached closure and continues to inform, within the broader debate on distributive justice, reflection on the legitimacy of social inequalities.

This debate emerged within a specific intellectual context: functionalism, the dominant current in postwar American sociology. This school conceived of society as an integrated system in which each institution performs a function, thereby contributing to the equilibrium of the social body. It distinguished between manifest functions, which are openly intended, and latent functions, which are unintended but equally real. Some of its intellectual roots can be traced directly to Pitirim Sorokin, who trained at Harvard many of the future functionalists, including Talcott Parsons himself.

The controversy between Davis, Moore, and Tumin extends well beyond the boundaries of sociology, which precisely justifies the perspective adopted in this article. Rawls raises the general question of the criteria for a just distribution, a question of political philosophy before it is a sociological one. American functionalism, for its part, provides an answer disguised as an objective description of social functioning, without ever formulating it as a contestable normative choice. It is precisely this gap—between a question posed in political terms and an answer framed in ostensibly neutral sociological terms—that this theoretical framework seeks to illuminate, with the help of two analytical tools drawn from political theory itself. This is the type of question raised by Max Weber when he distinguishes between different sources of the legitimation of power (Weber, 1921/1995), and taken up by Charles Wright Mills when he accuses Parsons's theory of transforming, through apparently neutral technical vocabulary, the defense of the established order into scientific evidence (Mills, 1959). This tension continues to occupy a central place in contemporary debates on distributive justice. Philosopher Michael Sandel thus shows that the meritocratic ideal, far from constituting a remedy for inequality, has become one of its principal moral justifications, thereby contributing to distrust in institutions and fueling the populist political realignments observed in several Western democracies (Sandel, 2020).

This foundational debate generated several extensions that this article examines in turn, consistently from the same political science perspective. Robert Merton and Gerhard Lenski offer a psychosocial interpretation centered on the way individuals internalize the norms of the group to which they aspire. On the American side, Seymour Lipset and Hans Zetterberg, and on the British side, David Glass, developed interpretations that were sometimes convergent and sometimes opposed regarding social mobility and its political significance. Peter Blau and Otis Duncan, finally, endowed this theory with unprecedented statistical rigor, without ever directly addressing the normative objection raised by Tumin.

This controversy retains concrete relevance, including well beyond the American context in which it originated. In a recent work inspired by Weber, the Moroccan state is presented as combining administrative rationalization,

domination, and practices of allegiance. This articulation attests to the persistence of an older political order (Hibou and Tozy, 2020).

This observation extends the earlier analysis of John Waterbury concerning the Moroccan political elite, which was already organized around patronage networks rather than open selection based on competence (Waterbury, 1970). Yet the Moroccan civil service system continues to formally uphold merit-based recruitment through competitive examinations. A recent study shows that, in several ministerial departments, this discourse coexists with practices in which clientelism continues to influence appointments (Mekkaoui, 2021). This tension reproduces, in a very different institutional context, the one that Davis, Moore, and Tumin had formulated theoretically several decades earlier.

This article revolves around a single research question, addressed in two stages: To what extent does the functionalist debate on social stratification withstand scrutiny in light of its theoretical extensions? And do its conclusions retain their validity when confronted with independent Moroccan evidence on merit-based recruitment?

The article is structured in seven stages. We first propose a theoretical framework, constructed from Weber and Mills, that treats functionalist legitimation as an object of political science analysis. We then specify the method adopted. We successively examine the foundational theory of Davis, Moore, and Parsons; the psychosocial extensions developed by Merton and Lenski; the debate among Lipset, Zetterberg, and Glass concerning the significance of social mobility; and the statistical operationalization proposed by Blau and Duncan. Finally, we offer a critical discussion that examines the validity of these paradigms in light of the Moroccan case, before concluding on the common limitations of this theoretical tradition and its direct connection to the French debate.

Theoretical Framework. Functionalist Legitimation As An Object Of Political Science Analysis

Before examining the theories of Davis, Moore, and their successors, it is necessary to clarify the conceptual tool that will serve as the analytical framework for this article. This tool deliberately draws on political theory and political sociology rather than solely on the sociology of stratification, in accordance with the disciplinary grounding adopted here, namely the study of legitimacy.

Max Weber distinguishes three possible sources of the legitimation of power: traditional legitimacy, based on custom; charismatic legitimacy, based on the exceptional qualities of an individual; and legal-rational legitimacy, based on adherence to impersonal rules recognized as just (Weber, 1921/1995). The functionalist theory of stratification clearly belongs to this third category, but it proposes a particular variant that may be described as legitimation through systemic necessity. It does not merely assert that impersonal rules are respected. Rather, it argues that inequality itself is required for the social system to continue functioning, thereby shifting the basis of justification from procedural grounds to those of necessity.

This variant thus provides a precise sociological answer to the political question posed by Rawls concerning the criteria of a just distribution, without ever formulating it as a contestable normative choice. It is precisely this nexus—between a political question disguised as a neutral sociological description—that this theoretical framework seeks to illuminate, with the help of a second, more directly critical tool. A legitimacy grounded in functional necessity becomes particularly difficult to challenge because it presents itself as an objective observation of social functioning rather than as a value judgment. This is precisely what Charles Wright Mills denounces when he criticizes Talcott Parsons's grand theory for transforming, through technical and abstract vocabulary, the defense of the existing social order into scientific evidence removed from ordinary political debate (Mills, 1959). Whereas Weber provides a neutral typology of the sources of legitimacy, Mills therefore supplies the critical instrument that makes it possible to identify the precise point at which a social theory ceases to describe power and begins to justify it.

This pairing of Weber and Mills, one to identify the source of legitimacy invoked, the other to assess its critical implications, makes it possible to formulate three precise questions that will structure the examination of each theory considered in this article. What source of legitimacy does the author or intellectual tradition under consideration attribute to social stratification: a functional necessity presumed to benefit society as a whole, or

a mechanism that primarily serves the interests of those who already occupy dominant positions? What mechanism does this paradigm propose to explain the persistence of inequality despite the existence of channels of social mobility that are, in principle, open to all? Finally, does this theory withstand the critical test posed by Mills—that is, does it manage to justify its conclusions without improperly removing them from political debate by clothing a normative choice in the language of scientific necessity?

This analytical framework will be applied successively to the foundational theory of Davis, Moore, and Parsons; to the psychosocial extensions developed by Merton and Lenski; to the debate among Lipset, Zetterberg, and Glass; and finally to the statistical operationalization developed by Blau and Duncan. At each stage, it will make it possible to determine whether these theories silently reproduce the legitimation through systemic necessity criticized first by Tumin and subsequently by Mills, or whether, on the contrary, they manage to move beyond it. The same framework, finally applied to the Moroccan case, will make it possible to assess whether this tension between functional justification and the reproduction of privilege remains relevant beyond the American and British contexts in which it was originally formulated.

METHOD

This article proposes a targeted critical review rather than an exhaustive systematic review. Its objective is to examine several theoretical extensions of the same foundational debate and to address the research question formulated above from a political science perspective. The primary corpus first brings together the two texts that define the very subject of the article: the article by Davis and Moore published in 1945, and Tumin's critique published in 1953. This pair of texts plays a foundational role: it sets out the puzzle that subsequent authors would each attempt to resolve or extend. The primary corpus then includes the main extensions of this debate, namely Parsons's writings on stratification, Merton's reference group theory, Lenski's theory of status crystallization, Lipset and Zetterberg's thesis concerning the similarity of mobility patterns, Glass's British studies, and Blau and Duncan's work on the process of status attainment.

The secondary corpus comprises three types of literature. The first concerns the critical reception of the foundational debate itself, particularly Hahart's historiographical work, which traces why the Davis and Moore thesis remains, despite decades of criticism, one of the most widely taught texts in American sociology. The second concerns the contemporary extension of this debate within political theory, particularly Rawls's work on distributive justice, Sandel's recent work on the pitfalls of the meritocratic ideal, and Mills's earlier critique of grand Parsonian theory. The third concerns an independent and diverse body of Moroccan literature dealing with recruitment and political domination, including Waterbury's classic study of the Moroccan political elite, Hibou and Tozy's recent work on the political imaginary of the Moroccan state in the neoliberal era, Mekkaoui's research on recruitment in the public sector, and the statistical study by Housni et al. on occupational mobility.

From a typological perspective, this article falls within the same two methodological categories. It corresponds to what Grant and Booth refer to as a critical review, which does not seek exhaustiveness but rather the construction of an original argument based on previously published research (Grant and Booth, 2009). It also approaches what Torraco calls an integrative literature review, which draws on existing literature to generate new knowledge through a distinctive analytical framework (Torraco, 2005, 2016). This requirement justifies the construction of the theoretical framework presented above, which is distinct from the theories under examination and deliberately drawn from political theory rather than solely from sociology.

Our article adds a second methodological step to this foundation. It examines the extent to which the conditions of validity of the functionalist debate, established for the American case and its British extension, can be assessed in light of the independent Moroccan literature mentioned above, concerning merit-based recruitment in public administration. This approach to theoretical assessment, which consists of confronting an established theory with evidence obtained independently in a context different from the one in which the theory was developed, is recognized in both sociology and political science (Walker and Cohen, 1985; King, Keohane, and Verba, 1994). No primary data were collected for this article. Any reference to findings or data in the following sections therefore systematically refers to the cited empirical studies and not to original research conducted by the authors of the present article.

This method acknowledges one limitation. It does not seek the exhaustiveness of a systematic review, but rather interdisciplinary depth, which is necessary to bring together theories of stratification, political science, and the assessment of the validity of explanatory frameworks beyond the contexts in which they were originally developed.

Functional Necessity: A Legitimation Of Inequality Through The Value Of Positions

A Theory of Incentives, from Davis and Moore to Parsons

Davis and Moore's article is only a few pages long, but its reasoning unfolds in several stages. Every society must fill a certain number of positions, some of which require more training, sacrifice, and competence than others. To encourage the most talented individuals to make this effort, society in turn grants them greater prestige, power, or wealth. Inequality would therefore not be a regrettable accident, but rather an incentive mechanism, as necessary to social equilibrium as the distribution of roles is to the functioning of an organism (Davis and Moore, 1945). This organicist image is not incidental. It embodies the functionalist legacy of the theory, which conceives of society as a system whose every part contributes to the stability of the whole.

Talcott Parsons never devoted an entire article to social mobility, but he gave this intuition its most elaborate conceptual framework through several publications spanning nearly fifteen years (Parsons, 1940, 1951, 1954). He introduced the notion of pattern variables, pairs of opposed value orientations that make it possible to distinguish between different types of societies. The first contrasts universalism, in which access to positions is based on criteria that apply equally to everyone, with particularism, in which access depends on membership in a particular group, family, caste, or social origin. The second contrasts achievement, in which positions are earned through performance, with ascription, in which they are transmitted through birth. By combining these two oppositions, Parsons identifies four ideal types of society, each illustrated by a historical example. The achievement-oriented universalistic model, in which individual merit prevails and social origin has limited importance, would correspond to the United States. The ascription-oriented universalistic model, in which general rules coexist with a strong emphasis on birth, would correspond to traditional Germany. The achievement-oriented particularistic model, in which group membership remains decisive but individual merit nevertheless plays a role, would correspond to traditional China. Finally, the ascription-oriented particularistic model, in which social position is transmitted almost entirely through birth within a closed group, would correspond to traditional India and its caste system.

Viewed through our theoretical framework, this construction unambiguously attributes to social stratification a legitimacy grounded in systemic necessity, in the precise sense defined above on the basis of Weber (Weber, 1921/1995). Inequality is not justified by an equitable procedure, but by its presumed usefulness for the survival of the social system. It thus acquires an appearance of necessity, almost comparable to that of a natural law. At every stage of the reasoning, the mechanism invoked remains entirely functional: certain positions would inherently be rarer and more demanding than others. This would mechanically justify differences in rewards, regardless of the social origins of the individuals who do or do not succeed in occupying them. Parsons's typology adds a further dimension to this reasoning. It suggests that an achievement-oriented universalistic society such as the United States would naturally occupy the top position in an implicit hierarchy of social systems. This conception reproduces, in a more sophisticated form, the same legitimation through necessity already present in Davis and Moore.

A Contested Legitimacy, from Tumin to the Moroccan Case

Melvin Tumin directly attacks what he considers the central weakness of this reasoning. He first challenges the very possibility of objectively measuring the functional importance of a position. Is an engineer truly more indispensable than a skilled worker once their concrete interdependence within the production process is taken into account? He then challenges the idea that the training required for these positions represents a genuine sacrifice for those who receive it, since they often come from families sufficiently affluent to avoid experiencing this cost as a real renunciation (Tumin, 1953). His most decisive contribution for our purposes, however, lies elsewhere. He shows that those who already occupy dominant positions have a direct interest in transmitting this advantage to their relatives by limiting, often without even being aware of it, the access of others to the same

resources and networks. Stratification then ceases to appear as a mechanism serving the collective as a whole and becomes an instrument of preservation benefiting a restricted group.

When confronted with Mills's critique, the theory of Davis, Moore, and Parsons proves difficult to sustain. By presenting inequality as necessary for the functioning of the system, it transforms a value judgment into descriptive evidence without empirically demonstrating its underlying basis (Mills, 1959).

This logic of legitimation through necessity continues to shape contemporary discourses on merit, well beyond the academic context in which it emerged. It resurfaces whenever a selection system justifies differences in rewards solely through the presumed scarcity of the talents required, without questioning the conditions of access to those talents themselves. Michael Sandel shows that this rhetoric, far from having weakened since 1945, still structures a significant part of contemporary economic and political discourse, including in societies far removed from postwar America (Sandel, 2020).

The Moroccan case illustrates this persistence in almost literal terms and makes it possible to reconsider Parsons's four ideal types from a different perspective. The official system of recruitment into the Moroccan civil service explicitly rests on merit, assessed through competitive examinations, which closely reproduces the achievement-oriented universalistic logic described by Parsons for the United States. Yet Waterbury's historical study of the Moroccan political elite shows that actual access to positions of power has long followed a logic of patronage and allegiance, closer to the ascription-oriented particularistic model than to the formally proclaimed universalistic model (Waterbury, 1970). In a recent Weberian-inspired study, Hibou and Tozy show that the Moroccan state continues to combine administrative rationalization with practices of domination and allegiance, beyond the formal logic of merit alone (Hibou and Tozy, 2020). The gap between the proclaimed typology and the actual mechanisms governing access to dominant positions thus cuts across very different institutional contexts. It supports the substance of Tumin's critique: without rigorous evidence of a link between position and collective utility, functionalist theory transforms a justification into a description (Mills, 1959).

Anticipatory Socialization: Legitimacy Experienced Rather Than Demonstrated

Merton's Reference Group and Lenski's Status Crystallization

Robert Merton does not approach social stratification in the comprehensive manner of Parsons. Instead, he favors what he himself calls theories of the middle range, which are more modest in their ambitions but closer to individuals' concrete behavior. Together with Alice Rossi, he introduced the concept of the reference group in 1950, based on a wartime study of American soldiers known as *The American Soldier*. Soldiers who were more closely aligned with the norms of the army as a whole, rather than with those of their immediate group alone, were more frequently promoted. Merton refers to this phenomenon as anticipatory socialization: individuals adopt in advance the norms of the group to which they aspire, even before actually belonging to it, thereby facilitating their upward mobility (Merton and Rossi, 1950).

In 1957, Merton systematized this insight through a series of more precise questions that gave his theory genuine programmatic scope. Merton first examines the characteristics of individuals who adopt the out-group as a frame of reference: does isolation within the group of origin encourage this orientation, or does it instead constitute an obstacle? He then considers the relationship between the observed rate of mobility and the perceived legitimacy of the social system: can a system with limited mobility remain legitimate if it possesses other resources of justification? Finally, the moral dimension of this orientation raises another question: does the pursuit of upward mobility through the adoption of the dominant group's values constitute a conscious choice or a largely unconscious mechanism, often stigmatized by the group of origin through labels such as "social climbers" or "opportunists" (Merton, 1957). This observation remains strikingly relevant and anticipates contemporary analyses of related phenomena under different labels.

Gerhard Lenski extends this psychosocial approach through another perspective, that of status crystallization. Observing that individuals rarely occupy an identical position across all social scales at once, Lenski notes that income, education, occupation, and ethnic origin may diverge substantially within the same individual. When these positions remain inconsistent with one another, Lenski refers to this as "low status crystallization." He

links this phenomenon to certain political behaviors, particularly a greater propensity toward liberalism and challenges to the established order (Lenski, 1954). Among the examples he discusses is that of an individual occupying a high occupational status despite a low level of formal education, as in the case of the self-made man, or, conversely, that of an individual with a high level of education but associated with a devalued ethnic status in the society under consideration. In both cases, this inconsistency would produce a specific form of psychological tension, generating a diffuse dissatisfaction with the existing social order, regardless of the individual's actual average position.

Legitimacy Shifted toward Individual Experience: Theoretical Limitations and Moroccan Echoes

Viewed through our theoretical framework, these two approaches attribute to social stratification a form of legitimacy different from that defended by Parsons. Neither Merton nor Lenski genuinely seeks to justify inequality as such, in the sense of the legal-rational legitimacy defined by Weber (Weber, 1921/1995). Their object lies elsewhere: they describe how individuals experience and negotiate their position within an already established hierarchy, without directly questioning the legitimacy of that hierarchy itself. The mechanism they propose is consequently individual rather than systemic: normative anticipation in Merton's case and status inconsistency in Lenski's. Both logics explain trajectories rather than justify a structure. When subjected to Mills's critical test, these two theories therefore withstand scrutiny better than Parsons's, since they never claim that stratification is necessary for the functioning of the system. A limitation nevertheless remains. By focusing the analysis on the individual's psychological adjustment to a given hierarchy, these approaches shift attention away from the criteria that define the hierarchy itself, thereby silently naturalizing its existence in a different way (Mills, 1959).

The concept of anticipatory socialization sheds new light on the mechanisms of patronage documented by Waterbury, and subsequently by Hibou and Tozy, in the Moroccan context. What Merton describes as the early adoption of the norms of a desired group takes a particular form in a system where administrative domination and political allegiance remain closely intertwined. It involves, to a greater extent, learning the codes of loyalty expected by dominant networks than acquiring technical or merit-based competencies (Waterbury, 1970; Hibou and Tozy, 2020).

An individual aspiring to enter the Moroccan elite does not merely acquire a degree. They also learn, often implicitly, how to position themselves within the appropriate networks of loyalty. This constitutes a form of anticipatory socialization oriented toward allegiance rather than solely toward academic or professional merit. The questions raised by Merton in 1957 therefore find a specific resonance here: a Moroccan individual who prioritizes these networks at the expense of their group of origin may likewise face a form of local stigmatization. However, they remain dependent, like the American soldier studied by Merton, on the actual existence of opportunities for advancement. Otherwise, this strategy becomes, as Merton had already anticipated, dysfunctional rather than beneficial.

The theory of status crystallization also finds a contemporary echo, particularly in the current literature on social downgrading. A degree holder occupying a precarious job experiences precisely this type of inconsistency across several status dimensions, which directly echoes Lenski's original insight and continues to inform contemporary reflection on the social origins of political discontent.

The psychosocial approach experienced a marked decline from the 1960s onward, displaced by the growing influence of quantitative sociology of social mobility, which would find its most developed expression in the work of Blau and Duncan. This shift was partly due to a measurement problem: the concepts of reference group and status crystallization proved difficult to quantify rigorously, making them difficult to incorporate into the large-scale statistical surveys that were beginning to dominate the field. This methodological limitation nevertheless carried a theoretical cost that is more clearly recognized today. As the psychosocial approach lost influence, the sociology of mobility also lost part of its sensitivity to individuals' subjective experiences, the very dimension that contemporary research on perceptions of social downgrading seeks to recover several decades later through other means. Merton and Lenski thus provide a complementary and significant contribution to our broader research question. They remind us that the legitimacy of a stratification system is determined not only

by its official principles of justification, but also by the way individuals experience, internalize, or contest their own position within that system.

Social Mobility: A Shared Concern, Two Opposing Political Responses

Lipset and Zetterberg's Similarity Thesis: Glass's Normative Warning

Seymour Lipset and Hans Zetterberg begin from an observation that differs sharply from Davis and Moore's theory. Rather than justifying inequality in general, they seek to compare, across several industrialized countries, the intensity and form of social mobility from one generation to the next. Their thesis, known as the similarity thesis, argues that these countries display broadly comparable levels of mobility despite significant differences in their political institutions and national traditions (Lipset and Zetterberg, 1956). This similarity would be explained by five shared structural factors. The first concerns changes in the occupational distribution, themselves linked to economic growth, which mechanically creates new positions at the top of the social hierarchy. The second concerns differences in fertility rates between social categories, which have been lower among affluent groups since the earliest demographic studies of the century, thereby creating a structural upward pull within the social hierarchy, independently of individual merit. The third concerns the gradual evolution of the prestige attached to certain occupations, which changes over several generations rather than from one year to the next. The fourth concerns the increasing transition toward salaried employment among occupations that were formerly independent, thereby reducing their direct hereditary transmission from parent to child. The final factor concerns the gradual disappearance of inherited institutional constraints, such as former occupational guilds, which previously restricted access to certain occupations. Lipset further developed and extended this analysis several years later, together with Reinhard Bendix, in a work that also became a major reference in the field (Lipset and Bendix, 1959).

On the British side, David Glass offers a very different interpretation, rooted in the ideological context of postwar English socialism. British socialists of the period, who favored legal and democratic paths over revolutionary ones, regarded class conflict as a failure of capitalism to be gradually corrected rather than as an inevitable condition to be abolished through rupture. This orientation directly informed the study conducted by Glass at the London School of Economics. The objective was less to study mobility in the Marxist sense of social classes than to understand the mechanisms of social selection that led certain individuals toward the highest professional, administrative, and managerial positions. His findings show that access to these positions remained overwhelmingly reserved for the sons of those who already occupied high-status positions, making the chances of the children of unskilled or semi-skilled workers almost negligible (Glass, 1954). Glass did not stop at this statistical observation. He drew from it a precise normative requirement: a more meritocratic selection of elites may increase mobility, but it should never serve to legitimize the inequalities of condition that persist elsewhere.

Without such vigilance, he warned, meritocracy risks widening the divide between an elite that considers itself fully deserving and a mass that feels permanently excluded. Social tension may then become more acute than under an openly hereditary system, in which no one claims that the social order rewards individual merit.

A comparative reading of these two positions, already proposed by Goldthorpe, reveals a shared concern but opposing conclusions. Both authors perceive the same danger: increased mobility generated by increasingly universalistic social selection, in the sense in which Parsons uses the term. Lipset draws a more conciliatory conclusion: once the most pronounced inequalities of condition have been mitigated by postwar economic growth, it becomes reasonable to cease seeking to maximize mobility opportunities indefinitely. This would make it possible to reduce the personal and social tensions associated with differences in status. Glass, by contrast, rejects this conclusion. As long as inequalities of condition and opportunity remain at unacceptable levels, he considers it imperative to continue reducing them simultaneously rather than settling for a level of statistical mobility deemed sufficient (Goldthorpe, 1976).

A Fictitious Legitimacy Without a Reduction in Inequalities of Condition: From the United Kingdom to Morocco

Viewed through our theoretical framework, this confrontation reveals two very different relationships to legitimacy. Lipset and Zetterberg remain largely removed from this question, adopting an essentially descriptive

and comparative approach. The question of legitimacy remains implicit, while mobility appears as an almost natural consequence of economic growth rather than as an explicitly assumed societal choice. Glass, by contrast, explicitly adopts a normative position distinct from legal-rational legitimacy in the strict Weberian sense (Weber, 1921/1995). He argues that the legitimacy of a meritocratic selection system depends directly on the prior reduction of inequalities of condition. Without such a reduction, this legitimacy remains fictitious, even when selection procedures appear formally fair.

When subjected to Mills's critical test, the thesis of Lipset and Zetterberg withstands scrutiny only to a limited extent. By reducing social mobility to an economic by-product, it carefully avoids questioning the power relations that shape the actual distribution of positions. Glass, by contrast, withstands this test more effectively because he explicitly refuses to allow statistical increases in mobility to substitute for social justice, thereby echoing, from Britain, the critical insight that Tumin was formulating at the same time in the United States (Mills, 1959).

Glass's warning remains strikingly relevant, including in contexts far removed from postwar London. It finds a direct echo in the case of French grandes écoles, where meritocratic selection insufficiently accompanied by a reduction in inequalities of condition can generate lasting resentment toward institutions that are supposed to embody equality of opportunity (Pasquali, 2021). The Moroccan case illustrates the same risk in a different form. The official discourse of competitive examination-based recruitment in the Moroccan civil service expresses an ambition similar to that described by Lipset and Zetterberg: selection based on technical and universal criteria independent of candidates' social origins. Yet, as shown by Mekkaoui, and subsequently by Hibou and Tozy, the persistence of practices combining administrative domination and allegiance continues to affect appointments. The meritocratic promise may then produce the effect feared by Glass: widening a legitimacy gap between an administration that presents itself as meritocratic and part of the population that does not perceive its concrete benefits (Mekkaoui, 2021; Hibou and Tozy, 2020).

The thesis of Lipset and Zetterberg has been subject to specific criticisms that should be recalled for the sake of balance. Their class scheme, reduced to a simple opposition between manual and non-manual work, underestimates a significant share of the mobility occurring within these two broad categories themselves. Their analysis also excludes the agricultural sector for technical reasons, even though this sector has a substantial impact on mobility flows in many countries, including contemporary Morocco. Finally, their approach presents an important limitation for our purposes: it relies on absolute mobility rates without taking into account changes in the social structure over time. This limitation directly relates to Daniel Bertaux's distinction between structural mobility and net mobility (Bertaux, 1969). A substantial part of the similarity observed by Lipset and Zetterberg among industrialized countries may therefore reflect comparable economic transformations. It does not necessarily indicate a comparable degree of openness of societies to meritocratic mobility, which calls for caution when interpreting their thesis, just as with French or Moroccan mobility statistics.

Measured Universalism: Legitimacy Grounded In Numbers

The Statistical Model of Social Status Attainment

Peter Blau and Otis Duncan radically changed the methodological approach in 1967, without, however, abandoning the theoretical ambition that had driven this entire line of inquiry since Davis and Moore. Rather than reasoning in terms of functions or shared values, they sought to statistically model the process through which an individual attains social status. Their main tool, path analysis, was at the time a regression technique that remained relatively uncommon in sociology. Their book was based on a large-scale American survey conducted in 1962, covering more than twenty thousand men. The survey had initially been designed for other purposes, but was entirely reanalyzed for the study of mobility (Blau and Duncan, 1967). This work extended an earlier pioneering article by Duncan and Hodge, published in 1963, which had already addressed the intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status.

Their model starts from a simple structure: the father's status and educational attainment, the son's educational attainment, followed by his status in his first occupation and at the time of the survey. Blau and Duncan subsequently elaborated this framework by introducing several intermediate variables, including race, ethnic

origin, migration, sibship size, and birth order. This accumulation of variables reveals a network of relationships that remained invisible in the conventional mobility tables used up to that point. Their most frequently cited conclusion suggests that industrial societies exhibit a fundamental tendency toward universalism, with each selection or promotion decision increasingly tending to rest on criteria of individual competence rather than on membership in a particular social group (Goldthorpe, 1976). The model does confirm that the son's education and first occupation transmit a substantial part of the influence of paternal status, which appears to provide empirical support for the idea of an increasingly meritocratic society. Yet it also reveals findings that are more difficult to reconcile with this optimistic interpretation. Controlling for origin, education, and experience, the occupational chances of Black Americans remain significantly lower than those of White Americans, a gap that none of the measured variables can fully explain.

An Unexplained Residual: From the American Model to Its Moroccan Translation

This finding deserves to be reconsidered in light of our theoretical framework. Blau and Duncan never explicitly defend a functional necessity in the manner of Davis and Moore. Their legitimation is more indirect, almost statistical, based on the empirical demonstration of a tendency toward universalism, as though quantitative evidence of increasingly merit-based individual selection were, in itself, sufficient to validate the justice of the system under observation. The mechanism they identify remains entirely mediated: social origin continues to influence occupational trajectories, but primarily through education and first employment. This mediation permits a reassuring interpretation, whereby direct social inheritance would be receding in favor of a form of inheritance now operating through educational merit. The persistent gap between Black and White Americans falls entirely outside this mechanism, suggesting the existence of a second factor not captured by the model, one more closely related to structural discrimination than to a simple effect of social composition.

When subjected to Mills's critical test, Blau and Duncan do not escape the criticism, but in a form different from that directed at Parsons. Mills was not only critical of abstract grand theory; he was equally critical of what he called "empiricism distilled," namely the accumulation of precise, technically rigorous data that nevertheless lacked a critical perspective on what those data actually meant (Mills, 1959). Blau and Duncan illustrate this second pitfall by rigorously measuring the extent of racial disadvantage without examining it as a problem of political legitimacy. Unlike Parsons, this approach neutralizes a finding with potentially profound political implications by reducing it to a residual variable rather than treating it as a question of social justice.

The Blau and Duncan model gave rise to an entire research tradition known as the origin, education, destination triangle, which is now widely used well beyond the United States. A recent study applies precisely this triangle to the Moroccan case, using microdata from the 2014 census (Housni et al.2026). Its conclusions are broadly consistent with those of Blau and Duncan. Education constitutes a real and measurable channel of occupational mobility in Morocco, but social origin continues to exert an independent effect on the position attained, even after educational attainment is statistically controlled for. This methodological convergence between the foundational American model and its contemporary Moroccan adaptation confirms the relevance of the theoretical framework developed throughout this article. A form of legitimation based solely on statistical evidence of universalism, however technically rigorous, leaves an essential question unresolved. From the standpoint of the justice of the system under observation, what does this unexplained residual mean, that is, the independent effect of social origin once all variables have been controlled for?

Morocco, like the United States studied by Blau and Duncan, measures this residual with precision, without always treating it as a political problem in its own right. The findings of Mekkaoui, as well as those of Hibou and Tozy, confirm this interpretation from another angle by highlighting the persistence of logics of allegiance within the Moroccan administration (Mekkaoui, 2021; Hibou and Tozy, 2020). This model also calls for several methodological reservations. The occupational prestige scale used by Blau and Duncan assumes a degree of stability over time that can be questioned, since the perceived hierarchy of occupations itself evolves with economic transformations. Moreover, their survey covers only men, thereby entirely excluding women's social mobility from their model, a limitation that remained largely unnoticed for a long time in the subsequent reception of their work. These technical limitations do not, however, diminish their decisive contribution to our broader research question. They demonstrate that a theory of stratification can move from the realm of shared

values, characteristic of Parsons, to that of rigorous statistical measurement. Yet it remains exposed to the risk identified by Mills: transforming a political problem into a mere parameter of a model.

Functionalist Legitimation Tested By Its Own Theoretical Extensions

The four paradigms examined in this article share a common origin. Yet each moves away from this common starting point in its own way, making it possible to assess, step by step, the capacity of functionalism to withstand its own internal critique.

In Davis, Moore, and Parsons, legitimation remains explicit and fully asserted. Inequality appears as a systemic necessity, almost as a natural law governing the functioning of society, thereby placing it beyond the reach of ordinary normative debate. This reasoning corresponds precisely to what Tumin and subsequently Mills denounce as a justification disguised as description (Tumin, 1953; Mills, 1959). In Merton and Lenski, this legitimation becomes less pronounced without ever disappearing entirely. Their focus shifts toward the individual experience of the social hierarchy. This makes them less vulnerable to Mills's criticism, but also less directly useful for assessing the justice of the system itself. In Lipset, Zetterberg, and Glass, legitimation splits into two opposing paths. The first, almost mechanical, treats mobility as a by-product of economic growth. The second explicitly refuses to allow mobility statistics alone to stand in for social justice (Goldthorpe, 1976). Finally, in Blau and Duncan, legitimation changes nature once again. It takes refuge in the rigor of quantitative measurement, making it possible to reveal inequalities that the initial functionalist theory did not anticipate, without explicitly identifying them as problems of political legitimacy.

A common thread thus runs through these four paradigms. The more refined the analytical tools become, from Parsons's qualitative concept of function to Blau and Duncan's statistical regression, the more difficult it becomes to directly name what these tools nevertheless continue to reveal. An inherited advantage persists, whether it operates through culture, networks, or simply membership in an already advantaged group. Methodological sophistication gains descriptive power at each stage while losing normative clarity.

The examination of the Moroccan case makes it possible to assess the robustness of this trajectory in an institutional context very different from the one in which it was developed. Three specific echoes emerge from the preceding sections. The first concerns legitimation through necessity itself. The Moroccan system of merit-based recruitment reproduces, almost literally, the achievement-oriented universalistic logic described by Parsons for the United States. The second concerns the mechanism of anticipatory socialization identified by Merton, which in Morocco takes the particular form of learning the codes of allegiance, documented both by Waterbury and by more recent studies explicitly grounded in Weber (Waterbury, 1970; Hibou and Tozy, 2020). The third concerns the unexplained residual revealed by any statistical approach modeled on Blau and Duncan. Social origin continues to exert an independent effect on the position attained in Morocco, even after educational attainment is taken into account (Housni et al. 2026). These three echoes derive from an independent body of Moroccan literature that was not produced for the purposes of this comparison. Their convergence suggests that the tension observed in the United States and Great Britain is not merely an Anglo-Saxon peculiarity, but reflects a more general phenomenon extending across highly different institutional systems.

This conclusion invites a return to Glass's warning, perhaps the most contemporary point in this entire theoretical corpus. A meritocratic selection process, however rigorous its procedures may be, can never by itself produce lasting legitimacy. It must be accompanied by a parallel reduction in the inequalities of condition that precede competition itself (Glass, 1954). This is precisely the risk documented by Mekkaoui, and subsequently by Hibou and Tozy, in contemporary Morocco: an official meritocratic discourse coexists with persistent practices of allegiance, widening a gap in trust between the administration and part of the population it claims to serve equally (Mekkaoui, 2021; Hibou and Tozy, 2020).

This discussion also makes it possible to establish an explicit bridge to the French debate between Bourdieu and Boudon. This bridge is not an artificial construction. It is already present in the primary sources themselves. Boudon explicitly acknowledges that he drew on Parsons's systemic approach in developing his own theory of social mobility, adopting a method that takes into account a large number of collective and individual variables simultaneously. The same Boudon, as Bouvier recalls, also credited Bourdieu and Passeron with raising a

question that the American functionalist tradition, like Sorokin before it, had never genuinely addressed: the microsociological foundations of mobility (Bouvier, 2020). American functionalism is therefore not merely a historical backdrop to French sociology of social mobility. It provides one of its direct building blocks, reworked by Boudon, while Tumin's critique finds a structural, though not genealogical, echo in Bourdieu's later critique of any unexamined legitimation of the established educational order.

The debate opened by Davis and Moore and subsequently challenged by Tumin therefore finds no closure in its own theoretical extensions. Each paradigm examined in this article shifts the question without ever fully resolving it, moving from the realm of shared values to that of individual experience, then to that of international comparison, and finally to that of statistical measurement. Far from exhausting the initial controversy, this continuous shift instead reveals its persistence, even in institutional contexts that Davis, Moore, and Tumin would probably never have imagined confronting with their own theory.

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

This article began with a single research question, developed in two stages. To what extent does the functionalist debate on social stratification, initiated by Davis and Moore and challenged by Tumin, withstand the test of its own theoretical extensions? And do its conclusions retain their validity in light of independent Moroccan evidence on merit-based recruitment?

Our analysis leads to a nuanced but relatively clear answer. The foundational debate does not withstand its own theoretical extensions in its entirety. Each author examined shifts the initial question without ever definitively settling it. The legitimation through functional necessity asserted with confidence by Davis and Moore gradually weakens as analytical tools become more refined. Yet it never disappears completely. Rather, it is transformed, changing form at each stage, from the realm of shared values in Parsons to that of statistical measurement in Blau and Duncan. The Moroccan evidence mobilized throughout this article, drawn from an independent body of literature ranging from Waterbury to Housni et al., confirms that this persistence is not merely an American or British peculiarity. It reflects a more general tension observable in institutional systems very different from the one in which the debate originated.

Our discussion has also highlighted a finding that extends beyond the immediate scope of this article. American functionalism is not merely an outdated stage in the history of sociology. It constitutes one of the direct building blocks from which French sociology of social mobility was constructed, particularly in the work of Bourdieu and Boudon. Boudon explicitly acknowledges his intellectual debt to Parsons's systemic approach. Tumin's normative critique, for its part, finds a structural echo in Bourdieu's subsequent critique of any unexamined legitimation of the established educational order. This connection helps situate the present analysis within the broader intellectual history of social mobility research, while remaining directly relevant to the theoretical argument developed in this article. Sorokin's contribution to the development of functionalist thought is relevant to this intellectual history, but its detailed examination falls beyond the scope of the present article.

This article has limitations that should be clearly acknowledged. The examination of the Moroccan case remains based on an independent secondary literature addressing related, but not strictly identical, objects. Waterbury's analysis of political elite formation, Hibou and Tozy's work on administrative domination, Mekkaoui's research on civil service recruitment, and **Housni, Aoujil, and Housni's** study on occupational mobility study of occupational mobility each illuminate a different dimension of the same phenomenon, without constituting a single, coherent empirical investigation. Future research could seek to bring these different strands together in an empirical study specifically designed for this purpose, simultaneously measuring official meritocratic discourse, actual recruitment practices, and their effects on trust in institutions.

A second avenue for research emerges directly from the critical discussion. It would consist in examining more systematically, from the perspective of comparative political theory, how different administrative systems construct and sustain their meritocratic legitimacy in the face of documented inequalities in access. The French grandes écoles, Moroccan grandes écoles, and Moroccan public administration examined here offer three complementary fields for such an investigation. This approach would make it possible to assess whether the warning formulated by Glass in 1954 remains equally relevant today. A meritocratic system insufficiently

accompanied by a reduction in inequalities of condition may continue to intensify social division rather than reduce it, across [the different institutional contexts considered in this study](#).

REFERENCES

1. Blau, P. M., & Duncan, O. D. (1967). *The American occupational structure*. Wiley.
2. Bertaux, D. (1969). Sur l'analyse des tables de mobilité sociale. *Revue française de sociologie*, 10(4), 448–490. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3320436>.
3. Bouvier, A. (2020). L'individualisme méthodologique au défi des critiques de la philosophie analytique récente. *L'Année sociologique*, 70(1), 45–67. <https://doi.org/10.3917/anso.201.0045>.
4. Davis, K., & Moore, W. E. (1945). Some principles of stratification. *American Sociological Review*, 10(2), 242–249.
5. Glass, D. V. (Ed.). (1954). *Social mobility in Britain*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
6. Goldthorpe, J. H. (1976). *Mobilité sociale et intérêts sociaux*. *Sociologie et sociétés*, 8(2), 7–36. <https://doi.org/10.7202/001305ar>.
7. Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009). A typology of reviews: an analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, 26(2), 91–108.
8. Hauhart, R. C. (2003). The Davis–Moore theory of stratification: The life course of a socially constructed classic. *The American Sociologist*, 34(4), 5–24.
9. Hibou, B., & Tozy, M. (2020). *Tisser le temps politique au Maroc. L'imaginaire de l'État à l'âge néolibéral*. Karthala.
10. Housni, A., Aoujil, A., & Housni, A. (2026). Origine sociale, éducation et mobilité professionnelle au Maroc : une analyse du triangle OED. *International Journal of Accounting, Finance, Auditing, Management and Economics*, 7(6), 670–691.
11. King, G., Keohane, R. O., & Verba, S. (1994). *Designing social inquiry. Scientific inference in qualitative research*. Princeton University Press.
12. Lenski, G. E. (1954). Status crystallization: A non-vertical dimension of social status. *American Sociological Review*, 19(4), 405–413.
13. Lipset, S. M., & Bendix, R. (1959). *Social mobility in industrial society*. University of California Press.
14. Lipset, S. M., & Zetterberg, H. L. (1956). A theory of social mobility. *Transactions of the Third World Congress of Sociology*, 3, 155–177.
15. Mekkaoui, K. (2021). Le système de recrutement dans le secteur public marocain, étude exploratoire au sein des départements ministériels. *African Scientific Journal*, 3(4), 1–19.
16. Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure (Rev. and enl. ed.)*. Free Press.
17. Merton, R. K., & Rossi, A. S. (1950). Contributions to the theory of reference group behavior. In R. K. Merton & P. F. Lazarsfeld (Eds.), *Continuities in social research* (pp. 40–105). Free Press.
18. Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.
19. Parsons, T. (1940). An analytical approach to the theory of social stratification. *American Journal of Sociology*, 45(6), 841–862. <https://doi.org/10.1086/218489>.
20. Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system*. Free Press.
21. Parsons, T. (1954). *Essays in sociological theory (Rev. ed.)*. Free Press.
22. Pasquali, P. (2021). *Héritocratie ? Les élites, les grandes écoles et les mésaventures du mérite (1870–2020)*. La Découverte.
23. Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Harvard University Press.
24. Sandel, M. J. (2020). The tyranny of merit. What's become of the common good? Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
25. Siemoneit, A. (2023). Merit first, need and equality second: hierarchies of justice. *International Review of Economics*, 70, 537–567. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12232-023-00430-x>.
26. Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, 4(3), 356–367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283>.
27. Torraco, R. J. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. *Human Resource Development Review*, 15(4), 404–428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606>.

28. Tumin, M. M. (1953). Some principles of stratification: A critical analysis. *American Sociological Review*, 18(4), 387–394. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2087551>.
29. Walker, H. A., & Cohen, B. P. (1985). Scope statements: Imperatives for evaluating theory. *American Sociological Review*, 50(3), 288–301. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095540>.
30. Waterbury, J. (1970). *The commander of the faithful. The Moroccan political elite, a study in segmented politics*. Columbia University Press.
31. Weber, M. (1995). *Économie et société. Tome 1 : Les catégories de la sociologie* (J. Freund, P. Kamnitzer, P. Bertrand, et al., Trans.). Pocket. (Original work published 1921).