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Social Mobility: the politics, the reality, the alternative.

Social mobility – something we all think is wonderful, or do we? Certainly all the UK's major political parties appear to be all for it, expressing concern about clear evidence that mobility between social classes in Britain has levelled off, and more contested evidence that there is now less mobility up and down the income ladder than there used to be. But what exactly do politicians and academics mean when they talk about social mobility? And is a more socially mobile society as achievable or even as desirable a goal as many seem to think?

The academic literature on social mobility differentiates between 'absolute' and 'relative' social mobility and measures both in terms of the occupational status and income of parents and their children (traditionally fathers and sons). 'Absolute mobility' simply refers to the total amount of movement between occupational classes from one generation to the next, much of which results from shifts in the occupational structure of a society. In the UK there was a lot of absolute mobility in the years from 1945 up to about the mid-1980s due to a massive growth in the numbers in professional and semi-professional occupations driven by the 'tertiarization' of the economy, that is a growth in service sector employment and in particular in professional employment across education, health and other parts of the welfare state. Before deindustrialization really got underway in the mid-1980s there was also a very large and growing industrial middle class and an important mode of personal mobility was the move from skilled manual industrial work to technical and managerial roles, often on the basis of systematic part time higher education. This continued expansion of top positions meant that, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, unprecedented numbers of people were able to move up.

'Relative social mobility', in contrast, is not concerned with total rates of movement between social class positions but with the rates at which those from lower down manage to move up compared to the rates at which those from higher up avoid falling down. Despite high and rising rates of absolute mobility throughout much of the twentieth century, relative mobility chances have shown little if any sign of becoming any more equal over time. The reason for this is simple: an occupational structure that is expanding at the top enables more people to move up, but at the same time it also enables more people to avoid falling down. Growing 'room at the top' means it is possible to have a high degree of upward mobility even while inequalities in relative mobility chances remain unchanged.

However, where you have an occupational structure that has stopped expanding at the top, relative social mobility becomes a zero sum game: for some people from below to move up, some people from above have to move down to make way for them. This is precisely the direction in which the British occupational structure has been heading since the mid-1980s, a trend that the latest economic recession will no doubt have accelerated. The industrial middle class, once large, is now much reduced in size, and the new service sector middle class has seen its ranks decimated and demoted, particularly in the wake of drastic public spending cuts imposed in the 1980s by Thatcher and revisited by Cameron in the 2010s. The upshot of all of this is that upward social mobility increasingly necessitates downward mobility. And we have to ask ourselves: while those at the top might have been content to allow upward social mobility when it posed little threat to the successful intergenerational transmission of their own social standing, will they be as keen on upward mobility that threatens to displace their children?

The current political debate about social mobility is all about relative social mobility measured in occupational terms, although it is striking how much more of the talk has been about upward mobility than about its less politically palatable counterpart, downward mobility. Relative mobility has been the focus of a series of studies and reports in particular those associated with Alan Milburn's role as 'social mobility tsar', the work of the Social Mobility Foundation, the Sutton Trust, and the all-party parliamentary group on Social Mobility whose recent report was promoted by the right wing think tank, The Policy Exchange. All of these have promoted the idea of 'meritocracy' – that is a society in which social position is absolutely a product of innate ability coupled with application or effort and in which social origins have no influence on social position. The political corollary of this is that if there is genuine social mobility, then inequality is seen as more acceptable.

It is worth dwelling for a moment on the logic that lies behind this kind of political thinking. Inequality in terms of pay and conditions and social esteem (and consequently living conditions, health, life expectancy, and so on) is fine, so the thinking goes, so long as there is equality of opportunity to compete for these unequal outcomes. But the logic immediately breaks down as soon as we realise that one generation's unequal outcomes are the next generation's unequal starting points. It doesn't take much brain power to realise that equality of opportunity is practically impossible in the absence of equality of condition. When it comes down to it, the concern to increase social mobility is something of a diversion from the far more important, and in fact prerequisite, goal of reducing social inequality. Clearly we

should think rather more carefully about the political relationship between mobility and inequality. After all, the old working class slogan was: rise with your class, not from it.

While social mobility trends have been flat in recent decades, inequality has soared. Real incomes in the UK have doubled over the past forty years but a great deal of that increase has gone to a very small group of households. Note the shift from individuals, the focus of classic social mobility studies, to households because the household is the significant unit for income. Since the 1970s by whatever measure you take household income inequality in the UK has increased by more than 30%. There has been a massive absolute and relative increase in the incomes of the top 10% of households, and particularly for the top 1% of households. Over the last decade 40% of all income growth has gone to the top 10%. In contrast the poorest tenth of households have actually seen a fall in real incomes. Any cut in a continuous distribution is relatively arbitrary but there seems to be a real difference between the top 10% and those households below them. Despite considerable under-representation of really affluent households in the survey base for income distribution data, that data shows how the top 10% move away from the rest of us very rapidly. This will become even more the case in the future, given the current systematic attack on public sector professional salaries, a key programme of the present Coalition. The drivers for the acceleration upwards of the most affluent include reduction in progressive income taxes, the activities of the tax avoidance industry, the weakness of trade unions, and the tendency of high income earners to form domestic partnerships with other high earners.

The political concern about social mobility seems to be very much about access to this level of privilege and affluence. If we look at the mechanisms for achieving this then we see that they are very much to do with educational privilege. Much of this seems to be to do with secondary education, particularly access to private schools but also access to the 'best' state schools such as the 164 selective state grammar schools that have rejected comprehensivization and the 13% of state schools currently rated 'outstanding' by OFSTED. Graduates who went to ordinary state schools are substantially less likely to have attended one of the UK's more prestigious universities and are substantially less likely to enter professional occupations than graduates who were privately educated. Even if they obtain a graduate level job those who went to ordinary state schools earn less when they have comparable qualifications. To a considerable extent this reflects degree programme since private schools and the top state schools very much dominate medical and dental school intakes as well as intakes to elite universities.

It is worth paying attention to the nature of UK private schools. A particularly significant group in England and Wales are those which were once ‘Direct Grant Schools’ – that is schools which were not under the control of Local Education Authorities but received direct funding from central government and whilst admitting fee paying pupils also took in free place scholarship students. There were 179 of these and their students generally were the highest achieving at A level, doing better than private schools and state grammar schools. In the 1970s these schools were faced with the prospect of either going comprehensive or private. Forty five, mostly Catholic, went comprehensive. The rest went wholly private. They continue to be schools with outstandingly high results. Typical fees for these schools are about £9,000 a year, which would represent about 40% of the median household income for a household with children. They do have free or reduced fee places but typically their students are drawn precisely from high income households. This is even more the case for schools which were always private, particularly boarding schools, but the former direct grant schools which were built up on state funding provide an example of the privatization of privilege.

It is worth looking at the nature of the UK’s top state schools, too. These are almost invariably located in the most affluent neighbourhoods. A house close to one of the UK’s 30 highest performing state secondary schools would typically set you back more than £300,000. Prospective homebuyers with a 10% deposit would need a joint income of more than £70,000 to qualify for a mortgage on a property of this price, placing them in the top 10% of the household income distribution. The research evidence suggests that schools in many LEAs, particularly those in London, have become more not less socially segregated in recent years, linked no doubt to the phenomenal increase in house prices in the most desirable neighbourhoods.

What we see with schools in the private sector, and with the top performing state schools, is an ability of high income households to directly or indirectly purchase secondary educations which advantage their children in relation to access to elite universities and high status university courses. Around 8% of 11-16 year olds in Britain attend private schools and a further 4% attend selective state grammar schools, but private and grammar school students together make up more than 35% of students at Russell Group universities (the figure for Oxbridge is around 60%) and more than 45% of students on medicine and dentistry courses. Young people who attend private and grammar schools are of course more likely to achieve the grades necessary for entry to the most selective universities and courses – parents paying £9,000 a year in school fees would presumably expect no less, and grammar school pupils are

of course pre-selected on the basis of measured ability. But compared to ordinary state school students who have equally good A-level grades, private and grammar school educated students are considerably more likely to apply to the most selective universities and courses, and when they do apply they are considerably more likely to be offered a place.

The fact that private schools and top-performing state schools provide unparalleled access to prestigious universities matters because prestigious universities play an increasingly powerful role in helping parents pass privileges on to their children. This is not just a matter of qualifications; a degree from a low status university simply doesn't carry the same cachet. Nor is it a matter of prestigious universities offering a higher quality of teaching than that delivered in other institutions which have lower entry requirements and therefore have to cope with a tail of less well prepared students. Instead it is a matter of the establishment of networks of contacts – or, to use the jargon, ‘bonding social capital’ – and of ‘badging’ – of already being marked out, by virtue of institutional connections, as suitable for graduate recruitment to elite organisations and occupations. This is clear simply from looking at which graduate employers make ‘milk round’ visits only to the most selective universities. We can see a whole institutional system geared exactly to making sure that, for households who are up, their children stay up, drawing on the purchasing power of those households to achieve this effect.

Clearly the cost of private schooling or a home near an excellent state school is well beyond the means of families in ‘intermediate’ and ‘working’ class positions, and if the current £9000 per annum cap on university tuition fees is lifted in the coming years, then the cost of an elite university education will become so too. These things are also way beyond the reach of a large portion of nominally middle class families where only one parent works in a lower-professional job such as classroom teacher, social worker, or middle manager. However, where both parents work in jobs that pay middling incomes or better, then the use of private schools, of ‘good’ state schools in expensive neighbourhoods becomes a more affordable option. Clearly the joint income of couples, rather than the income or occupation of any one individual, is what is key.

Also crucial is that fact that the capacity of middle class parents to ‘invest’ in their children’s educational and occupational futures depends considerably on their own social mobility histories. Those who were themselves upwardly mobile into the middle class are much less likely to have parents who can help them cover the cost of their children’s school fees, or

fund a large deposit and high mortgage repayments on a house a stone's throw from an outstanding state school. No wonder, then, that recent research has shown that people's social mobility chances are affected by their grandparents' as well as their parents' social class positions, and that those most likely to be downwardly socially mobile are those who have been 'up' for only one generation. Clearly we need to think of social mobility as being about the socioeconomic trajectories of families over multiple generations, rather than the simple movement of individuals between origins and destination.

Despite the fact that social class and social mobility are anything but an individual affair, a key phrase in the discourse of social mobility is the 'ladder of opportunity'. Quoting Winston Churchill at this year's Conservative Spring Forum, David Cameron said: 'We are for the ladder. Let all try their best to climb.' Churchill himself went on to say of the socialist opposition of his day: 'They are for the queue. Let each wait his place until his turn comes.' This metaphor of the queue is, of course, a gross mischaracterisation of socialist principles: socialism is not about individuals waiting in line, it is about the collective advancing together. The metaphor of the ladder is misleading too, most obviously because it neglects the fact that some start out on the higher rungs, but more subtly because it presents as a collective endeavour something that is inherently individualistic. Raymond Williams took a distinctly jaundiced view of the metaphor of the ladder:

'Another alternative to solidarity which has had some effect is the idea of individual opportunity – of the ladder. ... many working-class leaders, men [sic] in fact who have used the ladder, have been dazzled by this alternative to solidarity. Yet the ladder is the perfect symbol of the bourgeois idea of society, because while it undoubtedly offers the opportunity to climb, it is a device which can only be used individually: you go up the ladder alone. ... The actual process of reform, in so far as it has not been governed by working-class pressure, has been in large part, the giving of increased opportunity to climb. Many indeed have scrambled up, and gone off to play on the other side ... My own view is that the ladder version of society is objectionable in two related respects: first, that it weakens the principle of common betterment, which ought to be an absolute value; second that it sweetens the poison of hierarchy, in particular by offering the hierarchy of merit as a thing different in kind from the hierarchy of money or birth.' (1963 317-8)

Fifty years on this may seem like radical socialist utopianism but we consider that its time has come again. Clearly any programme directed towards equal opportunity accepts inequality.

Some inequality may be inevitable in a capitalist society but the degree of that inequality can vary enormously. In the UK in Hobsbawm's 'fortunate third quarter' of the twentieth century and in the Scandinavian democracies today inequality in lived experience was / is somewhat tightly bounded in consequence of relatively good 'low paid' earnings and income substitution benefits and strongly progressive and enforced taxation. During that fortunate third "quarter", which began with the post-war introduction of free grammar school places and university maintenance grants, changes in the occupational structure allowed for the entry of a number of young adults from working and lower middle class backgrounds through secondary and higher education into well remunerated and regarded professional and managerial roles.

Many of those roles have now undergone or are undergoing serious 'proletarianization'. Teaching is a clear example as are the middle ranks of the civil service (the old Executive Officer grades). Further Education teaching has been virtually completely deprofessionalized and downgraded and this may become the norm for many 'qualified' roles in the future. Other higher level occupations have been much reduced in volume as a consequence of deindustrialization. The industrial middle class has declined in number alongside the old industrial working class from which it recruited as much by life course mobility as by intergenerational mobility.

As a result, many new University graduates today get jobs which are the functional equivalent of relatively poorly paid clerical and retail work – call centre agent for example. Even those who get what used to be regarded as decent public sector professional jobs are entering something which is much less of a career than it used to be. A degree pretty well guaranteed much higher lifetime earnings to one of the authors of this piece who graduated in 1969, but someone graduating in 2013 is far less likely to earn a lifetime premium. In a post-industrial society where the re-creation of a large reserve army of labour is a key mechanism in the disciplining of workers, the acquisition of qualifications offers little in the way of guarantee of entry into an improved social position. Even Oxbridge offers only potential access to the highest income positions –the best and safest route to income and wealth still is to be born to it. Social mobility is a false prospectus even for individuals. As a basis for politics the old slogan bears repeating: rise with your class, not from it.

The tenor of this piece is of course that we should focus on equality, not mobility – on solidarity, not meritocracy. And the solidification of the occupational structure coupled with

the massive appropriation of the whole social product by the super-rich and their closest associates, offers a particular historical opportunity for just that focus in the future. At the very least we should think again about whether we are prepared to accept such wide disparities in income and wealth, and the considerable educational and other advantages they can buy, at a time when opportunities for social mobility are about to close down.