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Misplaced optimism: how higher education reproduces rather than reduces social inequality

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Review essay in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*

The Working Classes and Higher Education: Inequality of Access, Opportunity and Outcome, edited by A.E. Stich and C. Freie

Meritocracy and the University: Selective Admission in England and the United States, by A. Mountford-Zimdars

Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs, by L.A. Rivera

Many sociologists of education, including myself, have optimistically regarded educational expansion as a socially progressive development, one that promises to ameliorate socioeconomic inequalities by providing a ladder of opportunity for those from poorer backgrounds. During the second half of the twentieth century, sociologists looked to secondary education to boost social mobility as industrialised nations introduced free, universal and compulsory secondary schooling and progressively increased the minimum school leaving age. Over this period, social class differences in rates of progression from primary to secondary education equalized in almost all industrialised countries (Breen et al 2009), but social class disparities in levels of academic attainment at secondary level proved remarkably stubborn (Social Mobility Commission 2016). Towards the close of the twentieth century, sociologists turned their attention to higher education as rapid worldwide expansion facilitated mass enrolment in often highly stratified national higher education systems (Schofer and Meyer 2015). But despite absolute increases in higher education enrolment rates for all social groups across the industrialised West, socioeconomic differences in relative rates of progression to higher education have so far shown no sign of equalizing (Breen et al 2009). Moreover, the world's most prestigious higher education programmes and institutions continue to be dominated by students from the most privileged family backgrounds (Marginson 2016).

This persistence of social inequalities of access to higher education generally, and to more prestigious forms of higher education in particular, seriously compromises the in-theory potential of higher education to serve as a vehicle for social mobility. The picture becomes gloomier still if we look beyond enrolment to labour market outcomes after graduation. One of the consequences of rising higher education participation rates is that, in order to gain access to a skilled, autonomous, secure, well-regarded and well rewarded middle class job, a degree has become *necessary but not sufficient* (Brown 2013). The labour market returns to higher education have been shown to vary substantially by academic discipline studied and by the prestige of the institution attended (Britton et al 2016), with graduates of lower status disciplines and institutions – many of whom are from working class backgrounds – increasingly struggling to obtain graduate-level jobs, or indeed any job at all. Moreover, even when working class origin students graduate from high prestige courses and institutions, they are much less assured of walking into a graduate-level occupation, particularly in a prestigious organisation, compared to their socioeconomically advantaged peers (Britton et al 2016). All of this indicates that our optimism about the power of education to promote social mobility has been seriously misplaced. Worse still, many once-optimistic university graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds will have found this out for themselves, to their own considerable financial and psychological cost.

Why, then, do we continue to believe in the power of higher education to transform lives, communities and societies at large? Perhaps the reason we do is because *we know it could*. It could if the chances of going to college or university were not so much lower for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, if the higher education experience was not so diminished for students who lack the stock of economic, cultural and social capital enjoyed by students from privileged backgrounds, and if graduate employers did not persist in recruiting in their own image. The three books reviewed here explore the wide gap that exists in each of these respects between the promise and the reality of higher education for

working-class students. They also hint at what needs to change if our optimism is to be renewed.

Getting in

The Working Classes and Higher Education is an edited collection of eleven research papers focusing on higher education in North America and the UK. The first two chapters in the volume focus on social inequalities of access to higher education. The chapter by Wolfgang Lehmann documents how the placement of Canadian working-class students in upper track academic programmes in high school "...can set in motion a socialization process that fundamentally redirects an individual's habitus...", encouraging enrolment in higher education to be seen as the natural next step (Lehmann in Stich and Freire 2016: 19). Similarly, the chapter by Roberta Espinoza, Cynthia Alcantar and Edwin Hernandez shows how, in the US context, early and sustained support from high school guidance counsellors can create "pivotal moments" for working-class students which help them "...develop the necessary psychological dispositions and high-aspiration orientations needed for educational success." (Espinoza, Alcantar and Hernandez in Stich and Freire 2016: 43).

However, as Wolfgang Lehmann notes, although this redirection of working-class students' habitus promotes educational aspirations and increases rates of college-going, it serves also to diminish the value of working-class cultures and lives. For many working-class students, being "...exposed to discourses that consider university and professional employment as the only measure of success [...] cuts them off from potentially rewarding educational and occupational alternatives [and] dismisses the value of working-class employment and lives, which might alienate young, working-class people from an important aspect of their own culture." (Lehmann in Stich and Freire 2016: 27-28). Essentially, then, working-class students are being taught that if they want to "succeed" in life they must become middle-class; to remain working-class, materially or culturally, is to have failed.

Indeed, as Mari Plikuhn and Matthew Knoester argue later in the volume, the “social costs” of participating in higher education can be considerable for working-class students and graduates, who, with a “foot in two worlds”, may “feel it is necessary to choose between their families and their educational pathways” (Plikuhn and Knoester in Stich and Freire 2016: 191).

Meritocracy and the University explores social inequalities of access to higher education from the perspective of elite university admissions. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with admissions selectors at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the UK and at ‘Ivy League’ colleges in the US, Anna Mountford-Zimdars offers a rich description of the people who select applicants for admission to elite higher education institutions, of what selectors and the institutions that employ them are seeking to achieve, and of what considerations come into play when determining which applicants deserve a place. As the book makes clear, although the ideological underpinnings and specific practices governing elite university admissions are somewhat different in the UK and the US, the socially elite character of the entering classes are very similar.

In the UK, a narrow definition of ‘merit’ prevails as selectors for Oxbridge aim to admit ‘the best’ applicants as indicated by their formal academic achievements, with intensive interviewing of potential admits by the academics who will teach them serving as a further screening tool for judging intellectual ability. Achieving a more socially diverse student body is seen as a laudable but politically difficult goal. While contextual data about the socioeconomic circumstances of applicants is shared with admissions selectors and monitored by the central admissions office, prior academic achievements and performance at interview are still seen as largely objective indicators of individual applicant ‘merit’, and the bar is set very high for everyone regardless of context. No wonder, then, that just ten percent of Oxbridge entrants are from working-class families as compared to 32 percent of all higher education students nationally.

For Ivy League college selectors in the US, in contrast, ‘the best’ applicants are not simply those with the highest academic test scores. Professional admissions selectors, who are not themselves college professors, look also for evidence of outstanding accomplishment in extra-curricular activities such as athletics and music as they seek to “craft a class” of admits who are not only demonstrably academically able but also rounded individuals with “leadership” qualities who will make a uniquely valuable contribution to the institution. Preferential consideration is given to applicants who hold “legacy” status by virtue of their parents having attended the institution before them, and to athletes who have competed at national or international level. These selection criteria, despite being broader in scope than those used at Oxbridge, still serve to make it far easier to gain admission to an Ivy League college for those from the most privileged backgrounds. This is offset to a degree by the fact that Ivy League selectors purposely seek to admit a socially and ethnically diverse class. However, working-class and ethnic minority applicants often need to “hook” selectors with a highly compelling personal narrative of triumph over adversity in order to be in the frame for admission. One Ivy League selector offered an extreme but telling example of:

“stories that are so compelling that you know everyone’s going to feel that way about the student who’s homeless, who has no parents around them, and yet they managed to score a 1,500 out of 1,600 on their SAT and they had straight A averages; and no one in their school even knows that they’re homeless, except for their counsellor and the administrator. It’s unbelievable stories like that.” (Mountford-Zimdars 2016: 134).

Ivy League colleges do lower academic entry requirements slightly for applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, but only for those whose academic accomplishments are seen to be wholly exceptional given their circumstances. Small wonder, then, that only fifteen percent of students at Harvard College come from families in which neither parent holds a degree (Warikoo 2016).

As each of these studies makes plain, neither a narrow definition of 'merit' as measured ability, nor an expanded definition of 'merit' as measured ability plus effort as evidenced by inculcation of a middle-class habitus, outstanding extracurricular achievements, and/or an extraordinary defeating of the odds, is up to the herculean task of making the access to higher education fair and equitable. Sociologists of education and widening access practitioners have persevered with the 'meritocracy' paradigm, trying make it work for working-class students. Time and again it has been proved to work largely as a mechanism for the intergenerational reproduction of social elites. Clearly it is time to change tack.

Getting through

For working-class students, getting into university is only the beginning of the long battle to make the opportunities allegedly afforded by higher education a reality. Chapters three to eight of *The Working Classes and Higher Education* document the ways in which the experience of college is, for many working-class students, a mere shadow of the experience enjoyed by students from more privileged backgrounds. The chapter by Amy Stich draws on case study research inside a minimally academically selective two-year college in the US to show how the tracking of middle-class and working-class students into courses with and without honours respectively creates a two-tier higher education experience which "positions non-honours students as inferior and promotes advantages...to those who are already advantaged" (Stich in Stich and Freire 2016: 61). Similarly, Diane Reay's contribution to the volume highlights the "troubling paradox of widening access" in the UK which has seen more working-class and ethnic minority students go to university, but specifically to lower status and less well-resourced institutions leading to an "intensification of class and racial inequalities between different strata of higher education." (Reay in Stich and Freire 2016: 83).

Peter Kinsley and Sara Goldrick-Rab focus on the college experiences of US Pell grant recipients, challenging the claim that low rates of college completion for this group of students stem from a low commitment to education, and pointing instead to compelling evidence that these students are “working hard to do their best under difficult circumstances” including persistent financial hardship despite some degree of financial aid (Kinsley and Goldrick-Rab in Stich and Freire 2016: 107). Jenny Stuber explores how a large state college in the US Midwest “neglects the needs of in-state students who arrive on campus with non-dominant forms of social and cultural capital”, failing to adequately resource the kinds of programmes needed to enhance “the social and extracurricular involvement of first-generation, working-class students [which] would improve their likelihood of graduating, while also providing the social and cultural capital required by many jobs” (Stuber in Stich and Freire 2016: 124-5). Similarly, Carrie Freire highlights the necessarily restricted nature of the college experience for many working-class US college students, who find that extensive paid work and family commitments mean that “attending school is about the schoolwork, not about immersing themselves in the college atmosphere or taking advantage of other offerings outside of the classroom” (Freire in Stich and Freire 2016: 135). Ann Mullen draws on interviews with working-class US college students to explore framings of what it means to be intelligent, showing that “Intelligence acquired and validated through life experience is prized over that acquired and validated through formal schooling [...] in contrast to the instrumental order of most colleges and universities in regards with methods of learning, curricular content, pathways to success, and ideals of an educated person.” (Mullen in Stich and Freire 2016: 153).

These studies demonstrate how, in almost every respect, the college experience for working-class students is far from what is envisaged and promised. Clearly this will not change until working-class students are provided with the financial resources necessary to

immerse themselves in fully college life, and until higher education institutions invest fully in their working-class students.

Getting on

For an increasing number of working-class students who make it to and through, college, the optimism with which they started out, which may already have begun to wobble during their time as a student, may disappear completely as they face and fail the challenge of securing a graduate job. Even working-class graduates from the most elite US colleges are not exempt from the perils of the graduate labour market. In *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*, Lauren Rivera draws on her extensive period of participant observation with the graduate recruitment teams of Elite Professional Services (EPS) firms – aka prestigious legal, management consultancy and investment banking firms where salaries for newly graduated hires start in the high six figures – to show how access to the most well-paid jobs is effectively the preserve of the academic elite’s social elite.

These firms target their recruitment efforts overwhelmingly at soon-to-be-graduates of a small number of elite universities, putting on lavish getting-to-know you events on campus and spending considerable sums on prestigious venues for further courtship events and, eventually, job interviews for those shortlisted. Rather like selection for admission to Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, EPS selectors are the “revenue-generating professionals” with whom new recruits will work, and selection is ultimately based on the free-form interviewing of applicants with minimal guidance or documentation as to the criteria used for deciding who makes the grade. “Diversity” candidates from working-class and ethnic minority backgrounds are welcomed in theory, but are unlikely to make the shortlist in practice due to their minimal presence in the elite institutions targeted. When working-class and ethnic minority students are interviewed for jobs at EPS firms, they are less likely to receive job

offers because they are less likely to score well on the subjectively measured criteria of “polish” (confidence without cockiness) and, crucially, of “fit”:

“Fit is really important. You know, you will see more of your coworkers than your wife, your kids, your friends, and even your family. So you can be the smartest guy ever, but I don’t care. I need to be comfortable working every day with you, then getting stuck in an airport with you, and then going for a beer after. You need chemistry. Not only that the person is smart, but that you *like* him.” (EPS recruiter quoted in Rivera 2016: 138)

And rather like the Ivy League institutions from which they recruit, EPS selectors are looking not only for intellectual ability but also a compelling personal narrative:

“If they’ve gotten good grades and are on the law review, then I’ll know they have the ability to do the job. But I want more. I’m looking for their ability to talk about themselves and *who they really are*... I want to know what makes them interesting a special.” (EPS recruiter quoted in Rivera 2016: 148)

The stories EPS recruiters seem to favour are ones that vividly mark the candidate out as having shown “extreme dedication to a visceral personal passion” (Rivera 2016: 157). Some of the examples given – stories of candidates having set up their own businesses, of having pursued a dream to become an expert pastry maker by studying for six months at *Le Cordon Bleu*, of having stayed on after a holiday in India to help a local community recover from a devastating tsunami – indicate the high degree of economic, cultural and social capital on which a highly compelling personal narratives typically rests. Other examples – the Vietnamese refugee who went from speaking no English to being the star student of their high school and college class, the first-generation college student from a single family and a violent neighbourhood who went back to teach in his local community after graduating from college, the candidate who worked part-time whilst at college to support his welfare-dependent family at the same time as excelling in a range of extra-curricular activities – demonstrate what EPS selectors refer to as “the grit factor”, evidence of having overcome

extreme adversity to rise to the top. The value placed on qualities like “polish”, “fit” and a “compelling personal narrative” mean that, more often than not, EPS selectors are recruiting in their own, socially elite image.

One particularly striking aspect of the recruitment activities of EPS firms highlighted by Rivera is that they are marketing exercises as much as recruitment exercises. Thousands more elite college students than there are job openings are invited to attend information events held on campus where they meet revenue-generating professionals and receive gifts such as USB sticks, laptop cases and tote bags bearing the firm’s logo. These activities are enormously expensive but are seen by EPS firms as an investment in brand status, and as a way of courting business in the future. As one EPS firm’s campus flyer states: “If you don’t come to work for us now, you’ll hire us in the future.” (Rivera 2016: 65). Later on in the process, hundreds more candidates than there are job openings are interviewed at salubrious hotel venues by employees who have been called away from revenue-generating business with clients for the purpose. Interviewers are told to “ensure *all interviewees* have a positive experience” as a means of creating “goodwill” towards the firm on the part of the many who will not be hired by the firm but are likely to be in a position to commission the firm’s services later in their careers (Rivera 2016: 114). Those who are offered jobs are also seen as investments in the firm’s longer-term business future; they are hired not so much for their capacity to make money for the firm when they work there as for their likelihood of bringing business to the firm after they move on to work for other companies. No wonder, then, that EPS firms are not overly troubled by the fact that the majority of new hires leave within two years. This is not seen by the firms as a failure on their part to recruit and retain the best staff, but as a valuable means of getting the firm’s name and reputation out to other elite organisations who will send business their way in the future.

Another particularly striking feature of elite graduate recruitment documented by Rivera is the complicity of elite universities in the whole process. Elite universities provide

EPS firms with unlimited access to their students and generous amounts of space on campus for EPS firm to hold meet and greet events. The vast majority of Ivy League seniors apply to prestigious EPS firms and many go on to work in these firms for a time, something that senior college administrators have been known to publicly lament. But the reason it continues unabated is that elite higher education institutions receive a huge return on this arrangement, both economically and in terms of prestige. As Rivera points out:

“...elite schools and firms have a symbiotic relationship, providing one another with valuable resources. Elite universities supply EPS firms with the workers they need to do business. In turn...by hiring large quantities of their graduates at high salaries, firms enhance schools’ employment statistics, national rankings, and alumni donations.” (Rivera 2016: 271-2)

Most working-class students do not attend elite universities and most do not anticipate six figure salary jobs with elite employers. Instead they attend institutions further down the prestige hierarchy which promise to open the otherwise locked door to a secure and well-paid graduate job. For these students, employment prospects after graduation can prove very bleak indeed. Jennifer Silva’s chapter in *The Working Classes and Higher Education* provides several poignant insights into what she terms the “betrayal of the future” of working-class graduates, including the betrayal of the future of African American graduate Brandon, whose BA and MA degrees and student debts of \$80,000 have led to nothing more than a poorly paid job in a clothing warehouse. Sadly, Brandon is right when he states:

“I feel like I was sold fake goods. I did everything I was told to and I stayed out of trouble and went to college. Where is the land of milk and honey? I feel like they lied. I thought I would have choices. That sheet of paper [his degree] cost so much and does me *no good*. Sure, schools can’t guarantee success, but come on; they could do better to help kids out. You have to give Uncle Sam your firstborn to get a degree and it doesn’t pan out!” (Silva in Stich and Freire 2016::160)

Silva recounts a number of similar stories of “broken promises” from other working-class college graduates who have come to regard their time spent pursuing higher education and the better life they were told it affords as “simply meaningless, a worthless investment in [their] future.” (*ibid.*: 169).

This pattern is echoed by Allison Hurst in the closing chapter of *The Working Classes and Higher Education*. Hurst’s survey of students at selective liberal arts colleges finds that those who were the first in their family to go to college were only around half as likely to go on to graduate school, and only half as likely to be employed full-time in their desired careers, compared to graduates who were third-generation college-goers. To Hurst this comes as no surprise, and she states:

“We know that class intrudes on every stage of the education pipeline, from linguistic pattern variations in pre-kindergarten to teacher bias and favoritism in elementary school, to special education assignments, to high school tracking, to high school dropout rates, to college applications, and to college persistence. Why would class not continue to matter in the post-college transition to the workforce?” (Hurst in Stich and Freire 2016: 196).

Hurst points to the “great expectations” that we hold for working-class college students and that they hold for themselves; expectations that are dashed for more than just the unlucky few. Hurst makes a plea that we would do well to heed:

“The first-generation, low-income, and working class students who attend SLACs [selective liberal arts colleges] have great expectations, and we have great expectations of them. They experience four years of supposed classlessness, and then they graduate. I have been moved by their plight for many years, having experienced a few close calls of my own, but also having witnessed friends, colleagues and family members whose great expectations were dashed. I ask all of us who work in this area to reflect on the siren call of great expectations and to question our assumptions about the role of education. We seem to know it reproduces inequality, yet we stubbornly continue to reform it. Maybe it is time we started tackling inequality head on.” (Hurst in Stich and Freie 2016: 212)

Hurst's remarks make clear the fundamental problem: that any optimism we place in the simple notion of 'meritocracy' is bound to disappoint in the context of a wider society characterised by cavernous economic inequalities and the devaluing of non-dominant cultures. Our fundamental mistake is to believe that greater social mobility is the desired goal and that increased equality of opportunity is the way to achieve it. In reality, neither are possible without greater equality of condition. If our optimism in the power of higher education to transform lives, communities and whole societies is to be renewed we need to find ways of making people's starting points much more similar. In a more equal society, not only would it be easier for those from relatively disadvantaged family backgrounds to get to university and to experience higher education to the full, it would also matter much less for any given individual's future socioeconomic prospects whether they went to university or not.

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