

More Social Mobility versus Social Structural Change

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Abstract

Commentators in the UK have recently expressed concern about the current lack of social mobility in the UK. There is widespread political party support for the idea that the UK should be a meritocracy. The UK had enjoyed a relatively long period of easy, widespread upward social mobility because of changes in the social structure, such as the decline in manufacturing employment and the increase in white-collar employment. This is not a meritocracy in action as a meritocracy logically involves both upward and downward social mobility. This easy period appears to be coming to an end. Hence, there is the emergence of this somewhat misplaced concern about social mobility. Moreover, there are strong hints that there are the beginnings of meaningful downward mobility in the precarious world of neo-liberalism. The article also tries to clarify some common conceptual and empirical misunderstandings about social mobility and meritocracy.

The UK's political and intellectual elites have been in a bit of a lather recently over the linked topics of social mobility, meritocracy, the fate of public (i.e. elite private) schools, and social stability. The charge sheet is, of course, Alan Milburn's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's 2014 report **Elitist Britain?**, David Lipsey's 2014 article in *Political Quarterly*, and Tristram Hunt's proposed Labour policy on public schools which, unlike the other two, was greeted with derision in several quarters. They were followed by David Kynaston's Orwell Lecture. At the turn of the year (2014/15) there was also a kerfuffle about public school alumni dominating the arts. Unfortunately, not much of this effort has been politically or intellectually helpful or hopeful for those who are interested in the reversal of the secular trend towards greater and greater economic and social inequality in the UK. Among the reasons for this are, as John Goldthorpe (2012) has trenchantly argued, that quite fundamental confusions or wilful misunderstandings have been widespread among politicians and commentators about the quality of and the results from the sociological research on social mobility in the UK.

David Lipsey's "The Meretriciousness of Meritocracy" expresses his surprise (a cognate of which word he uses five times in the essay) that the three main political parties in Britain should presently support meritocracy, i.e. the notion that power and wealth should be awarded to people on the basis of their personal ability and nothing else. The parties support its *introduction*, that is, because there is general agreement that we do not live in a meritocracy (there are, of course, exceptions to this view¹) and the major party leaders now all publicly affirm that a meritocracy is socially and politically desirable. This gesture towards meritocracy is perhaps a token obeisance to democracy in a society in which democracy is an increasingly ethereal presence. However, democracy and significant levels of social mobility are not functional equivalents (witness the high levels of mobility in the countries of the old Soviet Union), even though they are sometimes spoken about as if they were.

¹ See the work of Professor David Saunders, for instance.

There is also always some academic debate about the amount and rates of social mobility but the sociologist John Goldthorpe is frequently quoted to the effect that if a society is to enjoy serious amounts of upward social mobility, it must also suffer serious amounts of downward mobility in order to begin to qualify as a meritocracy. The clincher in this mobility/meritocracy debate is that we do not yet have in the UK **serious** amounts of long range absolute social mobility both up and *down*, and nobody claims that we do (Goldthorpe, 2012; Lipsey, 2014: 40) although there is some new evidence that there is indeed the beginnings of some absolute downward social mobility for men (Bukodi et al, 2014). (There does, however, appear to be significant up *and down* inter-generational mobility within the black population of the USA.) Alan Milburn's report claims that in Britain social mobility is now "flat lining" after a post-war period of significant upward social mobility but Goldthorpe argues this erroneous claim is the result of not properly distinguishing between income groups and social classes and between the concepts of relative and absolute mobility (Goldthorpe, 2012).

Lipsey is most surprised by the shift in the Conservative Party to endorsing meritocracy, because it has been a party of privilege for most of its existence. Confident political elites can, however, welcome a modicum of meritocracy, as it were, especially as the Tory version of meritocracy does not go all the way down. This is how the 11 plus examination and Grammar school selection probably worked in the past in England. The introduction of comprehensive education has by no means achieved a levelling of educational provision and the fee-paying schools have easily maintained their supremacy in placing their pupils in elite positions. However, contemporary Tories are also a party which in power, even as part of a coalition with the Lib-Dems, has been pursuing a policy of social and, in effect, political exclusion, by fencing off the poor, as Lipsey notes in relation to comments on the other "half" of the governing coalition (Lipsey, 2014: 37). The present policies in this area clearly limit the range of meritocratic inclusion, if it can be called that. On the other hand, the Tories might be subconsciously aware that if a ruling group becomes too insular, it will fail. It needs both to be able to side-line its biggest duffers and to recruit from outside its group the brightest and the best for its purposes, but not from too far outside its group. (One must admit that looking at the present Conservative members of the coalition Cabinet this sidelining has not worked terribly well.²)

Labour shadow minister, Tristram Hunt has had ideas to make private schools (Guardian Opinion, 25 November, 2014) more public by making them recruit socially more inclusively. This proposal is in order to force the schools to properly earn their tax favourable charitable status. However, such a move would only help the existing ruling group in the UK to flourish further by augmenting and improving the supply of ruling class personnel. Hunt's proposal would not alter an iota the overall structure of inequality and its reproduction in the UK, a point to which I shall have to return.

Alan Milburn's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, where it is concerned with social mobility, serves much the same end of more deeply entrenching the present structure of high inequality. If the present system for identifying and promoting ability is regarded as efficient – and public schools are widely praised for their part in this - then an unequally skewed system of rewards can be more easily justified morally. Certainly, reducing rampant inequality will not be achieved by

² Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary for Work and Pensions, for instance, gives the impression that he is so dumb and accident-prone that he could call fall downstairs in a bungalow.

keeping so-called public schools or attempting to turn them from avenues for social mobility into boulevards. It is not that "Private schools have done too little for too long" as Hunt complains (The Guardian, 25.11.14). These schools have apparently done too much for far too long for their own class and it does not seem likely that they will cease doing so under the present dispensation or the next one. The stronger likelihood is their significance in securing the reproduction of inequality will increase if social mobility becomes more fluid.

A considerable measure of inequality of opportunity and low social mobility is highly functional for the hierarchical and class-ridden social formation that is the UK. Almost everyone knows of examples of bosses whose secretaries turn their rebarbative screeds into English, or who do not realise that their secretary steers them into making many of their more sensible decisions or we have read of or seen, say, the young ignorant officer guided by a veteran working class sergeant.³ Those of us who have worked or do work in British universities might have noticed that they only succeed to function as institutions because there are many workers in poorly paid administrative positions, overwhelmingly women, who actually know what they are doing. In a class-ridden and still sexist society, they are sometimes unable to obtain posts which pay enough to match their talents more properly. (On a personal note, I used to have the title of undergraduate admissions tutor, and for a brief while I thought I was making the important decisions. Gradually, it dawned on me that the clever young woman who was the administrative support for the post was permitting me to live with an illusion of my competence and power.⁴) The Peter Principle, the notion that people are commonly promoted upwardly to a level in the hierarchy where they become incompetent⁵, if it is true, only generally applies to white men. Secondly, the principle wrongly assumes that hierarchies are accurately calibrated with the least demanding jobs universally at the bottom and the most demanding jobs always at the top.

The assumption that not educating everybody to the full extent of their ability is economically wasteful is therefore false in a materially highly unequal society. Almost all work is labour which requires some inventiveness and intelligent input, and that is not just because the unexpected always arises. The world of employment that has been created in capitalist society is in the interests of high earners and owners of capital. Those high earners and owners depend upon a large measure of often unused but available ability and skill in the many posts below them. This is an expression of one of the central Marxist theses: capitalists purchase labour power and not labour. One of those allegedly junior skills is the important ability to cooperate, which is not valued at all, although when trade unionists "work to rule" its true value is revealed. In much manual work until the Second World War, and probably for a couple of decades afterwards, the most important employment learning experience was to join a work group.

The rise of mass education is both a cause but principally the effect of the expansion of white collar employment in the UK in the post-war period. There was considerable criticism of those Labour Party politicians, including Alan Milburn, that with the introduction of university tuition fees in 1998 they were pulling up the ladder which many of them had previously climbed up. The charge was one of hypocrisy. This is perhaps fair but Goldthorpe argues, though, that there is no real evidence that

³ An example that comes to mind is the recent film about the conflict in Northern Ireland, **71**.

⁴ This was not (easily achieved) superior bureaucratic competence on her part. I was once pulled up short on moral grounds: I was not being fair.

⁵ This does not mean that those who find themselves out of their depth are publicly revealed as such.

the combination of Grammar selection via the 11 plus examination, free university tuition, and maintenance grants – that is, educational policies – of themselves produced a “Golden Age” of meritocracy, even though individuals might have easily supposed it to be a Golden Age because they apparently benefited from the policies. What did happen was that there were significant structural changes in employment: wage-earning manual employment declined relatively when compared to the growth in white collar employment. Thus, those with a degree may have enjoyed some preference in seeking non-manual employment, but having a degree did not create employment openings. Now it appears that having a degree is not necessarily protection against downward mobility. Nearly twenty years ago, Marshall et al grouped individuals according to whether they had a minimum education (level 1), ordinary qualifications (level 2), advanced qualifications (level 3) and degree level qualifications (level 4). They summarised their findings as follows.

Britain looks considerably less educationally meritocratic a society than do most of her industrialized counterparts. Only in the case of respondents holding educational level two qualifications does this country appear to be slightly more open than average. It is at the bottom (or nearly so) of the league of nations here studied with regard to each of the other levels of educational achievement. In other words, the direct effect of class origins on class destinations is greater among individuals holding advanced and degree level qualifications in Britain than it is in any of the other eight advanced societies with which it has been compared. Among those with little or no credentials, only the former West Germany appears less meritocratic (Marshall et al, 1997: 94).

They created what they call a measure of social fluidity, which is a measure of overall social mobility. For those with degrees, the country with the greatest measure of social fluidity, with a score of – 1.20, was Bulgaria. Only two of the nine countries have positive scores. These are the US with +0.52 and GB with +2.22. For those with high educational qualifications then, Britain is one the least open societies in the world – and very markedly so. Social class still counts.

If this was the case, then it is not surprising that a widening gap has emerged between the “social classes in terms of the proportions completing a higher-tertiary education. While it is evident that the number of individuals from manual backgrounds who obtain degree level has gradually risen, it is those from the non-manual classes who have had by far the greater success, and increasingly so” (Marshall et al, 1997: 113). Logically, this means that, and it is the case, that a poor education results in poor employment prospects. But whereas, in the past, a degree meant a very small likelihood of starting employment as an unskilled manual worker, about 12 per cent of those born in the 1950s did so. For those born in the 1960s, the corresponding proportion was 15 per cent and seems to be rising. So, as more of those from the working classes get degrees, the protection against manual labour given by a degree gets weaker (Marshall et al, 1997: 119). These inequalities have been recently reinforced by the growing practice of unpaid internships, which are naturally only available to those with family means (Perlin, 2011).

Indeed, Bukodi, Goldthorpe, Waller and Kuha have recently argued that downward mobility is a growing possibility for the male children of the middle classes, a change which is unprecedented (Bukodi et al, 2014) for the white middle classes in the UK. These writers also believe that for women absolute upward mobility is increasing. This is certainly not reflected in anything like equality, but it might account for some (unjustified) male resentment.

White collar work was an important source of employment for women and was where the types of work cooperation took a different form from that found in male manual labour. Mass education in capitalist societies like the UK does not by itself encourage any form of work cooperation. The accent

is on individual competition within education for both staff and students. This defiles the pursuit of knowledge, for instance, but makes the vulnerable employed person central rather than the solidaristic work group.

David Kynaston's 2014 Orwell lecture, which The Guardian published (6th December, 2014) also invites a response, if only because the lecture shares little of Orwell's anger or capacity for savage irony. The lecture is a modest call for a little bit of social progress as long as it is not too disruptive of the existing educational system in the UK. He disputes Lipsey's essay's opening claim, a claim which requires quotation in full. "Equality of opportunity, when combined with gross inequality of outcome, is the worst possible recipe for a harmonious society. It engenders in the successful a sense that they have earned what they get, which transposes remorselessly into a desire to expand still further their share of the national cake. Meanwhile, the unsuccessful believe that it is their fault that they are poor (as opposed to being the fault of ill birth or bad luck) and so feel the weight of moral as well as material failure. Such a society will be prone to all the diseases of human discontent: crime, jealousy, fracture, civil discord and even civil strife" (Lipsey, 2014: 37). This could easily be a reprise of one of the findings of Samuel Stouffer et al's two volume study, *The American Soldier* (1949). The research showed that the result on an army unit of frequent promotion from within its ranks was to leave the remainder demoralised and grizzling over their ill-luck. In units with low promotion rates morale was higher as their solidarity, if it had emerged, was not disrupted by losing key members or by disturbing the structure of the group. It is revealing that social harmony is chosen as a desired goal because social harmony is a patrician value, particularly cherished by established elites.⁶

Kynaston shares this interest in social harmony but he is foolishly optimistic about the consequences of the introduction of meritocracy. Kynaston's response to the alleged danger of the disorientating effects of more social mobility on those who are scooped from the bottom to the top of the social hierarchy is so wonderfully feeble that it also demands quotation. If the UK were to expand equality of opportunity and social mobility, it would not be so bad as Lipsey fears because Kynaston is sure that, "it is reasonable to expect elite institutions and their customary inhabitants to be sensitive to the circumstances of the latter-day scholarship boys and girls." It would perhaps be cynical but much more sensible to expect, if the numbers of the usurpers threatened their supremacy, that the "customary inhabitants" would close ranks. They would probably demonstrate their recently acquired "emotional intelligence" by consolidating more subtlety than they might have done before. Kynaston's adds a hope that if those usurpers do make it to the top, they will be "with any luck increasingly imbued with less testosterone-fuelled qualities" and therefore they "should be capable of forming ... a 'well-tempered' meritocracy, respectful and sympathetic."⁷

There is no warrant for thinking that we can scale up these findings by Stouffer et al about a small army unit to that of a whole society. Indeed, the term "society" is deceptive. Society as term can be applied at almost any scale and it implies a level of functioning harmony or unity, even companionship, within a group. Social formation is a better term than society when applied to a nation state or country because it does not drag this highly misleading conceptual freight. Stouffer also introduced to social psychology the concept of relative deprivation. A person in a stable social

⁶ We should not imagine that equality of itself is productive of social harmony, although it might be.

⁷ Perhaps, it is rather that, "The working class can kiss my arse/I got the foreman's job at last"

group is unlikely to compare themselves socially or economically with those outside their milieu unless there is some kind of social rupture or breakdown. Peasants usually only envy other peasants; private soldiers usually restrict their envy to other non-commissioned soldiers. When peasants envy aristocrats, or private soldiers envy officers, social stability or military discipline is put into question. Social formations like the UK are composed of different groups and classes, within which people have generally compared each other socially and economically across a limited range of social positions. Thus, that a highly unequal social formation is socially stratified, segmented, fractured even, does not just contribute to maintaining its overall structural stability but can be seen to be absolutely necessary to reproduce itself (even harmoniously).

In the not too distant past, that is when Orwell was writing, social class functioned almost alone, but not exclusively, to dam enormous reserves of talent, skill and ability in manual or lower administrative positions. Gender now commingles more prominently with a less visibly rigid social class system to achieve this end, which is a kind of social advance towards more equality. Goldthorpe hazards that women and men's social mobility rates are becoming similar. I would suspect, however, that race acts rather differently, in that racial discrimination is most significantly a form of exclusion. This is most evident in an economic depression but it also shows itself in the inability of black minority ethnic middle class to stabilise itself inter-generationally. It is here that we have evidence of the complementary upward and downward absolute intergenerational mobility which Goldthorpe has suggested is necessary in a functioning meritocracy.⁸

But does not Lipsey offer a pretty good description of the social situation that exists already in the UK? The current grim condition of the UK is obviously the result of something other than "excessive" equality of opportunity in a "meritocracy-oriented society." The corrosive effects of advertising, for instance, are that big advertisers deliberately try to promote a universalised envy. More important is the flagrant display of wealth by the rich. Chapter 8 in my recent book *Charisma and Patronage – Reasoning with Max Weber* (Ashgate, 2014) collected considerable evidence of the greed of the plutocratic rich in the USA, and the legitimating of their possession of inordinate riches through their assumption of the role of charismatic leader. There is a good case to be made that the ruling classes in the USA and the UK are some of the greediest in history. Capitalism is not for them a mode of production but a means of unbridled plunder.⁹ This is all very close to Lipsey's critical description of the result of the combination in a nation state of equality of opportunity and "gross inequality of outcome."

Whilst Kynaston recognises that the "fundamental truth" about private schools is that they are a "brilliantly successful mechanism" for already privileged children to "go to highly resourced schools and have their privileged socioeconomic position further entrenched and strengthened", he regards these schools with awe. They are unquestionably of "proven academic excellence". Kynaston objects to the schools simply on the grounds that it is the fee paying principle which "leads directly to

⁸ I am aware that the implications of this are bizarre. The implications are that within groups like the black males in the USA we have what are the nearest to meritocracies in their form. It is not a single meritocracy as there are those black males who go to prison and those who do not. Moreover, within these meritocracies the spans of reward and disreward, as it were, are enormous and brutally effective.

⁹ "When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men living together in society, they create for themselves in the course of time a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it." F. Bastiat. Marx might have despised Bastiat but this describes modern banking, such as that practised by HSBC, pretty well.

engines of privilege, blocks relative social mobility and perpetuates a Berlin Wall not just in our education system but in our society.” He concludes by quoting Alan Bennett, who said that, “We all know to educate according to the social situation of the parents is both wrong and a waste.” For fee-paying parents, paying is manifestly not wrong and is not a waste. They are not embarrassed because buying education is unfair, it is precisely because a private education is unfair in its outcome that they value it. What they present as a moral defence is that, “everyone wants to do the best for their children.”¹⁰ What they chiefly value, however, is that a private education is a valuable positional good: it is precisely because not everyone is able to afford their children this social advantage that they have their children privately schooled. These schools compete with each other by offering more and more extraordinarily expensive facilities, as well as offering low staff-student ratios.

Moreover, those middle class families who cannot afford private schooling have adopted another tactic. House prices in the catchments areas of comprehensives reflect in part the perceived educational quality of the local comprehensive school (as every British Estate Agent knows). Abolishing the fee paying of private schools, it therefore appears, would not necessarily result in a more equal educational outcome. In any case, abolishing private school fees, which are indeed historically high,¹¹ means that the support systems, staff-student ratios, and ample resources of the private schools could not be maintained. Their performance would certainly decline in “quality” – a term I shall have to question.

Let me offer a set of preposterous propositions. The first proposition is that those who have considerable economic and political power, even though they might use these forms of power self-interestedly, are the people most (not totally, of course) responsible for the current state of the British nation. If they exercise their powers, these powers must have their effects even when they are held in reserve, or they would not be powers. Amongst other things, they contribute enthusiastically, with only some exceptions, to reproducing a social structure which favours themselves and those like them. (Thus, this is not social voluntarism; I assume that there is social structure because without a social structure human agency is not possible.) It is important to recognise (but it does not always seem to be) that although social mobility rates are enduring structural features of social formations, they do not just happen like some kind of involuntary social metabolism. Social mobility rates are the result of the ways that social formations reproduce themselves. Changing social mobility rates requires human intervention and effort, as reformers like Milburn accept. This is because the status quo is itself an achievement, a product which desperately tries to appear natural, when it is anything other than that. Educational systems, which are hugely expensive, are there to put children in their place – wherever that might be.

The second assumption is that significant clues to their adult behaviour, politics and morals are to be found in their social background and upbringing. (The rich constantly make this assumption about

¹⁰ This moral justification is practised, of course, by the wealthy in a form that makes it impossible for every parent to do the best for their children.

¹¹ These fees have become so high that at least one public school headmaster (Alex McGrath, Head of King’s Ely Senior School (note the most common gender) quoted in Daily Telegraph, 30.09.13) has regretted that many of their traditional parent customers from the British professional classes can no longer afford them. Many of their pupils are now from overseas. Kynaston quotes Andrew Halls, Head of King’s College School, Wimbledon, describing these schools as “finishing schools for the children of oligarchs”.

the poor, but it is equally true of the rich and it was why they choose the upbringings for their children that they do.) An extremely disproportionate number of those going to the allegedly best universities and also occupying powerful positions in their adulthood were sent to public schools. They are at the 'best' universities (a concession for the sake of argument) because their school results are outstanding. For instance, Eton College can boast in its 2013 report that only 4 per cent of its A level entries were awarded less than a B grade. Forty per cent were at A* - the highest ranking. Eton is the most famous of the boarding schools but is only at Number Four in the UK Sunday Times Table. Eton is not the most expensive and for better examination results an aspiring parent would have to spend a little more. Wycombe Abbey School is the most expensive boarding school and ninety-one per cent of its A level entries achieved A grade or above. Marginally above this is the highest performing school, which is St Paul's Girls' School, which is a day school where the current fees are around £7,000 per term.

It is hard to take exception to the values that the staff members at Eton College declare they are committed to instilling in their pupils: they aim, *inter alia*, to foster "self-confidence, enthusiasm, perseverance, tolerance and integrity". Queen Ethelburga's College¹² (three places behind Eton in the Sunday Times' boarding school rankings) also believes that its pupils possess "first class confidence and self assurance." These are qualities that are assumed to be required of those who will achieve high ranking positions. Confidence is something also investors require if capitalist markets are to function. Investors want to be sure that there will be a return on their investment. Private school pupils have a sense of entitlement that is not often disappointed. That Eton, along with other private schools, also values "integrity" in its pupils is also something I shall have to return to.

Many commentators cannot resist reporting, sometimes gleefully, the studies that compare the degree results of public school and comprehensive students with similar A level results because the studies show that the non-fee paying pupils do better at university (Guardian, 15 June 2013).¹³ A common assumption is that this is because fee paying students were highly coached and consequently peaked too early. There is another possible explanation for their alleged failure: getting to the right university is highly important but once there, there are more meaningful aims other than getting the best possible class of degree. The alternative aim is to foster the intra-class connections that evidently serve them so well in their subsequent working lives. Public school alumni dominate in the UK the professions, the military, the church, politics, banking, the higher civil service, etc. The domination is greatest in the judiciary. Where these alumni are less likely to be dominant are in the newer areas of finance where trading takes place, such as the stock-market, currencies and financial derivatives. Fifty-nine percent of the present cabinet (2015) went to either Oxford or Cambridge and thirty-six per cent went to a small number of private schools.

The current government presents a narrative about the terrible economic legacy which they inherited from New Labour and have struggled to master. Their story has been best related by one of their critics, the economist Ha-Joon Chang. He writes, "The economy has been in difficulty since the 2008 financial crisis. Tough spending decisions have been needed to put it on the road to

¹² I received in the post unrequested information from this school as I was writing this.

¹³ The studies, one at Cardiff University and the other at Oxford Brookes, followed one by the Sutton Trust. Interestingly, the university studies were uncovered by a Freedom of Information request by The Guardian newspaper.

recovery because of the huge budget deficit left behind by the last irresponsible Labour government, showering its supporters with social benefit spending. Thanks to the coalition holding its nerve amid the clamour against cuts, the economy has finally recovered. True wages have yet to make up the lost ground, but at least it is a 'job rich' recovery, allowing people to stand on their own feet rather than relying on state handouts" (The Guardian, 19.10.14). The problem with this is Coalition account is that none of it is true. The immediate source of the deficit was a recession unleashed by the financial crisis caused by the banks. Tax revenue fell and social spending rose mostly because of the recession, and not because of Labour's economic mismanagement. Ha-Joon Chang concludes that coalition policies have only produced "a bogus recovery largely based on government-fuelled asset bubbles in real estate and finance, with stagnant productivity, falling wages, millions of people in precarious jobs, and savage welfare cuts." Although many people have nevertheless found the coalition story persuasive, something else is really going on here since the deficit is not being paid down – far from it. The deficit is rising and the increase 2012/13 to 2013/14 was around £10 billion.

What is happening is that the "problem of the deficit" is being used to dismantle the welfare state. There is a little guile involved. There are many forms of state expenditure, military ones such as Trident for instance, that could be cancelled, if the reduction of the fiscal deficit was paramount. Plainly, it is not. What is paramount is a covert attack on state welfare which is nothing less than class warfare. What is extraordinary about this manoeuvre is that it comes at a time when it is often argued that social class is less salient now than in the past, which is reflected in a decline in class voting (Mair, 2013: 56-7). However, social class is more salient than ever, if the perspective is changed. What is different in the UK is that a triumphalist capitalist class is further grinding down a demoralised working class, but with little opposition compared to what existed in the heyday of social democracy. Hence, the superficial conclusion is reached that class is now less salient. It is rather that defeat and demoralisation of the working class that account for that state of affairs. Class is certainly not of lesser importance for the members of the capitalist class.

We ought to ask, how is this fraudulent social policy process possible psychologically, and therefore also possible morally? (The political question comes shortly.) One answer is that public schools are the equivalent of kibbutzim for the British upper classes. Perhaps therefore no political subterfuge was necessary. The consequences of collective childrearing in Kibbutzim are the attenuation of the capacity for empathy (Bettleheim, 1969: 171ff). Separated into age groups and all brought up together away from their parents, all maturation experiences were common to each child. According to Bettleheim, the result was a strong sense of social solidarity but this was a solidarity based on individual similarity. The children in the early kibbutzim did not need to, and therefore did not learn, to empathise. They were not used to taking a different person's point of view.¹⁴ Confident that they were almost always right, the children grew into adults who were emotionally undeveloped in this realm. In so far as the parallel between kibbutzim and public school is meaningful, it would follow that the adverse consequences of social welfare policy decisions could not be easily apprehended by those public school politicians who had made them. Their victims were not at all like them and therefore they were not capable of being concerned about them.

¹⁴ ¹⁴ In the 1967 Six Day War, kibbutniks were fearless and suffered high casualty rates. In 1969 I taught an Israeli sergeant who had been brought up on a kibbutz. I asked him once how had he dealt with soldiers who did not wish to fight as fiercely as he obviously had. His reply was that he hit them with a spade. (Humour of any kind was not his forte.)

Another answer, a complementary one, is argued by the psychologist Nick Duffell. Recently in the UK, he claims we have had “more of the kind of politics that sideline women and are dominated by the boys in the men who run things” (Duffell, 2014: 15) because public school boys dominate coalition politics. “Ex-boarder politicians have not had empathy on their school curriculum. Having forsworn all forms of vulnerability since they were seven or eight, they can’t imagine that humans might depend on each other...” They learn protective deception within the school world in which they were abandoned as children, and maintain this defence throughout their adult lives. The “quality”, then, of a boarding school education is of a limited, instrumental kind because the “privileged abandonment” of their children by wealthy parents creates duplicitous but successful adults: “Cameron’s electoral campaign image of the caring ordinary bloke shows how ex-boarder politicians, trained in dissociation and duplicity, can magically turn privilege into meritocracy, and believe their own myth” (Duffell, 2014: 16).

There are those, such as Peter Mair, who argue strongly that politicians and their constituents are disengaging from each other. It is not just that, in general, politicians (I would say particularly social-democratic politicians) are less interested than they were in the past in what voters want and think. It is also equally the case, Mair suggests, that the majority of people living in Western Democracies engage less frequently in conventional political action and participate more reluctantly in party politics than they have done. Mair is adamant that the “withdrawal is mutual ... It is not that that the citizens are disengaging and leaving hapless politicians behind, or that politicians are retreating and leaving voiceless citizens in the lurch. Both sides are withdrawing, and hence rather than thinking in terms of a linear sequence in which one of the movements leads to the other, and hence in which only one side is assumed to be responsible for the ensuing gap – the crude populist interpretation – it makes much more sense to think of a process of mutual reinforcement” (Mair, 2013: 97). It is not only that the concepts - elites and citizens – almost of themselves generate the general direction of this implausible analysis. It is rather that it is implausible because political elites have powers which ordinary citizens or party members do not have. The two groups are not equals for politicians collectively and individually are surprisingly superior at politics and they have decided, as British politics, for instance, becomes more presidential, to respond less and less supportively to political currents bubbling up from the party ranks.¹⁵ What they do respond to are the agents of patronage so that on leaving politics health ministers join private health businesses or secretaries of state join military suppliers, etc.

The creation of New Labour was precisely an empirical confirmation of Mair’s “crude populist interpretation”. Long before New Labour, Old Labour, specifically the parliamentary Labour Party, was often embarrassed by the annual Labour Conference. When the party at the Conference supported the leadership everything was fine and dandy, but when the vote at conference went against the leadership, the leadership were quick to point at that the votes did not determine policy. This was because, even though Militant was expelled from the Labour Party in 1985 because it was a “party within a party”, the Parliamentary Labour Party was also a “party within a party” which acted independently of the votes of Labour Conference and the National Executive of the Party. Those of us who have had the experience of moving into a Labour fiefdom such as the North-East of England,

¹⁵ A similar argument to the “crude populist interpretation” is made by Mair, however, in relation to the politics of the EU. Political leaders organise political competition in a way that they can “free themselves from any possible restraints imposed by external and binding mandates “ (Mair, 2013: 110).

as I did in 1981, find the idea that there was a mutual withdrawal of elites and citizens somewhat risible. I recall finding it difficult to transfer my membership from Colchester to an electoral ward Labour party in Newcastle. My experience was not unique and one family's domination of Labour politics in the east of Newcastle, for instance, generated strong, repeated rumours that people wishing to join ward parties, particularly young or educated people, were told that the membership was "full-up". In my ward in the west of Newcastle, when I queried after a ward boundary reorganisation why so few members had been transferred from a ward to my now the newly constituted ward, the ward secretary informed me that the councillor of the ward affected, now a Labour peer, did "not like too many ward members." The officers and councillors of the ward remained the same and, in any case, treated the chore of labour ward meetings as a favour where they reported to the membership what they had decided to do as they vied with each other to dominate the meetings. In the many years that I regularly attended the ward meetings I do not ever recall the councillors accepting any kind of mandate from the ward to take to full Newcastle council meetings.

The creation of New Labour, with its focus groups as a means of sounding party and extra-party opinion, accelerated these tendencies and eviscerated what little politics that did exist within the Labour Party. Increasingly, the New Labour leadership identified themselves with the "nation" or the "whole community" rather than attempting to represent the working class or the poor. Blair spoke at Labour conferences to these classless audiences of community and nation and, in effect, completely ignored the party, its members and its supporters, particularly if they happened to be working class or poor. But Blair's ideas of the "nation" or the "whole community" were concepts without meaningful empirical referents outside the consciousness of those in his immediate circle who thought like he did. Blair could commune with "the nation" in the same manner as he could commune with God and speak therefore of "the nation" with total authority. Thus, mass, cross-class opposition to the Iraq invasion in 2003, to take one stunning example, could be dismissed because of his personal spiritual communication with the essence of the nation. If there was an empirical referent, it was US foreign policy. Brown really was no better, thinking of the trade unions, for instance, as "special interests".

Moreover, fewer politicians come from outside of the ranks of the educated middle classes. Even in the Labour Party elected working class politicians are a rarity. The major parties in the UK are less and less a means to social mobility. And the painful truth is that social mobility post-war in the UK was largely not a politically planned result of increased social openness but of economic changes in the class structure. The shift from manufacturing to white-collar and service jobs in the UK provided what must really be described as an illusion of social mobility. The expansion of these areas of non-manual employment and the reduction of the numbers in manual employment meant that in the recent past upward absolute social mobility was possible without any complementary downward mobility. The economic structural change in employment – there were simply more white-collar and professional jobs – meant that demand exceeded the supply, if only for a time.

The then existing UK middle classes might have felt threatened somewhat by the rise of *hoi polloi* – an acquaintance was sneered at, for instance, because he had been foolish enough to enter academic life without a private income - but they were joined by the newly professionalised and not displaced by them. Some evidence of this is that the older universities did not expand so much to accommodate those from families where higher education was something new. It was rather that

new universities and degree-awarding polytechnics were initially added to the complement of higher educational institutions to take the new numbers of students from novel backgrounds. In 1960-61 there were merely 33 universities in the UK. Eleven more well-funded new universities were added in the subsequent decade (Mayhew et al, 2004: 66). In 1992 the quondam polytechnics became degree-awarding institutions so that by 1995-96 there were 89 universities (Mayhew et al, 2004: 80) and currently (2015) there are 116 higher education institutions. Although these are all under the aegis of the Higher Education Funding Councils, they are only superficially similar as institutions. The councils are divided by country (England, Scotland and Wales) but the universities are divided into a number of classes.

At the top, plus a few others, are those 24 universities which belong to the Russell Group. These are universities which bag most of the available research funds and produce most of the students who are awarded doctorates. Their research records are superior because their staff-student ratios are relatively low. University College London, a highly production research institution, has, according to tables produced by the *The Guardian* newspaper, a staff-student ration of 1:10.2. The highest staff-student ratio in this group is at the University of Exeter with one of 17.2, which is an outlier. The bottom 24 universities as ranked by *The Guardian* have staff-student ratios ranging from 1:17 (Salford) to 1:26.3 (East London). Moreover, of course, those institutions which were once under local authority control – the polytechnics and colleges – had no assets beyond their buildings when they “freed” from that control. Oxford and Cambridge, on the other hand, are universities with immense real estate and financial holdings of £3 billion and £4 billion respectively. The third richest UK university is Edinburgh with assets of less than £150 million. As the unit of resource shrinks in UK universities these divisions are exacerbated.

This is a form of higher educational apartheid in which the families of those traditionally educated at elite universities continued to be so educated and students of working class and lower middle class by origin were offered a less prestigious form of that kind of higher education: “As things stand, those from the lower socio-economic groups are as likely as not to be sorted into the lower reaches of the student population, obtaining the lower end ‘graduate jobs’” (Mayhew et al, 2004: 79). It is not necessarily the case that all of those universities not in the Russell Group offer to their students an inferior quality of educational experience. It is rather that the status of the increasing number of qualifications awarded is not regarded as particularly valuable in the job markets. Therefore, the majority of the qualifications obtained at degree level shrink in worth in the labour market. The need for school Advanced Level qualifications in the labour market was supplanted by a need for a first degree, and the need for a first degree became supplanted by the need for a higher degree. Hence, it is right describe this UK system of education as part of an illusory system which promotes the idea that the higher education sector contributes to the overall scale of social mobility. It only does so insofar as universities themselves expand in number and size – although the relative value of academic salaries has declined as they have done so.

The easy expansion within the UK then, both of universities and of the ranks of the secure middle classes, has ended. The functional alternative to secure employment within the middle classes is insecure self-employment or “going freelance”, which is the fastest expanding form of employment in the UK. The historical norm (1984-2007) for this form of employment was 12.6%. These workers have experienced a far greater collapse in earnings than employees. Employees’ pay fell by 6% over the period 2006-7 to 2011-2012 but the pay of the self-employed fell in the same period by 20%.

Nevertheless, according to a recent study, 15 per cent of the UK workforce is now self-employed. This sector is expanding because workers become trapped in it and it is growing even though incomes in this type of employment are falling: “the typical self-employed person now earns 40 per cent less than the typical employed person” (D’Arcy and Gardner, 2014: 4). Increasing competition within the self-employed sector is driving incomes downward. Will Hutton has described the UK as a country where, “Millions of workers struggle in a harsh demimonde of temporary jobs and zero-hour contracts. For many it is no longer a realisable aim to acquire skills or a profession and pursue a stable career within an enduring and reliable organisation; our companies engage in unending cycles of restructuring, regrading and reshaping, while the public sector has shrunk to an unprecedented degree. It is only those at the very top who see their pay and possibilities expanding – along with the ease of passing on advantages to their children, creating a new closed caste of elites and diminishing prospects for social mobility” (Hutton, 2015: 27).

This, then, is what the complaints with which this piece began are about. Sociologists and senior journalists are sometimes, the former more than the latter, part of this precarious new social world where the tectonic plates are now beginning to shift. Previous middle-class certainties have collapsed and there circulates an unfocused anxiousness about the prospects of the younger members of the middle class. There is no evidence that the young and old members of the middle classes know what to do except that they must each try harder and, if they are young they must get an education, in order to succeed in a world dominated by neo-liberalism and capitalist oligarchs. After all, intensely competing with one another is what UK universities are now fruitlessly doing, and some commentators claim it is leading to “the betrayal of higher education” (Warner, 2015).

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