

## 10 | Social Mobility in Britain in Comparative Perspective: Is Britain a Low Mobility Society?

As we noted in the Introduction, although the main concern of our work is with the detailed analysis of social mobility in Britain, it is often revealing to take a cross-national comparative view; and the question that in this case most obviously arises is that of how levels of mobility in Britain match up with those found in other modern societies.

In official circles, it has become widely believed, and asserted, that Britain is a low mobility society. Most notably, claims to this effect have been repeatedly made in the annual reports of the Social Mobility Commission. For example, the 2013 report states that Britain 'is a low mobility society compared to other developed countries'; the 2015 report starts out from the proposition that 'Britain has lower levels of social mobility than most other comparable countries'; and the 2016 report reaffirms that Britain has a 'deep social mobility problem'.<sup>1</sup> Such contentions then serve, in the same way as those of declining mobility, to justify the importance that is given across the political spectrum to increasing mobility. However, in Chapters 2 and 3 we have shown that the evidence of mobility in decline is open to serious question, and we can now ask whether the same might not be true of the evidence that underlies the view that in British society mobility is unusually restricted.

To begin with, it may be observed that in this latter case just as in the former, it turns out that such supporting evidence as exists relates only to income – or in fact for the most part only to earnings – mobility, which could in itself be thought a significant limitation. And what can then be further said is that the evidence in question derives from analyses that are based on data of often doubtful reliability, that involve uncertainty as to whether it is absolute or relative mobility

<sup>1</sup> See Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2013: 126); Social Mobility Commission (2015: 1, 2016: 1–3).

that is at issue, and that are not confirmed in their conclusions by other analyses of generally superior quality.

The sources most often invoked when the claim is made that Britain is a low mobility society are two: a report sponsored by the Sutton Trust and a report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. These reports relate to different sets of countries and apply different measures of mobility but both purport to show that, at least so far as men are concerned, Britain (or, in the case of the OECD report, the UK) has clearly lower levels of income mobility than do the other countries that are covered – apart from the US – and, in particular, lower levels than the Nordic countries, which appear the most mobile.<sup>2</sup>

However, the data problems generally associated with studies of income mobility that we referred to in Chapter 1 are clearly present. Thus, for some of the countries in the OECD report, fathers' earnings are not observed but are imputed from other data, usually on fathers' education or occupation, with a consequent large increase in the margin of error involved. And in the Sutton Trust report, cross-national comparability is impaired in that for some countries, including Britain, it is parental income from all sources rather than father's earnings that serves as the 'origin' variable – and it is notable that in all such cases *lower* mobility is indicated than in the others. Further, the OECD report relies largely on a measure of income mobility, known as 'the intergenerational earnings elasticity', that reflects not only the strength of the net association between the earnings of fathers and sons but also changes in the degree of earnings inequality between the fathers' and sons' generations. Absolute and relative mobility are thus confounded. Intergenerational changes in earnings inequality should not enter into the comparative assessment of relative earnings mobility, which – it would appear – is the main concern of the report.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The report sponsored by the Sutton Trust is Blanden, Gregg and Machin (2005b), who for Britain draw on the analyses of data from the 1970 cohort study by Blanden et al. (2004) referred to in Chapters 2 and 3. The OECD report is d'Addio (2007). Further OECD reports that seek to underwrite d'Addio's conclusions, though without adding any results of direct relevance, are Causa, Danton and Johansson (2009) and OECD (2010).

<sup>3</sup> The intergenerational earnings elasticity indicates the proportion of the difference in parents' earnings that is transmitted, on average, to children. It may thus serve some descriptive purposes but it is of very doubtful value for comparative analyses, since the confounding of factors involved means that countries can have



Not surprisingly, then, other researchers in the field have shown some scepticism over these findings, and from analyses in which problems of data and measurement have been more seriously treated results have been obtained that differ in two main respects. First, once due account is taken of the likely error in estimates, the range of cross-national variation in income mobility appears a good deal less than might otherwise be supposed; and second, within this more limited range of variation, Britain would seem most reliably placed in a middling rather than an extreme position, closer in fact to the Nordic countries than to the US, and with a level of mobility that is not obviously lower than that of other major European societies such as France, the former West Germany and Italy.<sup>4</sup> However, the results of these later studies of income mobility, which do not fit well with the favoured narrative, have been simply ignored within British political and policy discourse on social mobility.

What, then, is the situation if we turn to studies of comparative social mobility carried out by sociologists and focused on intergenerational class mobility? The first point to make is that in these studies, at least from the 1970s onwards, the distinction between absolute and relative mobility has always been central.

As regards absolute mobility, a large degree of consensus is apparent on the following lines. Total mobility rates can show some rather wide range of variation, depending primarily on the historical development

different – or similar – elasticities for quite different reasons. The Sutton Trust report mainly uses the correlation between father's earnings – or family income – and son's earnings. This is a better measure of relative mobility, although still based on the assumption that the intergenerational relation between incomes or earnings is linear, which is known not always to be the case.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Björklund and Jäntti (2009: fig. 20.1) and the further discussion in Jäntti and Jenkins (2015). Björklund and Jäntti also work with the intergenerational earnings elasticity – while recognising its limitations – but put confidence intervals around their estimates of it for each country that they cover, and these intervals turn out in many cases to overlap. It should also be noted that in later work Blanden (2013) has taken a far more cautious position on the extent of cross-national variation in income mobility than the Sutton Trust report does; that a recent study treating mobility on the basis of a measure of socioeconomic status, combining income and education, has found that among fourteen modern societies the UK had the fourth lowest correlation between parents' and children's status (Ballarino and Bernardi, 2016: fig. 16.1); and that Jerim (2017b) has directly questioned the idea of Britain as a low mobility society on the basis of comparative analyses relating men's earnings to the educational level of their fathers.

of countries' class structures. The positions of countries within this range are then likely to change over time as the development of their class structures proceeds. In the middle of the last century, the British total mobility rate would appear to have been around the European average – while perhaps being a little below that of the US – and was mainly kept at this level by the increase in upward mobility during the early stages of the expansion of the managerial and professional salariat (see Figure 2.1). Countries with lower total rates were those with still large agricultural sectors characterised by high immobility, such as Ireland or Poland – and, one could almost certainly add, Spain and Portugal – while other European countries, such as France, Italy or Sweden, had higher rates than Britain, mainly because of the outflow of individuals from rapidly declining agricultural classes. However, by the end of the century some degree of convergence in the shapes of the class structures of western societies was in train, and in turn cross-national variation in absolute mobility was reduced. The British total mobility rate changed rather little but that of other countries tended overall to move closer to it. In sum, sociological research on intergenerational class mobility relating to the twentieth century provides no indication at all of Britain being a distinctively low mobility society so far as absolute rates are concerned.<sup>5</sup>

As regards relative mobility, sociologists differ somewhat over the extent of cross-national variation and over the degree to which, insofar as such variation occurs, it is in some way systematic or reflects only historically formed cultural or institutional features of particular societies. According to the liberal theory of the transition from industrial to postindustrial society, as outlined in Chapter 5, a general tendency should prevail for relative rates of class mobility to become more equal – that is, for social fluidity to increase – as an education-based meritocracy comes into being. And some early studies did indeed claim to show a 'world-wide secular trend' in this direction, so that while countries' levels of relative mobility varied, this variation was systematically related to the progress they had made towards postindustrialism. But these studies have been subject to criticism concerning both the comparability of the data used and the methods of analysis applied, and their findings have not been consistently replicated by subsequent

<sup>5</sup> See in particular Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992: chs. 3, 6); Breen and Luijckx (2004a, b).



research. A contrasting view, claiming more empirical support, is one that would place greater emphasis on the similarities that exist in levels and patterns of relative rates among modern societies – that is, in their endogenous mobility regimes – even if with some degree of variation of a nationally specific kind. However, what for our present purposes is of main relevance is that regardless of which of these two positions has been favoured, Britain still emerges from the analyses that have been undertaken *as a rather unexceptional case* – somewhat less fluid than the Nordic social democracies or, while they existed, the communist, or ‘state socialist’, societies of east-central Europe, but more fluid than a number of other western European societies.<sup>6</sup>

The studies referred to in the foregoing are ones based on data collected in different national surveys carried out from the 1970s through to the 1990s and are now therefore somewhat dated. They are also studies reliant on extensive recoding exercises, which have been necessary to bring the data from the national surveys used so far as possible into comparable form. In order to make some advance in both these respects, we go on to present analyses of comparative mobility that are based on a new dataset that extends into the twenty-first century and that derives from a series of surveys of *cross-national design*, thus providing data that have a high degree of comparability from the start. This dataset is constructed from the first five waves of the European Social Survey (ESS), carried out between 2002 and 2010, which involved face-to-face interviews with individuals in probability samples taken from the adult populations of thirty countries. The samples range in size from 4,740 in Germany down to 891 in Italy. We focus on men and women who were aged 25 to 64 at time of interview. In the case of women, we also limit our analyses here to those who, when interviewed, were working full-time. With women working part-time, selection processes and employment conditions vary cross-nationally to an extent that would make separate analyses necessary.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The main study claiming a general movement towards greater social fluidity linked to economic development, and from which the phrase ‘world-wide secular trend’ is taken, is Ganzeboom, Luijkx and Treiman (1989). For critiques, see Wong (1990), Jones (1992) and Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992: chs. 4, 5). The latter authors develop the idea of nationally specific variation around a common ‘core’ pattern of social fluidity.

<sup>7</sup> This limitation means that in the case of women we have to omit Italy since the effective sample size becomes too small.

For the purposes of establishing intergenerational class mobility rates, survey respondents’ class positions at time of interview are related to the class positions of their parents when respondents were age 14 according to the seven-class version of the European Socio-Economic Classification (ESEC), which is in effect a European version of the British NS-SEC (see Table 1.1).<sup>8</sup> Our dataset is obviously restricted in that it allows us to consider variation in social mobility only across European countries. Nonetheless, this would still appear an adequate context within which to examine further the comparative standing of Britain – or, in the case of the ESS, the UK.<sup>9</sup>

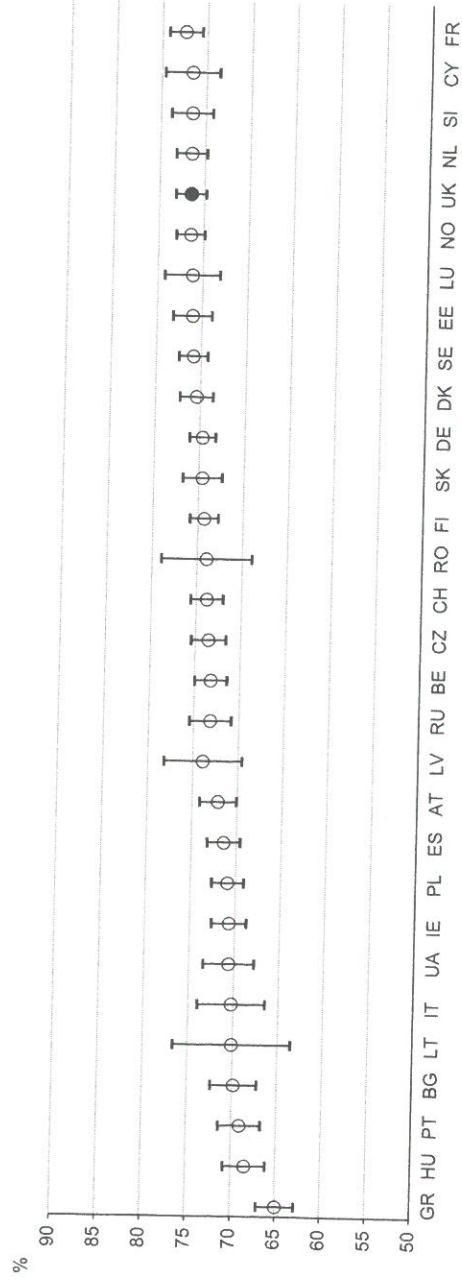
We begin with absolute rates. In Figure 10.1 we show the total mobility rates for men (with 95 per cent confidence intervals) using the seven ESEC classes: that is, the percentage of men found in a different class to that of their parents. What should first of all be noted is *the very limited range of cross-national variation*. In almost all cases, the rates fall between 70 and 80 per cent. Second, as regards the position of the UK, it may be observed, first of all, that the total rate, at approaching 80 per cent, is reassuringly close to that which we showed for Britain in Figure 2.3 on the basis of our data from the cohort studies, and then further that, within the range of variation that exists, this rate puts the UK *among the more mobile European societies*.

In Figure 10.2 we show corresponding total mobility rates for women who are in full-time employment. The rates are in general somewhat higher than for men but almost all still fall within the 70 to 80 per cent range; and while there are some differences in the ordering of the countries, the UK with a rate of close to 80 per cent again ranks high.

So far, then, as total mobility rates are concerned, there is no support at all for the idea that Britain is a low mobility society, although cross-national variation in this regard is in fact quite restricted. As we have emphasised, total rates of class mobility are primarily determined by the shape, and changes in the shape, of the class structure; and what can be taken as underlying the large degree of cross-national similarity in these rates that is apparent in Figures 10.1 and 10.2 is the

<sup>8</sup> For full details of ESEC, see Rose and Harrison (2010).

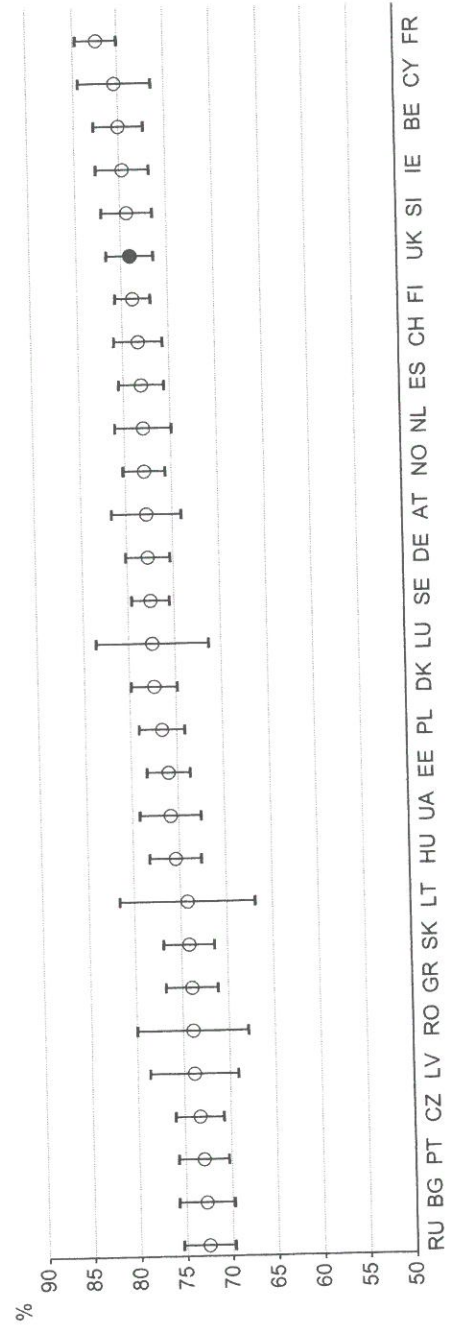
<sup>9</sup> For full details of the dataset, see Bukodi, Paskov and Nolan (2017).



GR: Greece, HU: Hungary, PT: Portugal, BG: Bulgaria, LT: Lithuania, IT: Italy, UA: Ukraine, IE: Ireland, PL: Poland, ES: Spain, AT: Austria, LV: Latvia, RU: Russia, BE: Belgium, CZ: Czech Republic, CH: Switzerland, RO: Romania, FI: Finland, SK: Slovakia, DE: Germany, DK: Denmark, SE: Sweden, EE: Estonia, LU: Luxembourg, NO: Norway, UK: United Kingdom, NL: Netherlands, SI: Slovenia, CY: Cyprus, FR: France

Source: Bukodi, Paskov and Nolan (2017)

Figure 10.1 Total mobility rate (%), with 95% confidence interval, by country, men aged 25-64



Source: Authors' calculation from the European Social Survey (ESS) data

Figure 10.2 Total mobility rate (%), with 95% confidence interval, by country, women aged 25-64, in full-time employment

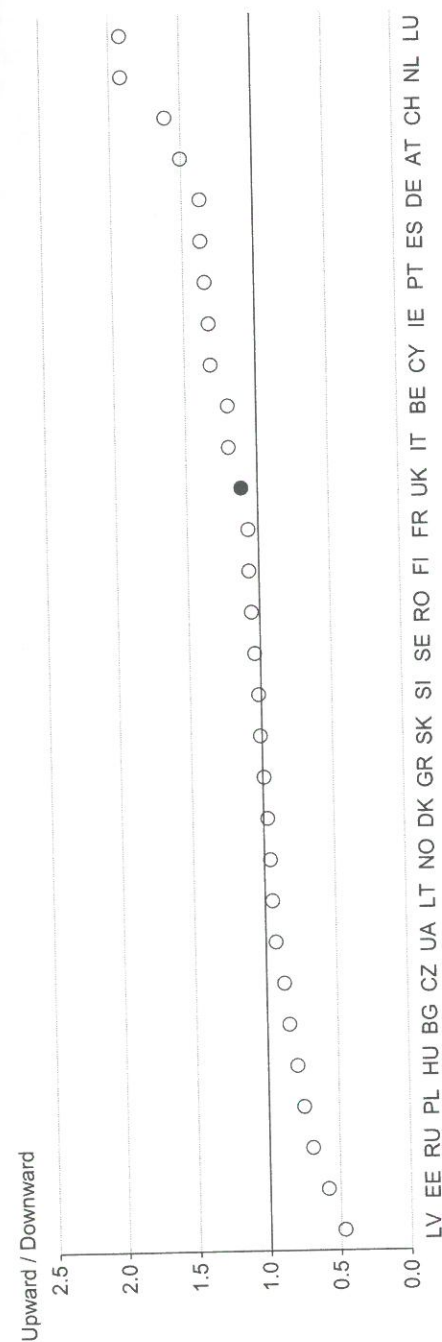


continuation through into the twenty-first century of the convergence in the shapes of national class structures that was previously referred to.

It has, however, at the same time to be recognised that this convergence is occurring from sometimes quite different starting points and in different societal contexts; and this is reflected in the fact that, despite the high degree of cross-national similarity in total mobility rates, further analyses, in which we use the hierarchical divisions within ESEC corresponding to those within NS-SEC (see again Table 1.1), do reveal greater variation in the relative importance of the upward and downward components of the total rates. Figures 10.3 and 10.4 show for each national case the ratio of the upward to the downward component.

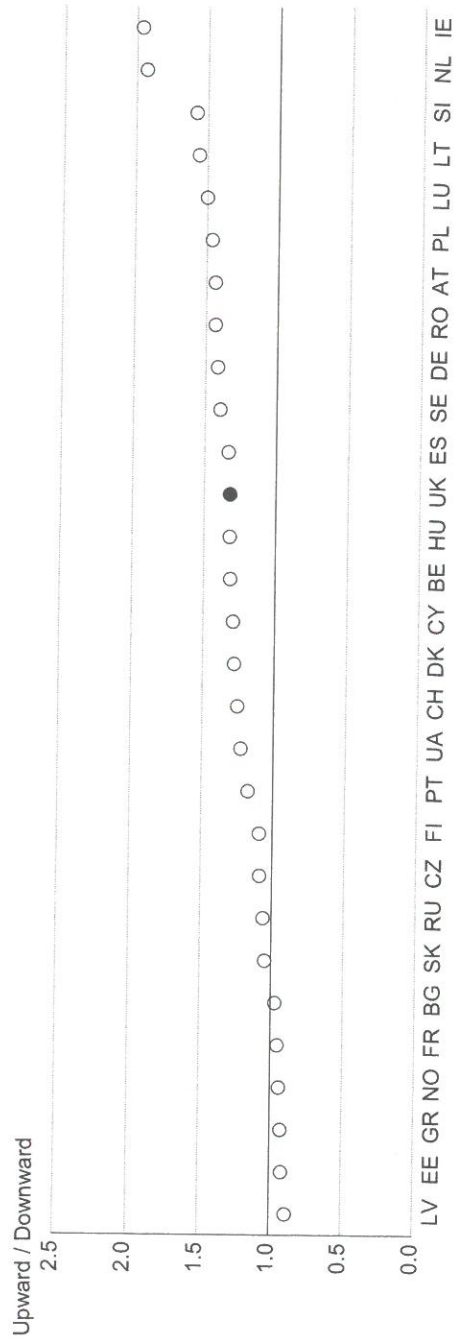
Focusing first on men, it can be seen from Figure 10.3 that the differences in the ratios are quite marked. There are some countries in which the upward component of the total rate is clearly larger than the downward. Most notable in this regard is a geographically contiguous west-central group, comprising Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the Benelux countries, but also included are several southern European countries in our dataset – Cyprus, Portugal and Spain – and Ireland. In all these countries the growth of the managerial and professional salariat would appear to have continued rather strongly over the recent past. In contrast, there are countries in which downward mobility is clearly more common than upward. Included here are countries that were formerly part of the USSR – Estonia, Latvia and Russia itself – together with several other post-communist countries, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. In these cases, it seems likely that men's mobility chances in particular have been adversely affected by the reduced availability of higher-level positions in declining heavy industries and also by the dismantling of extensive state and party bureaucracies.<sup>10</sup> Finally, there are countries in which the upward and downward components of the total rate are more or less equal. These include the remaining post-communist countries, the Nordic countries,

<sup>10</sup> Older respondents to the ESS in post-communist countries will have spent some part of their working lives under communism. But the changes that occurred in these countries during the transition period are known often to have created 'period' as much as 'cohort' effects – i.e. ones bearing more or less equally on individuals of all ages alike. For Russia, where period effects appear to have been particularly strong, see Gerber and Hout (2004).



Source: Bukodi, Paskov and Nolan (2017)

Figure 10.3 Ratio of upward mobility to downward mobility by country, men aged 25–64



Source: Authors' calculation from the European Social Survey (ESS) data

Figure 10.4 Ratio of upward mobility to downward mobility by country, women aged 25–64, in full-time employment

France, Italy – and the UK. The common factor here would appear to be that the managerial and professional salariat has become more or less stable in size or, at all events, is no longer growing at the same rate as it once did.

Turning to women in full-time employment, in Figure 10.4, we find a generally more favourable situation as regards the balance of upward and downward mobility, which is what might be expected given that these women will tend to be in higher-level employment than those working only part-time. However, while there are no countries in which for women who work full-time downward mobility is clearly a more common experience than upward, there are ones in which the difference is slight. These are mostly post-USSR or other post-communist countries, but Finland and Norway among the Nordic countries are also included and so too is France. The UK appears as one of the countries in which the upward component of the total rate is only moderately higher than the downward.

What emerges from these findings of specific significance for Britain is, we would suggest, the following. If Britain's comparative position is considered together with the trends in upward and downward mobility for men and for women working both full- and part-time that we earlier presented (Figures 2.3 and 2.4) and also with the evidence of the slowing growth of managerial and professional employment after the rapid expansion of the golden age (Figure 2.1), then the distinct possibility arises that Britain could shortly become another country in which individuals' chances of moving down within the class structure are greater than their chances of moving up. We earlier argued that the neglect of this possibility in the political discussion of mobility in Britain can be related to the misplaced concern that has existed over mobility in decline. We may now add that a further factor in its neglect would appear to be the equally misplaced concern over Britain as a low mobility society. So far as cross-national differences exist in total rates of intergenerational class mobility, Britain can in fact be counted as a high mobility society; but it is in the actual, and in the potential future, change in the balance of social ascent and descent that a real mobility problem can be identified.

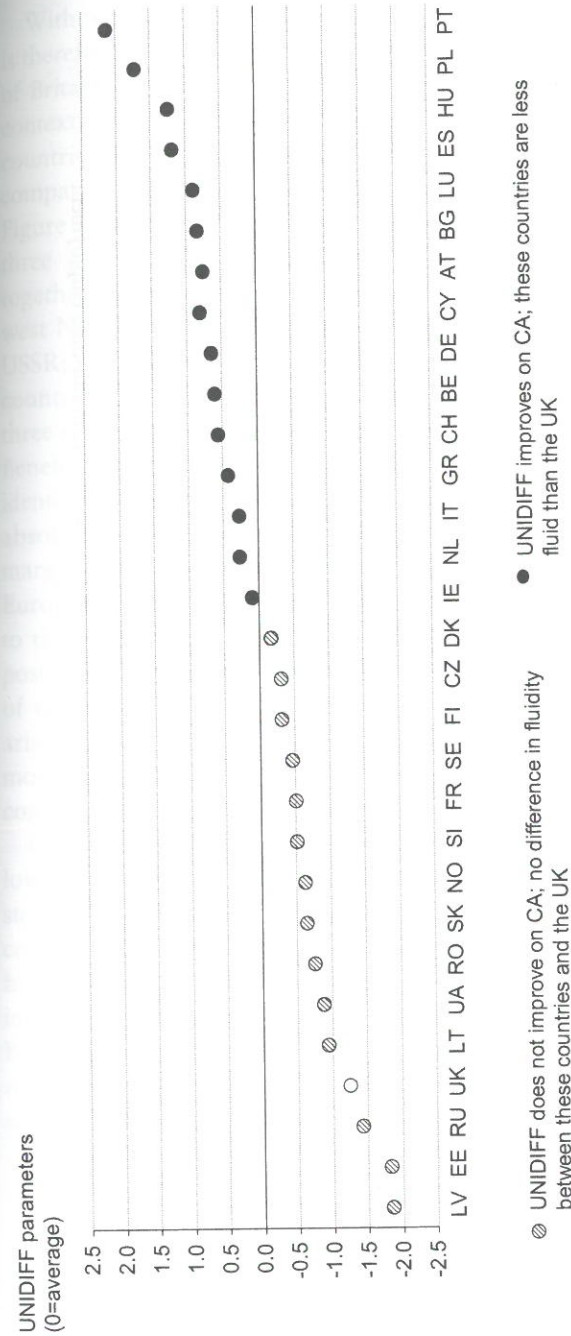
We now move on to a consideration of relative rates. We follow essentially the same statistical modelling strategy as in Chapter 3. That is, we use the constant association (CA) and uniform difference (UNI-DIFF) models there described, but instead of applying them to class



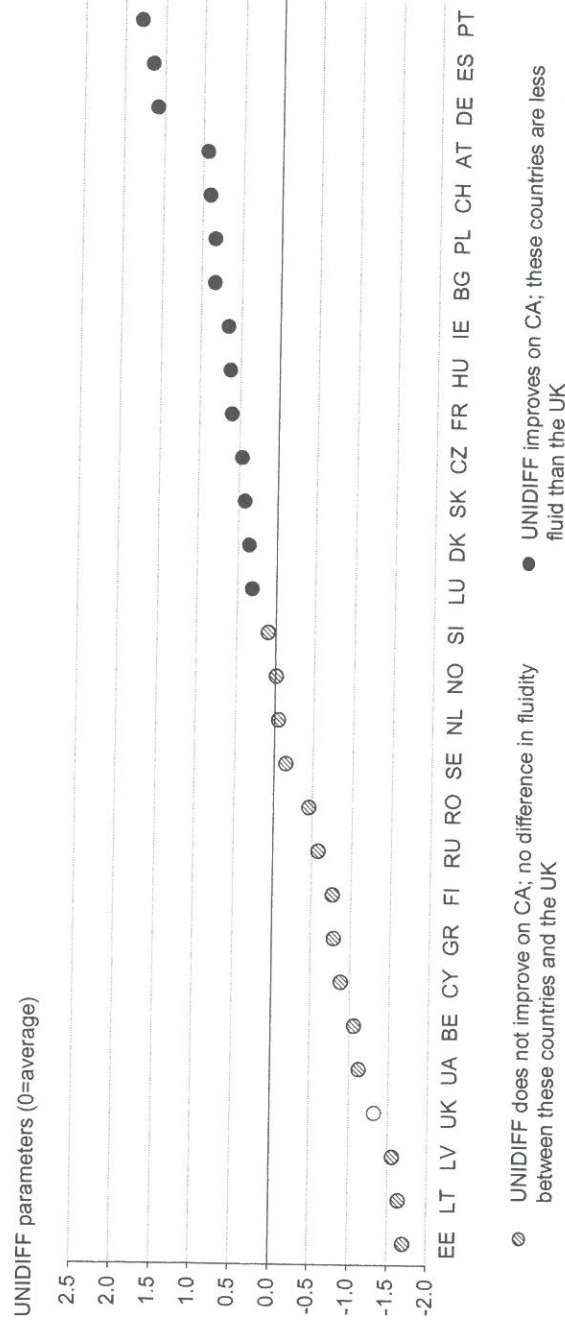
mobility tables for successive birth cohorts in Britain in order to examine change in relative rates over time, we apply them to class mobility tables for the European countries in our dataset in order to examine variation in relative rates across these countries – and to determine the UK’s comparative position. Results for men are shown in Figure 10.5 and for women in Figure 10.6.

These figures are to be understood as follows. The average of the UNIDIFF parameters resulting from fitting this model to the mobility tables of each pair of countries involved is set at zero, and the individual countries are then ordered in terms of their deviation from this average according to the average of the UNIDIFF parameters from each of the pairwise comparisons in which they were themselves involved. Negative deviations indicate that the odds ratios capturing the association between class origins and destinations in a country’s mobility table are uniformly lower than the average – that is, there is greater social fluidity within its class structure – while, conversely, positive deviations indicate that the odds ratios are uniformly higher than the average – that is, there is less social fluidity. It can then be seen from Figures 10.5 and 10.6 that with both men and women in full-time employment, the UK comes close to the high fluidity end of this ordering.

However, what is further indicated, by the country markers being unshaded or shaded, is whether or not *the difference with the UK* is statistically significant so far as the overall level of fluidity is concerned. It turns out that, in the case of men, the UK does not differ in this respect from any of the other fourteen countries that fall below the line of the average, and that, in the case of women, from any of the other fourteen countries that fall below or more or less on this line. In ten of the fourteen comparisons involved for men and in eleven of those for women, the CA model – in this context better understood as the *common* rather than the constant association model – does in fact give an adequate fit to the data, while in the remaining cases this model fits less well but is not improved on by the UNIDIFF model. That is to say, although in these latter cases some differences from the UK exist in the pattern of social fluidity, no systematic difference in the level of fluidity shows up. The point of main importance that emerges is that it is from countries *above* the average line that the UK can be most reliably set apart: that is to say, from countries with class mobility regimes that entail less fluidity.



Source: Bukodi, Paskov and Nolan (2017)  
 Figure 10.5 Country differences in relative rates of social mobility, men aged 2.5-64



Source: Authors' calculation from the European Social Survey (ESS) data

Figure 10.6 Country differences in relative rates of social mobility, women aged 25–64, in full-time employment

With relative rates of class mobility, just as with absolute rates, there is therefore no evidence whatever of the UK – or, one could safely say, of Britain – being a low mobility society, at all events in a European context. The UK can rather be seen as one of a fairly large number of countries that in fact share largely similar mobility regimes so far as a – comparatively – high level of fluidity is concerned. In the case of men, Figure 10.5 shows that the countries that make up this number fall into three groups: first, the UK plus France and, marginally, Ireland, together with the Nordic countries, forming what might be labelled a west Nordic group; second, those that have emerged from the former USSR; and third, a group comprising several other post-communist countries. The countries with less fluid mobility regimes also fall into three groups: one made up of Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the Benelux countries – that is, the same west-central bloc we earlier identified as having a favourable balance of upward and downward absolute mobility rates – though with the Netherlands now being marginal to the west Nordic group; then one comprising the southern European countries in our dataset, with Italy being possibly marginal to the west Nordic group; and finally one made up of the remaining post-communist countries, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland. In the case of women, as Figure 10.6 reveals, some differences from this pattern arise, but not for the most part ones of a very substantial kind. And, most relevant for our present concerns, the UK clearly remains in the comparatively high fluidity group.<sup>11</sup>

Given the prevailing insistence in official discourse that Britain is a low mobility society, the results shown in Figures 10.5 and 10.6 may strike some readers as surprising – even implausible. However, in the context of sociological research, past and present, they could not in fact be regarded as at all out of the way. On the one hand, as was previously indicated, in comparative analyses relating to the twentieth century, Britain was not found to have exceptionally unequal relative rates. And, on the other hand, while these earlier analyses did show the Nordic social democracies and also the existing east-central communist

<sup>11</sup> For more detailed discussion, see Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2017). A further study of comparative class mobility based on the ESS is Eurofound (2017). This covers a smaller number of countries and, because of a focus on change across (quasi-)cohorts, most analyses are based on a rather crude threefold collapse of ESEC, which makes it difficult to compare the results reported with our own. However, it is again the case that no evidence at all emerges to support the idea of Britain as a society with distinctively low fluidity within its class structure.



societies as having greater fluidity than Britain, more recent research has clearly pointed to the possibility of these differences diminishing. In the Nordic countries it appears that increasing fluidity, rather than being sustained through to the present time, has to be seen as a distinctive feature of certain earlier birth cohorts, so that, through processes of cohort replacement, the level of fluidity has stabilised. And it has been consistently found that in former communist countries economic liberalisation or 'marketisation' and the ending of close state control of the educational system and of its linkages with the labour market, directed towards egalitarian ends, have led to a general decline in social fluidity and, in some cases, of a very sharp kind.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, rather than the idea of Britain as a low mobility society being derived from any serious examination of the body of relevant research – whether relating to income or to class mobility or to absolute or to relative rates – *it is essentially a political construction*: that is, an idea that it has been found convenient to advance in support of the attempt, made across party political lines, to form a response to increasing inequality of condition in Britain primarily through a policy emphasis on raising levels of mobility.

What, then, are the implications of our findings on comparative mobility in a European context for a better grounded understanding of mobility in Britain?

As regards absolute rates, we can only repeat that what should chiefly command attention in the British case is not the total mobility rate, which, within the limited range of cross-national variation that exists, is quite high, but rather the balance of the upward and downward components of this rate, which is clearly less favourable than in a number of other countries and, on the evidence of trends we have earlier presented, is tending to worsen. This is a matter over which serious political concern would be justified but has, so far, been largely lacking. It is in this connection of some interest to note that in the group of west-central European countries, where upward mobility still predominates over downward, issues of social mobility would appear to have far less political and public prominence than in Britain. This may be due in some part to the fact that in these countries social inequality has

<sup>12</sup> On the Nordic countries, see for Sweden, Jonsson (2004) and Breen and Jonsson (2007) and for Finland, Erola (2009); on post-communist countries, see for Russia, Gerber and Hout (2004), for Hungary, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2010) and for an important comparative analysis, Jackson and Evans (2017).

increased less strongly than in Britain – with therefore politicians feeling less need to focus on mobility. But insofar as mobility arouses less public discussion and anxiety, what may be of main importance is that, despite the comparatively low fluidity that prevails in these countries, the actual experience of mobility among their populations remains similar to that of the British population during the golden age.

As regards relative rates, what would appear to be of main importance is that our findings indicate that rather than European countries varying in their levels of fluidity in some quite continuous way, they tend to fall into a number of groups with more or less distinctive levels. And this in turn suggests that such variation in fluidity might best be understood not by seeking to relate it directly to variation in other macro-social features, such as level of economic development or economic inequality, but rather by considering further the possibility we raised at the end of Chapter 5. That is, that in all societies with a capitalist market economy, a nuclear family system and a liberal democratic polity, some limit exists to the extent to which relative mobility chances can be equalised, primarily on account of the capacity of more advantaged families to use their superior resources, economic but also social and cultural, in order to maintain their children's competitive edge – their greater chances of success in the educational system and in turn in the labour market; and that, as this limit is approached, further attempts to equalise relative chances of class mobility, in having to extend beyond educational policy, will meet with increasing political difficulties.

On this view, certain of the countries in the comparatively high fluidity set that we have identified, that is, the west Nordic group including Britain, could be taken as ones that are coming close to the limit that is suggested, while the post-communist countries in this set are ones *moving away from this limit* as the levels of fluidity they were able to achieve under authoritarian state regulation are now being reduced following their transition to some form of capitalist democracy. At the same time, it can also be recognised that countries may fall some way short of the limit, or recede from it, to differing extents and for quite different reasons.

For example, in such post-communist cases as Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland it would appear that particular features of their transitions have had an especially powerful effect in widening relative mobility chances, thus changing these countries over a period of only a few



decades from being probably among those with the highest levels of social fluidity in Europe to being among those with the lowest. However, with the southern European countries included in our analyses, low fluidity has obviously other sources. It would seem likely that in these countries their level of economic development does take on major importance: that is, as regards their still relatively large agricultural sectors, the size of the class of small entrepreneurs within which a marked propensity for immobility, especially for men, is typically found (cf. Chapter 4), and their high educational as well as income inequality. But with the west-central European countries that also show comparatively low fluidity a different situation again has to be recognised. These are economically advanced countries with high standards of living and income inequality that is generally lower than in Britain. In their case it would appear that low fluidity is primarily the result of stratified educational systems coexisting with distinctively strong linkages between their educational systems and labour markets. Or, to revert to the OED triangle, one could say that these countries have lower fluidity than Britain, and likewise France and the Nordic countries, because not only the OE but, perhaps more importantly, *also the ED association* is stronger. There is thus a greater danger of credentialist restrictions on mobility, and education is far more likely to be 'class destiny'.<sup>13</sup>

If such an interpretation of our comparative findings on relative rates of class mobility has any validity, then what follows for Britain is that, as a country coming close to the limit on fluidity that we have proposed, it is one in which attempts to further equalise relative rates – even though, as was shown in Chapter 4, these do remain at the extremes highly unequal – will require political intervention of a kind likely to meet with strong opposition; far stronger than that raised against present attempts directed primarily at continuing educational expansion and reform. We pursue these issues further in our final concluding chapter.

<sup>13</sup> The German case is by far the most studied. For discussion of the 'highly institutionalised' relations prevailing between education, employment and class positions, see Müller and Pollak (2004) and for more detailed analyses, Klein (2011) and Grätz and Pollak (2016). The countries in question may of course benefit in that there are better guarantees of skill in particular occupations: Germany does not suffer from 'cowboy builders'.

## Conclusions

In this final chapter we first of all sum up the main findings from the research on which we have reported, and note again where these findings are in contradiction to what is claimed or supposed in current discussion of social mobility in political and policy contexts. We then aim to show how this discussion might in future be conducted on a more secure evidential basis and to bring out some of the implications for policy that would follow.

We list below the leading conclusions that emerge in regard to the substantive issues we have successively taken up in Chapters 2 to 10, basing our analyses throughout primarily on mobility in terms of social class, which, we believe, allows the best estimates to be made of the intergenerational transmission of economic advantage and disadvantage. Relatively minor qualifications that we have previously made to these conclusions are here ignored, but readers are reminded that they do exist.

- Contrary to what has become a widely held view, there has been no decline in absolute intergenerational social mobility in Britain over the recent past, at all events if mobility is treated in terms of class. Men and women born in the 1970s and 1980s are just as likely as those born in the 1940s to be found in different class positions to those of their parents. However, a significant change has occurred in that while earlier, in what has become known as the golden age of mobility, social ascent predominated over social descent, the experience of upward mobility is now becoming less common and that of downward mobility more common. *In this sense*, young people today face less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents or their grandparents. This change is primarily the result of the course of development of the class structure – in particular, of the slowing down of the previous rate of growth of the managerial and professional salariat.