

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.



- There has also been no decline in intergenerational class mobility if considered in relative terms or, that is, no decline in social fluidity within the class structure. The relative chances of men and women of different class origins being found in different class destinations have remained remarkably constant over decades. The one exception is a – slight – *increase* in fluidity among women, resulting from some growth in the number of those from more advantaged class origins whose part-time working implies downward intergenerational mobility: that is, women who under existing constraints appear to give priority to family life rather than seeking to exploit their advantages to the full in the context of their own working lives. For the most part, however, what might be called the endogenous mobility regime shows a powerful resistance to change.
- Over-time constancy extends to the pattern as well as the level of relative rates of class mobility. These rates can be shown to be structured by the effects of class hierarchy, class inheritance and status affinity in an essentially unchanging way, and on much the same lines for men and women alike. With short-range mobility transitions inequalities in relative mobility chances are often quite small – ‘perfect mobility’ is approximated; but with longer-range transitions, as class hierarchy and inheritance effects come increasingly into play, these inequalities widen to a quite extreme extent. Men originating in NS-SEC Class 1 are twenty times more likely to be themselves found in Class 1 rather than in Class 7 than are men originating in Class 7.
- If education is to play the key role in increasing social mobility that is typically assigned to it in political discourse, then certain – often unrecognised – conditions have to be met. The association between individuals’ class origins and their educational attainment must weaken, while the association between their educational attainment and their eventual class destinations strengthens, and no offsetting change occurs in the effect of origins on destinations that is *not* mediated via education. However, if education is considered in relative terms, as would appear appropriate insofar as its possible impact on social mobility is concerned, then the associations in question show little change over the historical period that our research covers. It is again the degree of stability of the mobility regime that is notable – despite more or less continuous educational expansion and reform, and often with the express aim of increasing equality of opportunity.

- Even if education is considered in absolute rather than in relative terms – that is, as a consumption rather than an investment good – there is still no evidence of educational inequalities linked to social origins being reduced, at least once social origins are treated in a comprehensive way so as to include parental social status and education as well as parental class. And this finding holds good when early life cognitive ability is also included in the analysis. Considering individuals with similar levels of cognitive ability, those from more advantaged social origins have significantly higher educational attainment than those from less advantaged social origins, and there is little indication of such disparities decreasing over time. Many men and women thus do not realise their full academic potential, and in this way a substantial wastage of talent occurs.
- Analyses of individuals’ class histories in relation to their educational attainment show that, as compared with the situation in the first half of the twentieth century, there are now greater numbers of men and women entering higher-level managerial and professional positions directly on completing tertiary education – and remaining in such positions subsequently. But over the more recent past there has been no systematic decrease in the numbers achieving upward mobility during the course of their working lives. The achievement of such worklife mobility is associated with more advantaged social origins and, in some cases, with a relatively high level of cognitive ability, in addition to educational qualifications. When considered *independently* of social origins and cognitive ability, education has not, as seems often believed, increasingly become class destiny. No general and sustained movement towards an education-based meritocracy is apparent.
- The effect of individuals’ class origins on their class destinations that is not mediated via education – that is, the so-called direct effect – is yet again a feature of the mobility regime that would appear to have remained constant over time. The direct effect can be shown to be especially marked if social origins are taken to comprise parental status and education as well as class. Both glass ceilings and glass floors are created, and the latter, preventing the downward mobility of individuals of more advantaged origins who have only modest levels of educational attainment, appear if anything the more important. At the same time, though, education pursued over the course of individuals’ working lives, if it leads to an improvement in



their relative qualifications level, does continue to have an effect on their chances of accessing the salariat and avoiding working-class positions. As regards the mediating factors that underlie the direct effect itself, parental help in the labour market proves to be less important than individual characteristics, such as cognitive ability and internal locus of control – which are themselves associated with social origins – but other factors are also involved including, very possibly, parental wealth.

- Contrary to what has been generally expected, or at least hoped for, lifelong learning – whatever other individual and social benefits it may confer – contributes less to mobility than to immobility in intergenerational perspective. Rather than providing a way in which individuals of less advantaged social origins can compensate for low levels of attainment within mainstream education, it serves as a way in which individuals of more advantaged origins can build on qualifications that they have earlier acquired and, in cases where they have been downwardly mobile at labour market entry, thus improve their chances of counter mobility back to their parents' position. In this connection, further academic qualifications are of far greater value, and especially for men, than are further vocational qualifications.
- Whether class mobility is considered in absolute or relative terms, Britain is not a low mobility society, despite claims to this effect being repeatedly made, notably by the Social Mobility Commission. As regards absolute class mobility, cross-national variation in total rates is not all that wide but, within such variation as exists, the British rate is towards the high end of at least the European range. However, Britain is not among those European countries in which the upward component of the total rate remains clearly greater than the downward, and could be moving towards a situation in which the reverse is the case. As regards relative mobility, Britain again appears at the high end of the European range, being one of group of west Nordic countries whose levels of social fluidity may in fact be approximating a limit for countries with a capitalist market economy, a nuclear family system and a liberal-democratic polity: that is, in the sense that policies aimed at further equalising relative rates will have to be ones going beyond educational expansion and reform and of kind that are likely to be far more strongly contested.

Given these findings, what implications do they carry for a better public understanding of social mobility and for a more securely evidence-based approach to the identification of, and policy responses to, the problems that may be thought to arise? In this regard, we believe it crucial to maintain the distinction we have insisted on throughout between mobility as considered in absolute and in relative terms. Neglect of this distinction is a major source of confusion in much discussion of policy.

So far as absolute mobility is concerned, what most obviously follows from our findings is that it is not the overall level of absolute mobility, or any decline in this level, that constitutes a problem, but rather that rates of upward mobility are falling and rates of downward mobility rising. Where mobility is treated in terms of social class, it is generally found that changes in the level and pattern of absolute rates are overwhelmingly determined by changes in the shape of the class structure, and we have shown that this is indeed the case in Britain today. The end of the golden age of mobility was brought about by a falling off in the rate of growth of the managerial and professional salariat after its rapid expansion over the postwar decades, resulting in a growing number of individuals from advantaged class origins who are at risk of downward mobility. What is therefore implied is that any movement back to the situation of the golden age, when upward mobility predominated over downward, must be dependent upon the further upgrading of the class structure. It is important here to recognise that while achieving a greater equality in relative rates would lead to an increase in total mobility, *it could contribute nothing to the balance between social ascent and descent*. For, as we have emphasised and illustrated in Chapter 3, any such equalisation – any increase in fluidity within the class structure – must raise levels of upward and downward mobility to exactly the same degree.

What policy areas are then of most relevance? Educational policy should not in fact be seen as of primary importance, even if it may have a part to play in supplementing other policies. As we argued in Chapter 2, the supply-side scenario envisaged by Gordon Brown, in which the creation of a highly qualified labour force pulls into Britain a steady stream of 'top end' jobs from around the world, is unlikely to be realised to any significant extent, since Britain, along with other advanced societies, is at an evident disadvantage in the 'global auction' that operates in this regard. Rather, demand for higher-level



employment must be essentially created within the national economy; and in this connection it is policy in areas other than education that would appear to have greatest potential – although in current discussion of social mobility this appears to be surprisingly under-appreciated.

This point is perhaps best illustrated in the case of industrial strategy, in which there has of late been a marked revival of interest, as reflected in the publication of government Green and White Papers.<sup>1</sup> A greater role for state intervention is envisaged in influencing not only the *rate* but also the *direction* of economic growth: for example, through measures that seek to improve Britain's poor record in research and development and in technology transfer – moving technological innovation into commercially viable production; that prioritise infrastructural and environmental initiatives; and that make available more 'patient', long-term capital that can enable promising business 'start-ups' to move on to 'scale-ups'. But what is rather remarkable is that in the proliferating discussion of industrial strategy, the implications for social mobility have received very little attention. In her introduction to the White Paper, Theresa May refers to creating 'high quality well-paid jobs right across the country' but makes no explicit linkage to the discussion of social mobility. In the text itself, there is just one reference to mobility. The government, we are told, will 'shortly publish a plan for improving social mobility in England, which will set out how the educational system will expand equality of opportunity': that is, even in the context of industrial strategy it is educational policy that is prioritised in regard to mobility, with the demand side of the matter not being adequately distinguished from the supply side and the confusion between measures relevant to absolute and to relative mobility being all too apparent.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> HM Government (2017a, b). See also IPPR Commission on Economic Justice (2017) and Heseltine (2017). An academic work that has been of major influence is Mazzucato (2015).

<sup>2</sup> HM Government (2017b: 123). The plan, previously referred to in Chapter 6, n. 16, appeared shortly afterwards with predictable emphases on the importance of school effectiveness and parental behaviour, and with the claim that education would play an 'integral role' in delivering the industrial strategy (Department of Education, 2017: 7). A successful industrial strategy will of course require an appropriately educated and trained labour force; but it would seem desirable, before policy in this regard is developed in any detail, to have some well-considered ideas about how many and what kinds of new jobs are likely to

Policies directed towards the renewal of manufacturing especially, and the more effective exploitation in this regard of the national science and technology base, should in fact be clearly recognised as one major way in which a further upgrading of the class structure could be brought about – not only by increasing the number of higher-level managerial and professional positions but also by offsetting the 'hollowing out' that has resulted from falling numbers of technical and more skilled manual jobs. In turn, and regardless of what might be happening with relative rates, a rise in the upward component of the total mobility rate could be expected to follow – and one that would benefit in particular those localities scarred by deindustrialisation that are regarded as mobility cold spots.<sup>3</sup>

A further policy area of relevance is that of social and of public services more generally. A major driver of the expansion of the managerial and professional salariat that created the golden age of social mobility was the development of the welfare state. And a return to high levels of social investment of this kind does then represent another way in which the upgrading of the class structure could be effected. At the present time much concern is being shown over the possibility of a coming digital and robotics revolution leading to large-scale unemployment or even to 'the end of work'. But this is, in effect, just another expression of the old 'lump of labour' fallacy that within an economy there is always some fixed amount of work to be done. While any period of rapid technological change is likely to be associated with economic and social disruption requiring sustained management, it should be apparent enough, and especially as regards maintaining and advancing the range and quality of services, that substantially greater numbers could be very valuably employed than is presently

emerge, and thus to avoid the present situation – which the report did not refer to – in which overqualification and skill shortages appear to coexist. For cogent commentary in this regard, see Peston (2017: 223–4, 230–3).

<sup>3</sup> The Social Mobility Commission has in fact of late taken up this point, even if not giving it any great prominence. It has recommended that 'Central government should put social mobility and place at the heart of the industrial strategy, with a focus on rebalancing economic and work opportunities' and should 'increase the number of high skilled jobs in the regions and particularly in social mobility cold spots, by encouraging and incentivising public sector bodies and private companies to base themselves in those areas' (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a: 9; 2017b: 93).



the case, and often, moreover, at higher levels of employment. For example, in preschool education, childhood and youth services, the health service, the prison service, support for the derelict and homeless, and above all the care of the aged, great individual and societal benefits would follow not only from the expansion of workforces but also from the further upgrading of many personnel to professional standards and status. The crucial issue that arises is, of course, that of how such advances are to be financed: in short, the issue of how gains in productivity and national wealth resulting from technological progress can be directed to this end.

At all events, for present purposes the essential point remains that if current trends of falling upward and rising downward rates of class mobility are to be reversed – or even prevented from becoming more marked – then it is only through the upgrading of the class structure, in one way or another, that this can be achieved. That is to say, within the national economy jobs with employment relations that offer not only relatively high levels of pay but also of income security and stability and career prospects will have to progressively replace jobs in which the employment relations that prevail mean that labour is in effect being reduced to a commodity.

Turning now to relative mobility, it is again the case that the problem that has to be recognised is not that of a decline – not that of an actual decrease of fluidity within the class structure – but rather that of a constancy in relative rates, and one that has persisted over a lengthy period in which attempts have been more or less continuously made to create a greater equality in mobility chances, primarily through educational policies of expansion and reform. What is then implied is that the idea, to which politicians of all parties have resorted, that education can serve as the key means of breaking the link between inequality of condition and inequality of opportunity is seriously flawed. Disparities in the chances of educational success of children from families in more and less advantaged positions persistently show up, even when early life cognitive ability is taken into account, which are in turn reflected in their mobility chances; and in the case of longer-range mobility, such chances diverge to an extent that becomes difficult to reconcile with any conception of equality of opportunity.

The basic failure of politicians in this regard lies, as we have earlier observed, in their inability to grasp, or at all events their unwillingness to accept, that reducing social inequalities in educational attainment as

a way of reducing inequalities in mobility chances inescapably involves a zero-sum game. Given the existence of what might be called an objective opportunity structure – in other words, that formed by the class structure as it exists at any one time – any improvement in the relative mobility chances of children of less advantaged class origins can only come about at the expense of a worsening of the chances of children of more advantaged origins. This being so, it is only to be expected that parents with superior resources, economic and also social and cultural, will not remain merely passive in the face of changes in the educational system that appear to threaten their own children's life-chances. They will use their resources as necessary in order to minimise the risks of their children experiencing downward mobility. And, as we have suggested, there are good grounds for supposing that the motivation to avoid social descent is yet stronger than that to achieve social ascent. The concern and, for the most part, the capacity of families holding more advantaged class positions to stave off any threat of serious intergenerational downward mobility could in fact be regarded as the key source of the long-term stability that the endogenous mobility regime displays.

What is therefore implied is that if politicians are to pursue any serious commitment to making relative mobility chances more equal, it will be necessary for them to move on from generalities about the importance of raising educational standards and reducing socially linked attainment gaps, on which a broad political consensus exists, and to face issues likely to be of a far more controversial kind.

Thus, even in connection with educational policy, questions arise of how far more advantaged parents' ability to use their superior resources to further their children's educational success should be countered or constrained. For example, apart from raising the quality as well as the quantity of preschool provision for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, should poorer families receive income support specifically for purposes of 'child investments'? Should the ability of well-off parents to employ private tutors for their children be offset by state-funded private tuition as, say, through voucher schemes for children of less well-off parents? Should the various ways in which schools' admissions procedures are exploited by wealthier and better connected and informed parents be made more difficult by introducing selection by lot or by requiring schools to have a balanced intake of pupils in different ability bands? Proposals in all these respects have in



fact been put forward by the Sutton Trust and other bodies, but would appear to have received no positive political response.<sup>4</sup> And proposals of a more radical kind – for example, that private schools should lose their charitable status or that, as suggested by Jeremy Corbyn, VAT should be imposed on their fees – have been met with very strongly voiced opposition from Conservative quarters as manifestations of ‘class envy’ that amount to an illegitimate attempt to undermine parents’ rights.<sup>5</sup>

A more fundamental alternative to specific measures of the kind in question can of course also be envisaged, but one that would appear likely to meet with yet wider-ranging sociopolitical dissent. That is, for the perspective on social mobility and social inequality that has so far prevailed in political circles to be directly reversed, so that, rather than increasing mobility, through educational policy, being taken as the preferred solution to the problem of inequality, inequality is recognised as the basic source of the historic ineffectiveness of educational policy in this regard. A general reduction in inequality would then be taken as the prime means of levelling relative mobility chances. Of late, a number of authors have in fact advanced in some detail policy programmes for significantly reducing at least economic inequality, including proposals for more progressive income tax, an inheritance tax, a national pay policy and capital endowments for all at adulthood. But the political viability of such programmes, in the first place in electoral terms, must obviously remain very much in question.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See the introductions by Sir Peter Lampl to Kirby (2016), Cullinane et al. (2017), Jerrim (2017a) and Stewart and Waldfogel (2017).

<sup>5</sup> Under New Labour some consideration was given to removing the charitable status of private schools but, instead, a policy was adopted of requiring them to more fully justify this status – with results that do not appear all that impressive. The proposal that VAT should attach to private school fees did in fact receive some unexpected support from Michael Gove – who was then, however, denounced in the right-wing press as a ‘class traitor’.

<sup>6</sup> The most important work in this regard is that of Atkinson (2015). But while Atkinson deals very persuasively with objections to his proposals to the effect that they would be detrimental to economic efficiency, that they would be impractical in the face of globalisation, or that within the national economy they could not be afforded, he gives little consideration to whether they could find the political support necessary for their implementation. An interesting sociological commentary is that by Grusky (2017), who suggests that Atkinson’s essentially ‘technocratic’ stance needs complementing by some degree of ‘populist’ appeal. It is in this connection important to recognise (on the US, see Reeves, 2017) that those benefiting from existing inequalities of both condition and opportunity are

What has, though, at the same time become apparent is that maintaining existing views that would neglect or discount the ways in which inequality of condition impedes equality of opportunity is also facing growing political difficulties. In this regard, developments involving the Social Mobility Commission are of particular note.

Early in 2017 the Commission published an assessment of government policies over the previous twenty years that had been directed towards increasing mobility. The conclusion reached was that the large majority of these had failed to meet their objectives. Of thirty-seven specific policies that were evaluated – most being in the field of education – only seven could be rated as successful. In the discussion of this disappointing record, references were repeatedly made to persisting or widening inequalities – in incomes, in wealth, in housing, in health – that impacted directly on individuals’ mobility chances.<sup>7</sup> Then in November 2017 the Commission’s annual report appeared and was focused on geographical differences in the prospects of upward mobility for young people of disadvantaged social origins. The report received wide media attention, although largely based on a misunderstanding of what it showed. Contrary to what was generally supposed, the report did not contain any evidence on geographical differences in the social mobility of individuals, whether upward or otherwise. Rather, what were presented were the results of applying to different local authority areas sixteen so-called ‘social mobility indicators’ – or, more accurately, indicators of *conditions taken to be relevant to the chances of upward mobility*. Some of these indicators related to the educational performance and labour market position of disadvantaged young people – in other words, those eligible for free school meals – but only at an aggregate, area level, while others related directly to such matters as school quality, average wages, prevalence of low wages, home ownership, and the availability of managerial and professional occupations. In other words, local areas were characterised not in terms of the actual mobility of individuals born, or currently

in modern societies no longer a small minority. In Britain even Class 1 now accounts for well over 10 per cent of the electorate and Classes 1 and 2 together for around a third.

<sup>7</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2017a).



living, in them but rather in terms of where they stood on a range of measures of economic and wider social advantage or disadvantage.<sup>8</sup>

It would then be difficult to conclude anything other than that the Commission was becoming increasingly forced to take the position, even if this was nowhere explicitly acknowledged, that rather than mobility being a means of mitigating inequality, inequality had to be seen as fundamentally conditioning mobility. And support for this interpretation is provided by the fact that, shortly after the publication of their report, the members of the Commission collectively resigned. The grounds for this action, as stated by the outgoing chair, Alan Milburn, were that public policy, as thus far conceived and implemented, had failed to improve social mobility, that the present government gave no indication of being ready to take any more serious measures aimed at supporting the 'left-behind communities that had voted for Brexit' or at 'healing social divisions', and that he and his colleagues saw no point in continuing in their efforts 'to push water uphill'.<sup>9</sup>

It would thus appear that at the present time something of an impasse has been reached so far as the social mobility agenda is concerned. While it is becoming increasingly hard in policy circles to ignore the fact that problems of inequality of opportunity cannot be effectively addressed separately from those of inequality of condition, there is no evident political basis for a more integrated approach.

<sup>8</sup> Social Mobility Commission (2017b). Acknowledgement that the report does not in fact contain any analyses of geographical variation in social mobility rates, since no databases adequate to the purpose exist, is tucked away in a methodological appendix (Appendix 1). It would have been helpful, and appropriate, if this limitation of the report had been clearly stated at the outset. How well the indices used would correlate with actual mobility is unknown but it may be observed that they do not always correlate very highly with each other.

<sup>9</sup> See *Sunday Times*, 3 December 2017. Given this strong position, it is, however, somewhat strange to find that in their earlier report calling for new thinking on mobility – and despite the chair's recognition that the 'social mobility agenda has tended to be skewed towards children and the educational system' to the neglect of the labour market – the Commission still made recommendations that were heavily concentrated on school effectiveness and parental behaviour on much the same lines as the Department of Education report referred to in note 2 above. The only recommendation directly concerning inequality of condition was that the government should have the 'ambition' to make the UK the country with the lowest level of low pay within the OECD (Social Mobility Commission, 2017a: 5, 9).

One question that arises is then that of whether any way remains through which a viable attempt might be made at reducing inequalities in relative mobility chances: that is, without the emergence of some significantly new political conjuncture. In the light of our research findings, it is possible to suggest one approach that could be pursued and which need not be politically divisive but that would, however, again require a major reorientation of thinking that has for long been largely shared across the political spectrum. What would be entailed would be the following: a move away from an uncritical acceptance of the idea of education as 'the great equaliser' and of an education-based meritocracy as a generally desirable end state; a recognition that, insofar as the association between individuals' social origins and their educational attainment is not weakened, education often serves in effect to *restrict* mobility; and, in turn, a concern to prevent any unnecessary transfer of educational inequalities into inequalities in chances of – upward – mobility in the course of working life.

In Chapter 6 we have shown that there is a wastage of talent in that many individuals of high cognitive ability, but coming disproportionately from disadvantaged social backgrounds, do not fulfil their academic potential at least so far as the attainment of formal qualifications is concerned. The implication of this is that within the labour force there are likely to be some significant number of men and women who are actually capable of undertaking a higher level of work than that in which they are presently engaged. And in Chapter 7 we have further shown that over the postwar years levels of upward mobility achieved in the course of working life have been largely maintained, that educational qualifications are not the only or always the dominant factor in such mobility, and that cognitive ability and perhaps other individual attributes also play a part. We would then see here a positive tendency as regards equality of opportunity that should be sustained and as far as possible strengthened. With many occupations, mainly professional and technical, it is of course the case that certain standards of competency need to be guaranteed a priori, and this is best done by appropriate qualifications being entry requirements. But there are many other occupations, including relatively high-level ones as, say, in management in the services sector and in general administration, where what is of main importance, apart, perhaps, from basic standards of literacy and numeracy, is simply an individual's demonstrated capacity to do well the work that is involved; formal qualifications are



of far less relevance in assuring competency, and a demand for them may amount to no more than a credentialist restriction on access.<sup>10</sup>

To return to the point we made at the end of Chapter 7, we would therefore see advantage in at least as strong a concern being shown with employers' internal promotion policies as with their recruitment policies. Employers could be encouraged, or indeed required, to have programmes in place that would help to establish that they are in fact exploiting to the full the human resources that are available in their existing workforces: that is, by providing detailed information on the promotion opportunities open to employees at all levels, ensuring that inappropriate qualifications barriers are not imposed, and, where potentially successful candidates could benefit from it, providing in-house preparatory training. In short, the credentialist 'closure' of positions should be minimised. Any improvement in the chances of upward worklife mobility for able individuals from disadvantaged social origins that followed from such initiatives could well entail worsening chances for less able individuals from more advantaged origins with perhaps higher levels of formal qualification. That is to say, a zero-sum game would, all else being equal, again be in operation. But, as well as this being less apparent than in the case of attempts at increasing equality of mobility chances through educational policy, there would in any event be fewer possibilities for countervailing action.

Finally, though, whatever might be achieved through seeking to remove credentialist barriers, and indeed whatever possibilities for further policy interventions might exist under different political conditions, we would still wish to return to our argument that some limit must exist on the extent to which inequalities in relative mobility chances can be reduced in societies with a capitalist market economy, a nuclear family system and a liberal democratic polity. Within capitalist market economies, wide inequalities in incomes and in economic conditions more generally are inevitably produced – individuals in different class positions live in the different economic worlds that we

<sup>10</sup> It could in this connection be thought generally encouraging that according to a recent OECD report the UK, along with Sweden, is distinctive in that variation in years of education, which could be taken as a proxy for qualifications, has no greater impact on differences in earnings than variation in literacy proficiency, whereas in most other countries the impact of the former variation is significantly greater than that of the latter (OECD, 2017: fig. 2.5).

referred to in Chapter 1. Within nuclear families there is a natural tendency for one generation to seek to pass on to the next such economic and wider social advantages as it may have gained – parents want 'to do the best they can' for their children, using whatever resources they have available for the purpose. And within liberal democratic polities any proposed interventions that aim at modifying these essentially inegalitarian processes must, as well as winning political support, electoral and otherwise, be consistent with recognised individual rights. If, then, as we have also argued, Britain is, along with a number of other societies, approaching the limit in question, how further might it be possible to go in equalising relative mobility rates, even supposing policies more radical than those that have been so far pursued?

Through measures of the kind we have previously referred to aimed at restricting the 'commodification of opportunity', within the educational system especially, some check could certainly be placed on the ability of better-off parents simply to buy advantage for their children or at all events this could be made a good deal more expensive; and more general redistributive policies would evidently help to 'level the playing field' so far as the provision of the material conditions conducive to educationally effective parenting is concerned. Insofar as any reduction thus achieved in educational inequalities was reflected in the labour market, some further equalisation of relative mobility chances could then be expected to follow.

However, it has to be recognised that while in these ways the effects of economic inequalities among families might be mitigated, the effects of inequalities in social and cultural and what we have referred to as specifically educational resources need be little changed. And, as is now well established, and as we have at various points illustrated, these latter inequalities are also strongly, and perhaps increasingly strongly, associated with children's attainments in the educational system – and subsequently. Inequalities of the kind in question have then to be recognised as in some large part lying beyond political reach. To take what have become the paradigm cases in this regard, parents who read their children bedtime stories or engage with them in 'supper table debates' give them clear developmental advantages. But to prevent parents from doing these things would be neither feasible nor in any event desirable. The crucial fact that has to be faced is that many activities that could be regarded as *constitutive of family life* serve in



themselves to create significant inequalities of opportunity among children from their early years onwards, and in turn play an important part in maintaining intergenerational immobility.<sup>11</sup>

What our argument amounts to is then that, given its established economic, familial and political institutions, *some* degree of inequality in relative mobility chances, and quite possibly at the extremes of a marked degree, has to be accepted as an integral and persisting feature of British society: that is, as following directly from the existence of the institutions in question – which may, of course, on other grounds be valued. As philosophers have had occasion to point out, there is rarely ‘lexical ordering’ in sociopolitical values or principles; not all of what might be regarded as ‘good things’ go consistently together.

This being the case, we are led to the conclusion that the primary policy emphasis so far as social mobility is concerned could be most effectively placed on initiatives of the kind earlier discussed that would impact on *absolute* rather than relative rates, and, specifically, through contributing to the upgrading of the class structure. Although industrial strategy and the progressive development of social and public services may well themselves entail political conflict, as regards mobility it is a positive-sum rather than a zero-sum game to which they could be expected to lead: that is, to a situation in which opportunities for upward mobility into more advantaged class positions generally increase, while the risks of downward mobility from such positions decrease – or in other words, to the same situation as prevailed during the golden age. This outcome would not be affected if relative rates remained unchanged, as indeed they did throughout the golden age. And it is in this connection also relevant to note again that what individuals actually *experience* is mobility, or immobility, in the

<sup>11</sup> For a sociologically and philosophically informed discussion of the issues that arise, see Brighouse and Swift (2014). The main attraction of preschool programmes for children from disadvantaged backgrounds lies in the possibility of their ‘compensating’ for their families so far as their educationally relevant development is concerned. There is evidence that such programmes can have some success, and without subsequent ‘wash-out’ effects, *but only* if they are of an intensive and high-quality kind; or, as Gilbert (2017: 103) has put it, if, as in the US Abecedarian project, they provide ‘a substitute family of highly-motivated professional caregivers who work to educate and socialize the children from 7:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. five days a week from infancy through age 5’. For a useful review of the present British situation, see Stewart and Waldfogel (2017).

absolute sense, and that while relative rates are important indicators, for social scientists and for policy makers, of the extent to which inequality of opportunity exists in a society, it is unlikely that they greatly impinge on the consciousness of its lay members.

Moreover, if as a result of class structural change a return could be made to a situation in which upward mobility was again more widely experienced than downward, this would in fact provide the most favourable context for further attempts at reducing inequalities in relative rates. Just as policies aimed at income redistribution are more likely to be politically viable when incomes are generally rising, so policies aimed in effect at redistributing mobility chances may meet with less resistance when the general tendency is for people to move up rather than down. In particular, the fear of downward mobility, which, we have argued, chiefly motivates those in more advantaged class positions to oppose or to seek to circumvent egalitarian reforms, may be expected to be less where individual instances of such mobility are only rarely encountered than where, as in Britain today, they are becoming increasingly frequent and thus far more visible.

The preoccupation with educational policy as the primary means of creating more equal mobility chances has, in the light of all the historical evidence, to be seen as misguided. Educational expansion and reform over the last half-century or more *have* widened opportunity in the sense that more individuals of all social origins alike have been able more fully to realise their academic potential. And it is on making further progress in this regard – on reducing the significant wastage of talent that still occurs – that those who work within the educational system should be required, and allowed, to concentrate, rather than having imposed upon them, under an unduly instrumental view of education, the leading role in overcoming problems of inequality of opportunity in a wider sense, the main sources of which lie in fact outside of educational institutions. Efforts can still be made to deal with these problems, as far as is possible, through other forms of policy – ones that will need to be aimed in one way or another at reducing the effects of inequalities of condition. But insofar as social mobility *per se* is to remain a concern – rather than just a convenient topic for political rhetoric – the main focus should be on policies for economic and social development of a purposive kind. That is, for development directed towards the creation of a technologically and



economically more efficient and also more humane form of society that would lead, through changing demand conditions, to a steadily increasing number of men and women, of all social origins, being able to move into class positions in which they could enjoy economic well-being, security and stability and the prospect of advancement over the course of their working lives.

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