

Richard Breen / Walter Müller (eds.): Education and Intergenerational Social Mobility in Europe and the United States

Reviewed by Veronica Coram

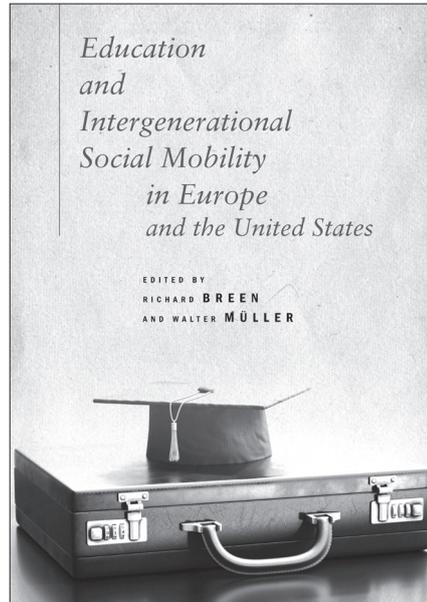
Since the great educational expansion of the 20th century, almost universal across the advanced industrial economies, education has been held out as the golden ticket to opportunity and prosperity for individuals. Educational expansion is implicitly assumed to be accompanied by equalisation of access, meaning there are no longer any barriers to the talented and meritorious, regardless of their class origins, rising through society's ranks and finding their rightful place – or so we are encouraged to think.

In this new volume edited by Richard Breen and Walter Müller, rigorous analysis of empirical data from across eight countries reveals that education's promise to deliver social mobility has become increasingly hollow. That investment in education is yielding diminishing returns for individuals is not a new story. Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) highlighted the way the increasing (and globalising) competition that has come to characterise the graduate job market has created a high-skill, low-wage workforce. More recently, Bessant, Farthing and Watts (2017) have exposed how deeply human capital theory and the commodification of the self are implicated in the neo-liberal project in countries such as the UK, the US and Australia.

Young people are expected to invest enormous resources in crafting themselves as skilled, knowledgeable and networked players in an overcrowded jobs market, but with the spoils increasingly monopolised by a shrinking elite many will find the investment does not pay off. The educational pathway to upward social mobility has been left behind in the industrial age. However, if individuals fall foul of the pervasive stagnation of wages and opportunities, they are held responsible rather than governments being accountable for structural inequalities reinforced by public policy.

What sets *Education and Intergenerational Social Mobility in Europe and the United States* apart from previous, less empirical, discussions is the way the bigger picture emerges from an analysis of large datasets. These data are drawn from a selection of European countries (Sweden, France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain) plus the US. The book is methodologically rigorous, heavily referenced and data-rich, incorporating many detailed tables and graphs.

The volume is structured as a series of eight country chapters, preceded by an introductory chapter from the editors and a chapter which gives Professor Breen some latitude to explore his inter-



est in quantitative methodologies, and followed by a concluding chapter from both editors. Some level of statistical knowledge is helpful in understanding the methodology chapter, which explains the models used throughout the country chapters: notably the odds ratio to measure social fluidity; the unidiff model to show associations between the key variables (origin class, destination class and education) and trends in fluidity; and simulations to triangulate the results.

The country chapters are effectively stand-alone case studies and very little comparative analysis is undertaken until the concluding chapter. The book's structure is somewhat fragmented as a result, but several factors mitigate this and ensure the volume works as a cohesive whole. One is the effort put into maintaining a high degree of consistency in the datasets and methodological approaches used across the country chapters.

Another is the common themes that emerge repeatedly in a way that feels organic and driven by the data, rather than the data being selectively deployed to fit interpretations or frames imposed from the top down. Finally, the concluding chapter integrates the common themes very effectively and helps the reader put the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle together. The US chapter is something of an afterthought (though strategically placed as the first country chapter) and feels like a concession to the American market. Little is made of differences or similarities between the US data and the findings from the other countries, making the US chapter seem unnecessary in a volume that is clearly focused on (Western) Europe rather than taking a global perspective. The European focus does not detract from the book's broader relevance. While there are plenty of idiosyncrasies in the individual countries' educational systems and the ways they experienced the structural economic changes of last century, the cases of exceptionalism serve largely to prove the rules.

Breen and Müller set themselves and their contributors a mammoth task and almost bite off more than any of us can really chew. They set out to assess whether social mobility (the difference between a person's class origin and their class destination) and social fluidity (relative mobility) increased during the 20th century, and if social fluidity is associated with educational expansion and/or equalisation. However, there are other relationships in play: class origins affect destinations directly (not just through the filter of education) and, because origins affect education, it is not clear how much of education's effect on destinations derives from education alone.

Further complications arise as social mobility, social fluidity and educational norms shift over time. The conditions prevailing when people are young adults will have a lasting effect on them. Older cohorts who are already comfortably ensconced in the labour market will be less affected by changes in education or social fluidity than young cohorts who are yet to settle.

Breen and Müller note that they aim to describe rather than explain, but there is an assumption implicitly being tested here: the dogma that educational expansion drives upward social mobility. The average level of education attained by young people increased massively across most of the industrialised world in the 20th century, though it must be noted that educational expansion is not the same as educational equalisation. Educational expansion may enhance the access of the higher classes to education much more than the lower classes, in which case expansion will help to reinforce rather than ameliorate class differences. In practice, educational expansion has tended to be accompanied by some degree of equalisation.

The data presented in this volume suggest that educational expansion is in fact associated with upward social mobility – but, critically, only under certain conditions and up to a point. Once that tipping point is reached, further educational expansion is associated with *downward* social mobility. The likelihood of children being worse off than their parents increases.

This is because when upward social mobility has been occurring for a while, more young people will have class origins at a higher level. Regardless of the levels of education they attain, there is nowhere for many of them to go except down unless the occupational structure in place continues to shift upwards. Under a stagnant occupational structure, mobility is a zero-sum game: anyone who does achieve upward mobility will be displacing someone with a higher origin class into downward mobility. As Breen and Jan Jonsson note in the Sweden chapter, “mobility is shaped by the available positions in the class structure.” Educational expansion has continued while the shifting up of the occupational structure has stalled in most advanced industrial societies, so upward social mobility is limited despite high levels of educational attainment. On this reading, educational expansion and equalisation may facilitate upward social mobility but they do not drive it. Rather, both educational expansion and upward mobility have been driven by a third factor, the upgrading of the occupational structure in mid-20th-century industrialised societies. Educational expansion has been necessary to feed the growing service class thereby produced.

If the upgrading of the occupational structure stops, so does overall upward mobility, regardless of whether educational expansion continues or not. Higher average educational attainment in a society does not magically generate the jobs to match, though educational equalisation may go some way towards influencing who secures the high-quality jobs that *are* available. Under these circumstances there may be fluidity as the link between origin and destination class continues to weaken, but the more lower-level people who rise up into the higher levels, the more higher-level people will be pushed down into the lower levels.

This raises the question of whether post-industrial societies still require high (or increasing) levels of educational attainment. There is something very perverse about demanding that young people invest more heavily in their own human capital than is required to meet society’s need for educated labour, especially in countries

with high education costs and limited public subsidisation of university fees. The tertiary education that once used to be an almost guaranteed ticket to upward mobility is now required merely to tread water: necessary to have any hope of maintaining one’s origin class but less and less likely to permit upward mobility.

On the evidence presented in this book, the trajectory of modernisation plays out with sufficient inexorability to satisfy the most unfashionably teleological social scientist in search of a grand unified theory. Manufacturing grows as the agricultural sector contracts, then education expands massively to feed a burgeoning service class, which draws increasing numbers of women into the workforce. There are abundant opportunities for upward social mobility, especially for women. Society becomes increasingly open and prosperous, with benefits for all. And then, when it has barely begun, the party is suddenly over.

For the sake of simplicity, let’s say the clock strikes midnight in the early 1970s for advanced industrial democracies. Manufacturing contracts sharply, economic shocks become global, productivity growth slows, gains become more concentrated among an elite rentier class, labour markets restructure and jobs are increasingly precarious. There are many more highly-educated graduates than there are good-quality jobs and opportunities for upward social mobility diminish. The party might burst back to life for brief periods, notably in the dying days of the 20th century in the US and some other countries, but the overall trend is clear. The rewards of industrialisation are not reaped indefinitely.

This is reflected in one of the key overall findings in this volume: across the European countries, men’s social mobility remained stable or increased for cohorts born before the mid-1950s but declined for cohorts born thereafter (in the US it remained stable). In most countries, the risks of downward mobility remained constant or declined for men born before the mid-50s but increased for men born after. It was not only in France that the three decades following the Second World War proved to be an unrepeatably “les trente glorieuses”, delivering economic rewards to the cohorts born in the 1920s to 1950s that have dried up for those born since.

This is not to say there aren’t interesting variations on the theme highlighted in the country chapters of *Education and Intergenerational Social Mobility*. For example, the highly-stratified educational systems in Germany and Switzerland, in which students are early on directed down either an academic or vocationally oriented pathway, have tended to tamp down the educational equalisation–social mobility link compared to some other countries. Italy lags behind other developed nations in terms of tertiary education expansion and equalisation, and also experienced a more limited expansion of service-class positions during the 20th century, both of which have contributed to relatively low levels of fluidity and stronger links between origin and destination class. Spain is something of an anomaly amongst the European countries in the timing of its economic transitions, with the Civil War and Franco years delaying development in some respects.

A strength of the book is its foregrounding of the different experiences of women during the 20th century. Women have generally benefited more than men from the expansion of education and upward social mobility, and education is more strongly associated with mobility for women, though of course increases in education and upward mobility for women were coming off a low base. For example, in the chapter on France we find that women have

experienced a 42% increase in social fluidity since the 1935–44 birth cohort, while for men the increase ranged from 19 to 26%. The data for women is not as extensive as that for men. This is largely because only women in the labour force are included, and particularly in the older cohorts this comprises a smaller proportion of the female than male population. Female workforce participation also tends to fluctuate over time and between countries more than male participation. Notwithstanding these factors, the editors conclude that “the same trend towards an opening and closing of opportunities to enter the service class that we saw among men is also evident for women”. The main difference is that for women, upward mobility tended to persist a little longer than for men, with the tipping point occurring after the 1955–64 birth cohort, while for men it was after the 1945–54 cohort.

For much of this book, it is difficult to see the forest for the trees. One of the main strengths of the volume is also a weakness: the exhaustive analysis of large quantitative datasets make this one for scholars, and scholars with methodological interests at that, rather than for a general audience. However, the final pages of the concluding chapter are redolent with insight emerging from the data analysis, painting a compelling picture of the decline of opportunity since the post-war boom. The editors conclude that “perhaps our most striking finding is the sharp contrast between the fortunes of people before and after the 1950s”, and it is here that the deep relevance of the book for intergenerational justice becomes evident. The editors acknowledge that intergenerational mobility must be considered from a long-term perspective as any generalisations from snapshot data will not show what is really happening, and the volume reflects this with its inclusion of cohorts born from the 1920s to the early 1970s. Younger cohorts are generally not included because at the time the class data were collected they were under 40 and had not necessarily yet reached their final class destinations. However, some analysis of how the observed trends in social mobility and fluidity are likely to be affecting younger cohorts would have been a welcome addition to the book and enhanced its contemporary relevance. A more critical discussion of issues associated with measuring class by occupational category (as per the Erikson-Goldthorpe schema used for most of the

country analyses) would also have been useful given how much importance is attached to the class datasets.

It must be recognised that the wave of structural change in advanced industrial democracies which benefited people born before the 1960s, lifting so many into positions of greater prosperity, is over. Further expansion and equalisation of education may have many benefits, but it is not going to give today’s young people the same opportunities in life and work that their parents and grandparents enjoyed. As the editors of *Education and Intergenerational Social Mobility* note, this is of particular concern in countries such as the US, the UK and Australia which have more substantial income and wealth inequalities than most European nations, and where the impact of downward mobility is therefore especially damaging. The most important contribution of this volume is to show that expanding and equalising education cannot be used to justify excessively unequal distributions of opportunity and resources: equality of opportunity (even if it actually exists) does not legitimate inequality of outcomes. The book also offers a timely reminder that we remain hostages to the fortunes of history as the life chances of a generation of young people are reshaped by their coming of age during a global pandemic and being disproportionately affected by the economic fallout. If older cohorts are better off than younger ones it has a lot more to do with having been born at an opportune time than studying or working harder.

Breen, Richard / Müller, Walter (eds.) (2020): Education and Intergenerational Social Mobility in Europe and the United States. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. 360 pages. ISBN: 9781503610163. Price £60.

References

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