

One Direction Social Mobility

Government and the media are pretty obsessed with *social mobility* as long as it flows in a supposedly upward, virtuous trajectory. We don't mean those shiny-boy pop superstars *One Direction*, though their success rather illustrates the current-age vogue for aiming at fame, individualism and upward mobility. The accepted social mobility narrative seems to be something like this. Firstly, more people need to leave their social class and climb *upwards and outward* – that is to get out of their current, less affluent or under-privileged social class. Secondly, the way to do this is through lots of high-grade GCSE's and a university education.

Both premises need questioning as does a dysfunctional view of social class and social progress that lies beneath. Social mobility policy is torturing and confining people, especially the young, and perpetuating the modern myth of 'good austerity'. Social mobility detaches us from any idea of equity and fairness. Politicians of right and left plus sections of the commentariat unquestioningly accept social division via 'good' social mobility policies. Education, social policy and 'welfare' – it's not called income maintenance or social insurance in the UK – can, in the minds of the political class at least, be neatly divvied up between helping the *strivers* and punishing the *skivers*.

Upward only social mobility has long since been an illusory idea and now the doyen of social mobility Professor John Goldthorpe is warning us about the ever growing class of young people falling downwards. The children of the 50s, 60s and 70s upwardly mobile faced less job competition. People of 'high status social origin' as Goldthorpe puts it cannot stay in their better-off social class any longer as international and home competition for their jobs increases and the long-run affects of austerity policy and economic depression silts up job-creation and investment in innovation. The room at the top is smaller and people's kids are falling out of it!

The social mobility idea relies on clear social strata – it must do otherwise how would we know what group we were escaping from or mobilising ourselves towards? One such stratum is the new *EMPTIES* - employed, poor and tied to insecure work and shelter. If you are not an EMPTIE then you know people who are. Of course we won't know EMPTIES socially very well; no surprise here as they can't afford a social life. We see them in wage deflated service jobs and on Facebook as that is the only place they can afford to socialise.

Social mobility, in its current form, says that it is ok for the over-worked and flat-broke working poor to be left poor whilst the happy few who are mobile can leave them to their penury. Shamelessly in the UK we subsidise bad employers so effectively that for the first time the working poor now outnumber the non-working poor. The cost to the exchequer is £4billion plus in low-waged subsidies through housing benefit and tax credits. We have over 5 million workers who earn below the Living Wage – that is a paltry £7.85 with the legal minimum wage a mere £6.50 for the over 21s. Just above them are millions more on survival wages well below the levels needed to thrive and flourish in life. Those who aim to leave the poorer classes, especially the young who have no track-record, do so taking a lot more risk and chancing more uncertain pay-offs than was once the case. Job insecurity, graduate debt, and frozen worker-earnings levels present a tough prospect.

These people, alongside the working poor, need action to protect them and help the essential service economy to be a thriving social economy rather than a 21st century workhouse. A big lift in the minimum wage would be a start above the modest and survivalist £7.85 recommended by the Living Wage Foundation. All credit to the Living Wage Foundation's Archbishop Sentamu and John Cridland at the CBI who have got the cost-of-living and profound inequality on the campaign agenda in the run up to the 2015 election and have doubled employer sign-up to the living wage to 1000. Strategic investment by government in innovating particular industries along the lines of successful economic strategy in Northern Europe and South Asia would also be a plus, instead of the constant favour given to the failed banks and financial services industries. After all these are secondary support industries not primary producers.

Diverting some funding from the inflated and less productive degree sector, and towards flexible, post-16 training, learning and support would also make a difference. A decent 'youth fund' could diversify post-16 learning and make it more appropriate to needs, wants and interests. The higher education quasi-market is telling policy-makers that this is the need, as confidence in many degrees and even in the degree brand is suffering. This was going to happen anyway as government after government erected huge entry barriers to work with the blunt instrument of degree status as the gold standard for a career. This filters down the qualification chain creating more and more *qualification-inflation* where the novice needs more and more qualification for the same job. Forget the nonsense about grade inflation – qualification inflation is wasting huge resources for little return. Do we really need a degree to be a

marketing assistant or to work in a sport club? Worse still, with all this qualification inflation, we still have employers complaining about young people with poor basic communication and co-operation skills.

Many young people will not waste large sums of cash and debt on risky and unproven higher education. They know that, for instance, 4 years of business study is not needed to work in a call centre or to sell financial services and this 4 years can be a very pricey distraction from things more fulfilling, cost savvy and, dare I say it, fun.

In any case many builders, plumbers and call centre workers are better off than lots of graduates, hence the current government and its Conservative, Labour or Coalition successors will be committed to investment in apprenticeships, and thus hopefully quelling the perverse desire for constant and excessive graduatisation of everything from degree-only nursing (that was a mistake) and administration jobs to graduate entry barriers in leisure industries, building, the media and uniformed services. This would be a long awaited turn away from the folly of arbitrary 50% graduate targets.

Social mobility, as it is deployed as an idea at the minute, implies that the mobile few escape to a 'good class'; a virtuous middle class defined by graduate status and professional work. Behind the progressive facade of the idea of upward social mobility is an old-school class consciousness – grammar school progression and secondary modern school office fodder (it used to be 'factory fodder' when the UK made things).

Of course the middle class can't be defined by good owner-occupied housing, nice pensions and careers anymore as these cherished shibboleths no longer apply. The baby-boomers who shout the loudest about the virtues of upward social mobility have wrecked the old comforts of middle-class life and blown all the winnings making all of us less secure and ever more likely to be in the insecure, world mono-class of city-dwelling *EMPTIES*.

Culturally many late flowering baby-boomers very much enjoyed a version of social mobility that mobilised many of us all to be less class-divided. Doing everything we could to leave some of the old mores of the late 20th century middle class was a blessed relief. Stuffy conservative suburban values were ditched in favour of freedom to work at what we wanted, advance careers, travel, enjoy life's own university and try things out. Heady days! Lots of us also wanted to celebrate soul music, punk, football and beer all marvellous

working class pursuits of the day that are now the pursuits of the new 2010s mono-class. Many of us could avoid *working for the rat race* and indulge our *imagination* and enjoy *temptation* at least for a while. Sorry we are on 1980s song titles now for the uninitiated!

Why are old (ish) middle-class people who enjoyed some choice and freedom in the 1960,70s and early 80s the very same people who are now constraining and pressurising young people in to limited pathways, potentially high-loss education and fallacious life-choices. One can only assume that it is because they have been forced to swallow the bitter pill of the intellectually dumb austerity model that is making insecure slaves of us all. Should we all swallow the CON-DEM coalition's austerity pill and all be parsimonious and individualistic and forget generosity and the chance to flourish in our own way!

Well no – let's not. Let instead question the illusions of social mobility and allow young people to discover their talents, loves and ambitions in a whole variety of ways and try and reduce the hideous burden of stress that our education system places upon them. Even the delightful Oscar on *Educating the East End* gets the stick treatment when the Assistant Head Teacher observes that he 'could do anything' (yes, clearly, thanks teach) and 'I hope he realises this in time' (sadly an all too typical passive-aggressive threat from a supposedly caring adult). Along the road from this school in Walthamstow is the truly remarkable east-end Borough of Tower Hamlets that manages to get better GCSE results than West Sussex or Brighton and Hove, above the national average despite being one of the two most deprived districts in the country.

However pushing young people too hard is hurting and it isn't working – clearly this is so, as the incidence of stress-related illness and mental illness has rocketed amongst younger people. NICE calculates that 1 in 8 children over 11 have a clinically diagnosed mental disorder and this excludes a middling rump of stressed out school students learning anxious habits but resilient enough to not go completely off the rails (yet) though they are more often binge-drinking and skunk-smoking to relieve their stress than were the generation before them. So back off baby-boomers and let us all re-think austerity, re-discover equity and equality, invest properly in the young and free ourselves from the burdens of torturing teenagers. They will flourish when they are ready and they are getting pretty wised-up to the folly of their elders.

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NOTES:

- 1) John Cridland CBE director said to the Living Wage Commission in 2014 there are “still far too many people stuck in minimum wage jobs without routes to progression...and that’s a serious challenge that business and government might address”
- 2) The number of people paid below a living wage rose by 400,000 in 2013
- 3) Food costs are now 44% more than in 2005
- 4) Children of poor parents are less likely to achieve at school. As an aside Tower Hamlets has bucked this trend as has much of London.
- 5) In Tower Hamlets amazingly GCSE performance is 64.7% + inner London is 63.1% on educational attainment amidst (in TH’s case) desperate poverty and deprivation and low educational attainment amongst older generations
- 6) Housing prices have tripled since 1997
- 7) Low pay costs the tax payer £3.6 to £6 billion
- 8) Productivity growth and median pay began to decouple in the 1980s and median hourly earnings have failed to keep pace with the average value of output that workers produce
- 9) Two-thirds of children in poverty live in a household where an adults works; and three-quarters of these are households where an adult works full time
- 10) The Resolution Foundation tracked low paid workers from 2002-2012 and found that only 18% had escaped low pay by 2012. 1.3 million employees remained stuck in low pay for the subsequent decade, and a further 2.2 million workers held higher paid jobs but returned to low paid jobs by the end of the decade
- 11) Professor John Goldthorpe above was interviewed on Today, Radio 4, 6th November 2014
- 12) Possible additions to develop:
‘There are many big bonuses to the fact that more inclusive grey collar jobs have replaced the white-collar/blue-collar divide’.
‘Now poor east-end kids are outperforming better off kids in Brighton Reading and Hampshire doing better in their GCSE’s.....’ ‘yet Tower Hamlets remains enduringly poor in spite of its academically achieving daughters and sons. They cant do anything about hopelessly flawed economic policy that deprives the m of job opportunities.