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Social Mobility: Lift Going Up, Doors Closing. Going Down, Doors Wide Open; Any Volunteers?

Ken Roberts, University of Liverpool

It is rare for Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee and Prime Minister David Cameron to agree, but this has happened. They agree that social mobility has slowed down, the class structure is solidifying, and that something should be done. Everyone outside sociology seems to be on their side. Former Prime Minister John Major [prompted](#) Cameron to join the bandwagon. Former New Labour minister Alan Milburn was already [investigating 'the problem'](#) for the Tory-led coalition. Only sociologists are out of step, but this is not unaccustomed.

Sociologists have been measuring social mobility since the 1940s. The measurements are quite complicated. They calculate the strength of bonds between social origins and destinations. How advantageous is it to be born near the top? How strong is the drawback for children born at the bottom? We have data on mobility rates for people born from the late-19th century onwards (they were still alive when the first social mobility surveys were done in the 1940s). Since then the evidence has been consistent: static social mobility. This made sociologists out-of-step throughout the decades when everyone else seemed to agree that the class structure was loosening as a result of successive educational reforms.

Sociologists are not proclaiming any recent change. It is politicians (the entire political class) backed by the media who have changed their minds and we can date the change precisely. It was 2002 when what might have been another obscure academic research paper reported a decline in mobility between children born in 1958 and those born in 1970. This research grouped the subjects (when adults) and their parents into income quartiles [1]. Evidence from the same cohorts when the subjects and parents were grouped more conventionally in mobility research, that is, into occupational classes, found no change between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts.

No research, dividing samples into income groups or occupational classes, has observed any change in cohorts born since the 1970s. We need to be cautious. It is still too early to measure rates of social mobility among cohorts born since the 1980s. Measurement needs to wait until a cohort has reached career maturity, when they are at least 35 and preferably 40. Earlier indicators tend to be deceptive. Reduced or wider social class differences in attainment during primary and secondary schooling are easily compensated later on.

What needs to be explained, then, is not a decline in social mobility but the near unanimity and panic outside sociology that the class structure is freezing. It seems that a panic was there, pent up, waiting to be unleashed in 2002 given the flimsiest of evidence. For clues, we should look at the changing shape of the class structure itself.

Structural change

From the inter-war years until the 1980s, the proportion of jobs in the middle class, that is, in professional and management occupations, grew steadily from around 15% to 40%. This

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was at the expense of working class jobs that were being lost to technology then, from the 1970s, to de-industrialisation. Expansion created room in the middle class that could be filled only by recruitment from beneath. Working class children had improved chances of ascent, and middle class children had better chances of avoiding descent. A net outcome was that in the closing decades of the 20th century over a half of professional and management jobs were filled by the upwardly mobile. This was despite most working class children remaining in the working class, and the superior odds of a middle class child remaining over a working class child ascending remaining unchanged.

This earlier pattern of structural change ended in the 1980s. Middle class jobs have continued to grow in number but at a reduced pace, and this has been at the expense of 'middling jobs'. Skilled manual jobs have been lost during de-industrialisation. Office jobs have been lost in the digital revolution. Meanwhile, new low-skilled and low-paid jobs have been created in coffee bars, retail, distribution, hotels and restaurants. The occupational structure has become hour-glass shaped. The chances of working class children ascending have not declined. Far from it; more of them go to university and enter middle class jobs than ever before. It is the prospects of those who do not ascend (still the majority) that have deteriorated. Their choice is often between poor work and no work.

It is true that middle class families are now supplying growing proportions of university students and entrants into management and the professions. This can create a misleading impression that the class structure is freezing, but it is simply a result of a higher proportion of all children being reared in middle class homes. Private education does not confer any advantages. Any such appearance is due to focusing on a small number of highly selective independent schools. The proportion of politicians who are privately educated is in long-term decline.

If the privately educated dominate the current cabinet, this is because David Cameron has chosen them. There are plenty of state-educated Conservative backbenchers who would love to be promoted. The big change in parliament has been a steep increase in the university-educated to around 90% in 2010, and a corresponding decline (mainly on Labour benches) in the numbers formerly employed in working class jobs. The route from the shop floor via trade union activity then into parliament has all but closed. The trade union UNITE is vilified for trying to prevent this route closing completely.

Middle class families have always done everything within their means to ensure that their children do not slide. Nowadays they try to select 'good' state primary schools, to enrol their children at one of the 160-plus remaining grammar schools in England, or at 'good' comprehensives, failing which they can turn to private education if they can afford it. They appreciate the importance of their children entering 'top' universities. Many are bound to be frustrated. There is simply insufficient room at the top to accommodate the 40% of children who are now from middle class families.

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The income spire

The mobility panic disguises a real underlying problem – glaring and still widening income inequality. Anyone earning £50K a year falls within the top 10% of income tax payers. Many no doubt feel that they are not well off, close to the average, just as many who are objectively poor say that they are ‘not too badly off’ because they know people who are worse off than themselves. Within the top 10% there is a long tapering spire. You need to earn over £140K to make the top 1%, and within the top 1% incomes rise into the £millions. The occupational structure is hour-glass shaped but income distribution is pear-shaped. By age 30 around 50% of young British adults now hold a degree level qualification. In the future most will carry considerable student debt which will increase their marginal tax rate by 9%. No doubt they will feel that they need and, indeed, are entitled to opportunities to enter the income spire, but advanced maths are unnecessary to see that 50% of the population cannot fit into 10% of all jobs.

Middle class families are experiencing a new vulnerability. Before the Second World War they could feel assured that their children were on track by enrolling them in secondary schools either on free scholarship places, paying subsidised fees, or full cost fees. After 1944 it was grammar school or pay. Then, following the spread of comprehensive secondary schooling, it was admission to university that guaranteed sound career prospects. Today, even if a young person goes to a ‘top’ university and graduates with a first or 2.1, unless the qualification is in medicine, dentistry or veterinary science, they can expect to start their working lives in the ‘squeezed middle’. They have earned only the right to compete with equally qualified peers to go higher.

Advocates of more mobility reach for their favourite measures. Polly Toynbee would re-boot Sure Start. Others want more grammar schools and state-funded places at independents. The wackiest idea must be widening access to internships. David Cameron repeats the case for boosting aspiration, but the fact is that there is already an excess of aspiration. A more fluid society would mean more downward mobility. Where are the volunteers? Getting more working class and state-educated students into Oxbridge may be good politics, and it may work, but it will have absolutely no effect on the life chances of 99% of working class young people.

There is no chance of repeating the mid-20th century expansion of higher-level jobs. More jobs may have ‘executive’ or ‘manager’ in the title, but they will be wedged within the squeezed middle.

The disappearing palliative

The era when we could rely on economic growth to raise everyone’s living standards has ended. It is no longer possible for everyone to rise. Pathetic growth is the new normal in countries such as Britain. Investment and higher growth rates are now in the emerging market economies. Richer countries face sustained rising prices for imported commodities which include food and energy. They also face rising costs of pensions and health care for ageing populations. So people have more need to move up. The middle classes are anxious

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to get into the income spire, but in practice their children are more likely to experience inter-generational descent. Rather than engines of upward mobility, universities are now offering (expensive) parachutes to cushion descent.

More equal societies have slightly higher rates of social mobility [2]. Advantages and disadvantages are lessened. Also, there will be less desperation to ascend and less fear of descent. However, I imagine that focus groups show that there will be more votes in 2015 in promising to boost mobility (just the upward type). Everyone can feel that they will benefit. There would be losers if mobility really was boosted. If, predictably, nothing changes, then there are no losers.

References:

[1] Blanden J, Goodman A, Gregg P and Machin S (2002), Changes in intergenerational mobility in Britain, Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics, London.

[2] Wilkinson R and Pickett K (2009), The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better, Allen Lane, London

Ken Roberts is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Liverpool. His books include Key Concepts in Sociology (2009), Youth in Transition: Eastern Europe and the West (2009), Class in Contemporary Britain (2011), and Sociology: An Introduction (2012).