Adam Swift

Social mobility has something to do with society and something to do with movement. It refers to changes of position in social – rather than, say, geographical – space. Intergenerational social mobility concerns changes between parents and children. After that, things get controversial. Most sociologists would agree that the issue is movement within, rather than movement of, society. Suppose everybody's real income doubles: everyone is better off, 'society' has moved forwards. No sociologist thinks that tells us anything about mobility, though some economists do. Among them is Stephen Machin, whose *Social Mobility and Its Enemies* (co-authored with Lee Elliot Major) likens absolute social mobility to a caravan progressing across a desert. But that's confusing: higher levels of social mobility may be a means to faster growth, but mobility and prosperity are best kept distinct.

There are deeper disagreements over how to understand and measure the 'social positions' that people are – or aren't – moving between. All mobility research is interested in the association between origins and destinations, and in the mechanisms generating that association, but there are different ways of defining those origins and destinations. Some researchers divide people into discrete social classes based on their occupations, then look at the probabilities of moving from one class to another. Others look at people's places in the distribution of a continuous variable, such as income, then work out, for example, how many make it from the bottom to the top quartile. Debate between these two camps has always been lively, as have disputes, among advocates of class analysis, about how best to construct a class scheme.

These disputes took on a new significance in 2005 when a report on income mobility, co-authored by Machin, made the news. Not only was the UK alongside the US at the bottom of international league tables but things were getting worse. Comparing cohorts born just 12 years apart – in 1958 and 1970 – the study found a sharp increase in the association between parents' and children's income. Responding to the increasingly prevalent view that Britain had a serious mobility problem, David Cameron's coalition government rebranded Labour's Child Poverty Commission as the Social Mobility Commission, with Alan Milburn as its head. Milburn gave a lot of attention to recruitment to elite positions – his flagship report was on fair access to the professions – but the commission's analyses and recommendations as a whole were much more extensive, including work on low pay and access to housing. No wonder the government took no notice. In 2017, Milburn and the commission's few remaining members resigned en masse, citing lack of progress.

THE SOCIOLOGIST John Goldthorpe has spent almost fifty years developing and championing his version of the class analysis approach. It has become the international norm in sociological research and is the basis of the categorisation used by the UK's Office for National Statistics. Jobs are characterised according to their employment relations. Employers, the self-employed and employees are differentiated, with the last (and much the largest) group subdivided according to contractual status. Zero-hours contracts are an extreme case of the commodification of labour already implicit in working for a wage; salaried professionals and managers are in a 'service relationship' which typically gives them more security and better prospects. Find out someone's occupation and their parents' occupations when they were young, and you know whether they have been mobile between social classes and, if so, in what direction. Up, down or sideways? (Some classes are not hierarchically ordered. The child of a garage owner who becomes a library assistant has gone from Class 4 to Class 3, but that's a horizontal shift.) Do that for lots of people and you can work out mobility rates and discover patterns. Do it for people born at different times, or in different countries, and you uncover variations in those rates and patterns. Add in more information about, say, educational qualifications or cognitive ability, and you get a handle on the processes generating these variations.

Erzsébet Bukodi and Goldthorpe's *Social Mobility and Education in Britain* tells a very different story from the conventional wisdom rehearsed in Major and Machin's chatty Pelican book. Elegantly organising many years of empirical research, it shows that the UK should be placed mid-table in the international rankings of social mobility, and that there has been no reduction during the postwar period. Their dissenting account derives mainly from their distinctive way of understanding what social mobility is. They pull no punches in their critique of income mobility research in general, and of the 2005 study in particular.

Survey respondents can only guess about the income coming into the home when they were children and are less willing to answer questions about income than about jobs. In any case, class position gives a better overall sense of an individual's place in the distribution of advantage: two people may currently be earning the same but their 'social position' will vary greatly depending on whether or not they are stably employed and have a reasonable expectation of career progression. But Bukodi and Goldthorpe are even more scornful of politicians and media commentators, who simply do not understand what they are talking about when they talk about mobility.

Here are three kinds of mobility to consider. A measure of *total* mobility tells us simply how much movement there is, i.e. how many people end up somewhere different from where they started from. The direction of movement is irrelevant; what counts is that they are moving. It's hard to see what would be good about higher rates of social mobility if that meant only that more people were moving down, so those keen on increased mobility are usually thinking about *upward* mobility. What they want is more people moving up and/or fewer people moving down. That isn't a silly thing to want, and sometimes it's what we get. On Bukodi and Goldthorpe's account, the 'Golden Age' of social mobility consisted in the expansion of the 'room at the top' (as per John Braine's 1957 novel): the postwar increase in the proportion of better jobs, which constituted an upgrading of the class structure. As the number of wage-earning working-class positions decreased compared to salaried positions, there was indeed an increase in absolute upward mobility.

The third kind of social mobility, *relative* mobility, is better described as social fluidity or openness. To know how fluid a society is we need to set aside the changing shape of the class structure, and focus instead on movement within that structure. Measures of relative mobility compare the mobility chances of people from different origins, thus telling us about the way chances are distributed. That is what we should be interested in if we care about equality of opportunity. And as far as that is concerned, Bukodi and Goldthorpe show that things are no worse, and no better, than they were in the Golden Age. Compared to those from lower origins, the odds continue to be stacked in favour of the advantaged. What has changed is the balance between upward and downward mobility. Changes in the shape of the class structure mean that, overall, more people are moving down, and fewer are moving up. That's partly because the upgrading of the class structure has slowed down, and partly because the more people there are starting out from higher positions, the more people there are at risk of falling to lower ones.

Politicians are keen on people moving up: they talk as if they are all for removing the obstacles that prevent children from lower origins climbing the social ladder. But they daren't mention those moving down. That's unfortunate, since lack of downward mobility is one of the barriers to upward mobility. (Goldthorpe tells a nice story about a Cabinet Office seminar at

which one of Blair's chief political advisers protested: 'But Tony can't possibly go to the country on a platform of increasing downward mobility!') In the effort to address equality of opportunity, the silence around downward mobility has always been a problem. Given a set of outcomes – of destinations – for which people are, in effect, competing, you don't have to be a rocket scientist, or even a social scientist, to see that the situation is zero-sum: the only way to improve the chances of those whose prospects are worse than average is to reduce the chances of those whose are better than average.

In the postwar period when the structure of class positions – the outcomes that opportunities are opportunities *for* – was improving, this mattered less, or at least the injustice was less apparent. Lots of people were moving up, fewer were moving down, so there was little obvious cause for complaint. Even those who weren't moving up could expect to live better, longer lives than their parents had; the social ladder was really an escalator. So attention was diverted away from the persistently unequal distribution of mobility chances: it wasn't salient how few people from higher origins were moving down. Today, for many, the escalator has ground to a halt, or even gone into reverse. To increase upward mobility from here there are only two options: create again more room at the top for people to move into, or weaken the mechanisms by which better-off parents can protect their children from moving down. We need more of the better jobs and/or less hoarding of the opportunities to get them.

Education might seem the way to kill two birds with one stone. By investing in human capital we can build a highly skilled labour force that will bring top-end jobs to the UK. And by expanding the provision of education we can spread to the many opportunities previously available only to the few. (Hence New Labour's target of getting 50 per cent of young people into higher education.) Bukodi and Goldthorpe are scathing on both fronts. As far as increasing the number of good jobs is concerned, newly industrialising countries, especially in Asia, can supply highly skilled labour at lower cost, and in any case the real problem is creating the demand for that labour. Rather than upgrading the class structure, a more qualified workforce increasingly means an overqualified workforce. And when it comes to widening opportunities, what matters isn't people's absolute level of education, which has indeed become less tightly linked to their class origins, but their educational qualifications relative to others. Education is, in large part, a positional good: what counts is one's place in the distribution. Measured that way – the way that employers and parents tend to see it – there has been no change in the association between children's origins and their educational qualifications. Educational expansion has had no impact on more advantaged parents' capacity to secure for their children a higher place in the queue.

Education, which promised to be the solvent that would loosen the class structure, has become an effective means of preserving it. The idea of opening things up by

widening access to education and allocating jobs 'meritocratically' (i.e. on the basis of qualifications) is attractive. But it underestimates the extent to which inequalities between children's class origins are inequalities precisely in parents' capacity to use education to preserve their children's class position – to 'play the education game'. Indeed, the whole idea of accepting inequalities of outcome, whether as desirable or simply as inevitable, and focusing instead on equalising opportunities, neglects the obvious point that parents' outcomes are children's starting-points. Mobility researchers disagree about a lot, but it is common ground that the best way to increase movement between rungs on the ladder is to reduce the distance between them.

As long as the mechanisms by which people end up in social positions are gameable – unlike, say, lotteries – advantaged parents are always going to be well placed to succeed in their aim of protecting their children from downward mobility. That's partly because their advantage consists in possessing relevant resources – such as money, security and time – and partly because they're going to have, and be primed to transfer to their children, whatever characteristics gained them their advantage in the first place. If they're lucky, they may not even need to think or act strategically; the reproduction of social inequality happens automatically, as it were. Unimpeachable intrafamilial interactions with no ulterior motive can be a perfectly efficient means of conferring the prized qualities. Some parents read their children bedtime stories because they want to give them the best start in life. Others confer the same advantages, by the same means, for other reasons.

WHERE Bukodi and Goldthorpe crunch big numbers and emphasise the 'rational choice' mechanisms that generate patterns of social (im)mobility across society as a whole, Friedman and Laurison's *The Class Ceiling*, a largely qualitative study of patterns of recruitment and promotion in elite professions, nicely lays bare the micro-processes, often unconscious, by which privileged backgrounds convert into higher earnings. Given the bigger picture, one can query Friedman and Laurison's preoccupation with relatively small inequalities between those who are doing very well – or, as in the case of actors and people working in TV, have knowingly chosen high-risk jobs in glamorous fields. (Those in elite occupations from working-class origins earn, on average, £6400 less than colleagues from more privileged backgrounds; some of that is explained by different educational credentials, sorting into particular jobs or firms and a London effect.) But their interviews and analyses, and especially their rich discussion of the ways in which embodied cultural capital – the 'self-presentational baggage of a privileged class origin' – is performed as and taken for 'merit', do as much as Annette Lareau's *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) to empirically vindicate Bourdieu's theoretical approach to questions of social reproduction.

Friedman and Laurison are well aware of the familial processes by which origins

affect destinations. They know that people's educational qualifications are strongly influenced by parental resources, and are particularly interesting on their interviewees' reluctance to acknowledge that their ability to take risks, or even to live where they want to work, depend on their access to 'the bank of mum and dad'. (We shouldn't take all talk of risk at face value: those who embark on 'risky' careers with access to family resources are rarely facing anything like the same probabilities of genuinely bad outcomes as those without.) But Friedman and Laurison's most valuable contribution is the light they shed on the more insidious forms of advantage that those from privileged backgrounds bring to the world of work, and the ways in which those forms of advantage are 'recognised' as 'merits' that deserve reward. What counts as 'fitting in' – the qualities needed to form good relationships with clients, the conversational modes available when chatting with colleagues, appropriate forms of dress – varies hugely between different fields. Accountants who want to become partners need qualities different from TV executives who want to become commissioners. *The Class Ceiling* is fun to read partly because it confirms stereotypes about those differences. But it also brings out the common mechanisms behind the variety: homophily, unconscious bias, and indeed stereotyping itself. 'Confidence' is essentially a matter of being au fait with the right moves in the relevant context. And there is in many elite professions a collectively understood self-image that is, in effect, an image of the privileged, so that 'classed performances masquerade as objective "merit".' Thus cultural and social reproduction tend to coincide.

The Class Ceiling is full of interesting angles, such as the suggestion that research should distinguish more systematically between 'technical' and 'embodied' forms of cultural capital. In fields where there are agreed standards of technical expertise – architecture, for example – fitting in and confidence matter less: actually knowing what you're doing counts for more. Class origins make less difference to pay, and those from lower origins feel more comfortable and are less likely to avoid ambitious career trajectories. In other fields, by contrast, what constitutes professional expertise is more up for grabs, leaving plenty of room for embodied cultural capital to plug the uncertainty gap. Here Friedman and Laurison emphasise the importance of the capacity to bullshit or schmooze. I especially enjoyed two moments from the world of TV production. A senior figure defends as relevant to job performance the same ability to engage in highbrow cultural theorising that some of his junior colleagues dismiss as 'pointless intellectual grandstanding'. And a TV commissioner whose professional success depended on learning and deploying the art of cultural mimicry suspects that he has reached his limit, both professionally and socially: 'I don't go to the parties, the clubs, and there's part of me that thinks actually . . . they're all cunts,' he told Friedman and Laurison, and laughed.

FROM the perspective of social justice, social mobility is both important and overrated. It is unjust that children's social origins exert such a strong influence on their destinations but, in austerity Britain, the increasing numbers who grow up in poverty, or who can find only badly paid work on zero-hours contracts, face bigger problems than a lack of opportunity to ascend to a higher class. What really matters, here and now, is the absolute position of those at the bottom, not their chances – let alone their relative chances – of moving up and out. That wouldn't be true if those at the bottom deserved to be there, and those who moved up deserved better lives than them, but – as Hayek and Rawls agree – it's hard to take that view seriously.

The mobility paradigm invites normative confusion between different values. Fairness, on the one hand: similarly able and motivated individuals should face a level playing-field and enjoy equal chances of success (and failure). Efficiency, on the other: it's socially wasteful not to exploit the 'pool of ability', so the right – i.e. the genuinely meritorious – people should reach the right jobs, rather than being kept out of them by the less meritorious from more advantaged origins. Those two ideas are usually seen as complementary, and in various ways all three books slide between them. But why it is any 'fairer' for high-potential, low-origin children to get better jobs or have better lives than low-potential, low-origin children – or low-potential, high-origin children, for that matter? Imagine you're the parent of two children: one sails through school and university and into a good job; the other has learning difficulties and struggles to make ends meet. What's fair about that?

Preoccupation with the class-biased processes by which the wrong people arrive in different social positions can make it seem as if the goal should be simply to replace those processes with genuinely meritocratic ones. That may indeed be a good move, for reasons of efficiency, but it's hard to see how it would achieve anything like fairness. To do that, the distribution of rewards itself would need to be challenged, not simply the ways by which people find their place in the distribution. Mobility researchers risk putting the cart before the horse: inequality between destinations comes into their story as an obstacle to more equal chances of mobility, not as a problem in its own right.

We do very little to prevent well-off parents doing what they can to protect their children from downward mobility or, indeed, to help their children climb as high as they can. We tend to think that's part of a parent's job. Robin Cook's memoir repeats a story told by a journalist to Roy Hattersley. Tony Blair, asked why he had sent his son Euan to the Oratory, despite the inevitable political flak, said: 'Look at Harold Wilson's children.' The journalist demurred: one of Wilson's sons had become a headmaster, the other a university professor. Blair replied that he certainly hoped his children would do better than that. Since we hardly try to block that kind of conscious, strategic engineering, it isn't surprising that we decline to intervene in the more informal, intrafamilial interactions

by which cultural capital is transmitted from parents to children. There are strong 'family values' reasons not to police the telling of bedtime stories, chatting about current affairs, or the sharing of cultural enthusiasms. Although those reasons don't obviously – I'd say they obviously don't – imply a similar freedom when it comes to decisions about schooling, or about many of the other ways in which parents intend to benefit their children, most people take a different view.

Suppose inequalities between top and bottom were less outrageous. Suppose the processes by which people found their place in the distribution of burdens and benefits could be justified. Or if those things seem too much to ask for, suppose simply that positions at the bottom weren't so bad. Then, perhaps, we might condemn parents who seek to bestow unfair advantages on their children. Doubtless, even now, some overdo it, exceeding any plausible prerogative to favour their own. But, given the outcomes to which we collectively acquiesce, and the levels of uncertainty involved, it isn't hard to excuse many of those who – deliberately or otherwise – contribute to current patterns of social mobility. They hoard opportunities; you don't make the rules; I love my children.   □