

LIBERAL REFLECTIONS ON LIFE CHANCES  
AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN EUROPE

*Liberal* reflections  
*on* life chances  
*and* social mobility  
*in* Europe

INGEMUND HÄGG | EDITOR

## PREFACE

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Social mobility is at the forefront of political debate in many European countries. This debate revolves around research based upon concepts of class, or hierarchies of occupation or income, where people move from one researcher-defined group to another. Such research is useful for developing policies that reduce inequality. This perspective is reflected in this book. But it also seeks to add the perspective of the individual's dreams, aspirations and desires – the goal of enabling people to move freely between class or income or other groups. That is, a true liberal perspective.

This collection presents a series of essays from different parts of Europe written by authors from Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. In addition, there are two conceptual essays: one on individuality and social mobility and one on liberalism and life chances. The collection closes with an essay on how insights from social mobility research, in particular from the liberal perspective of the individual, may be used in developing practical policies.

European countries have much in common but also significant differences in their approach to social mobility. The book seeks to tease out insights for developing effective policy and should be of paramount interest for European policymakers and politicians who are concerned with social mobility.

The idea of this book emerged from a seminar, “Life chances in Europe”, funded by the European Parliament and organised by the European Liberal Forum with the support of the Bertil Ohlin Institute in Stockholm in October 2008.

An important inspiration for the book has been the writings of the late Ralf Dahrendorf who developed a theory of, and argued for, individual life chances.

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Each author is solely responsible for her/his contribution.

Stockholm June 2010

INGEMUND HÄGG

*Editor*

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## ABOUT THE EUROPEAN LIBERAL FORUM

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Founded in the fall of 2007, the European Liberal Forum, asbl (ELF) is the non-profit European political foundation of the liberal family. ELF brings together liberal think tanks, political foundations and institutes from around Europe to observe, analyse and contribute to the debate on European public policy issues, as well as the process of European integration. These objectives, it is believed, can be achieved through education, training, research and the promotion of active citizenship within the European Union.

The role of the European Liberal Forum is to host European conferences, seminars, and workshops, issuing publications and conducting studies on policy issues of liberal interest. Of particular interest is the active participation of young European citizens. The ELF is ambitious in informing and involving the public in the construction of a united European democracy.

[www.liberalforum.eu](http://www.liberalforum.eu)

The Bertil Ohlin institute, liberal think tank, was founded in 1993. Bertil Ohlin was leader of the Swedish Liberal Party 1944–1967. In 1977 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics, thus combining a successful career as a political leader and as an eminent scholar.

The purpose of the institute is to initiate research and debate in critical areas of public policy in the tradition of liberal thinking. By building networks of scholars, participants in the public debate and persons from private and public working life, the institute – as a think tank – contributes to broadening the basis for liberal opinion formation and the renewal of liberal thinking. The institute is independent of political parties and interest groups, organisationally as well as financially. The institute is active in the European Liberal Forum and in liberal think tank networks through the Liberal International.

[www.ohlininstitutet.org](http://www.ohlininstitutet.org)

## Social mobility in Europe – evidence and debate<sup>1</sup>

*By Ingemund Hägg*

This book compiles reflections on social mobility in contemporary European societies from a liberal perspective.

Liberals believe that people must have as much power as possible to shape their own lives, so that they can pursue their interests and dreams to the fullest extent. In government, we try to identify and remove obstacles to individual progress.

This leads us to emphasise equality of opportunity over equality of outcome. People are born with and develop different talents; yet they are frequently constrained by their socio-economic background. Through their lives different people presented with similar choices pursue different courses of action. Social mobility is a social tenet of liberalism: people should have the right to move - or not to move - following their dreams, without being constrained by their origins.

Human societies have been ordered in hierarchies throughout history: free men and slaves, the Indian caste system, aristocracy and commoners. During the 20th century, European societies were ordered by class.

The sociological literature on social mobility has shown that social structures to a considerable extent are reproduced from one generation to the next in all societies. This means that positions in society are inherited: the children of profes-

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1. For this chapter I have been able to draw on and use notes by Lennart Arvedson.

sionals tend to become professionals, and manual workers' children go into trades. There are strong social forces working against mobility, even in societies in which everyone is formally at liberty to pursue their own aims. But to what extent is such 'rigidity' or 'stickiness' an expression of free choice – and to what extent are individuals controlled by social circumstance? And who can tell what is what?

### Studies of social mobility

The literature on social mobility has much to offer the student and the policymaker. Studies measure in various ways the movements of individuals over time. There are studies of mobility over the life of individuals (intragenerational mobility) and studies of mobility from father to son (intergenerational mobility). Some focus on class or position while others examine income. In addition there are life course studies (life trajectories) and studies of selected disadvantaged groups like single mothers, children in poverty, and boys in custody.

This literature helps us to discern patterns in the trajectories of peoples' lives in the mess and muddle of complex modern societies, and expose the degree of mobility that groups in varying societies enjoy. Individuals are not isolated atoms but live together in societies with structures and processes involving other individuals with their desires and wishes. The studies deal with how individuals move or do not move in social systems or structures where positions thus are defined by qualities such as class, occupation or income. In these studies, therefore, individuals are identified and categorised by measurable data on income or class. However, other qualities that might be important to the individual are disregarded.

There is a good deal of disagreement about how to define class. The various approaches used in the literature have one basic assumption in common – explicitly or implicitly – individuals in a society can be sorted into a hierarchical

structure. Three structures are most frequently used: social class, occupation and income. A 'higher' class or profession, or more income, is usually considered to be 'better' – more prestigious, or conferring more status – than belonging to a 'lower' class or profession or having less income. Thus, as the sociologist Richard Breen notes: "Inequalities in the social positions occupied by individuals and families are of several types: we can speak of the distribution of income, differences in status and so forth. Class inequalities are widely spoken of, but there is often little agreement about the concept of class, what it refers to and how it should be used."<sup>2</sup> Thus, concerns about social mobility lead inexorably to worries about inequality, and what causes it. But disagreements over precise definitions reign.

Two schemas have traditionally been employed: the 'big-class regime' and 'the gradational regime'. The big-class regime "has inequality taking the form of mutually exclusive and exhaustive classes."<sup>3</sup> Many take the form of adaptations of the so called Goldthorpe schema, named after the British sociologist John Goldthorpe:<sup>4</sup>

- I Higher grade professionals, administrators, and officials, managers of large industrial establishments, large proprietors
- II Lower grade professionals
- IIIa Routine non-manual employees, higher grade (administration and commerce)
- IIIb Routine non-manual employees, lower grade (sales and services)
- IVa Small proprietors, artisans, with employees

2. Breen in Breen (editor), 2004, p. 9.

3. Jonsson et. al., 2009, p. 980.

4. Breen in Breen (editor), 2004, pp. 9–13. Variants of this schema are found under the label EGP (Erikson Goldthorpe Portocarero) class categories.

- IVb Small proprietors, artisans, without employees
- IVc Farmers and smallholders, other self-employed workers in primary production
- V Lower grade technicians, supervisors of manual workers
- VI Skilled manual workers
- VIIa Semi- and unskilled manual workers (not in agriculture)
- VIIb Semi- and unskilled manual workers in agriculture

Mobility studies based on groups of occupations offer more acute detail than broad-brush studies of class mobility. They are also more intuitively valid, since the data used are based on an objective reality – jobs – whereas social class is a subjective label ascribed to categories of individuals in a variety of professions/occupations. In principle, a study of social mobility between occupations would not need to rank them hierarchically. But the grouping of jobs together in *any* way is an act of subjectification. Liberals stress self-determination and individuals as masters over their own identities – including with whom they want to compare. But the fact is that individuals do reflect the widespread perception of societies as hierarchical.

The Goldthorpe schema is a hierarchy, and implies that class I is the highest position and class VIIb the lowest. This hierarchy also correlates with income, wealth and education, even if this correlation is far from perfect. The hierarchy is primarily a practical way of sorting the available statistical data. Richard Breen comments: “By starting from a particular definition of class, sociologists can assess the extent to which such things as inequality in life chances among individuals and families are structured on the basis of class.”<sup>5</sup>

5. Ibid. p. 9.

In the Goldthorpe schema “Jobs or occupations are placed in the same class according to certain criteria, and these criteria are such that there is important variation in the life chances of individuals and their families depending on which class position they occupy.”<sup>6</sup>

Even if sociologists say their class schemas are not hierarchical, they impose an external order, lumping together people into classes, and suggesting that movement ‘down’ the scale is a regress, even when it reflects individual choice.

The gradational regime tries to represent differences in society on a one-dimensional scale, often income or prestige.<sup>7</sup> For example, studies often focus on the top and bottom deciles by income, using these to define ‘rich’ and ‘poor’. In general it is assumed to be in the interest of the individual to move from lower positions to higher ones, even if that might not be the desire and aspiration of all individuals.

Sometimes the regimes are combined, where people are grouped according to their access to a number of resources: health, education, income, or credit. Greater resources or capital implies a higher position in society.

While mobility research is focused on mobility up and down hierarchies, lateral mobility is just as important – since there is a wide range of jobs and professions in many of the classes into which people are sorted. Why should we assume that “making headway” always leads up or down? Post-industrial societies are less hierarchical than the industrial societies which preceded. This change necessitates new ways of describing the groups between which individuals move over time.

The danger is that rigidly adhering to a hierarchical perspective on society seems to constrain the view of what

6. Ibid. p. 9.

7. Jonsson et. al. 2009, p. 979.

makes people tick. For example, the Swedish sociologist Jan Jonsson writes that “In general children want to get as advantageous a class position as possible (a wish that is shared by their parents).”<sup>8</sup> But at the same time he adds in a footnote: “Surprisingly little theoretical interest has been paid to the micro-foundations of social mobility, the study of which is dominated by empirical description and advanced statistical modelling.”<sup>9</sup>

A further step in research has come with the addition of a third regime to the big-class and gradational regimes discussed above. This new research defines a ‘micro-class’ regime, which builds on a more narrow description of occupation than those used to define classes in the big-class regime. The idea is that maybe mobility and immobility can better be identified and grasped between occupations than between broader classes.<sup>10</sup>

Much social mobility research is cohort research and often cross-sectional. That is, at a point of time studying a certain group, for example, those born in a certain year and then repeating the study at a later point of time. This applies to both inter- and intra-generation research. Two common types of mobility used in international research are absolute mobility and social fluidity (relative mobility). *Absolute mobility* refers to mobility between social groups (classes) and is greatly affected by socioeconomic change. The patterns are similar in most western societies which have moved from agriculture to industry and now to services.

*Social fluidity* refers to the probability that individuals in different social groups (classes) end up in other social positions once socio-economic changes have been controlled for and is taken as an indicator of the openness of a society.

8. Jonsson in Breen (editor) 2004, p. 227.

9. Ibid. p. 226.

10. Jonsson et. al. 2009, p. 983.

When the findings for a number of European countries are summarised the authors find a convergence trend in absolute mobility but no convergence in social fluidity.<sup>11</sup> Sweden, Norway, Hungary, Poland, Netherlands are more fluid than Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy and Ireland. And there is a widespread tendency towards greater fluidity – except in Great Britain.

### Social policy debate

The authors of the essays in this collection also reflect on some aspects of social mobility not dealt with in the mainstream research on social mobility, such as longitudinal studies (where individuals are followed over time) and studies focusing upon socio-economic change other than that of up or down hierarchies. We also want to introduce perspectives compatible with liberal views of the individual and contrast the policy implications drawn from these from other political strands.

This book discusses social mobility studies, debate and policy in a small number of European countries. It is not intended to make systematic cross-country comparisons, rather the studies focus on different aspects of social mobility. The chosen studies should give an insight into the diversity of the policy discussions in European countries. The essays or reflections on the chosen countries are therefore different in focus and discussion. They give an idea about what policy instruments are utilised and what kind of evidence policy is based upon. Questions come up about how to define and “measure” poverty, inequality, life chances and, of course, mobility and immobility. The essays also debate how economic programmes, including tax systems, can help or hinder

11. Breen and Luijkx in Breen (editor) 2004, p. 73.

mobility and whether the state can provide real life chances for individuals.

The book is structured as follows. Chapters 2 to 6 are country-level studies from Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. They in general combine a description of the social policy debate in each country with data on social mobility, and offer some policy prescriptions.

Chapter 7 is a discussion of liberalism, individuality and social mobility.

Chapter 8 provides a liberal life chances perspective on social mobility which shows how social mobility could include analysis of individual choice. This is contrasted with the communitarian tendency to focus on equality of outcomes. This chapter aims to provide a basis for liberal policy prescriptions, which are further explored in the concluding chapter 9.

Inequality is the focus of many studies, not least international comparative studies by the OECD and other international organisations. Our “omission” of inequality is deliberate. We want to focus on mobility and life chances and not on distribution. This does not mean that issues of social exclusion and poverty are omitted; such issues are part and parcel of social mobility in a life chances perspective.

We hope that the book will contribute to Europe’s debate on social mobility, and provide a framework for expanding life chances, defined in its broadest sense, for individuals across Europe.

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## Great Britain – from meritocracy to social mobility

*By Alasdair Murray*

The political debate about social mobility has intensified in Britain in the last five years. There is growing concern that an apparent ‘golden age’ for social mobility in the immediate post-war decades has drawn to a close and that people born into the bottom income quartile are finding it increasingly difficult to move up the income ladder.

All three mainstream political parties have since the election of 2005 established commissions or inquiries to consider how to respond to the perceived challenge of declining mobility. In the most recent election of 2010, leaders paid at least lip service to their desire to improve mobility rates. However, there is little consensus about the precise nature of the social mobility problem within the UK or the required policy responses.

### A growing debate

Policymakers and academics have long debated life chances – or social mobility (the terms are used almost interchangeably in the UK although the latter is now more commonly employed). However, it is only in the last decade that British policymakers and politicians have widely begun to talk about social mobility in standard political discourse.

The governing Labour party mentioned the term for the first time in their 2005 election manifesto: “In our third term we will build new ladders of social mobility and advancement on the firm foundations of stability, investment and growth.”<sup>1</sup>

Since then, both the Conservatives in 2006 and the Liberal Democrats in 2008 have established their own taskforces or Commissions to review the issue.

There is a longstanding British political debate around the notion of ‘meritocracy’: the idea that the best qualified person should get the job (although the sociologist Michael Young who coined the phrase had intended it to be satirical). In recent years however, the impact of the huge structural economic changes which took place from 1980s onwards have also become apparent and forced policymakers to re-examine their assumptions about how individuals are able to advance income or class groups.

The UK in the 1980s and 1990s experienced high levels of income inequality, which sparked concerns about the ‘life chances’ of those in poverty – second and even third generations trapped in workless or low paid households. In addition, more than half of pupils leave school without achieving the benchmark standard (five GCSEs, the 16 plus qualification, at A to C including English and maths). This record stands in direct contrast to its highly successful but exclusive private sector, which educates just 7 per cent of the total population and continues to dominate the elite universities.

At the same time, the British left moved away from its traditional focus on achieving equality through state ownership and high taxation rates on the rich towards accommodation with markets and incentives for ‘wealth creators’. The former prime minister Tony Blair famously remarked that he was relaxed about the then growing numbers of super-rich in British society. This has further encouraged the political debate to focus on social mobility rather than older concerns such as equality.

1. Labour Party Manifesto, 2005; p. 15. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/13\\_04\\_05\\_labour\\_manifesto.pdf](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/13_04_05_labour_manifesto.pdf).

This shift was also evident in Labour policy. When it was elected to government in 1997 it had a clear commitment to reducing child and other poverty. But its commitment to arresting the rise in income inequality was less clear cut. While it has had some success in reducing certain forms of poverty, it is certain to have missed its own interim target of reducing child poverty by 50 per cent by 2010.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, its record on reducing inequality, although contested, can be described as patchy at best. The rise in income inequality might have slowed, but wealth inequality has continued to widen (although this may have reversed a little in the current economic downturn). As a result, Britain remains in the bottom quartile of OECD countries for the scale of its income inequality.<sup>3</sup>

The aftermath of the financial crisis has emboldened some on the left of the Labour party to attack the then government’s focus on social mobility in favour of a return to directly targeting greater equality. For example, a pamphlet published by the influential Compass Labour party pressure group recently argued that: “As social mobility is about meritocracy, it offers the narrowest possible definition of fairness. Meritocracy fails to create a more just society because at best it is about removing obstacles from the paths of those who have the energy and luck to be able to make the most of their talents, and at worst it is about social Darwinism, the survival of the fittest and the demise of the rest. Social justice must be about more than simply clearing the way for those who are able and tenacious.”<sup>4</sup>

2. 18/03/1999, speaking at the Beveridge Lecture on social justice: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/298745.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/298745.stm).

3. OECD, ‘Growing Unequal?: Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries – Country Note: United Kingdom’, 2008.

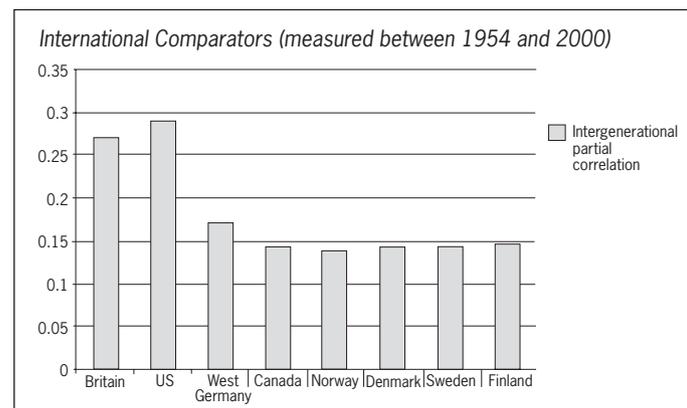
4. R. Hickman, ‘In pursuit of egalitarianism: and why social mobility cannot get us there’. Compass, 2009.

## Social mobility – the evidence

Most of the current British political debate is based on a relatively small body of earlier academic work. In particular, a series of papers by academics Jo Blanden, Paul Gregg and Stephen Machin have been especially influential.<sup>5</sup> Their key findings are:

- 1) That there was a significant decline in the social mobility of those born in 1970 compared to those born in 1958.
- 2) In terms of international comparators – the UK broadly had lower mobility than Nordic countries and Canada, but was similar to the US over this period.

Table 1: International comparison of social mobility rates



A follow-up report in 2007 had even greater political impact.<sup>6</sup> Due to an absence of fresh data on income mobility the report used educational attainment statistics. It found that inequality in degree attainment had increased between 1958 and 1970. In addition the report argued that there was ‘no evidence’ mobility rates had improved subsequently.

5. J. Blanden, P. Gregg and S. Machin, ‘Intergenerational mobility in Europe and North America’, CEPR, 2005.

6. Blanden, P. Gregg and S. Machin, ‘Recent changes in inter-generational mobility in Britain’, Sutton Trust, 2007.

Table 2: Income mobility 1958 and 1970<sup>7</sup>

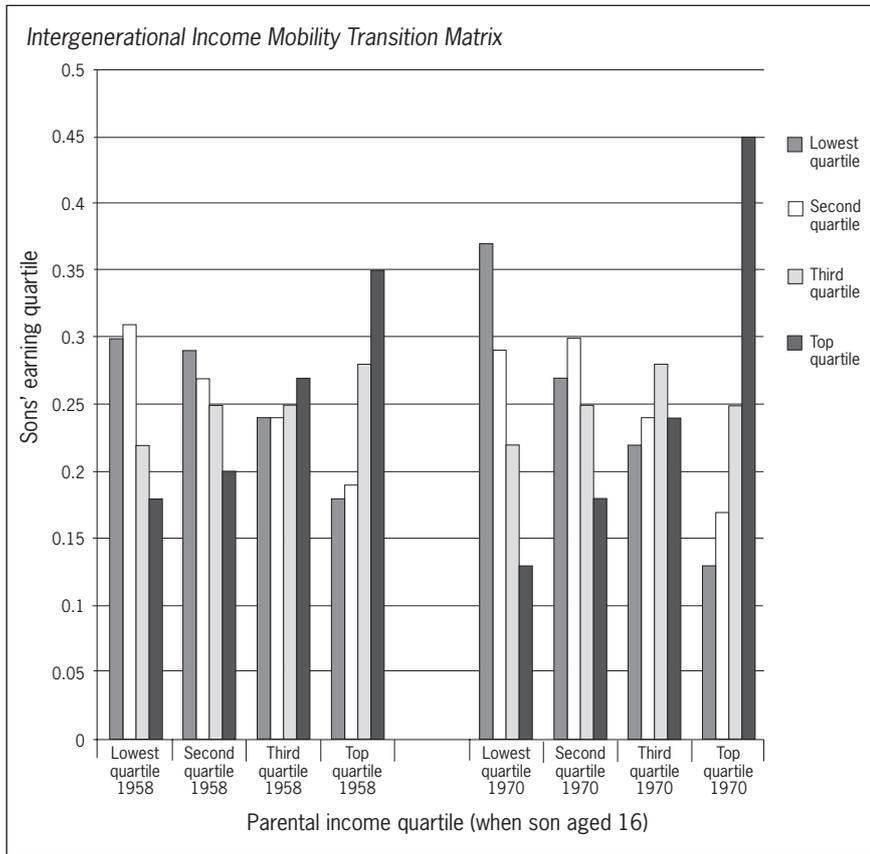
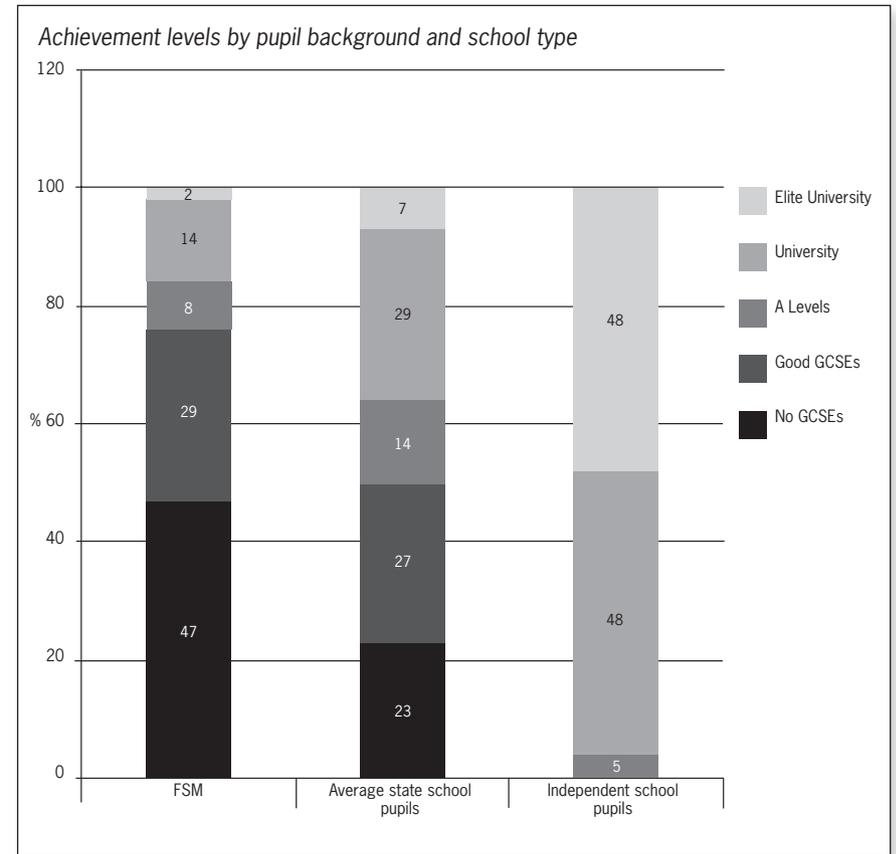


Table 3: Educational achievement/higher educational attainment<sup>8</sup>



7. *Recent Changes in Intergenerational Mobility* (2007) Blanden, J. & Machen, S.; p. 24. [www.suttontrust.com/reports/mainreport.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/mainreport.pdf).

8. *Sutton Trust Mobility Manifesto*, (2010), p. 13; [www.suttontrust.com/reports/20100312\\_mobility\\_manifesto.pdf](http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/20100312_mobility_manifesto.pdf).

More recently a government led report into fair access into the professions found their vastly disproportionate domination by those from high income backgrounds.<sup>9</sup> For example, although as previously mentioned only 7 per cent of the population attended independent schools, more than 50 per cent of members of the professions have done so. This figure rises to 75 per cent of judges and 70 per cent of finance directors. While the report noted that there had been a fall in the overall number of privately educated members of the professions, the percentage drawn from higher income groups (including both state and privately educated) had continued to increase. It concluded that: “The overall trend is clear: the professions have become more, not less, socially exclusive over time. Despite a sharp growth in professional employment opportunities over recent decades, access to the professions is becoming the preserve of those from a smaller and smaller part of the social spectrum.”

This picture of long term and ongoing decline in social mobility rates remains the basic assumption of most politicians and policymakers. For example, senior conservative Chris Grayling has described restoring social mobility as “one of the historic challenges of our time.” Meanwhile, Nick Clegg, Liberal Democrat leader – has claimed that “New Labour has presided over ten years of stagnating social mobility in our country”.

However, the evidence for a sharp decline in social mobility in the UK over the last few decades is not as clear cut as politicians assume. In the last year a number of substantive criticisms have begun to challenge these assumptions. The first is that these studies rely heavily on cohorts who were

9. Cabinet Office, ‘Unleashing aspiration: The final report of the panel on fair access to professions’, 2009. [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/227102/fair-access.pdf](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/227102/fair-access.pdf).

schooled and entered the workforce up to three decades ago, making it near impossible to draw sweeping conclusions about future policy responses. The 1970 cohort which forms the key point of comparison for much of the work, was predominately educated and started work under the Conservative administration of 1979 to 1997. In an attempt to defend its own record, the Labour party makes this point. Gordon Brown, for example, arguing that: “It was under Thatcher, not New Labour, that social mobility in Britain stalled.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, some critics have pointed out that the quality of the data is not especially high, and that comparative analysis with other countries is flawed.<sup>11</sup> The datasets are based on a small longitudinal sample, with the number of individuals that can be compared declining over time. The international comparison, for example, uses time sets from different years and qualitatively different samples (for example some but not all include those whose parents were unemployed while not all include women even though this period is a key moment for the expansion of women in the workforce).

Third, sociologists who have examined social mobility through the prism of class rather than income level dispute whether there has been a decline in recent decades.<sup>12</sup> This is not entirely surprising given the period has seen a substantial expansion both in the numbers attending higher education and the proportion of white collar jobs in the economy. The outgoing Labour government itself recently published a white paper challenging the assumption that there has been

10. Gordon Brown, speech to Parliament, 28 June 2008: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7468506.stm>.

11. S. Gorard, ‘A reconsideration of social mobility rates in Britain’, *British Journal of sociology of education*, May 2008.

12. David Goodhart, ‘More mobile than we think?’, *Prospect*, December 2008.

no improvement in social mobility rates over the last decade – although it did not question whether mobility rates fell in 1980s and 1990s.<sup>13</sup>

### Current political response

Despite the evidential weaknesses outlined above, it appears unlikely that the UK political parties will back away from a goal of increasing social mobility anytime soon. All three have strong – if very different – reasons for this focus.

As previously mentioned for the Labour party social mobility has become a means of appearing to maintain some of its traditional focus on social justice while appealing to a more centrist political ground through a new emphasis on supporting ‘aspiration’. Gordon Brown, for example, has said that: “Raising social mobility in our country is a national crusade in which everyone can join and play their part.”

The Labour government sought to tackle social mobility through a mixture of redistributive measures to cut poverty, benefit reforms to encourage work, and educational reforms designed to raise standards. These include:

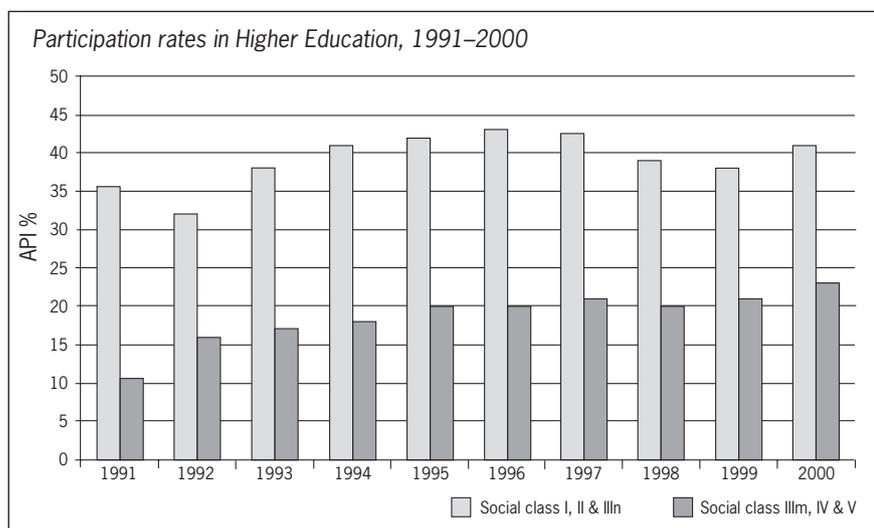
- An ongoing focus on cutting child poverty through redistribution (although it has almost certainly missed its target of reducing the number of children in poverty by 50 per cent by 2010). Although in 2006, a report by the Department for Work and Pensions showed that the number of children living in poverty had fallen by 700,000, missing the government’s 1999 target by 300,000.<sup>14</sup>
- An emphasis on work in benefits reforms to end the cycle of worklessness.
- A large expansion in free nursery care.

13. Cabinet Office, ‘Getting on, getting ahead’, November 2008.  
14. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4788270.stm> – DWP figures 2006.

- The introduction of the Academies programmes (direct rather than local authority funded schools) and other measures to improve school standards.. These state funded schools are created to replace failing institutions in more deprived areas (although the new Conservative-Liberal coalition government announced plans in May 2010 to allow all schools to apply to become academies). They are independent of local education authorities and managed by sponsors drawn from colleges, and universities, philanthropists, the voluntary sector and faith communities.<sup>15</sup>
- Raising the education and training leaving age to 18.

Of course, it is far too early to determine whether these measures have proven successful or not. However, Labour has not had great success in reducing inequality more broadly. Furthermore, while the proportion of the population attending university – a good proxy for future career success – has increased, the numbers from the lowest income group remains small.

15. [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/what\\_are\\_academies/?version=1](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/academies/what_are_academies/?version=1).

Table 4. Higher education figures<sup>16</sup>

According to the Sutton Trust report, “More recent figures (which are not comparable with those above due to changes in the social class categories) show that in 2004, 43 percent of young people from the higher social classes participated in higher education, compared with 19 percent of those from the bottom social classes – a gap of 24 percentage points”.<sup>17</sup>

The Liberal Democrats also have a firm interest in the topic of social mobility – not surprisingly given that Ralf Dahrendorf was for many years a Liberal Democrat member of the House of Lords. However, it is only recently that a broad interest in the topic of life chances has become a more concrete policy approach to improving social mobility.

16. Increasing higher education participation amongst disadvantaged young people and schools in poor communities; (2008), Sutton Trust, p. 14, [http://suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE\\_interim\\_report.pdf](http://suttontrust.com/reports/NCEE_interim_report.pdf).

17. Ibid. p. 14

This trend culminated in a Liberal Democrat sponsored Social Mobility commission, which reported in early 2009.<sup>18</sup> The Committee sought to provide coherent and broad-ranging approach to boosting social mobility.

The report maintained the party’s strong emphasis on education as the key lever for increasing mobility. Its recommendations included: greater investment in early years education; the introduction of a ‘Pupil Premium’ which targets deprivation funding at the most needy children and the expansion of vocational and work-based education for 14–19 years olds. However, notably there was no reference to role for the Lib Dems commitment to scrapping university tuition fees which has been the subject of fierce internal argument recently. While some Liberal Democrats have argued that this is key to ensuring a greater proportion of poorer students gain entry, there is strong evidence that intervention at this stage is too late to increase mobility and that the funding would better be used in earlier education.<sup>19</sup>

The other key package of suggested measures was around reducing child poverty. Here the Commission suggested a break with existing government policy by more tightly targeting the child tax credit on those most in need and establishing a minimum income standard to prevent families slipping below these levels.

The right of centre Conservative party has only very recently made tackling declining social mobility a priority. In part this change of position represents an attempt to rebrand the party as one of compassionate conservatism – concerned with social policy and poverty as much as economic efficiency. For example. George Osborne, the new Chancellor

18. 12/01/2009; The Guardian: [www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/jan/12/social-mobility-disadvantage](http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/jan/12/social-mobility-disadvantage).

19. J. Astle, ‘Why the Lib Dems should end their opposition to tuition fees’, 2009. [www.libdemvoice.org](http://www.libdemvoice.org).

of the Exchequer has claimed there is: “Growing inequality, falling mobility and rising poverty.”

The Conservatives have constructed an analysis of the social mobility problem which draws upon a number of traditional themes. They have emphasised the role of a ‘Broken Society’ in holding back children and therefore want to provide increased incentives for women to stay at home with children and couples to stay together. They have also stressed the role of welfare dependency and needless government intrusion in holding back social mobility, pledging – with few details so far – to reverse this trend. They argue that an over-generous welfare state has resulted in low-levels of social mobility because many of the poorest members of society are not sufficiently incentivised to climb the socio-economic ladder. There has been a strong focus on the economic disincentives contained within the Labour government’s complex tax credit system, most notably the high marginal rates facing recipients returning to the workforce.

However, the overall thrust of Conservative policy remains limited to date and there are also profound tensions, most notably in its approach to education. Some parts of the right blame the demise of state-funded elite schooling (grammar schools) for the decline in mobility. For example, David Davis, a former leadership contender (and grammar school pupil), recently claimed that it was the abolition of grammar schools which had led to a decline in social mobility. However, the party’s official stance is not to reintroduce selective schooling but adopt a pupil premium and free schools (ie a very similar approach to the Liberal Democrats and one which now forms one of the key areas of reform for the new coalition).

## Conclusion

Social mobility is now part of mainstream political debate in UK. However, the evidence base on which a picture of declining mobility is drawn is surprisingly weak. There needs to be further study to be confident of the most effective policy responses.

While the entry of the Conservative party into the debate should be welcomed there are serious questions over the extent of their commitment to increasing social mobility and pressure from their own supporters to resist anything that can be viewed as ‘social engineering’. However, the unexpected coalition with the Liberal Democrats means that a desire to increase social mobility is likely to inform a number of the new government’s initiatives such as education and welfare reform. However, both parties face the challenge of fleshing out a much more coherent policy response and one that is plausible in the harsher economic and fiscal circumstances the UK is now entering.

For the left there remains a doubt about whether the real concern is mobility (which inevitably implies some winners and losers) or equality, especially now that the Labour party’s alliance of convenience with the City of London is now at an end.

# Social mobility and higher education in Italy

*By Adele Colli Franzone and Francesco Velo\**

## Introduction

No one would question that our future depends heavily on the education and training of the younger generations. This is more true today, than ever in this so-called century of knowledge. Education plays a fundamental role, as it supplies the basic cultural roots and enables students to deal with the diverse issues which they will face throughout their working lives.

The enhancement of European competitiveness, as a whole, relies on the possibility of linking individual skills and abilities. And, above all, it relies on the possibility of building a framework that supports the creation of such skills.

Such a framework should also seek to grant life chances and resources to individuals as a prize for their efforts – in short it should foster social mobility.

Education has always been considered one of the most important pillars supporting social mobility. The European integration process calls on us to imagine how social mobility can be fostered in a wider and more complex arena. The question then is how to support social mobility and reward personal efforts in future European contexts, and how single countries are orienting themselves towards this goal.

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\* The authors share the responsibility for the chapter. The first and second sections are written by Francesco Velo and the third section by Adele Colli Franzone.

In the past, social mobility and geographical mobility represented the two sides of the coin: access to social mobility was linked to the movement of individuals from “less opportunity” countries to others. This was especially true for the poorest part of the population, involved in mass migration processes. Nowadays, this seems to apply mainly to the highly skilled: a few points of attraction seem to increasingly drain specialised human resources from the periphery.

This does not mean that we have to discourage mobility from one country to another, nor that we should discourage the creation of “points of attraction” and excellence at European Union level: mobility and points of excellence are essential to the development of the European Union.

But we should support the creation of a more equal national and supranational framework - mobility has to be matched by actions that support the chance of every territory to become a point of attraction.

It is especially important to seek to ensure that a dual system is not created which allows only a small part of the population to have access to the best pan-European opportunities, while the remainder are relegated to the local, weakest social mobility scheme.

The promotion of a common European model might help avoid the “old scheme” scenario, with mutual benefits. Cross-country mobility might sustain social mobility at a local level, through the development of a subsidiarity approach. This point will be developed more fully in the coming pages.

This essay is intended to focus on one particular case, providing a brief description of the policies and trends that have been developing in Italy during the last decade around the subject of education and social mobility. It develops in three sections. The first section provides a schematic representation of social mobility in Italy, through an overview of the relevant recent work policies and legislative acts. The

second section presents a picture of the university system in Italy and of the trends of education policies. The final section considers higher education system as one of the most powerful levers of social mobility.

### Social mobility in Italy

The latest OECD report on income distribution and poverty shows that, since the beginning of 1990's, inequality has grown rapidly in Italy. Italy has the sixth largest gap between the richest and poorest part of the population in the OECD.<sup>1</sup> The data reveals that the level of inequality in earnings, capital and savings has increased since the mid-eighties by 33 per cent: this is the largest increase among the OECD countries and compares with an average figure of 12 per cent.

Moreover, wealth is distributed more unequally than income: the richest 10 per cent owns approximately 42 per cent of total assets. In comparison, the richest 10 per cent hold approximately 28 per cent of total disposable income.<sup>2</sup>

The picture painted by the OECD data is confirmed by the Bank of Italy (Banca d'Italia): the distribution of income has remained quite stable in the last 15 years. As a result, income mobility appears to have declined. According to the SWG Research Institute, people born before the 1950s had

1. OECD (2008), *Growing Unequal? Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries*.

2. Since the early eighties, the percentage of households in relative poverty has always been close to 10 per cent. We face, by the way, an increase of particular importance in the period 1987–1989, when about 14 percent of households living in Italy was poor. The value has then progressively decreased, levelling off in recent years between 11 and 12 per cent. In 2004, according to the survey on household consumption, relatively poor are around 2.6 million households, or 11,7 percent of the total, corresponding to 7.6 million individuals. (ISTAT Annual Report 2005).

a 41 per cent chance of living in a better condition than their parents (and 8 per cent worse). A survey from 2008 shows that young people (born between 1985 and 1990) describe their situation as follows: only 6 per cent believe that their situation will improve, while 20 per cent expect to do worse than their parents (source: SWG, 2008).

The latest EUROSTAT report shows that 25 per cent of Italian children live in conditions of poverty. This compares with 15 per cent in France and just 10 per cent in Denmark, the lowest rate in the European Union.

What emerges also from recent studies is that the degree of intergenerational earnings mobility in Italy appears to be lower than that observed in other developed countries.<sup>3</sup> Mocetti clearly points out the link with low education outcomes. It seems in fact that parental education and socioeconomic status are the main determinant of educational choice and intergenerational mobility. Lower income students are less likely to go into tertiary education, despite the existence of a publicly funded system expressly designed to provide access to education to all families, regardless of income.

One likely explanation for this is that employment and earnings decisions are governed by family or peer boundaries rather than responding to education, or individual choice. The existence of such rules governing the education and then labour market is supported by various authors.<sup>4</sup>

3. S. Mocetti, "Intergenerational Earnings Mobility in Italy", in *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, Vol. 7 Issue 2, 2007.

4. See M. Pisati, A. Schizzerotto, "The Italian Mobility Regime: 1985–1997" in R. Breen (editor), *Social Mobility in Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, and A. Brandolini, C. Saraceno, A. Schizzerotto (editors), *Dimensioni della disuguaglianza in Italia: povertà, salute, abitazione*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009.

| Destination: son's education |                 |                 |                  |                   |       |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Origin:                      | None or primary | Lower secondary | Higher secondary | University degree | Total |
| father's education           |                 |                 |                  |                   |       |
| None or primary              | 5,7             | 32,9            | 24,5             | 3,1               | 66,2  |
| Lower secondary              | 0,2             | 5,3             | 11,5             | 3,0               | 20,0  |
| Higher secondary             | 0,1             | 0,4             | 6,1              | 3,2               | 9,8   |
| University degree            | 0,0             | 0,3             | 1,5              | 2,3               | 4,1   |
| Total                        | 6,0             | 38,9            | 43,6             | 11,5              | 100   |

Source: Mocetti (2007), figures in percentages

Cingano and Cipollone suggest, on this issue, that the predominance of short term financial constraints, rather than the long term effect of shaping offspring ability at early ages, prevail. This is due to the fact that the outcome of investments in education are difficult to predict.<sup>5</sup> The joint effect of this personal behaviour and of non-transparent career mechanisms could explain a great part of the weaknesses of the Italian system.

#### *Recent legislative action in the field of labour policies*

In the last decade the Italian Government's industrial policies have been characterised by the predominance of measures that were originally designed for sustaining salaries during a business crisis, or of those designed to tackle larger production/occupational problems which affect particular economic sectors.<sup>6</sup> The result has been the widening use of

5. F. Cingano, P. Cipollone, "University drop-out. The case of Italy", in *Temi di discussione della Banca d'Italia*, 626-2007.

6. Among these kind of measures, the so called ordinary "cassa integrazione guadagni" (CIG) i.e. covers with public funds the salary of workers that do abstain fully or partially from work. The ordinary CIG is designed to be a "temporary relief", cutting the cost of wages, and covers a maximum of 52 weeks over two years, or 13+13 consequent weeks. The CIG can also assume the characteristics of extraordinary measure if linked to industrial reconversion plans or in the case that

existing tools, but without questioning the overall vision of labour policies and their effectiveness in a new, globalised and rapidly changing environment.<sup>7</sup> Together with the deepening of the economic crisis, these measures have also been extended to economic sectors that were in the first phase excluded: we could describe this situation as "the use of wrong measures, in the wrong place".

The Italian government's 2008 Green Book confirmed the importance of state intervention to sustain income levels as well as employment protection legislation. The Green Book clearly indicates the role of these measures in maintaining the production and occupational basis of the economy. However, it ignores the fact that these measures have in some cases acted against competitiveness, as they were reducing the incentives for the necessary structural reforms.

It thus seems that the framework designed by the original rules has been changed out of all recognition. Tools that were intended to act as temporary and urgent relief to income have become permanent.

Moreover, this framework still needs to be shaped to the "regional" reforms that have been undertaken in the last decade. Eight years after the Constitutional Reform. 3/2001, that insisted on the empowerment of Regional Authorities and Regional competencies in various fields of economic intervention, many aspects of the rules have not yet been

bankrupt is declared. The risk of an excessive and inappropriate use of these tools can lead to obvious negative side-effects: it postpones the enhancement of proper structural measures, and neither improves the workforce skills or perspectives.

7. It is also the case of policies that were designed for sustaining employment opportunities for young workers: these policies, mainly short term contracts, were intended to facilitate the entrance of a new workforce into the labour market. But, in absence of a long term vision or clear career opportunities, these policies have mostly generated a higher rate of uncertainty and a higher pressure on the lowest working classes.

defined. The introduction of the fiscal reform (so called fiscal federalism, law 42/2009) was intended to define the standard cost of welfare services provided in the various regions. The aim of the reform was to diminish wealth imbalances between the regions.

The problem is that the essential levels of services that have to be provided at regional level have not still yet been defined. Most of all, this appears to be a cultural problem: the shift from a perception of welfare as “public charity”, to a model that insists on constitutional rights which are implemented at a regional level with targeted and specifically defined interventions, as underlined by the law 328/2000.<sup>8</sup> It calls into question not only local competencies in granting welfare services, but also the responsibility of raising and using resources

Many laws and bylaws have been promulgated since 2000 at national and regional level in an attempt to give concrete realisation to the rights enunciated in the Charter. These have sought to enforce vertical subsidiarity (the division of powers and responsibilities between upper and lower public administrations), and horizontal subsidiarity (the involvement of a plurality of public and private subjects that act on the same level). In this last case, forms of horizontal subsidiarity have been promoted, especially at regional level, by the recognition, authorisation and registration of public and private bodies, including NGOs, involving them in the promotion and provision of welfare services.

.....  
8. Charter of Social Rights, Art. 13: The law underlines the necessity of creating an integrated system of intervention and social services, that shall aim at offering people and families an integrated set of actions aiming at empowering the quality of life, equal opportunities, non discrimination and respect of citizens rights, as well as the reduction of disability conditions, needs and individual or family constraints that may derive from inadequate income, social disabilities or non-autonomy conditions.

The forthcoming definition of the essential levels of social services (so called LIVEAS), to be implemented at regional level, will probably represent a turning point in this process. It will not only lead to the settlement of welfare standards: it will make a concrete comparison between the various territories of the country, and targeted intervention, possible. This process seems far from being completed: as cited above, one of the most complex problems that remains to be solved is the implementation of a federal fiscal system, characterised by a clear attribution of competencies and resources to the state and regional level.

At the moment the overall framework of authorised welfare policies is still determined at state level (National Plan of intervention and of social services), and is mandatory for regional and local authorities. There are likely to be continuing conflicts between the desire to promote common welfare standards and the ability of local authorities to adopt innovative actions.

### The university sector in Italy

The university system has passed through several changes, over the past 20 years. The process is far from over and a further reform is currently under debate. All these reforms share the aim of ensuring the Italian system meets international best practices or, better, to follow the trend of major industrialised countries. The main objectives include: the reduction of the students' dropout rate; reaching international quality standards; and a structural change that was supposed to promote independence and raised the quality of teaching and research. But these reforms to date have had mixed success: university autonomy is not yet enacted while public finance constraints have limited the capacity to support planned (and new) investments.

The university system shows, for these reasons, a series of contradictions. Successive governments have pursued different approaches to higher education, affecting the ability to discuss a linear path of development. These continuous changes have led to uncertainty, and to universities adopting different roles: this has made the evolution discontinuous, inevitably affecting its development and the ability of pursuing long term, shared strategic objectives. A summary of the various law provisions is described in the following paragraph.

Five regulatory measures were introduced in the late 1980s. Law 168/1989, which established the Ministry of University and Scientific and Technological Research (MURST) and recognized the statute, administrative, financial and educational autonomy of Universities. Law 245/1990, which establishes rules and criteria for required three-year development plans. Law 341/1990 on educational systems, which introduced the tripartite division of academic titles: the University Diploma, the University Degree and the Ph.D. degree, and established the autonomy of universities in regulating teaching activities. Law 243/1991, which governs the inclusion of non-state universities in the Italian University System setting quality standards and procedures, assigning State contributions and regulating the activities of the teaching staff. Law 390/1991 on the right to study.

Between 1996 and 2001 the second important element of the reforms was completed. The process was driven by a number of proposals developed by the Ministerial Study Commission (Martinotti working group) and by the Bologna Declaration that was signed by more than 30 European Ministers of higher education in 1999.

With the Ministerial Decree 509/1999, a system based on two main levels (first and second level) was introduced. Another novelty introduced by this Decree is the system of measuring students' activities by assigning "credits". Credits

were defined as units of measure of "time", or "amount of work" (including self-study) necessary to acquire knowledge and skills. Courses that share the same qualifying learning outcomes are grouped into classes, identified by a Decree of the Ministry of Education. Titles awarded at the end of courses that share the same level (in the same class) have the same legal value.

The Ministerial Decree 270/2004 redefined again the qualifications of "titles" awarded by universities: bachelor, master, graduate diploma, PhD. The same decree also allowed the university to extend their action in advanced scientific and higher education learning, by promoting post-graduation or postgraduate degrees with university masters (first or second level).

The reform process is still ongoing. A new draft framework law "on government, organisation and evaluation of the university system" is currently under discussion in parliament. The reform will not only affect the finance and governance of universities, but will also impact on teaching staff recruitment and careers and on the financing of research and teaching.

#### *Students and teachers*

The Italian university system is composed of 61 state universities (including 3 polytechnics), 16 non-state universities and 11 on-line universities. In the academic year 2008–2009 there were 1.8 million students. The proportion of students who complete secondary education to enter university is declining: from 74.5 per cent in the academic year 2002–2003 to 68.5 per cent in 2006–2007. The report prepared by the National Committee for the Review of University System (CNVSU) in 2008 shows that the percentage of "regular" students is as low as it was when the last "great" reform law (68.5 per cent) was introduced (DM 509/1999). In-course

students total 1 million, while the drop-out rate stood at 19.8 per cent of registered students. The same report shows that in the academic year 2006–2007, inactive students (i.e. students who have not acquired any credit in the year) totalled 255,000 equal to 22.3 per cent of all students. There is only limited geographical mobility. During the academic year 2006/07, 79.6 per cent of students chose to begin their training in their region of residence. Only 1.3 per cent of students took part in international mobility programs, spending periods of study abroad. With regard to the highest level of the education (PhD), the Doctorate research program was established in Italy in 1980. Students enrolled in doctoral courses numbered 40,121 during the academic year 2006/2007.

In Italy, in 2008, there were around 60,000 people employed as teachers and researchers in the university sector. The teaching staff and researchers within the university are employed with a civil service contract for an indefinite period (confirmed after a trial period of three years). Recruitment procedures are launched autonomously by each university; the selection procedure is then managed by local commissions, composed of full professors elected by the whole academic body at the national level. The professors and associate researchers at non-state universities are considered as part of the national body of university teaching personnel, with equal rights and duties, even in terms of recruitment and retirement pensions. Salaries, however, are paid entirely by the non-state universities themselves.

#### *Universities and the labour market*

An important source of information is offered by Alma Graduate Consortium. The Consortium is supported by 47 Italian universities and conducts a yearly survey on a sample of nearly 300,000 students. One year after the attainment of the first level degree, graduates have an employment rate

of 48 per cent. 32 per cent dedicate their time exclusively to work, 16 per cent combine study and work. A further 42 per cent of graduates are seeking to continue their studies. Only 7 per cent of graduates are not working at all. The effectiveness of first-level degree in granting access to the labour market is in general good: at least 76 per cent of first level graduates. The degree title is generally more effective among those who have started to work after obtaining the three-year degree, compared to those who have continued working. One year after the attainment of the first level degree, the percentage of graduates employed is equal to 63 per cent; 19 per cent are actively seeking work, while the remaining share, 18 per cent, is composed of graduates who are neither working nor looking for employment. Three years after graduation 45 per cent of the employees use the skills acquired during the course of study at first degree level high, while 14 per cent of employees considered that they did not exploit the knowledge learned during the three-year university.

Among the second-level graduates who are currently employed, 32 per cent continue the same work undertaken prior to the attainment of the degree. Another 13 per cent have claimed to have changed the job only after the conclusion of specialised studies. More than half of graduates employed enter the labour market only after completing their degree studies. The overall effectiveness of the second level degree can be considered good (and at least effective enough to graduate at 84 per cent): one year after graduation 45 per cent of the employees say they use the skills acquired during the course of studying, while 42 per cent declare a limited use. 13 per cent of the graduates feel they do not completely exploit the knowledge learned during the second degree biennium.

In the last year, graduate unemployment rates have risen sharply. For first degree graduates it increased more than 30 per cent from 16.5 to 21.9 per cent. The unemployment rate

of second degree graduates has reached 20.8 per cent (it was 13.9 per cent); their average salary also reduced by 5 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

### *The evaluation of the university system*

Today, the evaluation of the system of higher education involves in Italy three major players and works on two levels: a first level internal to universities, consisting of the Evaluation Unit and a second external level, represented by the National Committee for the Evaluation of University System (CNVSU) and the Committee for Research Evaluation (CIVR).

The Evaluation Units are internal staff units, with the task of evaluating the activities of their own universities: their task is to analyse the productivity of teaching and research, cost management and the proper management of administrative action. Information is collected at national level by the National Agency (CNVSU). The “local” Units have thus a dual nature: they are engaged in internal evaluation of universities and at the same time, act as local contacts of the national authority in charge of the external evaluation. This duplicity of functions actually puts them in a ambiguous situation. The problem arises, especially in the evaluation of research: the CNVSU determine the requirements that the university must meet but verification rests with each university. This solution is not in line, for example, with the requirements of the European Association for Quality Assurance.

### Higher education and social mobility in Italy

A higher mobility implies a greater chance for people in the lower tail of the distribution to improve their well-being, providing they have the necessary skills and ability. A high degree of inequality of outcome would seem far less

9. Consorzio Universitario Almalaurea, Factsheets – XII Annual Report – 2009.

questionable if society offers equal opportunities to all individuals to achieve their aspiration than if everyone was stuck in an entrenched hierarchy (or underclass).<sup>10</sup>

The time-line and the criteria that drive the achievement of higher positions in the labour market are key factors in social mobility. If the educational system can enable individuals, to fulfil their potential then career opportunities should follow.

But this seems not to be the case of Italy, where family factors remain crucial. Better chances are still reserved to those who can rely not only on their education level, but also on that of their family and other existing social links.

A survey realised by the National Institute of Statistics confirms this hypothesis.<sup>11</sup> The data confirms that access to university studies has been constantly widened during recent decades, but social mobility is still strictly linked to the family environment.

The return rate of investments in education seems to be low. This is undeniably in contrast with international trends, as well as with the goals defined at European level by the Lisbon Strategy. This attitude seems to be shared not only by the population, but also by recent initiatives assumed by political bodies.<sup>12</sup>

It seems of great importance to recognise the role of education and universities in the promotion of social mobility.

10. S. Gabriele, F. Kostoris Padoa Schioppa: “Un’analisi economica della mobilità sociale in Italia”, in *Rivista di Politica Economica*, maggio-giugno 2006.

11. Linda Laura Sabbadini, “Mobilità sociale e traiettorie di vita: il percorso della statistica ufficiale”, WP, Istat 2008.

12. It has to be cited a draft law approved on January 27th 2010 by the Italian Parliament (that will have force of law if approved by the Senate) that allows students of 15 years of age to leave “regular” or “professional” school courses, if they choose to start a working career as apprentice in a firm.

At the same time, it is also a matter of considering education as an integrated part of an overall system. The education system has the task to answer to the demand that arises from the society: to promote social mobility is a matter of integrating the education system in a wider framework, one that recognises individual capacities and grants opportunities to next generations.

*A cultural approach to the future*

As already said, education can help individuals realise their aspirations and help society to develop. Education can thus act as a lever for a better society and as a means for individuals to evolve and to collaborate with each other.

Culture can play a fundamental role in dealing with two essential issues: the understanding of the reality that surrounds us and of the times we are living in.<sup>13</sup>

Our future is inside the new and creative combination of ideas already known, of innovation towards an original synthesis of past and future. History, in this sense, is only one branch of knowledge. As long as we have a sufficiently "robust" capacity that allows us to explain past dynamics, the future will increasingly appear as the result of continuous interaction between deterministic processes and discontinuities. There is, obviously, also the unexpected: what no one can imagine and therefore it is impossible to assign a probability value.

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13. For our purposes we can consider culture as something that has been formed over time, with the evolution of man, through the relationships built with the environment in a continuous process of osmosis. In this sense, the cultural sphere is that of values, styles, emotional attachment and intellectual adventure: something that could be described as the indispensable foundation for the development of man and society. It is the measure and expression of our ways of life and thought.

It seems obvious that such unpredictable events may erode certainties. Uncertainty, contingency, novelty, are inherent in everyday life. The union between past and future is not the result of a simple sum.

Here stands the fundamental *trait d'union* between education and social mobility. If our culture leads us to consider social mobility as a simple disruptive phenomenon that may affect individuals, there would be no place for actions or initiatives intended to promote it.

Otherwise, if we describe social mobility as the process of creating and grasping chances, we shall seek tools able to support this process, providing the background that makes social mobility possible.

We face today an accelerated need to adapt to change. We need the flexibility that comes from transferable skills and a solid integration of knowledge, from a culture that is not the sum of different pieces of knowledge, but of knowledge and understanding. This proposition helps us to understand which role education (and which kind of education) play in supporting social mobility.

First, we need to focus on the contribution that an interdisciplinary approach may offer to any subsequent specialisation, especially if we are more and more asked to live in new uncertain scenarios. Magris says: "It is precisely in times of global transformation, when the reality was dismantled and rebuilt as the scenes of a theatre for a new spectacle, reborn in the dust removal of the big questions. [I understand] who has no nostalgia for the past, or who takes refuge in the arid wilderness pathetic and archaic and aristocratic but who accepts with humility of mingling with promiscuous confusion everyday to the change in all things related".<sup>14</sup>

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14. Claudio Magris, *L'infinito viaggiare*, Milano, Mondadori, 2005.

Second, we are asked to enforce freedom, and above all freedom of thought. Eleanor Roosevelt said: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." In Calvino's book "Le città invisibili" Marco Polo speaks well in front of Kublai Khan: "if you want to know how much darkness there is around you, you sharpen your eyes on the distant lights dim".<sup>15</sup> With his well-weighed words Marco Polo gave substance to the crisis (the dark) and open the way to change (to sharpen the look) to see beyond the dim lights. As Anatole France says: "To accomplish great things we must not only act but also dream".<sup>16</sup>

But freedom means also that individuals shall have the freedom to fail: a true system that promotes social mobility cannot be a system that grants social mobility for everyone, despite of his personal efforts and "value".

#### *Change and innovation*

As cited above, innovation means change and change involves any uncertainty, hardship, difficulty and hence risk.

Change and creativity are strictly linked one to each other. The creative process by its nature seeks an intellectual and emotional unexplored terrain. The very essence of creativity lies largely in its ability to abandon the assumptions commonly accepted and avoid any pre-existing belief.

Some people have a romantic idea of creativity. They think an event is sudden, involuntary, ultimately inexplicable gift of the chosen few and lonely heroes. Others have a more enlightened and rationalist idea and believe that creativity is a process of selection and processing options in some way already known, perhaps the most striking and successful procedure in certain particularly gifted subjects, but still

15. Italo Calvino, *Le Città invisibili*, Torino, Einaudi, 1972.

16. Anatole France, Acceptance speech, Séance de L'Académie Française, 24th December 1896.

generated by knowledge and method. In fact, creation is the intuitive product of rather different psychological processes that include preparation, incubation and review. Their role in conscious beliefs, feelings and thoughts over the indispensable critical application, study, concentration and knowledge are essential ingredients for creativity. Nevertheless, it remains something that is inherently mysterious and elusive, and perhaps this is because cultural creativity remains unique and not predictable.

The problem is to create and support the conditions that can enforce this process, as a fundamental part of individual and evolution of society. Those environments that are prepared to sustain innovation and individual growth are the ones which are most favourable to development.

Renzo Piano states: "To create is a condition of serenity and tension, calm and energy, slowness and speed. In slow, there is a great speed, great agility of thought. In reflection of those who think there are thousands of links very quick and this is the rapidity that no computer can match"<sup>17</sup>. Certainly the creation requires passion and certainly stands by intelligence, the ability and talent of people but also by the desire to build on with work and dedication of these. Each of us is an artist, because being an artist means to give shape and structure to what otherwise would be chaotic, making it more likely the occurrence of certain events over others.

#### *Conclusions on higher education and social mobility*

Each stage of economic development experienced in the past has historically been supported by the ability to generate new organisational forms, the emergence of new skills and changing the culture of different parts of the economy.

17. Renzo Piano, *La responsabilità dell'Architetto*, Firenze, Passigli, 2000.

These changes have normally developed in the market or within businesses. In the past, universities provided a basic cultural training, after which the development of professional, empirical knowledge was afforded to workplaces.

Today, universities are meant to play a key role in driving the knowledge society. The knowledge society requires a wide spread of a renewed culture and a system of consistent values. The new generation is asked to contribute with innovative ideas to develop capabilities that can be easily adapted to the needs of the evolving world of work, in a flexible and prompt way. For the new generation, it is essential to be able to learn how to deal with the competitive arena, to relocate to other firms, to overcome the cultural barriers that separate countries, to be part of a single world market, acquiring an increasing international mobility.

The distinction between cultural background and subsequent university training is diminishing even more. Universities can develop the ability to offer scientific training, cultural opportunities as well as something that in the past did not exist. But, above all, the education and university system (extended to the research and applied research system) has to be adapted to the new European scenario.

The challenge is to renew itself in order to meet the needs of the knowledge society: this is both a threat and an opportunity. The issue is to enhance the ability of the higher education sector to transmit traditional knowledge, culture and science in a way that best meets the needs of a European extended knowledge society.

If we still aim to promote social mobility through education, we absolutely need to create even more specialised human capital: but above all a strong cultural basis. The future social and economic development of Europe requires new generations to focus on the creation of knowledge rather than the ability to perform tasks. This is why the training of

future generations is a crucial problem both for individual and for the society as a whole.

In order to face this issue properly, we have to imagine that the promotion of social mobility and of society itself should be coherent. The European Union has chosen subsidiarity and freedom as founding principles. Subsidiarity, as a lever of development, has indeed to be sustained by a common framework that fortifies its positive and virtuous effects: the efforts made by every single part of the system have to be driven towards shared goals. We suggest that the future framework, for secondary and university education, should be European. This does not mean that we have to renounce national heritage, but see it in a European context.

## On social mobility in the Netherlands

*By Fleur de Beaufort*

‘The VVD wants the Netherlands to be a country in which people have the opportunity to make something extraordinary out of their lives.’

### Introduction

The Dutch liberal party, the Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie (VVD), adopted a new statement of principles on 25th November 2008, emphasising the role of the individual in self-development. Liberals aspire to achieve a society in which each individual, given his talents, receives a fair chance to climb the social ladder. The VVD stressed that the state should strengthen and improve education and labour market policies, instead of making people more dependent on government.<sup>1</sup>

In his famous book on ‘life chances’, the social scientist and philosopher Ralf Dahrendorf argued that people should have the opportunity to choose their own life path irrespective of their background. Dahrendorf defined life chances as “opportunities for individual growth, for the realisation of talents, wishes and hopes,” pointing out that “these opportunities are provided by social conditions.”<sup>2</sup> He employed the metaphor of a house, in which each individual should at least

have enough opportunities to be able to stand on the ground floor. From there people can develop their individual talents and reach to higher floors. In the social sciences there is a distinction between two kinds of social inequalities: inequality of distribution and inequality of chances. Dahrendorf was especially concerned with the inequality of chances, and the VVD agrees. Liberals view inequalities of distribution as inevitable – although somewhat correctible by the state – and worry less than social democrats about it. They care more about equality of opportunity, instead.

In early industrial societies class mattered: inherited wealth could easily be turned into capital, which (if well stewarded) could be reconverted into an even larger inheritance for the next generation. The labouring classes, on the other hand, were forced to send their children to work in the factories at a very early age. As there was no compulsory education, and there were no laws to prohibit child labour, parents were ‘free’ to make such decisions. But their choices were highly constrained: wages were low, families large and social insurance systems were in their infancy.

Modern societies are different. The influence of family background on life chances has diminished. An expanded, compulsory education system, with health, pensions and unemployment insurance made Western societies more mobile. Growing individualism made people freer: before the 20th century it was almost a given that businesses passed down from father to son, but no longer. Children are now encouraged to follow their own interests and can choose a different career, with most feeling little pressure to continue a family tradition.<sup>3</sup>

The policy debate on social mobility rests on two concepts: intra-generational, or labour mobility, and intergenera-

1. VVD, *Beginselverklaring*, presented by M Rutte, November 2008.

2. Dahrendorf, 1979, pp. 38–39.

3. De Beaufort, (2008), pp. 167–178.

tional mobility. The former reflects the opportunities people have to change jobs, to educate themselves and to retrain. This kind of social mobility within a single generation is usually measured by comparing the occupational status of individuals at two or more points in time. The latter examines the extent to which social circumstances are inherited. Can new generations easily surmount poverty or poor education of their parents? Intergenerational mobility is measured by comparing the occupational status or educational level of children with their parents’.

The focus in this chapter will be mainly on intergenerational mobility, and those causes of it that government is able to tackle. Rebecca Thys, Wies de Raedemaeker and Jan Vranken of the University of Antwerpen list five underlying causes of social mobility: income, occupation, education, emotional well-being and personal relations.<sup>4</sup> They point out that good education for all or a high degree of job mobility alone do not equalise life chances. This might be true. But whereas income, occupation mobility and education can be influenced by the state, emotional well-being and personal relations are difficult and potentially dangerous territory for government to interfere with. Furthermore, the results of research on the increase of social mobility in Western societies since 1800 also show that the changes in social mobility depend to a large degree on changes in educational and occupational structures.<sup>5</sup>

In their analyses, liberals start from the point of the individual, instead of some social group or class. More than that, liberals don’t believe in the existence of a rather static class society, such as social scientists often present in their research. Liberals only use classes or groups to present research results

4. Thys, de Raedemaeker and Vranken, (2004).

5. Kaelbe, (2001), pp. 14345–14348.

or demonstrate the influence of certain group factors. Liberal policy proposals aim to promote individual opportunity, rather than trying to pass power and wealth from one group to another.

One final conceptual point: social mobility can be upward, but also downward. Governments can make people more upwardly mobile by deploying more effective social policies, but people can make poor choices. Life chances can be offered to every member of a society, but in the end it is the individual himself that has to take them. Thus liberals are realistic and therefore sceptical about providing every child with ‘equal life chances’. Too many factors are at play for the state to work against. Therefore liberals would rather advocate ‘fair chances’ than ‘equal chances’.

In this chapter I will examine the degree of mobility in Dutch society. Although I will touch upon all five of Thys, de Raedemaeker and Vranken’s causes, I will focus most on income, education and occupation, as these are the most important areas, and are most amenable to government intervention.

### Income – poverty

Before the 20th century, the socio-economic status of an individual was largely determined by that of his parents. People were unlikely to climb the social ladder. During the 20th century, however, Western societies became increasingly mobile, both absolutely and relatively. Levels of absolute poverty fell and better education made it easier for children to break loose from their background. This encourages us to ask what – if any – influence socioeconomic background has on individual life chances.

In the Netherlands poverty rates decreased from almost 16 per cent in 1995 to 8 per cent in 2008, according to the low-income threshold. This threshold is based on the Dutch

social assistance norm amount for a single person in 1979, annually adjusted for inflation.<sup>6</sup> In comparison, under the European Union relative poverty measure (60 per cent of median income) the poverty rate was just under 11 per cent in 2008.<sup>7</sup> Following the current financial crisis, researchers expect a slight increase of the poverty rates, but this doesn't change the fact that poverty rates have halved in the last 15 years. This fall is a consequence of increased employment rates over the last 10 to 15 years. With an employment rate of 76 per cent the Netherlands is near the top of the EU table. The relatively high level of minimum wages and of social benefits is a further cause.<sup>8</sup>

Notwithstanding these good results, there is a relative small group of people living on social benefits for a very long period. Out of an estimated 7,242,202 households, there are 211,000 households that have lived on social benefits for at least four years, according to the Dutch Statistics Bureau (CBS). More than 70 per cent of adults in these households have no qualification of any kind, and a majority are single parent families.<sup>9</sup> This group has proved difficult for government to help, and often low incomes and dependence on welfare is passed from generation to generation. For these people, the relatively generous social benefits has a negative influence on their life chances, as it affects the incentive to work, train or educate themselves. A survey from the Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP: the Netherlands Institute for Social Research) confirmed this again in 2008. As part of this survey currently unemployed people were asked why

6. In 2006 a single person living under the low-income threshold in the Netherlands could spend around € 880,- a month.

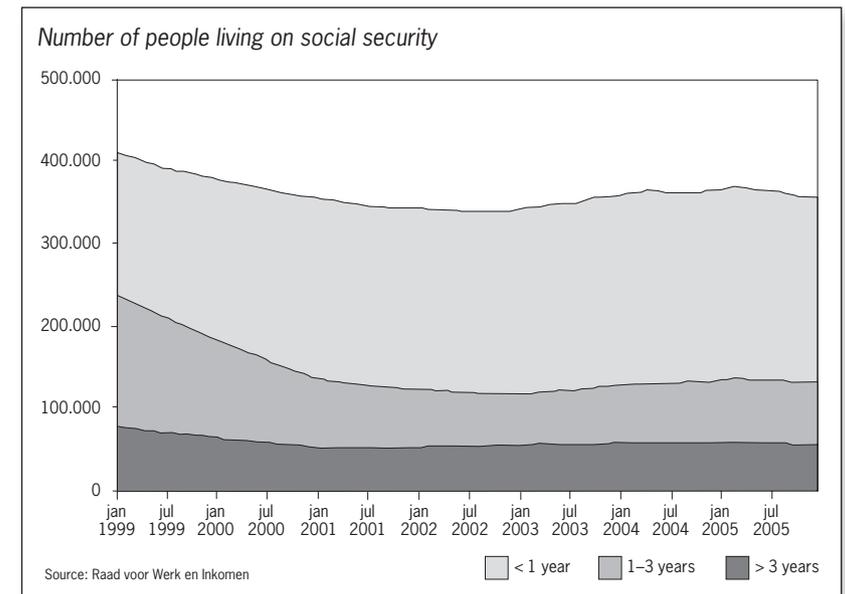
7. Wolff, (2010).

8. Otten (et.al.), (2008), pp. 14–15 and 22. Eurostat pocketbooks, (2008), p. 75.

9. Groot (et.al.), (2008), p. 15.

they preferred to maintain their situation instead of looking for a job. Besides other reasons – such as a low expectation to find a job – 96 per cent answered that they felt quite happy with their current unemployment, including their income. Almost 40 per cent argued that changing to an occupation would not improve their income and was therefore unnecessary.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1: People living on social benefits (long-term)

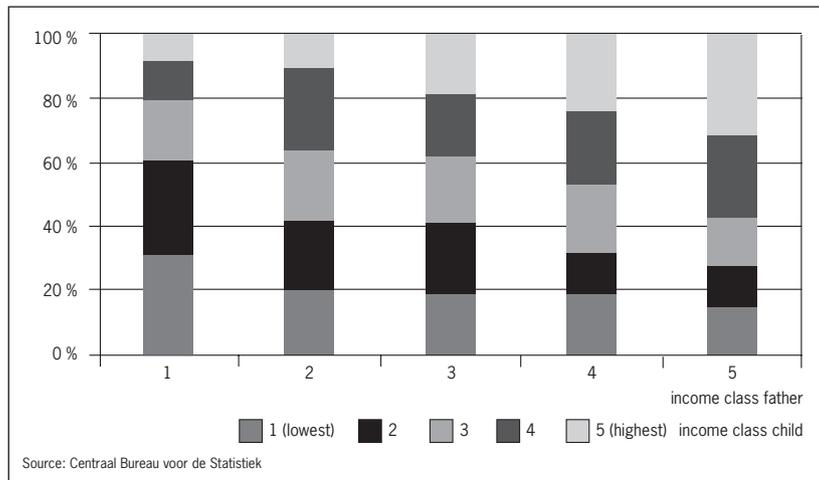


According to a CBS-study conducted in 2000, the lowest income groups were less mobile across generations than those on higher incomes. Figure 2 divides the income distribution into quintiles, and shows where the children of parents from different income quintiles end up. Under conditions of perfect intergenerational mobility, the chance that a child would end up in the same income quintile as its parents would

10. Van Echtelt en Hoff, (2008), pp. 52–54.

be 20 per cent. In reality, a child with parents in the lowest income quintile is 30 per cent likely to end up in the same bracket, while 28 percent make it into the second quintile. Only 11 per cent make it to the top bracket. In the highest income quintiles children have exactly the opposite chances, which shows that downward mobility is far less likely for them. Only children growing up in the middle income groups are almost as likely to climb the ladder as descend it.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 2: Income group father and child



11. Cörvers, (2000), pp. 93–103. Note that this research is based on the outcome of intergenerational mobility. On this basis one cannot conclude the exact chance people in different income groups have had during their life, as the factor of the individuals willingness to take an offered chance (mentioned in the introduction to this chapter) is not taken into account here. For example research on the willingness of unemployed to take an offered job opportunity in the Netherlands shows that these people often use arbitrary excuses to refuse the job. Liberals always stress the importance of individual wish or desire to improve one's situation. Without this desire, offering life chances is of little use. See more detailed: Van Echteld en Hoff (2008), pp. 54–55.

More recent research confirms this. A study conducted in 2005 found that people aged between 25 and 44 who grew up in poverty were twice as likely to remain there than the children of the better off. Of course there are other aspects – such as the educational level of the parents – that are also important for the life chances of the next generation.<sup>12</sup> Ethnicity also matters: non-Western immigrants to the Netherlands are likely to inherit their parents' poverty, if they are poor. But there is almost no difference in the chance to outgrow their childhood poverty between children born in the Netherlands and immigrants from Western countries.<sup>13</sup>

### *Material deprivation and well-being*

Poverty can also be measured as material deprivation. In the latest Eurostat publication – *Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion* – deprivation is defined as: “The enforced inability (rather than the choice of not being able/having) to pay for at least three of the following nine items: unexpected expenses; one week annual holiday away from home; arrears (mortgage or rent payments, utility bills, or hire purchase instalments or other loan payments); a meal with meat or fish every other day; heating to keep the home adequately warm; a washing machine; a colour television; a telephone; or a car.”<sup>14</sup> Here

12. Kösters en Otten, (2007), pp. 36–41.

13. Van den Brakel en Moonen, (2009), pp. 47–51. Immigrants from Western countries include Oceania, Japan and Indonesia.

14. Eurostat, (2010), pp. 56–57. Of course it is debatable whether the lack of for example a colour television or a car can be seen as material deprivation. In November 2008 the local government in Groningen announced that they planned to present all households living on social security with a flat screen television. This aroused a noisy debate among the Dutch citizens and politicians on the limits of the welfare state. Only the extreme left approved of the idea, whereas others thought a flat screen colour television couldn't be regarded a primary necessity of life. See for example: *NRC Handelsblad* (2008).

again the Netherlands show very positive results with one of the lowest rates of material deprivation among the citizens. In 2007 the material deprivation rate was around 6 per cent. Only Sweden (also 6 per cent) and Luxembourg (3 per cent) were comparable, whereas the EU27 average was 17 per cent. For those people who are at risk of poverty, they were most likely to be deprived of unexpected expenses (50 per cent), the capacity to afford an annual holiday away from home for one week (35 per cent) and a personal car (20 per cent).

In comparison to other European countries the quality of life in the Netherlands is relatively high and much of the Dutch population considers itself very satisfied with its quality of life. In 2009 an overwhelming majority of the Dutch people – 96 per cent – felt satisfied.<sup>15</sup> These results are underlined by the 11th position the Netherlands holds in The Economist's Quality of Life Index in 2010.

Research on social exclusion – taken from the EU index of social exclusion – shows that there is a very low risk of severe social exclusion in the Netherlands. This means that in the Netherlands there are only a few people suffering from a lack of social participation and/or integration, as well as material deprivation and/or a lack of social rights.<sup>16</sup>

## Education

In 1874 the Dutch liberal politician Samuel van Houten implemented his famous law against child labour ('Kinderwetje'). This was the first attempt to prohibit child labour in the factories, which was common in the 19th century. Despite the law, child labour was still not entirely abandoned. It would take until 1901 for a liberal government to implement compulsory education – against the wishes of the socialists

15. Eurostat, (Spring 2009), p. 9.

16. Schnabel, Bijl and De Hart (eds.), (2008), pp. 237–258, 239–241.

– and almost 95 per cent of the Dutch children from 6 to 12 years started to attend school on a more regular basis.<sup>17</sup>

During the 20th century the role of education in shaping career opportunities became increasingly important. This does not mean that the correlation between family background and the opportunities or outcomes in education vanished completely. In theory nowadays every child at a state school has the same opportunity to develop its capabilities during his school career. In practice however the background, for example, educational level of the parents or their occupation, still influences the future opportunities of the child and therefore the outcome of their educational career. The lack of a positive role model at home is a very important problem in motivating these children, on the one hand because their parents often can't help them with their homework. But, and this is also very important, on the other hand because some parents see no need for their children in reaching a high(er) level of education and therefore don't stimulate them.<sup>18</sup>

Recent research on school drop-outs shows that children with problematic family backgrounds have a far higher risk of leaving school without any kind of diploma, in comparison to children who grow up in stable families with an average family income. These children carry their background as a burden which often disables their opportunities in school.<sup>19</sup> But this problem is small in the Netherlands, compared to the rest of the EU. The number of school drop-outs decreased from 4.1 per cent in 2005–2006 to 3.7 per cent in 2007–2008. According to *Eurostat* in 2007 12 per cent of the Dutch population aged between 18 and 25 was at some time

17. Schenkeveld, (2003), p. 76. In those early days of compulsory education there were still exceptions, for example during the weeks of harvest time some children were allowed to help their parents.

18. De Graaf en Luijkx, (1995), pp. 31–45.

19. Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR), (2009).

an early school-leaver. In comparison to the other EU15-countries, only Ireland (11.5 per cent), Austria (10.9 per cent), Sweden (12 per cent) and Finland (7.9 per cent) had lower rates of school drop-outs.<sup>20</sup>

The chances young people have during their school career are often influenced by their background (see table 1). The school drop-out rate is twice as high among children growing up in single-parent families as among children growing up with both parents at home. Among first generation immigrants the rate of early school-leavers is twice as high (6 per cent) as among the native Dutch children (3 per cent). Although children from the second generation immigrants are often the beneficiaries of a better education than their first generation predecessors, they still show less intergenerational mobility in their educational attainment when compared to Dutch native students.

20. Eurostat, (2009), pp. 93-94. The level of education is defined in accordance with the 1997 International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 1997) and often aggregated into three levels: (1) low: below the second cycle of secondary education (up to ISCED level 3c short); (2) medium: second cycle of secondary education (ISCED levels 3-4 other than 3c short); (3) high: tertiary education (ISCED levels 5-6). Early school leavers refers to persons aged 18 to 24 in the following two conditions: the highest level of education or training attained is ISCED 0, 1, 2 or 3c short and respondent declared not having received any education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey.

Table 1: Early school-leavers

|                          | 04/05<br>% | 05/06<br>% | 06/07<br>% | 07/08*<br>% |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| Total % drop-outs        | 5.9        | 5.3        | 5.1        | 4.9         |
| Native                   | 5.0        | 4.5        | 4.3        | 4.1         |
| Immigrant                | 9.0        | 8.3        | 7.9        | 7.7         |
| Western Immigrant        | 7.5        | 7.1        | 6.6        | 6.5         |
| Non-Western Immigrant    | 9.6        | 8.8        | 8.4        | 8.2         |
| 1st generation Immigrant | 15.1       | 13.5       | 12.6       | 12.7        |
| 2nd generation Immigrant | 6.7        | 6.3        | 6.4        | 6.2         |
| < 2 x minimum wage**     | 9.0        | 8.4        | 8.3        |             |
| < 0,9 x minimum wage     | 10.8       | 10.1       | 9.9        |             |
| 0,9-1,1 x minimum wage   | 9.0        | 8.4        | 8.5        |             |
| 1,1-1,5 x minimum wage   | 8.7        | 8.0        | 8.0        |             |
| 1,5-2 x minimum wage     | 7.5        | 7.0        | 6.9        |             |
| 2-4 x minimum wage       | 5.2        | 4.7        | 4.6        |             |
| > 4 x minimum wage       | 4.1        | 3.5        | 3.2        |             |
| No income                | 14.1       | 12.3       | 10.6       |             |
| Income                   | 5.6        | 5.1        | 4.9        |             |
| One income               | 7.2        | 6.7        | 6.5        |             |
| Double income            | 4.6        | 4.1        | 3.9        |             |

Source: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS)

\* preliminary numbers

\*\* The gross level of legal minimum wage in the Netherlands was in 2007, € 1.317,- a month

The socio-economic background is another aspect of great influence on the future opportunities of each individual. Growing up in a neighbourhood with a high number of unemployed persons, low income rates and a high levels of immigrants doubles the possibility of an early school drop-out for children, as there is very little stimulation for these children to try and achieve the best results in school.<sup>21</sup>

21. Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, (2008), pp. 29-35; en cijferreeksen vroegtijdig schoolverlaters ([www.cijfers.minocw.nl/Rapport.aspx?RapportCode=SIB\\_laovs003&RapportOmscHrijving=VO+en+BVE+Voortijdig+schoolverlaters+meer+jaren,+landelijke+gegevens&SectorCode=SEC](http://www.cijfers.minocw.nl/Rapport.aspx?RapportCode=SIB_laovs003&RapportOmscHrijving=VO+en+BVE+Voortijdig+schoolverlaters+meer+jaren,+landelijke+gegevens&SectorCode=SEC)).

Upward social mobility in a society can also be measured by the number of children that attain higher educational level than their parents. The assumption that the level of parental education still influences the academic success for their offspring is confirmed once again. Some 21 per cent of the population aged 25–34 whose parents achieved lower-secondary education also has a low level of education, whereas 49 per cent attained medium and 30 per cent high level education.<sup>22</sup> When parents have achieved a medium level of education, 8 per cent of their children drop out of school with a lower educational level than their parents, whereas half attain the same level and 42 per cent an even higher level. Naturally the numbers for people aged 25–34 whose parents have a tertiary level of education are even better. Only 3 per cent leave school with a low level, 31 per cent with a medium level and 66 per cent finish their education on high level.

Table 2: Distribution of the population aged 25–34 in comparison to educational level \* of the parents (2005)

|                            |        | Educational level parents |        |      |
|----------------------------|--------|---------------------------|--------|------|
|                            |        | low                       | medium | high |
| Educational level children | Low    | 21                        | 8      | 3    |
|                            | Medium | 49                        | 50     | 31   |
|                            | High   | 30                        | 42     | 66   |

Source: Eurostat

\* see footnote 20 for the definition of low, medium and high.

22. Eurostat, (2009), p. 95.

## Job mobility

### *Intergenerational*

In 1927, in his classic study *Social and Cultural Mobility* the Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin concluded that in the long term there was no consistent trend in social mobility. One could only speak of ‘trendless fluctuations’. Since the Second World War far more representative figures can be found on social mobility. Data on job mobility, and its relation to other forms of social mobility has improved markedly in recent years. In the 1950s, researchers from different countries participating in the International Sociological Association agreed to present a mobility survey on a national level every ten years. In the Netherlands Professor Van Heek in Leiden and PhD-candidate Van Tulder where in charge of this research. Their results, as well as subsequent research provide us with a lot of useful material and enable us to find more than the mere trendless fluctuations Sorokin discovered.

Over the last decades the relation between parents’ and their children’s jobs weakened. This was caused by cumulative impact of several earlier developments in education: the increasing enforcement of the law on compulsory education; state finance for schools; and grants for every student in the Netherlands. Another important development was the fall in jobs passed from parent to child – farmers, for example – and the increase of the third sector – where hereditary jobs are far less likely. It was no longer obvious that a child continued the family business or took up the same occupation as his parent(s) had.<sup>23</sup>

In early research on intergenerational job mobility scientists only looked at mobility between fathers and sons. The Dutch social scientist Van Tulder, for example, subdivided

23. Dronkers en Ultee, (1995), pp. 303–325; 305.

the prestige of different jobs into six groups from (I) unskilled workers to (VI) academics. Then he looked how many combinations there were in occupation between father and son. In the following tables the numbers for the year 1954 are shown as example.

Table 3: intergenerational job mobility in the Netherlands 1954

|                    |       | Profession sons |      |      |     |     |    | Total | %    |
|--------------------|-------|-----------------|------|------|-----|-----|----|-------|------|
|                    |       | I               | II   | III  | IV  | V   | VI |       |      |
| Profession fathers | I     | 52              | 106  | 73   | 20  | 7   | -  | 258   | 11.0 |
|                    | II    | 60              | 288  | 182  | 72  | 17  | 3  | 622   | 26.4 |
|                    | III   | 44              | 168  | 353  | 125 | 66  | 16 | 769   | 32.7 |
|                    | IV    | 20              | 76   | 165  | 211 | 48  | 14 | 537   | 22.8 |
|                    | V     | 1               | 10   | 28   | 33  | 49  | 20 | 141   | 6.0  |
|                    | VI    | -               | -    | 2    | 5   | 7   | 14 | 28    | 1.2  |
|                    | Total | 177             | 645  | 806  | 466 | 194 | 67 | 2355  |      |
| %                  | 7.5   | 27.4            | 34.2 | 19.8 | 8.2 | 2.8 |    | 100   |      |

Source: van Tulder

The diagonal shows the number of sons with a job on the same status as their father, whereas the numbers above this line show the ones that climbed the social ladder successfully. In the last decade of the twentieth century the researchers Ganzeboom and De Graaf redefined and expanded van Tulder's research. They looked for intergenerational mobility in roughly five year periods from 1954 until 1993. Instead of defining 6 groups of jobs, they simply looked at whether there was job mobility between fathers and sons, and if yes, whether it was upward or downward. The table below shows the full results of their research.<sup>24</sup>

24. Ganzeboom en Luijkx, (1995), pp. 14–30; 17–18.

Table 4: Indices for intergenerational job mobility of men in the Netherlands 1954–1993

| Period    | A. Absolute mobility |          |               | B. Relative mobility |             |         |
|-----------|----------------------|----------|---------------|----------------------|-------------|---------|
|           | N                    | Immobile | Upward mobile | Downward mobile      | Odds ratios |         |
|           |                      |          |               |                      | U           | U-trend |
| 1954      | 2355                 | 41.1 %   | 32.7 %        | 26.3 %               | 0.440       | 0.392   |
| 1958      | 525                  | 53.0 %   | 23.6 %        | 23.4 %               | 0.391       | 0.364   |
| 1970–1974 | 1979                 | 37.7 %   | 36.3 %        | 26.0 %               | 0.262       | 0.264   |
| 1975–1979 | 3413                 | 35.5 %   | 39.3 %        | 25.2 %               | 0.204       | 0.229   |
| 1980–1984 | 2687                 | 33.8 %   | 40.0 %        | 26.2 %               | 0.175       | 0.193   |
| 1985–1989 | 4112                 | 32.5 %   | 39.9 %        | 27.6 %               | 0.164       | 0.158   |
| 1990–1993 | 1884                 | 30.8 %   | 41.6 %        | 27.6 %               | 0.160       | 0.126   |

Source: Ganzeboom & Luijkx (1995)

Between 1954 and 1993 social mobility among men in the Netherlands increased. This was primarily upwards – downward mobility remained stable during these years. Table 4 also shows the simplified relative mobility in the Netherlands in parameter U. If U would be equal to zero, there would be absolutely no relation in origin and destiny on the labour market. The higher the parameter U, the more closed a society is. Table 4 shows that social mobility in the Netherlands grew enormously between 1954 and 1993. The researchers assumed that if this U-trend would continue after 1993 the parameter could reach zero in 2009. Of course this is only hypothetical, as intergenerational job mobility is related to many different developments. For example, mobility could grow, because the quantity of unskilled jobs decreased, but this decrease has ended already.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the Dutch researchers draw an opposite conclusion than Sorokin did in 1927. Dutch job mobility increased over the last few decades.

25. Ibid. pp. 18–20.

Recently Ganzeboom en Luijkx updated their earlier research by adding fresh data on the mobility of working women. Table 5 shows the mobility percentages for men, women who once had a job and women who are currently in a job in five-year periods between 1970 and 2004.

Table 5: Percentage mobile for men, women, and working women for seven five-year periods in the Netherlands (1970–2004)

|         | Men % | Women % | Working women % |
|---------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| 1970–74 | 74.6  | 85.4    | 84.5            |
| 1975–79 | 78.8  | 85.9    | 86.8            |
| 1980–84 | 80.4  | 86.3    | 86.3            |
| 1985–89 | 81.0  | 86.8    | 87.3            |
| 1990–94 | 81.8  | 88.8    | 88.7            |
| 1995–99 | 83.4  | 90.2    | 90.3            |
| 2000–04 | 83.5  | 87.9    | 88.4            |

Source: Ganzeboom & Luijkx (2004)

Social mobility can also be divided into rates of absolute mobility and relative mobility (social fluidity). Absolute mobility rates tell us something about the percentage of individuals in some base category who are mobile or immobile. Relative mobility rates express the relative chances of access to different class destinations for individuals of differing class origins.<sup>26</sup>

26. Abercrombie, (1994), pp. 386–388. Relative mobility rates measure the statistical independence of categories of origins and destinations, these rates are known as ‘odds ratios’. A ratio of 1 equals complete statistical independence, which can be translated as ‘perfect mobility’ or ‘complete openness’. If it would ever occur in a society, it would mean that the chances of individuals ending up in a certain occupation or class are completely unaffected by their parent’s occupation or class level.

The scientists conclude that there still is a clear and continued trend towards more social fluidity, for both men and working women. Moreover the data for period 2000–2004 do not support any assumption of a slowed down trend, something the researchers speculated on earlier. While the mobility regime for women used to be more fluid than that for men, in 2004 both have reached about the same level of fluidity.<sup>27</sup>

### *Intragenerational*

Besides intergenerational mobility, one can also discern social mobility in an individual career. How likely is social mobility during one’s life? There are far less data for this kind of job mobility, but the available information can give an insight. Even a comparison between intergenerational and intragenerational mobility is possible on the basis of the data we have.

Table 6 shows the intragenerational mobility for men in the Netherlands between 1982 and 1992. We can conclude that there is some job mobility during a career. The percentage of people working on level IV, V or VI increased, whereas the levels I, II and III decreased. During their careers the Dutch men climbed the social ladder. This could be due to changes in the labour market – for example, more high level jobs – but it can also be caused by people starting at the bottom and climbing the career ladder.<sup>28</sup>

27. Ganzeboom en Luijkx, (2004), pp. 114–142; 128–130.

28. De Graaf en Luijkx, (1995), pp. 67–80; 69–70.

Table 6: Intragenerational job mobility (first job and last job) for men in the Netherlands (1982–1992)

|           |       | Last job |      |      |      |      |     | Total | %    |
|-----------|-------|----------|------|------|------|------|-----|-------|------|
|           |       | I        | II   | III  | IV   | V    | VI  |       |      |
| First job | I     | 10       | 28   | 32   | 12   | 14   | 5   | 101   | 5.4  |
|           | II    | 21       | 185  | 171  | 60   | 68   | 25  | 530   | 28.2 |
|           | III   | 25       | 91   | 402  | 103  | 127  | 50  | 798   | 42.5 |
|           | IV    | -        | 7    | 33   | 48   | 25   | 14  | 127   | 6.8  |
|           | V     | 3        | 6    | 27   | 20   | 103  | 34  | 193   | 10.3 |
|           | VI    | -        | 4    | 5    | 4    | 33   | 84  | 130   | 6.9  |
|           | Total | 59       | 321  | 670  | 247  | 370  | 212 | 1879  |      |
| %         | 3.1   | 17.1     | 35.7 | 13.1 | 19.7 | 11.3 |     | 100   |      |

Source: De Graaf en Luijckx

In comparison with intragenerational mobility, there seems to be more intergenerational mobility in the Netherlands. Looking at the intragenerational mobility of men between 1982 and 1992, almost 44 per cent was immobile. This percentage was only 30 when looking to the intergenerational mobility for that period. The odds ratio for intragenerational mobility is 1.42 – higher than 1 means more immobility – whereas the odds ratio of the mobility between the profession of the father and the first profession of the son – which means intergenerational – is 1.17. This ratio is the same when looking at the last profession of the son in comparison to that of the father.

In the Netherlands it is easier for an individual to work at a higher level than his father, but it is harder to break free from an individual's original starting point in the labour market. It is not self-evident that individuals undergo job mobility during their career, but if they do, it is almost exclusively upward mobility. Research also showed that social mobility is most likely to take place at the start of a career. At this point educational level is very important, people often start on a relative low level and change their social position due to

the education they have finished. After some years the final position, according to someone's educational level, is reached and maintained. This fact shows the importance of education to social mobility.<sup>29</sup>

Table 7: Intragenerational job mobility for men and women in the Netherlands (2003-2008)

|               |     |          | Number of persons with job | Job level before mobility* |     |      |     |     |
|---------------|-----|----------|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----|------|-----|-----|
|               |     |          |                            | I                          | II  | III  | IV  | V   |
| Period        | Sex | Mobility | x 1000                     |                            |     |      |     |     |
| 2003/<br>2004 | M   | ↓        | 97                         | -                          | 15  | 33   | 31  | 18  |
|               |     | ↔        | 150                        | 8                          | 25  | 62   | 41  | 14  |
|               |     | ↑        | 112                        | 23                         | 40  | 36   | 13  | -   |
|               |     | None     | 3445                       | 208                        | 793 | 1362 | 756 | 325 |
|               | F   | ↓        | 65                         | -                          | 8   | 24   | 23  | 10  |
|               |     | ↔        | 107                        | 2                          | 23  | 48   | 27  | 7   |
|               |     | ↑        | 85                         | 17                         | 32  | 28   | 8   | -   |
|               |     | None     | 2279                       | 158                        | 505 | 931  | 529 | 157 |
| 2004/<br>2005 | M   | ↓        | 89                         | -                          | 13  | 24   | 33  | 20  |
|               |     | ↔        | 154                        | 6                          | 26  | 67   | 42  | 13  |
|               |     | ↑        | 117                        | 29                         | 35  | 36   | 16  | -   |
|               |     | None     | 3443                       | 200                        | 802 | 1368 | 772 | 302 |
|               | F   | ↓        | 58                         | -                          | 7   | 21   | 21  | 9   |
|               |     | ↔        | 104                        | 3                          | 22  | 44   | 28  | 8   |
|               |     | ↑        | 75                         | 10                         | 30  | 27   | 9   | -   |
|               |     | None     | 2311                       | 142                        | 528 | 949  | 542 | 151 |
| 2005/<br>2006 | M   | ↓        | 102                        | -                          | 13  | 33   | 30  | 26  |
|               |     | ↔        | 153                        | 6                          | 25  | 67   | 41  | 14  |
|               |     | ↑        | 138                        | 34                         | 46  | 45   | 13  | -   |
|               |     | None     | 3383                       | 203                        | 789 | 1366 | 709 | 315 |
|               | F   | ↓        | 56                         | -                          | 8   | 17   | 18  | 12  |
|               |     | ↔        | 111                        | 5                          | 24  | 50   | 23  | 9   |
|               |     | ↑        | 95                         | 20                         | 37  | 32   | 6   | -   |
|               |     | None     | 2350                       | 153                        | 517 | 968  | 523 | 189 |

29. Ibid. pp. 70–71 and 79.

|       |   |      |      |     |     |      |     |     |
|-------|---|------|------|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|
| 2006/ | M | ↓    | 108  | -   | 15  | 34   | 33  | 26  |
| 2007  |   | ↔    | 181  | 9   | 30  | 82   | 44  | 16  |
|       |   | ↑    | 173  | 44  | 58  | 52   | 19  | -   |
|       | F | None | 3381 | 216 | 794 | 1329 | 715 | 327 |
|       |   | ↓    | 67   | -   | 10  | 22   | 22  | 12  |
|       |   | ↔    | 143  | 3   | 32  | 63   | 30  | 15  |
|       |   | ↑    | 117  | 18  | 50  | 35   | 13  | -   |
|       |   | None | 2378 | 154 | 518 | 983  | 535 | 188 |
| 2007/ | M | ↓    | 121  | -   | 14  | 44   | 36  | 28  |
| 2008  |   | ↔    | 194  | 11  | 32  | 84   | 53  | 14  |
|       |   | ↑    | 189  | 40  | 61  | 62   | 26  | -   |
|       | F | None | 3378 | 218 | 742 | 1323 | 740 | 356 |
|       |   | ↓    | 87   | -   | 12  | 26   | 29  | 18  |
|       |   | ↔    | 158  | 6   | 36  | 69   | 34  | 13  |
|       |   | ↑    | 130  | 23  | 53  | 39   | 15  | -   |
|       |   | None | 2453 | 161 | 502 | 1012 | 570 | 208 |

Source: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek

## Policy implications

The above presented data thus show that Dutch society is relatively mobile, with improving life chances in recent decades. There are low poverty rates, as well as an overall low risk of poverty. In line with these results there is only a small number of people experiencing material deprivation or any other sort of social exclusion. These good results are due to high employment rates, and an active labour market policy by the Dutch government. Nevertheless in the Netherlands there is a relatively small group of about 211,000 households living in relative poverty – mostly on social benefits – for a long time. Children growing up in these families show less (upward) social mobility in comparison to children from families with an at least an average income. Moreover, statistics show that these children do worse at school.

Some 70 per cent of households living in relative poverty and/or on social benefits have no qualification of any kind,

and a majority of these households is formed by single parent families with multiple problems to resolve. The fact that children coming from single parent families, or from families without income other than social benefits, or from families where the parents have no qualification whatsoever, are much more likely to leave school at an early age without any diploma, shows that family background is still a factor in individual life chances. Although social policies in the Netherlands have been quite successful in combating poverty and guaranteeing life chances, one should be realistic about the fact that the influence of family background on individual life chances can never be completely alleviated. In the same way it is realistic to acknowledge that there will always be relative poverty in an society.

Regarding job mobility between generations, the openness of the Dutch society is rather promising. When compared to intragenerational mobility, the rate of intergenerational mobility is higher. More people are mobile when compared to their parents' job level, whereas fewer people show mobility during their careers. This again shows the importance of the educational level children attain during their studies. The job level at the start of a career greatly determines the level reached at the end of the career. Happily, the rate of early school drop-out was reduced successfully the last few years, by active policies on truancy and more flexible advancements between the different school levels.

Moreover, since 1 October 2009 in the Netherlands people younger than 27 are obliged to either go to school or have a job. They can't apply for social benefits before they reach the age of 27, unless they are disabled. Doing nothing is only an option for people who can afford such a lifestyle. This obligation gives a lot of young people the opportunity and an important (financial) incentive to finish school, even if they don't have a supportive home situation.

In their Liberal Manifesto – published in 2005 – the VVD emphasises the importance of good education. After public security and defence, providing good education is, according to the liberals, the most important state task; even more important than social security. Only if a high level of education is guaranteed, everyone has the opportunity to develop their talents, even if his family background is far from ideal. The liberals assume correctly that, as long as there is no child abuse or neglect, the state should have no influence whatsoever on the private family life of children. The only real option to improve individual life chances is through education.<sup>30</sup>

Recently the VVD published some policy recommendations to mobilise the small group of people living on social benefits for a long time.<sup>31</sup> Along with these recommendations the VVD wants to guarantee more chances for children growing up in disadvantaged situations. They should have fair opportunities to outgrow their background. To achieve this goal the VVD introduced the so-called ‘Participation law’. This bill obliges people living on social security to work in return, by, for example, helping the elderly in the old people’s home or helping the parks and public gardens department.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, because it is fair that society asks something in return for the money it brings up to pay the social benefits. On the other hand – and this is even more important – because the only way to break the vicious circle of poverty, of few life chances for each new generation and of low intergenerational mobility, is to keep adults in work. Although it is said that welfare benefits are always

30. Dales, (2005), pp. 64–67.

31. For all policy recommendations on this subject: de Beaufort, (et.al.), (2010).

32. Participatiewet, (2009). As the Dutch liberals weren’t member of the Dutch government in 2009, this bill has not been adopted by Parliament so far.

meant to be temporary, the experience shows that some people never escape the welfare trap. Knowing that children in these households find it difficult to track a route out of poverty, it is necessary to mobilise the parents. The previous success in achieving higher employment rates in the Netherlands can be considered as good example that his kind of policy is effective. It is important to stress that this work would be temporary, and is considered to be first step back to the regular labour market. Dutch liberals don’t want large groups working in subsidised jobs.

Furthermore Dutch liberals want to end the poverty trap – the fact that sometimes work pays less than one can receive from welfare. Our social security system helped to alleviate poverty, but unfortunately it also gave some people the incentive to stay on benefits rather than working. The liberals hope to achieve this goal by cutting substantial in supplementary benefits. There are no less than 79 supplementary benefits for the lowest income groups. Most of them are bestowed automatically, which means if some supplementary benefits are won, people receive them automatically over a long period. If these people operate tactically, and successfully apply for all possible supplementary benefits, they can obtain an income above minimum wage, leaving them without any incentive to change their situation.<sup>33</sup>

Currently single mothers with children aged under five living on social security are excused from the obligation to apply for jobs. Because these mothers go without employment for such a long time, they have low job prospects when their last child finally reached five. Knowing that children from single-parent families without income other than social security already face more difficulties regarding their life chances this dispensation for single-mothers can have a

33. Centraal Planbureau, (2008).

malign impact on their offspring.<sup>34</sup> The Dutch liberals now suggest to stop the dispensation and provide good childcare instead.

Finally, the VVD seeks to further reduce the school drop-out rate. They will impose stricter policies on truancy, as this is often the forerunner of dropping out. Parents may be fined if their children aged under 12 do not go to school. For children over 12, parents and children themselves will be culpable. Improving education, smaller classes and better transfer from school type to another, would also help to prevent pupils from dropping out. Over the last decade the government has tried to make education more comprehensive, resulting in a very broad curriculum. The VVD argues that some pupils are troubled by too much information on too many subjects, which they don't use later on in their lives. They benefit more from a vocational school, where they can learn a skill. The liberals want these schools to be brought back into the Dutch school system. The socialist ideal of a broad comprehensive school with the same education for all children has not worked. In these schools some children find it very difficult to cope with their learning disabilities, whereas others miss challenges to meet their broad interests and capabilities. Fair chances ask for an educational system that suits pupils with great learning skills as well as those with lesser skills.

The Dutch liberals are convinced that by mobilising the people who are currently living in poverty – mostly long-term social security dependents – the vicious circle of inter-generational poverty can be broken. Thus the life chances of children with a problematic family background – the most immobile in Dutch society – can be improved. Nevertheless, liberals are realistic about the fact that the influence of family

34. Vrooman, Jehoel-Gijsbers en Soede, (2007), pp. 132–134, 142–150.

background on mobility can never be fully mitigated by any policy. Life chances will always to a certain amount be influenced by someone's background. Therefore liberals do not try to achieve 'equal life chances' for every citizen, but 'fair life chances' for all.

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## Poland – a scattered nation in a social mobility perspective

*By Leszek Jazdzewski*

### Introduction

Poland has been a striking example of the gap between the academic knowledge and research of social mobility and political rhetoric. The key features of the socio-political structure of Poland in recent 20 years was a rapid transition from autocracy and statism to capitalism and liberal democracy. This transformation was balanced by social transfers leading to passivity – partly a relic of the old Communist era but also designed to compensate those who suffered most due to the rapid modernization of the country.

Social mobility in Poland after 1945 was at similar levels to those in western countries. A high level of war casualties, especially among elites provided an opening for lower classes, alongside forced industrialisation and migration from the country to cities. During the Communist era, the state applied a political or class criteria for social mobility: people with the ‘right’ background (working class, peasants) received special points university entrance exams while people from intelligentsia were not allowed to become, for example, lawyers and clerks. After 1989 this was replaced by ‘meritocratic’ criteria. Social mobility in the early 1990s reached a new peak, both structurally (the whole new middle class was created) and individually.

The political scene was and still is divided between those whose main goal is to increase economic growth and reform

the social system (representing the middle classes and holding power since 2007, Civic Platform – PO) and those who try to maintain and develop privileges of supposedly most handicapped social groups, often closely connected to trade unions (the current opposition groups – the Law and Justice Party, PiS and the Alliance of Democratic Left – SLD).

It is widely recognised that current social security system does not produce incentives for upwards social mobility and at the same time does not provide those at the bottom of the social ladder with sufficient life chances. Unfortunately only a few reforms have been implemented. Short term political costs outweigh longer term gains for the whole country.

### Social mobility in Polish society – some evidence

The key facts about the social make-up of Poland include:

- The country is very homogeneous, almost 97 per cent of the population hold Polish nationality. There are no ethnic groups, unlike most European countries, who may face social exclusion.
- It has run a high emigration rate since joining the EU (1 million emigrants in 2004 and a total number of 2.2 million in 2008 – it is a total number of Polish emigrants – being abroad more than 3 months - in the end of particular year). In some areas, especially in deprived smaller towns, there are whole districts that went to work to UK or Ireland (the most popular destinations). Such mobility greatly helps in areas with a high unemployment rate, as it gives people the chance of earning a decent salary even for low skilled work but has other significant influences on individuals and families.
- There are considerable differences in life chances between urban and rural areas, especially for youth trying to access high education.
- Education at all levels in Poland is in theory guaranteed

free by the constitution. However, two-thirds of the students have to pay (attending either private or evening/weekend universities). Education is free for those with best results, in practice for those with high material or social capital. Public schools on average are better than private schools on all levels (as the incentive is for better students to achieve free education).

- Life expectancy is 71.3 years for men and 80 for women, with a variation depending on the region (in post-industrial Lodz it is less than 69.1 years for men, whereas in Carpatia mountains it is 73 years). Regions differ to a large extent in practically all social characteristics.
- The influence of the borders of Russia, Prussia and Austria (Austro-Hungary) that divided Poland since 1795 till 1918 are still visible in terms of income, political views, infrastructure and so on.
- Due to heavy industrialisation and mass migration from the country to the cities after the World War II most of the population in Poland has its origin in the countryside.
- *Homo sovieticus* – the lack of personal responsibility or useful skills among large amount of the population, especially those aged more than 45 with no higher degree. The large but inefficient social transfers continue to provide an alternative to work through early retirement or disability pensions. Most of the people aged 45–59 in 2008 occupied the same status (working, unemployed, not looking for a job) as two years previously suggesting limited mobility in this group.<sup>1</sup>
- The highest exclusion rate occurs in post-communists blocks of flats, post kolkhoz rural areas, the traditional ‘ghettos’ (of crime and poverty) in big cities.

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1. Czapinski and Panek (editors) 2009.

Social mobility is regarded as a liberal and democratic goal, going hand in hand with a desire for economic and social modernisation. The topic was studied in Poland during the communist era although with little relevance for today. Since 1989 there has been more reliable statistical data (general census in 2002) and with the most prominent example of Janusz Czapinski. The latest longitudinal survey took place in 2009 and provides a study of social mobility in Poland over the previous decade.

The main factor in analyzing social mobility is a social position of a father compared to a son. Domanski divided society into 6 basic categories: intelligentsia and managers, lower level clerks, company owners, skilled workers, non skilled workers and farmers. The fall of communism resulted in greater social mobility as socialism was meant to diminish social barriers with no regard to competence. According to Domanski (2000) and research by Meyer (1979) and Slomczynski (1989) the position of the father had bigger influence on the social position of the son in USA than in Poland.

Level of social mobility in general rose in Poland from around 62 per cent of population in 1982 to around 70 per cent in 2002. Farmers in comparison to other groups have the lowest level in social mobility. In common with other countries, every 9 out of 10 of them inherited their social status from their fathers, in 1987 every 4 out of 5 and in 2002 every 3 out of 4. At the same time between 1982 and 2002 the number of farmers decreased from 25 to 12 per cent of the workforce.

In 1982 only 10 per cent of the intelligentsia came from the same background as their father, in 2002 this had risen to more than 20 per cent. There is a growing number of people with higher education but only about 30 per cent of them work in intelligentsia jobs.

There is a growing demand for some kinds of jobs – requiring more qualifications; therefore it has to be satisfied by the growing number of intelligentsia and managers which implies that those social categories are more open than those with decreasing number (e.g. farmers).

Company owners come from very diverse backgrounds. In 2002 only 7 per cent from same kind of background as their father, compared with 27 per cent in 1982. This sector was virtually non-existent during communism so the private sector had to recruit its representatives in capitalism from different, mostly lower classes.

Domanski concludes that two decades of democratic Poland brought a growing self-recruitment in intelligentsia and skilled workers classes and the opening up of company owners.

In the first decade of transformation (1987–1998) the intelligentsia was the most privileged of all social classes in terms of education. More than 50 per cent of those with higher education in 1998 were part of the intellegentsia (almost a 20 percentage points rise from 1987). However, this figure fell sharply to 20 per cent by 2002 with the clerks social class now including 23 per cent of those with higher education, the largest single figure of all classes.

Domanski explains this by the education boom that took place in Poland – at the beginning the intelligentsia were the best equipped to pursue a higher education (with symbolic capital, resources and last but not least, aspirations). There is no alternative to higher education for the intelligentsia without suffering a decline in social status, a motivation for pursuing education stronger than among the less skilled classes. However rising demand for higher education led to the rapid expansion of private schools and made possible for people with different social background to study, reducing social hierarchies. Economic inequality in Poland has risen

sharply since 1989 except for a drop in the mid 1990s. It is now strongly correlated with qualification and level of education which, according to Domanski, is a sign that meritocracy is taking root in Poland.

### Some examples – on the basis of Social Diagnosis

The social diagnosis survey found that:

The percentage of young people aged 7 to 15 attending schools has increased (from 94 to 98 per cent throughout the country from 2005 to 2007).

The higher educational aspirations of Polish society are clear in the increasing percentage of persons aged 20 to 24, studying in schools and extramurally, which rose from 58 to 61 per cent between 2005 and 2007.

Almost 29 per cent of households in 2007 decided not to buy any book due to financial reasons, almost 10 percentage points less than in 2005.

More than 8 per cent of all households had moved out of poverty in February 2007 in comparison with two years previously.

### Poverty and social exclusion in Poland

The academic Andrzej Rychard quotes another Polish sociologist Anna Giza-Poleszczuk: “The most visible trend characterising Polish society is its development in two separate ways. On the one hand modern, cosmopolitan, well-off, travelling round the world Poland takes shape. On the other – more and more a lagging behind, traditional, rural, marginalised Poland reveals itself. A trip between Warsaw and a village in the North-East resembles time travel.”<sup>2</sup>

.....  
2. in „Rozproszona Polska” in Domanski et. al. 2003.

About 5.6 per cent of the Polish population (2.1 million) in 2008 were in extreme poverty comparing to 6.6 per cent in 2007. Relative poverty in Poland is on the similar level to European average – 17 per cent. But because of the country's low income levels, this is fixed at just 2101 Euro per year per person – taking into account the difference in prices, 3427 PPS (Purchasing Power Standard).<sup>3</sup> At highest risk of poverty are jobless people and their families. Poverty is also closely correlated with education; practically none of the households whose breadwinner had a higher degree were in extreme poverty.

The economic position of pensioners is comparably good but Poland has the highest levels of risk of poverty among youth in the EU according to EU-SILC. However, as Polish society ages it appears likely the elderly will become a group with a higher risk of poverty (due to early retirement). Youth and children under 18 made up 18 per cent of the population at risk of extreme poverty. More than 60 per cent of these lived in the countryside.

In general families with more than two children were above the average in terms of poverty. 38 per cent of the families with at least four children were in formal (relative) poverty and 18 per cent of them in the extreme poverty. Almost twice as many people in poverty live in the countryside as in the cities.

Almost 70 per cent of Poles have access to the computer at home and almost 60 per cent to the internet. It is strongly related to the age group, only 6 per cent over 65 had access to internet in 2008 and 87 per cent of youth (between 16 and 24). Another very significant factor is education – 94 per cent of students (of all levels) have internet access, 83 per cent of people with the university degree and only 7 per cent of those that finished their education at elementary school.

3. Szukielojc-Bienkunska.

In Poland, the most socially excluded (those facing permanent unemployment, without education, with less than a half of minimum income per person in a household) makes up around 9 to 10 per cent of population. However it is not an 'underclass' in the traditional meaning because that status has not been passed on between generations – although Domanski believe it is only a matter of time.<sup>4</sup>

### Cultural differences

Pawel Spiewak, sociologist and a prominent liberal claims in 'Between individualism and self-dependence' that the traditional links between higher and lower classes, which includes the aspiration to move up the social ladder and the influence of high culture on popular culture, has been broken.<sup>5</sup> He quotes the Polish General Society Poll (PGSP) from 2002 which found that 30 per cent of Poles have no intention of changing their status. Some 75 per cent never, or less frequently than once in a year use a library, 88 per cent do not attend the theatre or concerts and only 21 per cent read some kind of newspapers or other magazines. While 84 per cent watches TV at least one hour a day, 14 per cent have more than 500 books at home.

Spiewak separates a class based on style, relating it to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus: differences between categories of society based on the access to symbolic goods, such as education, prestige, power. Postmodern intelligentsia, concentrated now on individual self-expression more than traditional role of leading the nation, "enlightening" masses makes a very distinct, relatively separated category. Spiewak doesn't give any numbers of that group but by definition it is small, even elitist. Those people inhabit the biggest cities, are highly educated, and often come from the same background,

4. Domanski 2009.

5. in Domanski et. al. 2003.

they have a reasonable income, but aren't necessarily very rich. It is not income that matters – it is style. As Spiewak puts it:

“If the owner of the big furniture factory wants to distance himself from people surrounding him, he makes it by easily understood symbols of wealth, prompting envy and respect at the same time: builds [a] house larger than all the other houses in the neighborhood. (...) The interior of the house is equipped with a plasma TV, a new DVD and some furniture in the style of fake Louis XIV or something of that kind. However on this impressive equipment its owner watches those same crime or pornographic movies that laborers he employs or his poorer neighbors do. (...) What distinguishes a mansion of that rich man from the neighborhood is only wealth and prosperity but not style.”<sup>6</sup>

One could come to a conclusion that Spiewak inclines that a member of that higher class is a snob, on the other hand the gap between him and rest of a society is much wider than just income or education. It is a lifestyle, which also influences that person's political viewpoint, attitude towards democracy, nationalism or Europe. Poland for years lived in a myth of unity, while, as Spiewak claims, it is really heavily divided with virtually separate categories. Along the same lines, Rychard claims that there is no huge conflict dividing Poland in two but there are many smaller ones. Rychard describes this phenomenon as “scattered” – Poland lacks a positive unifying factor.<sup>7</sup>

### Propositions and programs of political parties

The current ruling coalition is based around the economically liberal but socially conservative Civic Platform party and its partners the agrarian Polish People's Party. One of the

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

government proposals was making it compulsory to attend school from the age of six years, as opposed to seven now. The Ministry of Education argued that this reform would help narrow the gap between those children that come from better off or better educated background and those that were less successful. However the reform was never implemented as it was strongly opposed by parents. In its place, the government introduced the option to start school at six and special classes for six years old have been introduced in some schools.

Another government goal that can be claimed to be partially achieved is a program of creating kindergartens even in small towns and villages where the access to them is either very limited or non-existent. The Ministry of Education boasts that between the election in September 2007 and January 2009 636 public, non-public and other forms of kindergarten care were founded. This is one of the crucial but not entirely recognised achievements of the government in recent years helping to enhance equal chances for the children at their earliest stage of education. Having said that, only 20 per cent of the children under six take advantage of the education at this level (kindergarten and crèche) which is the lowest level in the EU. Only 13 per cent of children in the country attend any form of education or daily care before the age of seven. This figure, however, is twice as high in the cities and the gap is widening.

The conservative Law and Justice (PiS) held power between 2005 and 2007 and is the biggest opposition grouping. In education PiS stresses order (their government introduced school uniforms), questions “neutral” in terms of values and school ideology, at the same time declaring a will to diminish a division in access to education between rich and poor. But the party only has a limited array of concrete policies to achieve this aspiration. These include: increasing scholarships

for the most talented students alongside special regional centers and programmes; social support depending on a behavior of a student; a higher pass threshold for exams combined with some help to less successful students and the introduction of a programme to try and equalise the performance of urban and rural schools. The Law and Justice parties blames the poor record of education in Poland on “lobbies”, such as NGOs, private schools, the authors of handbooks and so on. The party represents a very conservative, centralised model of education combined with traditional values and state control. That kind of ideology collides with attempts to level inequalities.

### Challenges for the future – the long term strategy report

A special body of counsellors to the Prime Minister was created in order to shape a long term strategy report covering different fields, among them social mobility. One of the ten strategy chapters is exclusively dedicated to the challenges of social cohesion.

The main idea put forward is to move from a welfare state to a ‘workfare’ state (where state activates people to work without replacing it with social security), where work is a value in its own and social solidarity is expressed without enforcing it by a state.

The diagnosis includes the creation of a more efficient and just model of social redistribution. For example, around 6 per cent of social transfers accrue to the richest 10 per cent of households and only slightly more than 10 per cent to the poorest 10 per cent.

Michał Boni, a minister in Donald Tusk’s Government and chief of the advisory board to the prime minister that prepared a strategy “Poland 2030”, said: “If we stop to treat social policy as a burden but and instead conclude that we

achieve job activity thanks to it – then of course it will be a progressive not regressive factor.”<sup>8</sup> The fighting against social exclusion also involves access to social services: health care, education, culture – it is one of the main goals of the Strategy Poland 2030.

Generally, PO appeals to those with aspirations to be middle class or those who are already middle class, while PiS tries to convince those that regard themselves as unsuccessful – the victims of the post-communist transformation.

### Inequality and perceptions of social mobility: conclusions

After 1989, the level of inequality in Poland increased. As Czapinski argues, the result was not that the poor had less chance of climbing the economic ladder than the rich.<sup>9</sup> The income of the 20 per cent of the poorest households in Poland rose faster than 20 per cent of the richest, at the beginning as well as in the end of the 2000s. The distance between the wealthiest and the poorest groups remains on the same level which means, according to Czapinski: “That Poles improve the quality of life not at the expense of the others but with others”. The Gini index for Poland is 0.40, – a similar level to the UK. The Transformation did not significantly change social mobility in terms of marriages or social life. The openness of social structures and inter-generational mobility remained on the similar level as before. Hierarchies are a source of stability rather than of conflict in social relations – concludes Domanski.

Despite well-grounded hypotheses, neither intergenerational nor intergenerational mobility influenced view on democracy, transformation, capitalism, distribution of wealth,

8. Boni 2009.

9. Czapinski 2009.

political choices and so on, proves Henryk Domanski on the basis of research conducted between 1982 and 2002.<sup>10</sup>

In general the Polish society expresses supports egalitarian policies. Four-fifths of those surveyed agreed with the statement that “income differences are too large” in 1992, according to the PGSS. This figure had climbed to 91 per cent by 2002. Nearly three-quarters supported the government actively trying to diminish these differences in 1992, a figure which has risen to almost 86 per cent in 2002. The impact of higher unemployment at the beginning of the 21st century and worsening economic situation clearly also played a role in increasing support for intervention. At the same time every nine out of ten adult Poles believe that personal success is mostly based on individual achievement. It seems that in Poland the rules of capitalism are widely accepted but less so their outcome of winners and losers.

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10. Domanski 200?.

# Social mobility in Sweden – more focus on groups than on individuals<sup>1</sup>

*By Ingemund Hägg*

## Introduction

Sweden has long been characterized as an advanced welfare state with a high degree of equality marked by a narrow income distribution. This chapter, however, examines the levels of social mobility. From social mobility research and studies we look for evidence of mobility and immobility and seek to draw out some liberal policy responses.

There is a political debate about social mobility which is focused on how reforms can increase upwards mobility both in terms of job status and in terms of income. Sometimes the term life chances is used even if there are different ways to think about life chances as the following examples indicate:

“[The government should pursue] ... policies which promote justice and equal life chances which means that everybody can get a job and make more and more money, improve their health, get an education, have influence and choose between alternatives.” (Quote from report of a parliamentary committee (SOU 1998:2 Storstadskommittén). “We want to offer people new life chances, ever new life chances, and opportunities to work their way out of unwanted situations with which they cannot cope without help and support from

1. Parts of this chapter draws on a European Liberal Forum seminar presentation by Lennart Arvedson, Ph.D, in Stockholm 2008.

others”. (Statement by spokesperson for the Green Party (Maria Wetterstrand in the parliament 12 October 2005). “Nothing is more important for giving people equal life chances than a school where everyone has good opportunities to develop” (Liberal party proposal 2001/02). “Where you live and how you live is important --- for your future life chances” (Social democrats proposal 2008/09 on housing policy).

So, life chances is a term with positive connotations which is used in different contexts in the public debate.

## Absolute mobility – society change

Over the course of the twentieth century Sweden moved from a largely agrarian to industrial and service based economy. This transformation can be described in terms of absolute mobility, that is, children moved to other social positions than those to which their parents belonged. “Equality at a halt? Social mobility in Sweden, 1976–99” is the title of a chapter by the sociologist Jan O. Jonsson.<sup>2</sup> In this research the so called Goldthorpe class schema or EGP schema with 11 classes is often used. The classes are constructed to mirror occupation and social-economic status. Often researchers for reasons of limited data combine classes and Jonsson uses the following smaller number of classes:

- I/II Service class
- III Non-manual routine workers
- IVab Petty bourgeoisie
- IVcd Farmers
- V/VI Skilled workers
- VII Unskilled workers

The research used data from annual surveys of living conditions (ULF – Undersökning av levnadsförhållanden) produc-

2. Jonsson 2004, pp. 225–250.

ed by Statistics Sweden. Jonsson studied changes in what he called the class structure for men and women in the labour force (25–64 years of age). For the period 1976–1999 the number of people working qualified non-manual jobs, that is, classes I and II each increased by 7 percentage points from about 10 and 14 per cent respectively, while the proportion in manual jobs (class VII) declined from about 33 per cent to 23 per cent. Agriculture workers almost disappeared entirely. The number of workers in traditional industry decreased from about 20 per cent (in 1982) to about 15 per cent in 1999. Not only workers in industry decreased but also workers in services (low grade sales persons, hotel and restaurant employees etc.) decreased over the period. The development was different for men and women but the differences diminished during the period 1976–1999.<sup>3</sup>

About 70 per cent of those in the labour force (25–64 years of age) were intergenerationally mobile during 1976–1999. This percentage was fairly stable over these years. Of this total upward movements were a little more than 40 per cent for men and about 30–35 percent for women. The figures for downward movement were 15–19 per cent for men and 23–29 per cent for women. Sideways or non-vertical movements (for example mobility between different types of workers) were 13–17 per cent for men and 16–19 per cent for women.<sup>4</sup>

### Relative mobility – social fluidity

It is important to note what measures of absolute mobility tell us about a society – and what they do not tell us. According to an old expression a rising tide raises all boats. Likewise socio-economic change such as the historic restructuring of societies from agrarian to industrial to post-industrial societies

entails drastic change in occupational and socio-economic categories. Agrarian and unskilled labour have been more or less wiped out while service and non-manual professions grow. There is massive upward mobility for the whole population. But this does not necessarily mean that the relative positions of individuals change. It is quite conceivable that there is an upward shift of the whole hierarchy. Thus those who were on top in the old society could still be on top after the structural changes while the rest could continue to live on the lower echelons of society albeit under better conditions than before.

Sociologists have spent considerable time, energy and creativity to develop measures of relative mobility or social fluidity where: “The degree of social fluidity is generally taken as an indicator of societal openness: that is to say, the extent to which the chances of access to class positions are equally or unequally distributed.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus social fluidity is defined as the probability that an individual ends up in a different social class from that in which he/she started in. The higher the social fluidity the larger the openness of the society (in Jonsson’s terms: “equality of opportunity”). As Jonsson expresses it, the key focus is “on the relative chances of occupational success of children from different social origins”.<sup>6</sup> He shows that the association between origin and destination is more or less the same for men over the years 1976–1999 and has decreased for women, implying more fluidity for women. Jonsson is, however, uncertain if the trend to more fluidity has continued since the 1980’s and writes: “It would be an exaggeration to claim that the equalisation of opportunities has come to a halt, but it has certainly lost speed.”<sup>7</sup>

3. Ibid. p. 231–232.

4. Ibid. p. 248.

5. Breen 2004 (editor), p. 4.

6. Ibid. p. 226.

7. Ibid. p. 226.

## Income mobility

As in other countries, researchers have shown great interest in income mobility. There is ample data on income mobility in Sweden. Table 1 has been adapted from the Swedish database LINDA (Longitudinal Individual Data Base) and shows income mobility for the period 2000–2005. LINDA is based on income registers and population censuses for a panel of more than 300,000 people and has data from 1968.

Table 1. Income mobility between quintiles 2000–2005 as per cent. Persons 25–55 years of age in 2000. Source: SCB LINDA.

| Year |   | 2005     |    |    |    |    |     |
|------|---|----------|----|----|----|----|-----|
|      |   | Quintile | 1  | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5   |
| 2000 | 1 | 51       | 17 | 14 | 12 | 7  | 100 |
|      | 2 | 16       | 39 | 27 | 12 | 5  | 100 |
|      | 3 | 6        | 18 | 45 | 26 | 6  | 100 |
|      | 4 | 3        | 5  | 18 | 53 | 21 | 100 |
|      | 5 | 2        | 2  | 4  | 16 | 77 | 100 |

Nearly half (49 per cent) of those who in 2000 belonged to the lowest fifth of the income earners had moved to higher income groups five years later. One-fifth (19 per cent) had moved to the two highest groups. Meanwhile 77 per cent of those who belonged to the highest group in 2000 remained in this group 2005.

There are great differences between age groups. Only one in three of those who in 2000 were between 25 and 30 years and belonged to the lowest group remained in this group in 2005. This was also true of 80 per cent of the women and 65 per cent of the men in the age group 55–60 years. As could be expected retired persons in the lowest group tended to remain in that group five years later.

Statistics Sweden has prepared a study for Lennart Arvedson of income mobility during the 30 year period

between 1970 and 2000 for those who in 1970 were aged between 25 and 34. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Income mobility 1970–2000 between quintiles in per cent. Men and women 25–34 years in 1970.

| Year |   | 2000     |      |      |      |      |   |
|------|---|----------|------|------|------|------|---|
|      |   | Quintile | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5 |
| 1970 | 1 | 21,1     | 17,4 | 22,8 | 23,1 | 15,6 |   |
|      | 2 | 14,4     | 16,5 | 23,6 | 26,0 | 19,6 |   |
|      | 3 | 7,8      | 12,1 | 22,4 | 33,7 | 24,1 |   |
|      | 4 | 3,5      | 5,2  | 15,1 | 35,8 | 40,3 |   |
|      | 5 | 2,6      | 3,1  | 8,0  | 22,3 | 64,1 |   |

Some 21 per cent of those who in 1970 belonged to lowest quintile remained in the same group 30 years later. The table also shows that 64 per cent of those who belonged to the highest group in 1970 were there also 30 years later. But from this study we cannot answer the question if these individuals had “visited” other income groups over the 30 years.

Björklund and colleagues studied family background and income for men in Sweden born 1932–1968.<sup>8</sup> The authors use brother correlations to find out how much of variance of income can be contributed by family background. They find that this has declined and then studied if number of years in school could be one cause for this. But no such evidence was found. For future research they suggest looking at specific education reforms instead.

## Occupation mobility

Sweden is one of four countries studied by Jonsson and colleagues where they also employ a ‘micro-class’ regime.<sup>9</sup> This focuses on occupational mobility, a narrower concept than the classes used by Goldthorpe and EGP schemas.<sup>10</sup> A combination of occupation and socio-economic conditions is the basis for the latter. The authors focus on immobility, that is, the choice of the same occupation as the father.

The data is limited to one census – 1990 – and links to the father’s occupation found in the 1960 and 1970 censuses.<sup>11</sup> While big-class immobility for Swedish men was 49 per cent, micro-class immobility was only 11 per cent. The authors, however, find 11 per cent high in view of how small the micro-classes are, indicating a high degree of inequality of opportunity. It is interesting to quote from the tentative conclusions the authors draw from their findings from the four countries, “... children develop a taste for occupational reproduction, are trained by their parents in occupation-specific skills, have access to occupational networks ... If children are risk-averse and oriented principally to avoiding downward mobility, the safest path to encouraging that objective may well be to use these occupation-specific resources... even in the absence of any intrinsic interest in occupational reproduction, children may still pursue it.”<sup>12</sup> The authors find it “troubling” that reproduction is so deeply rooted in family background.

8. Björklund et. al. 2009.

9. Jonsson et. al. 2009.

10. See above in the section about absolute mobility.

11. Jonsson et. al. 2009, p. 994.

12. Ibid. p. 1022.

## Life courses – group aggregations

The most common way to describe living conditions in a society – that is welfare or quality of life or equity – are in terms of economic equality. The social and economic conditions of the Swedish population have been monitored for the last 40 years in the framework of The Swedish Level-of-Living Survey (LNU).<sup>13</sup>

Within this dataset it is possible to compare the living conditions for a particular group (for example university graduates, single parents, unemployed, particular age groups) with other groups at a particular point in time and also to track the changes in living conditions of a certain group over time. Have the living conditions for group x, y or z changed over time – and if so, for the better or the opposite? The value of such information for policy debate and development is of course considerable.

It is important, however, to note what surveys of this kind are not able to tell us. They do not contain information about what happens to the individuals in the various groups. To be specific: the survey data describe the living conditions for a particular group – young unemployed men, single parents aged 25–29, university graduates aged 35–44 – in a particular year and then again at later points in time. But we are not informed about how the conditions of the individuals who belonged to the group at the time of the first survey have evolved over time.

On lack of resources Jonsson and Mills write “... the regularity of welfare problems as well as their duration (or permanence) is crucial for judging how severely people suffer from lack of resources. If, for example, all young people experienced a short spell of unemployment and thereafter

13. [www2.sofi.su.se/LNU2000/lnu\\_eng.htm](http://www2.sofi.su.se/LNU2000/lnu_eng.htm).

enjoyed life-long job security, unemployment would not be a great social problem.<sup>14</sup>

The authors use so called “event history analysis” and data from the LNU database where their “basic units of analysis are the sequence of events and states that make up the individual’s social and economic trajectory after birth.”<sup>15</sup>

In a chapter on generational changes in transitions and volatility Jonsson notes that family policy has been supportive to mobility in family relations while job market policy has underpinned stability in job relations. He concludes, however, that “both family life and working life are overwhelmingly predictable in that few changes occur after one has reached the age of 30–40. Descriptions of modern life as a flux in which family and occupational statuses are constantly changing are simply not in accord with empirical facts. Either because people have preferences for routine and want to foresee their future life, or because they are constrained by opportunity structures, they manifest in their life courses a stability that is quite impressive.”<sup>16</sup>

The LNU reports themselves provide interesting and valuable information about living conditions for various groups and how they change over time. The latest report, from 2001, compares the welfare conditions for the Swedish population and subgroups in 1990 with those in 1999. Single mothers is one subgroup presented (there were about 200,000 single mothers in 1999). During the 1990s single mothers as a group faced declining real income levels while the Swedish population in total had an increase. About 30 per cent of single mothers received social assistance with no change in this rate between 1990 and 1991. Their health status was lower in 1999 than in 1990.

14. Jonsson and Mills (editors), 2001, p. xviii.

15. Ibid. p. xvi.

16. Ibid. p. 25.

## Life courses – persistence in certain types of social positions

The political scientist Emil Uddhammar conducted an interesting study on income mobility for the period 1981–1993.<sup>17</sup> He concludes that: “A significant leap from a low income situation is the rule and not the exception.”<sup>18</sup> It is mainly young persons and students who have a low income. Measured over a six year period 80 per cent of the low income earners in the youngest category moved up to average or higher income groups. Some 60 per cent of the 20–29 year age group had moved to average or higher income groups, and 40 per cent of the 30–49 year age group. Less than 4 per cent remained in the low income group of those income earners 30 years of age or more in 1985.

A separate poverty study found that about 5 per cent per year of all Swedish households were on the average poor 1994–99.<sup>19</sup> Of those who were defined as poor (earning less than 50 per cent of the median income) in 1994 a little less than 50 per cent remained poor for just one year. Just over 70 per cent were poor for at most two years. Only about 1 per cent of households were poor in all six years. Thus most poor households improved their incomes in this period. Very few people, therefore, remained in a constant state of poverty.

This finding is borne out by a longitudinal study of child poverty which examined children aged 0–4 years in 1991 and at 13–17 in 2004. The study showed that 80 per cent were never poor (child defined as poor if share of household income was less than 50 per cent of median income), 15 per cent were born into poverty, 20 per cent were poor during

17. Uddhammar 1997.

18. Ibid. p. 210.

19. Sonnegård et. al. 2002.

one or more years, and 2 per cent consistently poor, that is poor for seven or more years.<sup>20</sup>

In a study with data from the Stockholm Birth Cohort Study (SBC) longitudinal data about a cohort born in Stockholm 1953 could be followed until 2001. Men who undertook criminal behaviour at a young age, but not later, tended to have a family and work like those who had not been criminal. Men who were criminal both at young age and as adults were worse off and turned out to have grown up under more difficult family conditions. For women the corresponding development was worse than for men and those who had committed crimes both at young age and as adults were more commonly living in social exclusion.<sup>21</sup>

We presented data on single mothers in the previous section. But what happened to a person who was single mother in 1990 over time? Maybe she was not a single mother in 1999. A small study in Sweden from the mid 1990's found that the average time as single mother was three to five years.

Pathways to social exclusion is the title of an article also using the SBC data base.<sup>22</sup> The authors conclude that there is "Evidence of the transmission of disadvantage from parents to their children and from childhood to adulthood. However, we do not find evidence for any direct linkages between childhood disadvantage and social exclusion, the effects are mediated by life events and processes in adolescence and adulthood, the most influential being deviant behaviour and educational achievement."<sup>23</sup>

Another study using the SBC data base focused on downward mobility. For women growing up in families with parents without higher education and higher job positions

20. Lindquist et. al. 2008.

21. Nilsson and Estrada 2009.

22. Bäckman and Nilsson 2010.

23. Ibid. p. 12.

downward mobility was more frequent than for women with "better" family backgrounds. For men it seemed as if such structural conditions were less important. For them school absence and drug abuse were more decisive.<sup>24</sup>

## Pictures of mobility in Sweden

In this chapter I have presented a number of very different types of studies, ranging from large-scale statistical studies to case study research. As could be expected such a complex phenomenon as social mobility cannot easily be grasped and interpreted even in a small country like Sweden. This is in spite of very competent research performed by prominent sociologists and economists. This section discusses the trends that emerge from the studies. However, first it is necessary to review the assumptions and problems of the social mobility research:

– Inequality is frequently the starting point of research and is normally viewed seen as an undesirable condition in society. Even in research that stresses inequality of opportunity, not outcome, it is difficult to keep the concepts entirely separate. The reason for this is that over a life-course outcomes develop and are successively included in new opportunity (or disadvantage).

– When studying mobility over a long period the precise categories can change – a specific class or category at one point of time is not the same at a later point of time. Even such broad categories as manual workers and non-manual occupations change over time. But income mobility researchers have developed measures that to some extent can handle long term differences.

– Objectives and goals for individuals are ascribed by the researchers when the assertion is that individuals wish to

24. Alm 2008.

move upwards in classes, occupations and incomes, or at least not move downwards.

– Individual choices are implicitly assumed to be of a passive, adaptive type, restricted by structures of economic and other kinds which are assumed to be given to the individuals and not affected by them.

These criticisms of the approach of researchers are not intended to dismiss the validity of the studies but just to highlight some of the assumptions that underlie the work in this area. If some of these assumptions were exchanged for other assumptions this could open up for complementary research endeavours.

The pictures emerging from available studies of social mobility in Sweden show not unexpectedly that the large scale structural changes from an agricultural society to an industrialised society and now to a maybe post-industrial society has – by definition – resulted in a massive absolute social mobility in the country. Relative mobility (social fluidity) shows a more mixed picture. There was widespread relative mobility through much of the second half of the twentieth century but since the late 1990's the picture is unclear.

The LNU and similar surveys do not provide – and they were never meant to provide – an account of what people do with their life chances or – in the terminology of LNU – with the resources at their command. In order to develop our understanding of how people exercise their options, make choices and experience success (or lack of success) in terms of “individual growth and the realisation of talents, wishes and hopes” there is an urgent need for many more longitudinal studies.

## Political parties on life chances and social mobility

In the introduction we gave a few examples of reference to social mobility and life chances in particular from the Swedish parliament. All the political parties make use of the terms ‘social mobility’ and ‘life chances’ but without providing clear definitions.

Searching on the web site of the Swedish parliament we find 471 instances of the term ‘life chances’ in parliamentary documents from 1980 onwards. Of these references the majority (304) were in the last decade and of the latter 115 can be found in party proposals. When life chances are referred to in Swedish Liberal party documents you find words like ‘always new’, ‘equal’, ‘equivalent’, ‘new’, ‘extended’, ‘the same’ and ‘create’. This indicates that the term life chances is regarded as a term with positive connotations, not always in need of more precise definitions.

The term ‘social mobility’ is less frequent with 139 instances since 1970, of which 91 in the last ten years. Of the latter 40 were to be found in party proposals.

For comparison we note that the word ‘equality’ increased from 1171 in the 1970s to 3576 in the 2000s and inequality from 190 to 1866 for the same period.

Thus the terms ‘life chances’ and ‘social mobility’ seem to have increased in the first decade of this century and that ‘life chances’ is more frequent than ‘social mobility’. But ‘equality’ and ‘inequality’ are still much more widely employed terms.

By looking at the content of the documents we find that school education and integration (social exclusion) seem to be the most common policy areas associated with social mobility or life chances. Education is viewed as the major instrument for improving life chances and social mobility. The reference to integration reflects concerns about social

exclusion. This is marked by reforms initiated by the present government with the Swedish Liberal party as the promoter. Both the minister of education and the minister for higher education and research are liberals. In basic education the focus has to be on knowledge, not least on reading, writing and mathematics. Parents and pupils will get more feedback. National tests will be more used. Apprentice programs are introduced.

In political discourse terms like ‘equality’ and ‘equality of opportunity’ are often used. We do not find many explicit references to social mobility research but implicitly the findings from cross-sectional group studies seem to be used as evidence for political proposals.

There are few policy-oriented reports dealing with social mobility in Sweden. However, Daniel Lind of the Swedish Federation of Trade Unions (LO) presented a report comparing intergenerational social mobility in the USA and Sweden. The report concluded that life chances are better distributed in Sweden than in the US and that family background was less important for reaching higher positions in society in Sweden.<sup>25</sup>

### The future – policy implications

We will come back to general policy implications in the final chapter of the book. But from the case of Sweden we can note that the need for longitudinal studies, following individual life courses is strong.

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 25. Lind 2009. Also other reports, for example from the Taxpayers’ Association take up distribution issues. The book *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett which came in Swedish translation in the beginning of 2010 aroused a lot of debate on equality – inequality, not least about its disputed causality conclusions.

We can see that individuals in “problematic” situations at one point of time might have moved out of such situations at a later point of time. The reasons for such mobility can be very different. Sometimes the main reasons can be that the individual have found new options sometimes in new contexts (bonds, ligatures) giving meaning to their choices. Sometimes the new contexts can be sought in family and friend relations, sometimes with help of civil society organisations, sometimes with the help of public policy and public agencies.

Reasons for not moving out from problematic situations can be lack of positive changes in contexts, depending on family, friends, misdirected civil society efforts or misdirected public policy measures.

A general implication is that measures to compensate problematic situations with financial support might just make the situations permanent instead of changing the situations. Such support should be combined with efforts to help the single mothers to move into employment. A research implication is that there is a strong need for more studies in these areas. And for youngsters in social custody tracking the life trajectories of those who have moved out of problematic situations. Again, we do not see coping with inequality as the most fruitful aim for dealing with such situations and see a need for translating social mobility research findings from mostly dealing with inequality to dealing with movements and change for individuals in society.

The policy discussions are too much influenced by conclusion about groups from cross-sectional studies of, for example, single mothers’ situations, immigrants’ situations, young persons out of work, and similar types of groups. Without knowledge about the extension of time these characteristics last, the temptation in policy formation might be to support such groups financially rather than trying to remove obstacles for getting out of such problematic situations.

One final important implication is that there is a need to be more accepting of the desires and aspirations of individuals who do not primarily want to ascend hierarchies, be they professional or income related. There is a need for more respect for individuals' differing desires and aspirations.

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# Liberalism, individuality and social mobility

By *Fleur de Beaufort*

‘Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself.’

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

## Introduction

Ralf Dahrendorf is always at the top of social mobility reading lists. In his famous work *Life Chances: Approaches to Social and Political Theory*, the social scientist and philosopher defines life chances as “opportunities for individual growth, for the realisation of talents, wishes and hopes, and these opportunities are provided by social conditions”.<sup>1</sup> Every person should have the opportunity to develop their own talents and attain a position in society based upon them. In an ideal world, someone’s talents, choices and efforts would determine their social status and income, not their family background.

Although Dahrendorf became famous for his concept of ‘life chances’, he was not the first liberal thinker to stress the importance of individual development. In fact liberalism has a very long tradition of this: it is not without reason that liberalism and individualism are often bracketed together. One of the aspects of individualism is self-development. In

1. Dahrendorf (1979), p. 30.

this chapter I will search for the philosophical roots of social mobility in the liberal tradition, starting in the Romantic Age in Germany. Based upon a discussion of key liberal thinkers, this chapter will discuss why social mobility is important to liberals, what can be considered ‘fair’ chances in life and what can or can’t be done to give these chances to all?

## Individuality and the importance of self-development

In his *Autobiography* the British philosopher John Stuart Mill added a chapter on the future course of his life. In it he wrote that *On Liberty* would be likely to survive longer than any other book he wrote. According to Mill, this work was “a kind of philosophic textbook of a single truth”, being “the doctrine of individuality, and the claim of moral nature to develop itself in its own way”.<sup>2</sup> This single truth running through the essay *On Liberty* was highly influenced by the German Romantic idea of individuality, as described by the Prussian statesman and philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt in his book *The Limits of State Action*.<sup>3</sup> The motto of *On Liberty* was a direct quote from Von Humboldt’s book: “The grand leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity”. Both philosophers had the same purpose with their

2. Mill (1989), p. 189.

3. Originally this work was titled: *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. The editor of the 1993-edition of *The Limits of State Action* showed the influence Von Humboldt had on Mill by adding an overview to the book with all similarities including references between both works (see: Von Humboldt (1993), pp. 149–151). Von Humboldt can be regarded as the most important exponent of the so-called ‘Bildungsliberalismus’ which appeared during the Romantic Age in Germany. This type of liberalism stressed mainly the importance of the development of one’s individuality, one’s personality and one’s abilities.

books, but Mill's book became more famous, was translated into many different languages and constantly reprinted, while Von Humboldt's book, where many of Mill's ideas originated, is almost forgotten.

To Von Humboldt liberty as such was – although very important – insufficient for individual life and happiness. “The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes; but there is besides another essential – immanently connected with freedom, it is true – a variety of situations.”<sup>4</sup> In the eyes of Von Humboldt the preconditions for an autonomous and purposeful self are freedom and variety. Even the most free, self-confident individual, would be hindered in its development without a variety of possibilities to choose from. The inevitable conclusion is that individuals should have a fair chance to develop their talents and live an autonomous life. Mill adopts this very idea: “[...] the importance, to man and society, of a large variety in types of character, and of giving full freedom to human nature to expand itself in innumerable and conflicting directions.”<sup>5</sup>

Von Humboldt concluded that: “Reason cannot desire from man any other condition than that in which each individual not only enjoys the most absolute freedom of developing himself by his own energies, in his perfect individuality, but in which external nature even is left unfashioned by any human agency, but only receives the impress given to it by each individual of himself and his own free will, according to

4. Von Humboldt (1993), p. 10.

5. Mill (1989), p. 189.

the measure of his wants and instincts, and restricted only by the limits of his powers and his rights.”<sup>6</sup>

In Germany thinkers like Von Humboldt, Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Georg Simmel and Friedrich Schleiermacher specifically opposed their idea of *Individualismus* to the Enlightenment's conception of individualism, which they thought was based on atomized, even indifferent individuals. The ‘new’ German individualism can be described as the individualism of difference. Social scientist and philosopher Simmel distinguished between qualitative and quantitative individualism or *Individualismus der Einzigkeit* and *Individualismus der Einzelheit*.<sup>7</sup> Translated by Steven Lukes in his book on Individualism as ‘individualism of uniqueness’ and ‘individualism of singleness’.<sup>8</sup> Individualism of uniqueness is concerned with the singularity of each individual and therefore focuses on the fact that each individual is different. Individualism of singleness stresses the independence of each individual.

Although the idea is older – even before Von Humboldt and the German Romantic period individualism was prevalent Western European thought<sup>9</sup> – the doctrine of individualism entered into the liberal tradition most fully through Mill and his book *On Liberty*. He used the famous metaphor of a tree to describe the importance of individual

6. Von Humboldt (1993), p. 15.

7. Simmel (1917), p. 78.

8. Lukes (1973), p. 18.

9. Already during the Renaissance people started to loosen themselves from static and rather oppressive group structures. The Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt already took the individual as starting point, when writing about the Renaissance culture in Italy. The rise of Protestantism can also be regarded as an important step towards more individualism, as the individual experience of faith became important and the personal interpretation of the Bible. See more detailed Lukes (1973), pp. 3–42.

development. “Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.”<sup>10</sup> Mill reacted against conformity – people urging each other to live up to approved standards, instead of choosing extraordinary desires. The ideal character in such a society, according to Mill, would be to have no marked character at all; “to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady’s foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity”. But, Mill argued: “He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.”<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine of individualism is a fore-runner to the contemporary concept of social mobility. Where social mobility indicates and describes the movement of individuals from one social position to another, the ideal behind social mobility is that people really have the opportunity to be mobile. Liberals always stress the importance of self-development for people, and with their policies try to create opportunities for individual growth. In the following I will explore the concept of life chances and its important role on social mobility.

### Life chances

Mill was one of the first liberal philosophers to move from classical liberalism towards social liberalism. While an advocate of individual liberty, he was convinced that factors such as poverty, bad housing, insufficient or bad education undermined individual dignity. Thus, there were situations in

10. Mill (1998), p. 66.

11. Ibid. p. 65 and 77.

which state intervention was necessary to guarantee individual liberty.<sup>12</sup> At the dawn of the twentieth century more and more philosophers and politicians became to see the importance of growing state intervention to achieve greater equality of opportunity. The British politician and thinker Leonard Trelawney Hobhouse provided the theoretical basis for social liberalism with his work *Liberalism*, first published in 1911.<sup>13</sup>

Hobhouse argued that the emerging social liberalism should not be seen as a rupture with the older laissez-faire liberalism. On the contrary, social legislation didn’t violate the main ideal of liberalism – individual freedom – but was an essential and necessary instrument to achieve this for everybody within society. More than once Hobhouse stresses that full liberty also implies full equality. But closer reading shows that this equality is meant as an equality of opportunity. “The struggle for liberty is also, when pushed through, a struggle for equality. Freedom to choose and follow an occupation, if it is to become fully effective, means equality with others in the opportunities for following such occupation. This is, in fact, one among the various considerations which lead Liberalism to support a national system of free education, and will lead it further yet on the same lines.”<sup>14</sup>

State intervention to achieve equal opportunity for all children is, according to Hobhouse, a liberal tendency, not socialism, which was a common assumption in Edwardian Britain. “It is the basis of the rights of the child, of his pro-

12. Although Mill underlined the importance of good education for children, this was explicitly not a task for the state. As part of his doctrine of individuality, Mill was very concerned with the danger of (state) paternalism. The danger of paternalism will be discussed more elaborately in the end of this chapter.

13. Freedon (2003), pp. 22–23.

14. Hobhouse (1944), p. 32.

tection against parental neglect, of the equality of opportunity which he may claim as a future citizen, of his training to fill his place as a grown-up person in the social system. [...] Once again we have found that to maintain individual freedom and equality we have to extend the sphere of social control.”<sup>15</sup> In fact one could say that with his social liberalism Hobhouse already describes what Isaiah Berlin eloquently would put forward in his famous essay *Two Concepts of Liberty* almost fifty years later.

In his essay Berlin distinguishes between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ freedom.<sup>16</sup> Negative freedom deals with the area in which someone is – or should be – left to do or to be what he chooses, without any interference by other persons. This negative freedom – or freedom *from* – can also be explained by Mill’s harm principle, which states that the only purpose to rightfully exercise power over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.”<sup>17</sup> Under negative liberty someone is not free if he is prevented from action by others. Berlin states that it is not considered a lack of freedom if one is not able to fly like an eagle or swim like a whale; incapacity doesn’t mean lack of freedom in the negative sense of the term.”<sup>18</sup> Of course, the wider the degree of non-interference, the more extensive the individual freedom. Although liberals approve of the fact that this area should be limited to a certain point, they are well aware that one should be very careful with these limitations. As Benjamin Constant noted, we must always preserve a

15. Ibid. pp. 41 and 101.

16. Note that Berlin was not the first one to make this distinction between two different forms of liberty, but he is the thinker that became famous for it.

17. Mill (1998), p. 14.

18. Berlin (2002), pp. 169–170.

minimum area of personal freedom in order to prevent the degradation and denial of our very nature.<sup>19</sup>

Positive freedom means individual power. This notion of freedom – freedom *to* – derives from the wish of individuals to be their own master. It stems from interior desires and motivations, which Berlin gives voice to: “I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them.”<sup>20</sup>

Positive freedom implies that individuals have a fair opportunity to develop their talents and grow up to be rational autonomous adults, instead of staying mere slaves to their passions. Reason is central to the struggle for a life beyond passions. Social liberals took the notion of positive freedom even further and assumed that more of it is needed to be truly free. In order to provide every citizen with freedom both in the negative and positive sense, the state should step in. Not everybody could be his own master without help. If a child is born in deprived circumstances, without any opportunity to go to school and develop talents, it may never then achieve self-mastery. In policy terms, this suggests this implies that the state should provide every child with a proper education and a law forbidding child labour. Thus, to maintain and increase social mobility in a society both negative and positive freedom must be advanced by the state.

19. Benjamin Constant was, according to Berlin, “the most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy”; see: Berlin (2002), p. 173.

20. Berlin (2002), p. 178.

The first name in social mobility – Ralf Dahrendorf – also underlined the importance of both notions of freedom. In fact he thought that advocates of negative freedom, like the great economist Friedrich Hayek, couldn't be regarded as true liberals. Dahrendorf even downgraded Hayek's famous book *The Constitution of Liberty* as only a semi-liberal work. To Dahrendorf the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was a reprehensible example of a politician chiefly concerned with negative freedom.<sup>21</sup>

Positive freedom or – in the words of Dahrendorf – 'life chances' guarantee each individual with fair opportunities to realise their talents, wishes and hopes. Life chances occur by the interaction between 'options' and 'ligatures'. Options are choices and alternatives of action for each individual, provided within social bonds. Ligatures on the other hand are the social bonds and allegiances that constrain the individual given realities. Dahrendorf assumes that there is a certain optimal balance between options and ligatures, where an individual has the greatest possible number of life chances. This balance is of great importance, as options without ligatures result in a social vacuum, in which values or standards no longer exist: choice becomes impossible without assigning value to the choices considered. Whereas ligatures without options cause oppression of the individual by the community, state or family.<sup>22</sup> Life chances are guaranteed by providing each citizen with certain social and political rights, which create both options and the social network that make them possible, such as free education, minimum wages, housing and freedom of speech.

To describe a society in which everybody has fair life chances, Dahrendorf uses the metaphor of a house: "If all

21. Dahrendorf (1979), p. 38 and Dahrendorf (1983), pp. 53–55.

22. Dahrendorf (1979), pp. 29–32 and Dahrendorf (1985), pp. 142–144.

men are to have equal opportunities to develop their talents, interests, even eccentricities and idiosyncracies, there has to be a common floor on which they stand. That floor is provided by citizenship rights, and the higher it is the better. But apart from this positive approach one has to make sure also that nobody is in a position to restrict the life chances of others, or indeed their citizenship rights, arbitrarily. [...] Apart from the common floor, the social fabric has to have a ceiling, although one might argue that this should not be as low as possible, but only as low as necessary."<sup>23</sup> Although Dahrendorf seems to be prepared to lower the roof in order to elevate the floor – for example by guaranteeing a relative high level of basic needs – he clearly states that equality is only an instrument to achieve the goal of liberty. "In any case I have always assumed that equality provides the floor of the mansion in which liberty flourishes; it is condition, not purpose; equal opportunities are opportunities for unequal choices."<sup>24</sup> As soon as equality becomes a goal in itself, freedom will be unacceptably curtailed. The right to receive a good education, for example, should never result in the obligation to give every child exactly the same schooling. If excellent pupils are made to visit the same schools and learn the same lessons as less gifted children their freedom is in fact restricted. Educational policy should be motivated, according to Dahrendorf, by "the basic social right of all people to be given the opportunities for which their abilities and their desires equip them."<sup>25</sup>

23. Dahrendorf (1979), p. 126.

24. Dahrendorf (1975), p. 43.

25. Ibid. pp. 42–43. 'I am not prepared to reverse the case and argue that equality of opportunity is realized only once all social groups are represented in proportion to their numerical strength on all levels of the educational system, and that therefore a deliberate effort should be made to insure such proportional representation. By starving private schools and mistaking the idea of comprehensive education as aiming

## Optimal state

For Dahrendorf, an optimal state would provide everyone with ‘equal chances’ in life. This raises the inevitable question of what ‘equal chances’ are, and how they can be provided. Unfortunately, Dahrendorf never gave an exhaustive account of the social and political rights. Moreover rights and entitlements can change depending on social and economic circumstances, and during his lifetime Dahrendorf changed his opinion on which rights citizens should hold. Nevertheless his position in the debate on equal opportunity gives us a sense of how he thought ‘fair chances’ should be provided by the state.

Dahrendorf favoured ‘liberal equality’ over ‘natural liberty’. Proponents of ‘natural liberty’ regard a formal equality of opportunity that allocates positions in society according to talent or skill – suitability – as just. Proponents of ‘liberal equality’ see this as unjust, as people might be hindered in the development of their talents by the quality of their education or parenting. They seek to remedy this injustice by going beyond formal equality of opportunity and correcting, where possible, for social and cultural disadvantages. The ideal of liberal equality is to provide all with an equal start, which should result in the fact that those with similar talents and capacities, as well as similar willingness to exercise these talents and capacities would have the same prospects of success regardless of their initial place in society. Family income for example should not define the outcome in life of the child.<sup>26</sup>

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at integration rather than differentiation, we sacrifice the reality of liberty for the appearance of equality.’ Again Dahrendorf explains the wish ‘to offer opportunities; so let us be careful not to destroy them in the process’.

26. Sandel (2008), pp. 66–67.

Although the principle of liberal equality is more ‘socially liberal’ than natural liberty, to the philosopher John Rawls it is still ‘too weak an assault on the arbitrariness of fortune’. And the political philosopher Michael Sandel points out that it is impossible to extend individual opportunities in such a way that inequalities stemming from social and cultural conditions alone can be eradicated. “Even if compensatory education and other reforms could fully, or even nearly, correct for social and cultural deprivation, it is difficult if not vaguely forbidding to imagine what kind of social policies would be required to ‘correct’ in a comparable way for the contingencies of natural fortune. What is needed, then, is a conception that nullifies the *effect* of these differences while at the same time acknowledging their intractability.”<sup>27</sup> Critics see in this assumption a movement from equality of opportunity to ‘equality of outcome’.

In answer, Rawls suggests the ‘difference principle’, which argues that those social and economic inequalities that work to the benefit of the least advantaged individuals in society are just. Rawls does not seek to eradicate unequal endowments but to rearrange the scheme of benefits and burdens in such way that the least advantaged may share in the resources of the fortunate. “Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out. [...] No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society.”<sup>28</sup> Rawls thought the distinction between genetic and cultural advantages is almost irrelevant to justice. But Sandel is right and realistic when stressing that the more inequality turns out to be genetic rather than culturally induced, the less society can do to change this inequality. “People are different, and

27. Ibid. p. 69.

28. Quoted in: Sandel (2008), p. 70.

these differences, sooner or later, will inevitably come to the fore, even – perhaps most assuredly – in a society where fair opportunity prevails.” What is important is that a society is as open as possible in allowing social mobility to everybody, but without trying to equalize outcomes.

Traditionally the libertarian thinker Robert Nozick is presented as Rawls’ opponent on this question. To Nozick, redistribution of any kind violates individual liberty: in fact he compares taxation to slave labour. Nobody has a right to claim something that is not his. For example, the fact that an individual has no food doesn’t automatically entitle him to social benefits to gain food.

Nozick thus represents libertarianism, advocating a minimal state that protects individual liberty and private property. On the opposite end of the liberal spectrum sits John Rawls, with his vision of a strong state which enables people to actually exercise their liberties in practice.<sup>29</sup> Ralf Dahrendorf chooses a position in the middle of these two extremes. The minimal state guarantees too little (only negative freedom) whereas what could be called the maximum state tends to sacrifice too much negative freedom in order to guarantee positive freedom. Between these opposing states, Dahrendorf positions the ‘optimal state’ or *weniger Staat*. In this state the necessity of positive freedom is recognized by guaranteeing equal opportunities. In other words: each individual has the opportunity to stand on the floor of the house. But after this, the state should not intervene in the outcomes of individual choices. Equality of outcome is not the goal. In Dahrendorf’s state there always will be differences in status, but this is no problem at all, as long as these differences are the result of individual choices.<sup>30</sup>

29. In fact one could argue that Rawls almost leaves the liberal spectrum. It is not without reason that his philosophy is claimed by both liberals and socialist to highlight their ideologies.

## The limits of state intervention and individual responsibility

The development of social liberalism was key to increasing mobility in society. Achievements like good universal education made Western societies more open and mobile in the course of the twentieth century. The assumption that the state had an increased responsibility for human welfare was central to social liberalism. Nevertheless, there are two very important caveats, as liberals fear that positive freedom can easily be abused. If one stresses positive freedom too much at the expense of negative freedom the very heart of liberalism is assaulted. First, there may be too much equality and mediocrity in a society. Second, positive freedom could lead to state paternalism.

In the first place the stress on positive freedom can easily lead to the socialistic ideal of overall equality. Where liberals are concerned with fair chances for everybody at the start of their lives, socialists are more concerned with equality of outcomes. Both ideologies also have different opinions on what can be considered as basic needs which should be guaranteed to all citizens. With an appeal on the notion of positive freedom in the most exaggerated situation almost everything could be regarded as basic need.<sup>31</sup> In August 1941 United States President Roosevelt and the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill issued a joint declaration on the

30. Dahrendorf (1987), pp. 111–129; 126. Here of course one can question the individual choice in genetic abilities.

31. The probability that the notion of positive freedom is abused to give way to hobbies of the left was recently shown in the Netherlands, where social services provider in one locality planned to present the households living on social security with a flat screen television. This aroused a huge debate among the Dutch citizens and politicians on the limits of the welfare state. Only the extreme left approved of the idea, whereas others thought a flat screen colour television could not possibly be regarded a primary necessity of life.

purposes of the war against fascism. One of their hopes for the world after fascism included the assurance that all men could live their lives in “freedom from fear” and “freedom from want”.<sup>32</sup> This wish uttered by both statesmen shows exactly the problem with positive liberty. Who can determine ‘want’? This differs from person to person, from society to society and from time to time.

The French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville was already aware of this problem in 1835, in his speech on pauperism – *Mémoire sur le paupérisme* – he made before the Cherbourg Academic Society. His ideas took shape during a journey through England, where the Industrial Revolution resulted in an immense growth of pauperism among laid off factory workers. Tocqueville warned that this problem would become deeply ingrained and hard to resolve. Besides exposing men to many new misfortunes, the progress of civilization also brings society to alleviate miseries which are not even thought about in less civilized societies. This leads to the paradox that the richer a nation is, the greater the number of those who appeal to public charity. This number will increase, as needs “infinitely expand and diversify”.<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, Tocqueville pointed out the danger of public aid, open to all citizens in need. He recognised two incentives to work: first, to cover basic living standards and second, the desire to improve the conditions of one’s life. Experience has proven, according to Tocqueville, that for the majority the first incentive is sufficient to work. Only a small minority is influenced by the second incentive. Therefore it is disastrous if the first incentive to work – earning a living – is weakened or destroyed by charitable institutions or social laws indiscriminately accessible to everybody.<sup>34</sup> The problem

32. Hunt (1995), pp. 222–224.

33. Tocqueville, (2007), pp. 24–25.

34. Ibid. pp. 27–28.

is the difficulty in differentiating between deserved and undeserved misfortune or poverty. Ultimately Tocqueville cannot resolve the problem. He recognises the utility and necessity of public charity to ameliorate the helplessness of infancy, sickness, insanity or the decrepitude of old age. He also approves of public charity which opens free schools for the children of the poor. But, on the other hand, he is “deeply convinced that any permanent, regular, administrative system whose aim will be to provide for the needs of the poor, will breed more miseries than it can cure, will deprave the population that it wants to help and comfort”.<sup>35</sup>

With his remarks on pauperism Tocqueville correctly underlines that liberals should always be very cautious with state interventions to assure positive freedom, as it can easily give some people the wrong incentives. At the start of the twentieth century the then Liberal politician Winston Churchill claimed – during a speech on liberalism and socialism – to look forward to the universal establishment of minimum standards of life and labour. In his opinion liberalism could not cut itself off from this “fertile field of social effort” and he warned his audience not to be scared in discussing any of these proposals “just because some old woman comes along and tells you they are Socialistic”. Nowadays liberals will agree with Churchill’s wish to “draw a line below which we will not allow persons to live and labour, yet above which they may compete with all the strength of their manhood”.<sup>36</sup>

35. Ibid. pp. 36–37. In his conclusion Tocqueville underlines that individual charity is preferable above public charity, even if it is insufficient to alleviate all misery in society. “It can produce only useful results. Its very weakness is a guarantee against dangerous consequences”. Still Tocqueville already foresees that individual charity will be too small to answer the growing need in industrial societies.

36. Churchill (1909), pp. 81–82. Churchill’s line can be compared with the floor in Dahrendorf’s imaginary house on which all citizens should at least be able to stand.

This indeed can be seen as a liberal goal, because it guarantees each individual a fair start in what could be called the contest of life, but does not provide the outcome of the contest. Socialists would be more concerned with equality in outcomes, whereas liberals leave the outcomes to the responsibility of each individual.

Life chances should be concerned with equal or fair opportunities, even if it is hard to explain what fair opportunities are. One should never forget the individual responsibility in social mobility. If people are provided with basic needs like food, clothing, housing, (basic) health care and good education, their position in life highly depends on their own efforts. The ‘father’ of social liberalism already realised this when he wrote: “[...] while personal opinions and social institutions are like crystallised results, achievements that have been won by certain definite processes of individual or collective effort, human personality is that within which lives and grows, which can be destroyed but cannot be made, which cannot be taken to pieces and repaired, but can be placed under conditions in which it will flourish and expand, or, if it is deceased, under conditions in which it will heal itself by its own recuperative powers. The foundation of liberty is the idea of growth. Life is learning, but whether in theory or practice what a man genuinely learns is what he absorbs, and what he absorbs depends on the energy which he himself puts forth in response to his surroundings.”<sup>37</sup>

Regarding the notion of positive freedom, liberals also fear (state) paternalism, described by Immanuel Kant as “the greatest despotism imaginable”. When speaking of social mobility, individuality and the importance of self-development, an often heard quote is that people should have the opportunity to make the best of themselves. In his essay on the two concepts of liberty Isaiah Berlin quotes Thomas

37. Hobhouse (1911), pp. 122–123.

Hill Green, who wrote: “the ideal of true freedom is the maximum of power for all members of human society alike to make the best of themselves.” Reflecting on this quote, Berlin wonders whether there is a problem if someone would choose an immediate pleasure instead of making “the best” of himself. For example someone buys an expensive car instead of investing the money in a good university education. Others – or the state – could easily say that this was a stupid thing to do, as it harmed the (future) possibilities of self-development. But what gives others the right to judge someone’s decision and in fact to claim they know what is ‘the best’ for this other person? Berlin correctly notices that tyrants could easily (ab)use the formula that all citizens should be able to make the best of themselves. It could justify even the worst oppression.<sup>38</sup>

As already quoted, Dahrendorf underlined that equality should be regarded as a condition, not a purpose. Equal opportunities are opportunities for unequal choices. In his Reith lectures Dahrendorf explains that: “The new liberty means that equality is there for people to be different, and not for the differences of people to be leveled and abolished.”<sup>39</sup> Everybody should be able to choose its own destiny, even if the choices are obscure and puzzling to others. As long as an adult is self supporting, and does not violate anybody’s individual freedom or integrity, the state may not judge the life path this person chooses. In the words of Kant: “Nobody may compel me to be happy in his own way.”

### Closing remarks

Since the emergence of liberalism many liberal philosopher stressed the importance for each individual to have enough opportunities to design its own life. First liberals were fore-

38. Berlin (2002), p. 180.

39. Dahrendorf (1975), p. 44.

most concerned with individual liberty and self-development. Each person had to be released from oppressive structures like a mighty church, strict traditions and family relations. Therefore liberal philosophers in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century above all stressed the notion of negative freedom. The general thought then was that the individual could develop as long as it was free from any (state)interference.

As modern societies emerged and strict traditions loosened as well as hierarchical power relations, liberals gradually moved towards social liberalism. Besides negative freedom the importance of positive freedom grew immensely. Furthermore state intervention was more and more required to actually provide each individual with fair or equal opportunities. Some liberals blamed them for socialist tendencies. And indeed, gradually some (liberal) philosophers were inclined to move towards socialism, when they became too optimistic about providing individual opportunities and even seemed to be willing to sacrifice too much negative freedom in order to earn more positive freedom. As Dahrendorf correctly notices equality is always only an instrument too achieve fair opportunities. It is never a goal in itself, because that would mean socialism. Liberals were and are well aware of this danger and are therefore cautious to allow too much state intervention. The same can be said about the danger of state paternalism. Liberals want to provide individuals with opportunities and options to choose their own life path.

To return to John Stuart Mill: "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode."<sup>40</sup>

40. Mill (1998), p. 75.

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# A liberal perspective on life chances and social mobility

By Ingemund Hägg

## Introduction

This chapter will develop and compare liberal views on life chances and social mobility to communitarian views. Liberal and communitarian are very broad terms and we will choose a particular, though not unique, liberal perspective which seems to us to be fruitful when life chances and social mobility in individual perspectives are discussed.

The next section of the chapter gives an introduction to a liberal life chances perspective developed by Ralf Dahrendorf.<sup>1</sup> Then communitarianism is briefly presented. Finally the particular characteristics of the liberal life chances perspective are presented and discussed with communitarian ideas as a contrast. This enables us to make the liberal perspective quite clear. Implications for life chances and social mobility are discussed.

## A life chances perspective on social mobility

Ralf Dahrendorf devoted a great deal of thought to the subject of life chances in a number of books between 1979 and 2008. He defines life chances in the following way: “Life chances are opportunities for individual growth, for the realisation of talents, wishes and hopes, and these opportunities

1. This perspective is very rich and aspects of it are presented also in Chapter 7.

are provided by social conditions. Life chances are a function of two elements, options and ligatures.”<sup>2</sup>

“Life chances are indeed the prevailing balance of rights and opportunities. The battles for more life chances provide the theme of the modern social conflict.”<sup>3</sup> “More life chances for more people are the objective of the politics of liberty.”<sup>4</sup>

For Dahrendorf the politics of liberty for life chances takes place in the modern social conflict. In earlier times the social conflict was between classes. It can be noted that a chapter in his last book *The modern social conflict. The politics of liberty* has the title “Conflict after class” which shows that societal conflicts are now about life chances instead of between classes.<sup>5</sup>

“Options are possibilities of choice, or alternatives of action ... opportunities ... directions in which the individual can go ...” Ligature is a complex concept ... Ligatures are allegiances ... bonds, linkages ... forefathers, home country, community ... give *meaning* to the place which the individual occupies ... create bonds and thus the foundation of action; options require choices. Deep cultural linkages that enable people to find their way through a world of options. Ligatures without options are oppressive. Options without bonds are meaningless.”<sup>6</sup>

Ligatures can be constraining – as exemplified by rigid social structures, the norms of fundamentalist religious and political sects, tight family bonds, the expectations of class and clan. Increased individual liberty can to a great extent be explained by the loosening of constraining ligatures. Dahrendorf is very clear in his conviction about the value of ‘good’

2. Dahrendorf 1979, pp. 21–39.

3. Dahrendorf 2008, p. ix.

4. Ibid. p. 18.

5. Ibid.

6. Dahrendorf 1979, p. 30.

ligatures: "Deep cultural linkages that enable people to find their way through the world of options."<sup>7</sup>

The strong emphasis on ligatures makes it clear that we as individuals lead our lives in a social context – the civil society is one prerequisite for freedom. Dahrendorf has much more to say about the relationship between the individual and the civil society than about the relationship between the individual and the state.

Full life chances require the ligatures of a civil society. "Without the structures of civil society liberty remains a fragile flower," Dahrendorf states. "At all times civil society is to fill the vacuum between the organisation of the state and atomised individuals with structures that give meaning to the way in which people live together. A civil society is not just a society of individuals but of citizens."<sup>8</sup>

With references to work by Timothy Garton Ash the characteristics of civil society are summarized in this way: The multiplicity and diversity of its elements, the autonomy of the many organisations and institutions, and human behaviour, that is, the social climate is "polite, tolerant and, above all, non-violent" – and of course "civil and civilian".<sup>9</sup>

On who are included in the civil society Dahrendorf writes: "Small and medium-sized enterprises are elements of civil society, as are foundations, clubs and associations."<sup>10</sup>

Dahrendorf elaborates on his theory of life chances, particularly the concept of *options*. "Options", he says, "are specific combinations of entitlements and provisions."<sup>11</sup>

7. Dahrendorf 2008, p. 19.

8. Ibid. p. 22.

9. Ibid. pp. 38–39.

10. Ibid. p. 39. When referring small and medium-sized enterprises to civil society it is unclear if he at the same time sees them as included in the market. Dahrendorf does not comment on that.

11. Ibid. p. 18.

He makes a distinction between people's access to things and the things that are actually there for them to desire. Entitlements are in themselves not good or bad, they give people a rightful claim to things. Entry tickets can open doors to non-economic goods (right to vote, education), provisions – the supply of alternatives in given areas of activity. He argues that "...entitlements draw lines and constitute barriers. This means that there is in principle nothing gradual about them."<sup>12</sup>

Life chances are frequently referred to in sociological texts but in general the term remains undefined. Authors seem to assume that it has a broadly accepted general meaning.

In politics and sociology it is often argued that "life chances" is something which should be equitably distributed. Breen and Jonsson note that inequality of opportunity "Has its origin in the liberal goal that a person's chances to get ahead (attain an education, get a good job) should be unrelated to ascribed characteristics such as race, sex, or class (or socioeconomic) origin." They continue that "Inequality of condition, is concerned with the distribution of differential rewards and living conditions, either in the simple form of distribution of scarce goods or in relation to different inputs (such as effort and time) or rights (such as citizenship or employment)."<sup>13</sup>

Dahrendorf notes: "Life chances are never distributed equally. The reason lies in the fact that every society has to coordinate different tasks but also accommodate diverse interests and talents."<sup>14</sup> Life chances is not a commodity that can be distributed. There are always tensions and conflicts when it comes to life chances.

12. Ibid. p. 11.

13. Breen and Jonsson 2005, p. 223.

14. Dahrendorf 2008, p. 23.

“Inequalities of provisions are more tolerable than inequalities of entitlements.” And more precise: “The basic idea throughout is that inequalities of provisions are acceptable if and when they cannot be translated into inequalities of entitlements.”<sup>15</sup>

Life chances is not one more variable of welfare (such as income, education, health, power) that ideally should be equally distributed. Life chances mean a more complex social phenomenon which is the basis for individual liberty and also for social and economic progress and development “The world of entitlements and provisions, politics and economics, cannot exist by itself; both have to be anchored in the deeper structures of society ... Liberty rests on three pillars: the constitutional state (or democracy), the market economy, and civil society.”<sup>16</sup> Dahrendorf’s theory of life chances is a basic element for liberal policy in the modern world. The most important proposition is: “Life chances are opportunities for individual growth, for the realisation of talents, wishes and hopes”<sup>17</sup>

### Communitarian ideas

Communitarian ideas have both been seen as anti-liberal but by other thinkers as a complement to liberalism. This indicates that there are very different interpretations of communitarianism and that those thinkers advocating communitarianism do it from different basic assumptions and perspectives. Communitarian ideas tend to give importance to community, to a common good, to groups of individuals and bonds between individuals in groups. In the literature we find communitarian thinkers accusing liberalism of seeing

15. Ibid. p. 42.

16. Ibid. p. 21.

17. Dahrendorf 1979, p. 30.

the individual as an isolated island, and liberal thinkers accusing communitarianism as seeing the individual as less important than the group or community.

In Bell (1993) a communitarian theory is outlined where a comparison with liberalism gives distinctiveness to the communitarian theory.<sup>18</sup> Daniel Bell’s version of communitarianism rests on three pillars. First Bell states that “We are, first and mostly, social beings, deeply bound up in the social world in which we happen to find ourselves ... community matters whether we like it or not”.<sup>19</sup> Second, following Michael Walzer, “political thinking involves the interpretation of shared understandings bearing on the political life of one’s community, as opposed to those who would derive universally applicable political principles starting from a more abstract specification of the individuals and their needs, interests, and moral claims.”<sup>20</sup> Third, Bell sees “A need to experience our lives as bound up with the good of the communities out of which our identity has been constituted.”<sup>21</sup> Three kinds of communities are identified: community of place, community of memory, and community of personal interaction. In Bell’s book these characteristics are developed in the form of a dialogue where these pillars are developed, criticised and defended.

There have been attempts to reconcile communitarianism and liberalism. In Simhony and Weinstein (editors, 2001) the debate between New liberalism and communitarianism is presented and analysed. (It should be noted that New liberalism in this context refers to philosophical thinking at

18. Bell makes reference is made to well-known communitarian thinkers like Alasdair Macintyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, Michael Walzer.

19. Bell 1993, p. 14.

20. Ibid. p. 14.

21. Ibid. p. 14.

the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, thus not be mixed up with later neo-liberalism).<sup>22</sup> The reason for choosing to take up this debate here is that it presents arguments fruitful for defining both communitarian and liberal ideas today.

In that book Michael Freeden focuses on the community. He argues: “For Sandels, membership in a community is a constituent of individual identity, and it is an attachment which shapes at least in part the ends of the self, prior to the exercise of choice by the self.”<sup>23</sup> This view in contrast to another communitarian thinker, Michael Walzer who according to Freeden does not have his focus “on community as the basis of individual identity but on communities as the expression of social networks”.<sup>24</sup> The community is given different interpretations in communitarian discourse.

In his book *Anatomy of antiliberalism* Stephen Holmes analyses non-marxist antiliberalism and sees communitarianism as an anti-movement, defined by its criticism of liberalism. On attacks of liberalism for the supposed atomisation of society the response is that there is some truth in this when “liberals deny that the value of a person hinges on his or her contribution to the aims of the collectivity ... Liberals consistently urge individuals to think for themselves.”<sup>25</sup> Communitarians attack liberals for denying the existence of a common good. This is not so when “liberals retained an emphatic conception of the common good. Justice, self-rule, and the fruits of peaceful co-existence are all common goods. They are enjoyed by individuals, to be sure, but jointly, not atomistically. As pluralists, liberals discourage the use of force

.....  
22. Participants in these discussions were among others J. Dewey, T. Hobhouse, J. A. Hobson and T. H. Green.

23. In Simhony and Weinstein (editors) 2001 p. 29.

24. Ibid. p. 31.

25. Holmes 1993, p. 195.

to impose an official set of moral purposes on all citizens, without being hypertolerantists.”<sup>26</sup>

Holmes stresses the importance of separating liberal ideas from existing liberal societies when criticising these two objects. He finds that communitarians constantly mix these two and thus cause confusion. On the one hand communitarians argue that liberalism as an idea is wrong but on the other hand argue that liberalism anyway has created atomised societies without values, that is, the societies we have today as they see it. Holmes offers a critique of communitarianism and in particular the lack of clarity about what constitutes a community: “Some rhapsodize about neighbourhoods, churches, school boards, and so forth., Some idealise the past, forgetting that earlier communities were characterised by the exclusion of women, homosexuals and minorities of different kinds.”<sup>27</sup> Holmes also notes that “It is only through intense social interaction, for example that human beings acquire their worst follies and fanaticisms: the capacity for intolerance or racism would never flourish in pre-social isolation.”<sup>28</sup>

### Liberal views on life chances and social mobility contrasted with communitarian views

Bonds, ligatures, linkages sound like communitarianism but that is not so – in the Dahrendorf interpretation of liberalism. In the following I will make statements about communitarianism which for the sake of discussion stresses a somewhat extreme form, a form which would probably not satisfy many communitarians.

1. Some ligatures and bonds are seen as more important than others and are there to be taken into account as facts of life, they are given to the individual, they provide the identity

.....  
26. Ibid. p. 200.

27. Ibid. p. 178.

28. Ibid. p. 179.

of the individual, often given from birth, or from growing up in a context of the family, the church and/or ethnicity.

2. The individual is in principle expected not to question or critically analyse these bonds. They are facts of life and should be accepted by the individual.

3. The individual should stay in his or her community, and not leave it.

4. The community has a value in itself – common good, above the individual.

5. The community comes first and is the basis for the identity of the individual.

Let us contrast this with Dahrendorf's liberal ligatures.

1. Ligatures within which the individual is born: Parents should acknowledge the child to learn about and respect other communities, ligatures, and favour a school system which promotes such learning and respect.

2. All ligatures are allowed to be questioned and critically analysed by the individual, be it the conventional family, the church, the local community.

3. The individual is free to leave communities (ligatures) and enter into other communities (ligatures).

4. The values held by the individual is always superior to values of ligatures, the role of ligatures is to assist the individual in finding meaning to his/her choices.

5. Communities are not given by nature but created by individuals in interaction and are not given ones and for all from above.

I would argue that communitarian views reflects a static and closed society, a society where social mobility is constrained while the liberal view is consistent with a changing, dynamic society – an open society where social mobility is less constrained. This said, both liberals and communitarians value

ligatures but liberals are more open to new and changing ligatures. And the liberal agenda insists on the perspective of the individual.

A problem in policy making is that liberals – politicians and parties – have focused on enlarging the range of provisions, that is, goods and services to choose between. But they have often neglected to focus on the importance of ligatures, that is, contexts with which individuals can find meaning with their choices. It is true that liberals have been in the forefront of tearing down constraining ligatures like being open to a wider range of family structures or introducing religious freedom etc.

But identifying and fostering new kinds of ligatures, not least in connections with civil society organisations with which individuals can give meaning to their choices is not an easy task. Sometimes it would be enough to try to identify such ligatures and make them visible by debate and in policy and respect that individuals are different and fruitfully can exploit different kinds of ligatures. But in the end – context in the form of ligatures and bonds are in the eyes of the beholder and connected to the wishes, desires and dreams of the individual and not something to be ascribed from above.

Neglect by liberals to focus on ligatures and bonds has led enemies of liberalism, like communitarians to attack liberalism for first, defining the individual as an isolated island and second of being neutral to different basic values and almost void of such values. And many liberals – politicians and parties have not responded to such accusations but only pointed at the increase in choices for the individual.

It should not be too difficult for liberals to reject such attacks by pointing at the importance of ligatures, but ligatures that are not constraining and that liberalism respects that individuals adhere to different kinds of ligatures. And this is important for enlarging the life chances of individuals

which not only has to do with more enlarged provisions in the form of a wider set of goods and services.

Liberals are often also very silent when they are attacked for having contributed to a modern society, where people are left without knowing where they should look for norms and values. We know a lot about mobility viewed as careers in jobs with increasing incomes and with stepping higher up in hierarchies. But more research should be devoted to finding what values and norms people actually hold rather than from above saying that they are, for example, only consumerists. It could be that non-vertical mobility and immobility can be consistent with positive individual life chances for many persons.

An area in a society that is of utmost importance for enlarging life chances is civil society, where plurality reigns, where individuals can develop their different identities and learn to handle tensions and conflicts in peaceful ways. And where mobility is defined by developing and utilising life chances where not least entitlements or entry tickets and ligatures providing meaning are important. Ligatures that are not given from above but developed in dynamic contexts – in an open society.

So an important overall policy for liberals is to see to it that, within a system of law and order and respect for fundamental rights, civil society can develop in ways that should not be controlled by the state.

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## Liberal policies for life chances

*By Ingemund Hägg*

In this chapter I present some reflections and conclusions. These are my own and they represent no attempt to comprehensively review the chapters in this book. I have, however, drawn upon the discussions in the previous chapters in reaching them. The previous chapter 8 on life chances, in particular, is directly linked to the reflections in this one.

Social science research has over many years examined the topics of social mobility, inequality, poverty and social exclusion. These topics have also entered the policy debate in most European countries albeit at a lower intensity. This book has sought to focus on social mobility and life chances in both social science research and the broader public debate.

We have presented and analysed studies and reports about absolute mobility, relative mobility, intra- and inter-generational mobility. The studies are of different kinds: cohort studies, cross-sectional studies, longitudinal studies, surveys and case-studies. They provide useful information but also have limitations and weaknesses – see for example chapters 2 and 6 on Great Britain and Sweden respectively.

### Assumptions in social mobility studies and policy debate

A number of assumptions seem to be common for many studies of social mobility and in the related policy debates.

*Assumptions about the individual* are crucial. Explicitly or implicitly a common assumption is that an individual has the aim of improving his or her standing in society, seeking to

move upwards in a hierarchy of classes or occupations, in a hierarchy of status and prestige or in a hierarchy of income. And parents are assumed to want their children to make such hierarchical advances. This aim is ascribed to them by researchers as well as by policymakers drawing on evidence from social mobility studies. It is assumed that these hierarchies exist in reality and are not only analytical instruments for research. They are understood to be meaningful for the individual. It is also assumed that individuals make choices from one position in such a hierarchy in order to reach another higher position. The structures that these hierarchies constitute are seen as given.

Thus aims and desires and aspirations of individuals are abstracted into very simplistic models, similar to that of the often criticised “economic man” from economic theory. This type of model postulates that individuals when making decisions maximise outcomes in terms of one particular objective and that decisions are taken within the framework of a given context or structure. In social mobility research and debate individuals are assumed to have climbing the ladder as an objective and act within a given class or occupation hierarchy. Even if such modelling of human behaviour can be useful and informative in the context of social science research it is less useful and sometimes even adverse and negative when discussing policy.

A further simplification in social mobility research and often in many policy debates is the narrow *focus on the constraints and opportunities that can be connected to characteristics of hierarchies of class, occupation, income*. Other kinds of constraining and enabling contexts are disregarded, such as bonds that can give deeper meaning to the choices made by the individual – which is a focus for Ralf Dahrendorf’s theory of life chances (see chapters 7 and 8). That is, for example the prestige in belonging to a particular class versus bonds and

ligatures in the form of voluntary membership and association to a civil society organisation or NGO focusing on, for example, the environment, welfare, sport. In Dahrendorf's words deep cultural linkages that "enable people to find their way through a world of options". Many researchers agree in principle but argue that in research it is not possible to take individuals into account as *individuals*. Instead studies focus on groups.

*Inequality* is a starting point for much social mobility research and policy debate and is generally regarded as inherently undesirable. Inequality is assumed to lead to segregation, low social cohesion and high levels of exclusion. This applies to inequality of *opportunity* as well as to inequality of *outcome*. There are problems with these two complementary concepts of inequality. The distinction between inequality of opportunity and of outcome is not clear cut and there is "difficulty of inferring inequality of opportunity from data on inequality of outcomes."<sup>1</sup> This also means that policy implications from such studies can be problematic. In Dahrendorf's view inequality of outcome is not undesirable as it is a sign of dynamism and vitality in a society – with the reservation that extremes at the bottom and at the top have to be kept within some limits for the sake of social cohesion.

It is often assumed that *the ideal* is a society where the living conditions for an individual as a child should not be relevant for advancement in society. In a mobility table for social fluidity this would lead to everyone having exactly the same chance to reach every position. As I see it this would be a society of individuals as isolated islands without deep cultural bonds and ligatures. I see no reason to consider all kinds of family conditions for children as being undesirable in order to have some kind of ideal society. Family conditions in the form of long term poverty and the absence of a

1. Breen and Jonsson 2005, pages 223–224 and 229, respectively.

stimulating environment are adverse and undesirable but many other kinds of conditions, including learning from parents are not. And of course pre-school and school education are very important for compensating for adverse family conditions.

It is sometimes implicitly assumed that *classes and class hierarchies* have an independent existence rather than being constructions of researchers in the form of models and constructions of policymakers in the form of shared ideas and beliefs. And it is easy to imply that a class positioned higher up in a hierarchy is better than a class on a lower level, thus giving hierarchies a normative character. Views that such classes and hierarchies exist and have positive and negative values can be strongly institutionalised (for example as attitudes) in the minds of people and used by people when comparing their situations with other persons' situations. I would see class hierarchies as constraining ligatures – to use Dahrendorf's term.

### Liberal assumptions about the individual in a life chances perspective

The basic liberal assumptions are different from those presented in the previous section.

Liberals place a greater emphasis on an individual's own desires, dreams and aspirations – and not the objectives and goals ascribed to individuals by researchers and policymakers from above.<sup>2</sup> An individual's choices can force open social structures and lead to the creation of forming new kinds of hierarchies. Individual movements may not always be upwards, but also voluntarily horizontal and even in conventional

2. A comparison can be made with identity of an individual which also is often ascribed from above instead of recognition that an individual can see himself/herself as having several identities at the same time – that is, the liberal position.

terms downwards, for example choosing jobs with lower incomes and/or a lower position in class hierarchies but more aligned to individual dreams and aspirations. Positions in social structures are not always given, but changed and created as a result of individual choices. In addition, an individual's own desires, dreams and aspirations can change over time. To the extent that individual efforts are successful (or not) and that they are rewarded along the dimensions measured by the sociologists' hierarchies he or she may achieve a higher or lower hierarchical position in terms of status and/or income. But many may well succeed in their efforts without any noticeable result in terms of hierarchical standing.

In general both researchers and policymakers – including not least liberals – argue that *equality of opportunity* is an important aim for policy. Dahrendorf argues that “inequalities of *provisions* are more tolerable than inequalities of *entitlements*.”<sup>3</sup> Entitlements “give people a rightful claim to things”.<sup>4</sup> They are entry tickets, civil, political, social and other kinds of citizens' rights for access to education or voting etc. A problem with equality of outcome as an aim is that this is a static characteristic, referring to a particular point of time. It ignores that inequalities of outcomes can be considered not just acceptable but desirable, for example between the experienced and inexperienced in the labour market. This inequality can demonstrate to the young that he/she may well be able to achieve better conditions for himself/herself and his/her family in the future. A dynamic view rather than a static view of inequality is fruitful from a liberal perspective.

For liberals it is desirable to complement extant knowledge from social mobility studies with insight and reflection

3. Dahrendorf 2008, p. 13. See also chapter 8 in this book, p. 00, where the concepts provision and entitlements are explained more in depth.

4. Ibid. p. 9.

gained from studies with perspectives on an individual's life chances. It would be useful to elaborate on Dahrendorf's life chances theory (see chapter 8 for a more complete presentation) and especially on the concept of ligatures: cultural structures that provide an individual with a framework for choice. The desires, dreams and aspirations of an individual refer to much more than positions in structures identified by researchers and policymakers. Dahrendorf points the way for a variety of hierarchies and life courses for the individual. Social positions are often created by individual action. Such are the characteristics of the messy open society.

Liberals have long been at the forefront of efforts to loosen up the constraining bonds of family, church, local community etc. The aim has been to enable the individual to question, to change and to leave and to enter such associations at will. In a liberal society ligatures like family, church, local community etc. can still be important for individuals who choose them voluntarily. Liberalism does not see the individual as an isolated island – on the contrary. Bonds should, however, never be forced upon the individuals. The individual should be able to find or develop enabling rather than constraining ligatures. This is an area of conflict between those communitarians who cherish stability within a given community and liberals who want open communities.

The liberal society is an open society with rich opportunities for social mobility. The classes or categories in a class hierarchy, occupation hierarchy or status/prestige hierarchy can in the Dahrendorf terminology be seen as options rather than as ligatures and bonds giving meaning to individual choices.<sup>5</sup> And class hierarchies and occupation hierarchies should not be assumed to be given for the individual but be affected, developed or created by the individual. Many indi-

5. Options are combinations of provisions (goods and services) and entitlements (entry tickets) in Dahrendorf's theory.

viduals will choose to try to ‘make headway’ by moving upwards in class categories, job categories, income and wealth. But not everyone and not at all stages in life. Low mobility need not be regarded as a problem to be solved by political or other means. The objectives of policy should not be to create mobility per se but to identify and remove constraints and to create opportunities. All this is easy to say but difficult to put into practice in view of the power that normative ideas about conventional class and class hierarchy descriptions have in our societies.

Civil society is central in the open liberal society. It is the arena for enlarging the life chances of most people. Individuals can find and develop deep cultural linkages that are the basis for meaningful choices. Civil society with its multitude of groups, associations, networks etc. is where values and norms are developed, scrutinised and changed in interaction. It is a messy society with conflicts and power struggles and competition for life chances. As Dahrendorf argues – the modern social conflict is not a conflict between classes. Instead, “the battles for more life chances provide the theme of the modern social conflict”.<sup>6</sup> Conflicts of interest are inherent in an open, dynamic, liberal society.

### Policy debates in Europe today

The policy debates on social mobility and life chances are very different in different countries. This can be seen in the contributions from Great Britain, Italy, Netherlands, Poland and Sweden in this book

*Alasdair Murray* finds that social mobility issues are now mainstream in UK politics, with the participation of all the mainstream political parties, not least the Liberal Democrats. For the liberals improving life chances for the poor is a main focus in particular alleviating child poverty. Education is seen

6. Dahrendorf 2008, p ix.

as the main lever for improving social mobility and programs with deprivation funding for the most needy children and the expansion of vocational and work-based education considered among the potential solutions.

Higher education and social mobility is the focus of the contribution from Italy by *Adele Colli Franzone* and *Francesco Velo*. They show that social background continues to be decisive for education choices. There is a need to develop a culture in higher education which better fosters creativity and innovation to the benefit of social mobility and for the wider development of society.

*Fleur de Beaufort* in the Netherlands finds that raising the quality of education, especially at an early age, increasing levels of vocational training, and efforts to diminish the frequency of drop-outs from school, are key issues for the liberal party VVD. This is necessary in order to improve social mobility for the adults over their working lives. Another important area of reforms is to try and change the incentives for people facing a benefits trap to re-enter the labour market.

Poland, which is sometimes described as a polarised country, should rather be seen as a country with several types of divisions where the search for social cohesion is problematic. *Leszek Jazdewski* shows how the post-communist era has led to a great interest in social mobility but there is still today a long way to go before achieving acceptable degrees of mobility. Education reforms are seen as very important, even in a country without real liberal parties.

As for the other countries dealt with in this book education is also the main focus in Sweden for developing social mobility and life chances. The Swedish liberal party in government has championed this area with both the minister for education and the minister for higher education and research being liberals. *Ingemund Hägg* finds a need for longitudinal studies of individual life courses. Without

such knowledge it is difficult to develop adequate policies for assisting people to move out of undesired “problematic” situations, such as child poverty, educational deprivation and a lack of resources.

### Liberal policy challenges

Social policy is today largely based on income, class and group social mobility rather than seeking to recognise individual movements in society. As a result politics tends to be too directed at solving the wrong problems. Individuals who at one point of time have been in “problematic” situations might have moved out of these situations at a later time (and then might have moved into such situations again). We often lack knowledge about why and how they moved out and in, and for how long they faced difficulties.

Much of social policy seems to be directed to increasing choices (options) and too little to improving contexts (ligatures) which provide a framework for finding meaning in individual choices. Improving contexts is admittedly more difficult but efforts are desirable to remove constraining contextual circumstances. It might be that finding new contexts – bonds, ligatures – rather than finding new options might help individuals deal with their challenges. It could also lead to individuals identifying new options in the light of being in such new ligatures. The reasons for individuals being trapped in constraining contexts could derive from a lack of possibilities to change contexts – depending on family situations, misdirected civil society efforts, or misdirected public policy measures.

There are many other ways than rising up through class hierarchies that individuals can shape their lives. Liberal policy should more take into account that individuals might find meaning in ligatures and bonds connected to different arenas in civil society, that is, not only to class, profession,

income and wealth hierarchies, but also to all kinds of groupings in civil society like NGOs, active in for example environment, sport, culture, religion, welfare. The important task is to recognise and build policy on the fact that an open liberal society is characterised by a multitude of dynamic contexts for individual life courses. Individual mobility in all kinds of directions – including voluntary non-mobility (staying in a position) is the characteristic of a liberal society. To focus liberal policy only upon hierarchies defined and developed in mobility research and used in policy debate would be a big mistake. And – the liberal society is different from a society in which community is seen as an unchanging structure where individuals are born into and remain in static structures. The liberal society is thus messy and more difficult to govern than a static predictable society. As Dahrendorf repeatedly stressed in his writings a society with conflicts of interest divides along other lines than between what has traditionally been defined as class.

Liberals should be careful not to let the state take control of civil society and steer clear of even well meaning policies which might diminish the independence of civil society organisations. Support for and use of civil society organisation for societal purposes should always be based on the recognition of the autonomy of such organisations. Public financial incentives which lead to NGOs adapting their objectives and activities just to conform should be avoided, for example by forcing social services providers to adopt models stipulated by the state.

Liberals should in their policies support equality of opportunity but be wary of policies that promote greater equality of outcome which, apart from interventions to support deprived people, could prove counter-productive to the vitality and dynamism of an open liberal society. At least in countries with relatively low degrees of inequality.

There is today rightly much focus on education, especially at an early age. This cannot be underestimated. Pre-school and early school education for all children must be a priority along with lifting deprived families with small children out of long term poverty. In education it is important to let children develop critical thinking skills – not least to ensure they can devise their own life paths and not uncritically accept their existing status. This is also part of becoming a citizen complete with the ability and the possibility to be active in all parts of society – public affairs, the market and civil society. Such efforts in education should be given priority irrespective of if one wants to promote upward mobility or other movements in society.

Upwards social mobility should not be seen as an overall goal for all – some might find a better life not moving, moving horizontally or even downwards. More social mobility might not always be the best for every individual in view of their desires, dreams and aspirations.

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