

# Social mobility and its critics

Aveek Bhattacharya

**SMF**

Social Market  
Foundation

# Social mobility and its critics

Aveek Bhattacharya

## FIRST PUBLISHED BY

The Social Market Foundation, July 2023  
Third Floor, 5-6 St Matthew Street, London, SW1P 2JT  
Copyright © The Social Market Foundation, 2023

The moral right of the author(s) has been asserted. All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

## THE SOCIAL MARKET FOUNDATION

The Foundation's main activity is to commission and publish original papers by independent academics and other experts on key topics in the economic and social fields, with a view to stimulating public discussion on the performance of markets and the social framework within which they operate. The Foundation is a registered charity (1000971) and a company limited by guarantee. It is independent of any political party or group and is funded predominantly through sponsorship of research and public policy debates. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the Social Market Foundation.

### CHAIR

Professor Wendy Thomson CBE

### DIRECTOR

James Kirkup

## TRUSTEES

Professor Tim Bale  
Tom Ebbutt  
Caroline Escott  
Baroness Grender MBE  
Rt Hon Dame Margaret Hodge MP  
Sir Trevor Phillips OBE  
Melville Rodrigues

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Aveek Bhattacharya

Dr Aveek Bhattacharya is the Research Director of the SMF, having joined as Chief Economist in September 2020. Prior to that, he was Senior Policy Analyst at the Institute of Alcohol Studies, researching and advocating for policies to reduce alcohol-related harm. He has also previously worked for OC&C Strategy Consultants, advising clients across a range of sectors including retail, consumer goods, software and services.

Aveek studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at undergraduate level, and has Master's degrees in Politics (from the University of Oxford) and Social Policy Research (from the London School of Economics). He holds a PhD in Social Policy from the London School of Economics, where his thesis compared secondary school choice in England and Scotland.

Aveek is co-editor of the book *Political Philosophy in a Pandemic: Routes to a More Just Future*.

## Is social mobility back? Why did it ever go away?

Earlier this month, Labour published its “opportunity mission”, with Keir Starmer pledging to fight against the notion that “your circumstances, who you are, where you come from, who you know, might shape your life more than your talent, your effort and your enterprise” and to bring down “the class ceiling”.<sup>1</sup> Close observers might recognise a bit of a shift in rhetoric from the party. In 2019, then Labour leader and Shadow Education Secretary Jeremy Corbyn and Angela Rayner declared social mobility a “failure”, and sought to reorient discussion towards “social justice” – for example, proposing to replace the Social Mobility Commission with a Social Justice Commission.<sup>2</sup>

It is barely four months since the Social Market Foundation’s James Kirkup wrote a piece in *The Times* calling for politicians, particularly Labour ones, to start talking more about social mobility.<sup>3</sup> Yet the mood music does seem to have changed. Soon after, Shadow Employment Minister Alison McGovern gave a speech to the SMF entitled “Putting social mobility on the agenda”.<sup>4</sup>

Social mobility is an odd concept. In most contexts, it is ‘motherhood and apple pie’, the sort of thing everybody agrees on, that it seems no right-minded person could be against. Witness, for example, the recent parliamentary “debate” on social mobility, in which no speaker really questioned the premise that social mobility is a good thing or a desirable goal for government and society.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Corbyn and Rayner’s rejection of social mobility was hardly eccentric or idiosyncratic. Their arguments echo intellectually rigorous and respectable philosophical criticisms of social mobility and its close conceptual cousins, equality of opportunity and meritocracy. For example, in May, the *Boston Review* ran a series of articles responding to a piece by the philosophy professor Christine Sypnowich called “Is Equality of Opportunity Enough?” (her view is quite clearly no).<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, I want to explain why many thoughtful people hold such heretical views, and what Corbyn and Rayner got right in their attempts to dump social mobility. At the same time, I want to explore whether this debate even matters. Confronted with Labour’s apparent reversal of position from rejecting social mobility to embracing it, Alison McGovern argued: “I don’t think it’s about words, it’s about the reality of people’s lives”.<sup>7</sup> Was she right? Is this just a semantic disagreement? Or does it have implications for how politicians should make policy and approach social problems?

A few definitions before we get started. In this essay, when I refer to social mobility I will mostly be talking about *relative* social mobility: the extent to which people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are able to overtake their more advantaged peers and achieve positions of prosperity and privilege. A standard way of measuring this sort of social mobility is by looking at the relationship between a person's origins and their position – for example, calculating the proportion of people who grew up in the bottom income decile that ultimately rise to the top decile. I'll also be talking about *equality of opportunity*, by which I will generally mean the extent to which people from better and worse off backgrounds have equal chances to achieve positions of power and privilege. I won't spend a lot of time getting into what we mean by "equal chance" and what sort of obstacles to that equality we should care about, which is a large and separate philosophical discussion. I'll also later open this out to more expansive notions of equality of opportunity that go beyond economic advantage and relative position. A third concept to have in mind is *meritocracy*, by which I mean a society where the most talented and capable receive the greatest power and rewards.

I won't here say much about *absolute* social mobility. Absolute social mobility measures the extent to which children are economically better off than their parents – for example, how much higher their income is. Though I can see the rhetorical significance of such figures, I'm not sure what they measure that isn't better captured by aggregate population-level data on income growth. In any case, absolute mobility maps onto quite a different concept than relative mobility, which is where the debate mostly is. Certainly, conflating the two is recipe for confusion.

### Critics see social mobility as a cover for economic inequality

In his comments explaining why Labour wanted to move away from social mobility towards social justice, Jeremy Corbyn said "For decades we've been told that inequality doesn't matter because the education system will allow talented and hard-working people to succeed whatever their background. But the greater inequality has become, the more entrenched it has become".<sup>8</sup> It isn't made explicit what *sort* of inequalities he has in mind, but we can reasonably infer that his conception of social justice involves reducing economic inequalities, such as those of income and wealth.

Such attitudes to social mobility – and in particular the concern that it crowds out more fundamental issues of economic inequality and poverty – did not emerge from nowhere. Equality of opportunity, in particular, is regularly contrasted with equality of outcome (see, for example, David Cameron's 2015 party conference speech, but there are dozens of other examples).<sup>9</sup> In fact, this is part of the appeal of social mobility and equality of opportunity. The implication is that giving people better life chances, helping them to help themselves, can spare us the grubby unpleasantness of giving them more money or power.

At its worst, this sort of thinking risks providing ideological cover for unjust social and economic systems. The figure that looms largest above social mobility discourse in the US is Horatio Alger, the 19<sup>th</sup> Century novelist famous for rags-to-riches stories of poor young men who rise to fame and fortune through ingenuity, initiative and determination.<sup>10</sup> The effect of these stories of people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps is to give the impression of a country where anybody can make it if they only work hard enough. By focusing on the exceptional – indeed, in Alger’s case, the fictional – stories, a focus on social mobility successes can provide false reassurance that all is well.

While Horatio Alger is an American phenomenon, the British equivalent might be the grammar school child, whose spark and talent was discovered in unpromising circumstances, and nurtured by a selective school to help them succeed. Parliament is full of them, and five postwar prime ministers went to selective state schools.<sup>11</sup> Yet for all the anecdotal power of such exceptional stories, analysis of the data suggests that areas with grammar schools suffer worse educational inequalities, with the majority of poorer students that don’t make the cut doing worse as a result – reaffirming the worry that stories of social mobility serve as a cover for inequity.<sup>12</sup>

### **Social mobility is far more demanding than it seems – taken seriously it collapses into equality of outcome or even more drastic social engineering**

Objections like these – to Horatio Alger and the anecdota of grammar school graduates – are objections to the misused *rhetoric* of social mobility, to the abuse of the concept, rather than its good faith implementation. Advocates of social mobility will deny that it implies a conservative defence of the status quo, and argue that to really create a society in which the poorest and most disadvantaged can get to the upper echelons would require far-reaching changes.

The trouble is that this argument proves too much. Take social mobility seriously and it turns out to be extremely demanding. That undermines its appeal as an apparently more pragmatic and achievable alternative to hardline calls for economic redistribution. The distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome is less robust than it seems, and the two risk collapsing into one another. Indeed, social mobility may in some respects require us to go further than we would need to for brute economic equality.

Consider the argument against grammar schools made by Conservative MP and former Social Mobility Foundation Chief Executive David Johnston:<sup>13</sup>

*“the narrative ignores the fact that somewhere in the region of 80 per cent of our outcomes are related to what happens to us at home rather than at school. You won’t often hear the proponents of grammars tell you whether their parents pushed them more than other parents did (it is very difficult for them to know) or what their parents did for a living, both of which strongly affect a child’s outcomes.”*

Attacking that 80% would seem to involve heavy intervention. Think of the sorts of issues that make it harder for poorer children to succeed in life – housing, the time and support they get from parents, their ability to buy helpful materials and experiences. Many of them are inextricably linked to the fact that they are poor. As such, it is hard to find a way to lessen that disadvantage that does not involve addressing their economic handicap. Equality of opportunity is stymied by inequality of outcome. That has led many people to say that the distinction between the two is practically illusory – we cannot have one without the other.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, it's worse than that. Far from being the soft option, promoting social mobility might require *greater* social engineering than facing up to economic inequalities. For even if we lived in a far more economically equal society, we would still have to deal with differences in culture, expectation and cultivated habits between different households.

Political philosophers like James Fishkin have highlighted the tensions between protecting family autonomy and achieving equality of opportunity.<sup>15</sup> To truly level the playing field, the state wouldn't just need to stop advantaged families passing on their wealth. It would also have to find ways to stop them from utilising their social connections, transmitting their cultural knowledge and instilling economically useful habits. It would be drawn into questions like whether certain parents encourage their children to do too many or too few extracurricular activities, whether they debate too much or too little over the dining table, whether they read an appropriate number of bedtime stories.<sup>16</sup> Pursuing true equality of opportunity would, as Dylan Matthews puts it, turn society into “a dystopian, totalitarian nightmare – and even then, it would still prove impossible”.<sup>17</sup>

That is almost certainly a straw man. As the philosopher Adam Swift says, hardly anybody “has been foolish enough to endorse such an extreme view” as advocating for *perfect* social mobility.<sup>18</sup> But if the objective is not to eliminate the relationship between a person's background and their life outcomes, that raises the question of what *acceptable* social immobility looks like, and how we know when we achieve it. It is important here not to hold social mobility to an unfair or unreasonable standard we don't expect of other principles. Just as perfect social mobility would not be perfect, reducing income inequality to zero would likely also involve illiberal and undesirable means.

Yet we can press the objection further: there are forms of social immobility which we don't just tolerate but think are natural, inevitable or even desirable. A strong correlation between parents' occupation and status and that of their children may result from preferences, as well as brute privilege. Consider Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison's finding that children of doctors are 24 times more likely to be doctors than other children, and that children of lawyers are 17 times more likely to be lawyers.<sup>19</sup> This is mostly attributable to social inequalities and differences in awareness and understanding. But those figures almost certainly also reflect the unobjectionable tendency for some children to admire their parents and want to follow in their footsteps, continue family tradition or prefer a familiar lifestyle that they grew up around.



## Opponents of social mobility object to its positional zero-sum nature

There is a more fundamental objection to social mobility, however. Many critics object to its inherently *positional* nature. What I mean is that social mobility tends to start with a 'league table' perspective on society, focusing on how far people move up and down over generations – their positions relative to one another. Sceptics of social mobility don't like the oppositional, zero-sum nature of such a worldview, arguing that we should care more about how we all do collectively as a society. More than that, it's the wrong emphasis: we should care about how far apart the rungs on the ladder are, not just the identity of the people on each step. As Dylan Matthews puts it: "A decent society shouldn't try to build a better aristocracy. It should try to achieve a reasonable and rising standard of living for all".<sup>20</sup>

Adam Swift criticises positional theories in a different way.<sup>21</sup> He identifies that all claims about inequality of opportunity take the following form: "x is unequal to y with respect to the opportunity to get (or to become) z". The sorts of opportunities we morally care about – things that can fill the placeholder z in Swift's formula – come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some, to be sure, are opportunities to take up certain economic and social positions. But many are opportunities to do, be and have other things – to go to different and better places, to enjoy different and better experiences. Those are the sorts of opportunities denied to those in poverty, for example. Social mobility puts a lot of emphasis on a working class child's ability to be a doctor or a millionaire because those are elite positions that involving 'moving up'. It does not care about their ability to travel abroad or play the piano, because those have no bearing on their relative place in the social hierarchy. Social mobility arbitrarily narrows the scope of what we consider socially important opportunities.

Implicitly or explicitly, proponents of social mobility can respond to these objections by tapping into notions of deservingness. If those at the top of society get there by dint of their talent, hard work and overall merit, then it isn't arbitrary to allow them to enjoy greater rewards and greater opportunities in life, they argue – it is just fairness. Philosophers tend to be more sceptical. At the extreme, they see the natural inequalities of being born more or less capable or intelligent as no more morally salient as the social inequalities of being born to a posher family.<sup>22</sup> As Thomas Nagel argues, "When racial and sexual injustice have been reduced, we will still be left with the great injustice of the smart and the dumb, who are so differently rewarded for comparable effort".<sup>23</sup>

The question of deservingness is another area where there tends to be a gulf between philosophers and the general public. Doubts about free will, and whether we can be causally responsible for any of the qualities and advantages that bring us success in life, make many philosophers sceptical about when and whether anybody can deserve anything.<sup>24</sup> Common sense morality is less troubled by such metaphysical questions.

We don't have to go as far as denying free will, however, to believe that our genetic endowments and the norms we are raised with are not things we can reasonably take credit for, and so undermine efforts to build a society where positions of power and prestige accurately track deservingness.

## The ideology of social mobility reinforces hierarchies and risks undermining equality of status and respect

Even if, for the sake of argument, we go with the common sense view that some people *can* deserve to be better paid and lionised because of their talents and abilities, we are still left with another objection to social mobility – that a society that operates that way is less, well, *nice*.

If Horatio Alger is the spectre hovering over American social mobility discourse, his British counterpart is Michael Young. Young, famously, was the inventor of the word 'meritocracy' in his 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The book is 65 years old, but it is almost 23 years since Young wrote a grumpy article in *The Guardian* reminding everyone that his novel was “a satire meant to be a warning”, and chastising people (most prominently Tony Blair) for seeing meritocracy as something to aspire to.<sup>25</sup>

Young's fear, expressed in the novel in the form of an imagined revolt of the underclass against a meritocratic system, is that the successful become detached, arrogant and cruel and that the failures become stigmatised and demoralised. As Young put it, “It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that”.<sup>26</sup>

These sorts of worries about inequalities of status – rather than inequalities in the distribution of goods or positions — have cropped up in different ways in political philosophy over recent decades. Philosophers who favour reducing economic inequalities often see reducing status differences as part of their motivation for that goal. For example, T.M. Scanlon cites the belief that “it is an evil for people to be treated as inferior, or made to feel inferior” as number two on his list of six objections to inequality.<sup>27</sup>

Elizabeth Anderson went further in her excoriating 1999 article “What is the Point of Equality?”, which criticised philosophers for spending too much time worrying about who gets what rather than ensuring everybody in society gets a decent level of respect.<sup>28</sup> Instead, she championed an alternative approach, ‘relational egalitarianism’, concerned primarily with asserting the equal moral worth of people, opposing hierarchies and ensuring social relations operate on a more equal basis. All of this sits uneasily with the inherently positional social mobility approach, which takes hierarchies as given rather than trying to tear them down.

Those arguments ran in parallel with the “redistribution-recognition debate”, between those that wanted to focus on structural economic inequities and those that favoured a pivot towards recognising and respect individuals' value and identity.<sup>29</sup>

In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the uprising against the smug elite takes place in 2033. In our timeline, it came 17 years sooner, with the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. Both highlighted the political gulf between those certified and garlanded by the education system and those outside it.<sup>30</sup> Hillary Clinton's description of Trump supporters as “deplorables” was perceived to be indicative of the contempt with which the educated 'elite' regarded the rest of society.<sup>31</sup>

The philosopher Michael Sandel certainly saw parallels. His 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit* is an attempt to understand Trumpism through the lens of dissatisfaction with meritocracy.<sup>32</sup> He argues for a shift away from the adversarial, hierarchical social mobility worldview towards a politics of 'common good' that emphasises the dignity of work, any work, and contribution, any contribution, to our shared endeavour, rather than obsessing over each individual's relative share. He endorses a form of the politics of recognition (a close relative of identity politics, though that label tends to be applied less to working class White people).<sup>33</sup> Indeed, this sense that social mobility is an attack on cultural traditions and rootedness is reflected in the apparent wariness of British Conservatives towards the concept, worrying that it entails their children and grandchildren leaving their communities to go to big cities and universities.<sup>34</sup>

The book made a strong impression on the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who, inspired by Sandel, made "Respect" the central theme of his successful 2021 election campaign. In Scholz's view, Brexit and Trump resulted from the fact people are "experiencing deep social insecurities, and lack appreciation for what they do".<sup>35</sup> His objective, according to *The Economist*, is to create a society "with equal regard for binmen and CEOs".<sup>36</sup> (There is a curiosity to the fact that the most prominent proponent of recognition in the old redistribution-recognition debate was a German, Axel Honneth, and that the original source of much of recognition is the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, yet the ideas found their way into German government via the American Sandel).

Keir Starmer has been urged to take a leaf from Scholz's book, and there is some evidence that he does see the German Chancellor as a role model.<sup>37</sup> In an essay Starmer wrote for *The New Statesman* in March, he name-checked Scholz, and emphasised his own commitment to the 'r-word': "I talk about respect a lot because I saw how my father felt disrespected because he was a toolmaker. He always felt others looked down on him".<sup>38</sup>

Yet Starmer couldn't help himself but follow that up with a statement that sounded suspiciously like an endorsement of social mobility: "Growing up, I saw too much unfulfilled potential; too often ambition was stifled; there are too many barriers to working-class kids getting a break". Certainly, Starmer does not seem to have registered the apparent tension between a politics of social mobility and a politics of respect and recognition. The idea of "respect" was again at the heart of his opportunity mission speech this month, presenting Labour's plan as "The road to respect and shattering the class ceiling".<sup>39</sup>

In fairness, it is possible to interpret Starmer as holding a non-positional conception of equality of opportunity. The terminology is a bit of a mouthful, but the idea it gets at is important, and potentially represents a way forward in terms of developing a more defensible goal for society than social mobility. As I've suggested through this essay, one of the big problems with social mobility is that it is inherently positional: it assumes somebody is on top, somebody underneath, the winners are separate from the losers. If we think of equality of opportunity as being about a person's ability to get to a better place in the income distribution or social hierarchy, it too is positional. But we don't have to think about equality of opportunity that way. Perhaps equality of opportunity isn't about how a person does relative to other people, but is rather about how much they can make of their own talents and inclinations.

There is another conception of equality of opportunity as valuable for *self-realisation*, allowing everybody to achieve their full potential. If the standard approach to equality of opportunity frames it as about ensuring a fair starting gate so everybody has an equal shot at winning the race, equality of opportunity as self-realisation is about ensuring everybody gets the chance to run as far and fast as they can, and not worrying too much where they place. Such a view has been attributed to John Rawls, for example.<sup>40</sup>

This sort of interpretation is at least consistent with Keir Starmer's words above. They also fit with the Labour Party's alternative to social mobility under Corbyn - "Labour is committing itself to a radical transformation of society so that every child has the chance to flourish, not just a lucky few" - and to Angela Rayner's claim that social justice is "Not just one person doing better than the people they grew up with but all of us working together to give everyone the chance to reach their full potential".<sup>41</sup>

### **Social mobility is a reasonable proxy for social justice, but self-realisation is a better value**

By now, it should be clear why a vocal minority object so strongly to the language of social mobility, meritocracy and equality of opportunity (in its narrow sense). They risk legitimising or distracting from more fundamental issues of economic inequality. Taken seriously, they imply drastic social engineering and interference in family life. Their fundamentally positional framework reinforces hierarchy rather than tearing it down, and can undermine equality of status and respect.

All of these objections explain why these are theoretically flawed objectives for a government or a society. That does not mean that Alison McGovern is wrong to say that in practice such arguments are more about words than about deeds. We should not overstate the extent to which poverty and income inequality are neglected topics, or the likelihood that politicians will forget about them if they talk too much about social mobility. As an indicator of the current state of the conversation, consider that the word "poverty" has been mentioned 10 times as often as the words "social mobility" in House of Commons debates over the last parliament.<sup>42</sup> Certainly, there is scope for some strategic ambiguity in political rhetoric, emphasising messages that sound good and attractive to voters over conceptual clarity.

On the other hand, there are key symbolic ways in which recent governments have tried to sideline poverty in favour of social mobility. The abolition of the Child Poverty Act in 2016 removed government targets to produce a child poverty strategy, to set targets for reducing child poverty and to report on progress against these milestones.<sup>43</sup> It also led to the Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission (originally the Child Poverty Commission) to drop child poverty from its name entirely. Politicians can reverse these changes without stepping back from talk of social mobility or equality of opportunity more generally. Indeed, Labour's opportunity mission briefing spoke of the need to "involve child poverty reduction at the heart of this work"<sup>44</sup> – though some MPs have criticised the leadership for failing to adequately prioritise poverty.<sup>45</sup> The recent controversy over Keir Starmer's refusal to scrap the two-child benefit limit has cast further doubt over the depth of his commitment to reducing child poverty.<sup>46</sup>

The more fundamental tension is between affirming a positional worldview which focuses heavily on social rank and one which seeks to stress our fundamental equality and shared standing. Putting too much emphasis on whether disadvantaged people can get into university, break into certain elite professions or make lots of money risks devaluing those that cannot and do not pull themselves up in this way. In reinforcing a view of society as divided into winners and losers, it risks reproducing the disrespect and division that Keir Starmer, inspired by Olof Scholz, has tried to get away from. Far better to think and talk in terms of helping people to achieve their potential, to be the best they can be, relative to their own capacities, not anybody else's – for want of a less jargony term, to *self-realise*.

## Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Labour, 'Breaking down the Barriers to Opportunity', July 2023, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>; Keir Starmer, 'Keir Starmer Unveils Labour's Mission to Break down Barriers to Opportunity at Every Stage' (Speech, Mid Kent College, Gillingham, 6 July 2023), <https://labour.org.uk/press/keir-starmer-unveils-labours-mission-to-break-down-barriers-to-opportunity-at-every-stage/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Labour, 'Labour to Put Social Justice at the Heart of Everything a Labour Government Will Do with New Social Justice Commission', Press Release, 7 June 2019, <https://labour.org.uk/press/labour-put-social-justice-heart-everything-labour-government-will-new-social-justice-commission/>.
- <sup>3</sup> James Kirkup, 'How Social Mobility Tripped on the Red Wall', *The Times*, 8 March 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/how-social-mobility-tripped-on-the-red-wall-k5lzt6p2>.
- <sup>4</sup> Alison McGovern, 'Putting Social Mobility on the Agenda' (Social Market Foundation, London, 2 May 2023), [https://www.smf.co.uk/commentary\\_podcasts/putting-social-mobility-on-the-agenda-a-speech-by-alison-mcgovern-mp/](https://www.smf.co.uk/commentary_podcasts/putting-social-mobility-on-the-agenda-a-speech-by-alison-mcgovern-mp/).
- <sup>5</sup> 'Social Mobility Volume 730: Debated on Tuesday 21 March 2023', Hansard, 21 March 2023, <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-03-21/debates/36E77607-A136-4B68-9997-9C6DAA3408C6/SocialMobility>.
- <sup>6</sup> Christine Sypnowich, 'Is Equal Opportunity Enough? - Boston Review', *Boston Review*, 10 May 2023, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/is-equal-opportunity-enough/>.
- <sup>7</sup> McGovern, 'Putting Social Mobility on the Agenda'.
- <sup>8</sup> Labour, 'Labour to Put Social Justice at the Heart of Everything a Labour Government Will Do with New Social Justice Commission'.
- <sup>9</sup> Staff, 'David Cameron's Tory Conference Speech in Full', *The Independent*, 7 October 2015, sec. News, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/tory-party-conference-2015-david-cameron-s-speech-in-full-a6684656.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> Alissa Quart, 'The American Dream Is Built on a Lie: New Book "Bootstrapped" Explains – Rolling Stone', *Rolling Stone*, 14 March 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/american-dream-myth-horatio-alger-lie-bootstrapped-excerpt-1234695926/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Sutton Trust and Social Mobility Commission, 'Elitist Britain 2019: The Educational Backgrounds of Britain's Leading People', 2019, <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Elitist-Britain-2019.pdf>.
- <sup>12</sup> Jon Andrews, Jo Hutchinson, and Rebecca Johnes, 'Grammar Schools and Social Mobility' (Education Policy Institute, September 2016), [https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Grammar-schools-and-social-mobility\\_.pdf](https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Grammar-schools-and-social-mobility_.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> David Johnston, 'The Social Mobility Case against Grammar Schools', *The Spectator*, 30 July 2022, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-social-mobility-case-against-grammar-schools/>.
- <sup>14</sup> David A Strauss, 'The Illusory Distinction between Equality of Opportunity and Equality of Result', *Wm. & Mary L. Rev.* 34 (1992): 171.
- <sup>15</sup> James S Fishkin, *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* (Yale University Press, 1983).
- <sup>16</sup> Shlomi Segall, 'If You're a Luck Egalitarian, How Come You Read Bedtime Stories to Your Children?', *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (1 January 2011): 23–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2010.518388>.
- <sup>17</sup> Dylan Matthews, 'The Case against Equality of Opportunity', *Vox* (blog), 21 September 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/21/9334215/equality-of-opportunity>.



- <sup>18</sup> Adam Swift, 'Would Perfect Mobility Be Perfect?', *European Sociological Review* 20, no. 1 (2004): 1–11.
- <sup>19</sup> Matthew Moore, 'Children of Doctors and Lawyers Get a Leg-up to Top Jobs', *The Times*, 26 January 2019, sec. news, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/children-of-doctors-and-lawyers-get-leg-up-as-elite-hoard-top-jobs-rr3v6zncm>.
- <sup>20</sup> Matthews, 'The Case against Equality of Opportunity'.
- <sup>21</sup> Swift, 'Would Perfect Mobility Be Perfect?'
- <sup>22</sup> Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen, 'Are Some Inequalities More Unequal than Others? Nature, Nurture and Equality', *Utilitas* 16, no. 2 (2004): 193–219, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820804000536>.
- <sup>23</sup> Matthews, 'The Case against Equality of Opportunity'.
- <sup>24</sup> Dylan Matthews, 'The Philosophy of "You Didn't Build That"', *Washington Post*, 20 July 2012, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2012/07/20/the-philosophy-of-you-didnt-build-that/>.
- <sup>25</sup> Michael Young, 'Down with Meritocracy', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2001, sec. Politics, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment>.
- <sup>26</sup> Young.
- <sup>27</sup> T.M. Scanlon, *The Diversity of Objections to Inequality* (University of Kansas, Department of Philosophy, 1996), [https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12409/scanlon\\_1996.pdf?sequence=5](https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12409/scanlon_1996.pdf?sequence=5).
- <sup>28</sup> Elizabeth S Anderson, 'What Is the Point of Equality?', *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337.
- <sup>29</sup> Mattias Iser, 'Recognition', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>.
- <sup>30</sup> David Runciman, 'How the Education Gap Is Tearing Politics Apart', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2016, sec. Politics, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/05/trump-brexit-education-gap-tearing-politics-apart>.
- <sup>31</sup> Matthew Yglesias, 'Hillary Clinton's Basket of Deplorables, Explained', *Vox* (blog), 14 September 2016, <https://www.vox.com/2016/9/14/12896540/hillary-basket-of-deplorables>.
- <sup>32</sup> Julian Coman, 'Michael Sandel: "The Populist Backlash Has Been a Revolt against the Tyranny of Merit"', *The Observer*, 6 September 2020, sec. Books, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/06/michael-sandel-the-populist-backlash-has-been-a-revolt-against-the-tyranny-of-merit>.
- <sup>33</sup> Craig Calhoun, 'Charles Taylor Has Reimagined Identity and Morality for a Secular Age', *South Asia@LSE* (blog), 19 October 2016, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/10/19/charles-taylor-has-reimagined-identity-and-morality-for-a-secular-age/>.
- <sup>34</sup> Kirkup, 'How Social Mobility Tripped on the Red Wall'.
- <sup>35</sup> Philip Oltermann, 'Olaf Scholz: "Merit in Society Must Not Be Limited to Top-Earners"', *The Guardian*, 8 September 2021, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/olaf-scholz-merit-society-not-be-limited-top-earners-germany-election>.
- <sup>36</sup> 'The Challenges Facing Olaf Scholz as Germany's Chancellor', *The Economist*, 8 December 2021, <https://www.economist.com/europe/the-challenges-facing-olaf-scholz-as-germanys-chancellor/21806676>.

- 
- <sup>37</sup> Jason Cowley, 'What Keir Starmer Has Learnt from the Return of the German Social Democrats', *New Statesman*, 1 March 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/editors-note/2023/03/jason-cowley-keir-starmer-learnt-return-german-social-democrats>.
- <sup>38</sup> Keir Starmer, 'Keir Starmer: This Is What I Believe', *New Statesman*, 20 May 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/preparing-for-power/2023/05/keir-starmer-manifesto-labour-5-pledges-missions>.
- <sup>39</sup> Starmer, 'Keir Starmer Unveils Labour's Mission to Break down Barriers to Opportunity at Every Stage'.
- <sup>40</sup> Matthew Clayton, 'Rawls and Natural Aristocracy', *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 3 (2001): 239–59.
- <sup>41</sup> Labour, 'Labour to Put Social Justice at the Heart of Everything a Labour Government Will Do with New Social Justice Commission', Press Release, 7 June 2019, <https://labour.org.uk/press/labour-put-social-justice-heart-everything-labour-government-will-new-social-justice-commission/>.
- <sup>42</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/search?startDate=2019-12-19&endDate=2023-07-04&searchTerm=%22poverty%22&house=Commons&partial=False&sortOrder=1>; <https://hansard.parliament.uk/search?startDate=2019-12-19&endDate=2023-07-04&searchTerm=%22social%20mobility%22&house=Commons&partial=False&sortOrder=1>
- <sup>43</sup> 'Recent History of UK Child Poverty', Child Poverty Action Group, accessed 18 July 2023, <https://cpag.org.uk/recent-history-uk-child-poverty>.
- <sup>44</sup> Labour, 'Breaking down the Barriers to Opportunity', July 2023, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>.
- <sup>45</sup> Peter Walker, 'Keir Starmer to Say Class Ceiling Must Shatter to Let Children Get Ahead', *The Guardian*, 5 July 2023, sec. Politics, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jul/05/keir-starmer-snobbish-class-ceiling-shatter-let-children-get-ahead>.
- <sup>46</sup> Pippa Crerar and Patrick Butler, 'Labour MPs Urge Starmer to Rethink Two-Child Benefit Cap Decision', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2023, sec. Politics, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jul/17/labour-mps-urge-starmer-rethink-two-child-benefit-cap-npf>.