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Social mobility and class barriers [1]

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The Sutton Trust has just released a report [3] on the way in which social mobility has been flatlining since 1970. All of the newspapers seem to be taking the same line (with varying degres of stridency, I agree) which is that this shows how ossified society is and isn't it all an outrage, a crying shame. The FT [4], The Indy [5], Times [6], Telegraph [7]. Oddly, it's the Guardian which gives the best report [8]:

> *The brightest children in Britain's poorest homes are outperformed by the least gifted children from wealthy homes by the age of seven, according to research. It concludes that social class is still the biggest predictor of school achievement, the likelihood of getting a degree and even a child's behaviour, suggesting that the advantages of being born in a privileged home have not changed in 30 years.*

For the Sutton Trust hasn't studied social mobility at all. It's studied what is, in the very kindest possible description of it, a weak proxy for it, the liklihood of getting a degree by age 23 (one that I myself would have failed btw).

I'm entirely willing to believe that coming from a privileged home does indeed increase your chances of succeeding via the education system: given the manifest deficiencies of that system, that anyone without a strong home and family background gets anything at all out of it surprises me.

What I'm much less sure about is that this is in fact a good proxy for social mobility: for a start, we're not actually interested in social mobility at all, we're interested in economic mobility and income and class have never been closely linked in England. The report does acknowledge this in a way:

> *A key assumption is that, as demonstrated by previous studies, earlier educational and behaviourial outcomes for children are a good (and reasonably constant) predictor of their future earnings as adults.*

Given that the graduate premium is falling and has been for a decade or more (to the point that investment in an Arts degree, for men, is thought to now have a negative economic return) that assumption of constancy seems unwarranted. The Sutton Trust has pointed out that the education system, as so many of us have been insisting, isn't very good. But they haven't, as most of the newspaper reports seem to think, found out anything about social or economic mobility, at least, not to a reasonable standard of proof they haven't.

Still that won't worry anyone, will it? "Research" has shown that the UK lags the civilised world in social mobility and that'll be good for a few thousand jeremiads. Just a pity that what the research does show is that the £77 billion a year we spend on the education system isn't being well spent, but then we knew that, didn't we?

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