

Social class and education in modern Britain: why inequalities persist and how can we explain them

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Abstract

This paper discusses the historical continuity and persistence of educational inequalities in postwar Britain. It shows that despite much policy activity, educational inequalities have never really been the real target of policy action. Rather, a more concrete policy target has been the support of the markets, which were expected to act as an equalizing force of the aforementioned inequalities. In such a context, my contention is that inequalities of any sort cannot be reduced without challenging class inequalities, which, in turn, is predicated upon the challenging of the dominant class relations. Insofar as explanations have to be invoked to explain the persistence and salience of educational differentials in attainment and the attendant centrality of social class in these explanations, I suggest that the research interest is turned to the role of the élites and their contribution in the rearrangement of class relations.

Keywords Social class, educational inequalities, social mobility, political economy, social class relations, social class inequalities

Introduction

The issue of educational inequalities has been of major significance within the sociology of education since the establishment of the field as a distinct area of social scientific inquiry. Few countries can boast a more extensive research production and accompanying publications on the topic than the UK. This is probably justified by the fact that the UK displays some of the starkest educational inequalities. What is more, these inequalities have persisted over the years. That is to say, the UK qualifies as an interesting though by no means exceptional case within the economically advanced world. Despite its economic position as one of the most affluent countries in the world, its formally-educated population seems to be divided on various lines that span across all areas of importance. Namely, those educated in the UK are expected to have significantly different attainments and concomitant life-chances among each other, according to their social class background, ethnicity, gender and disability. The nature of the English education system is such that inequalities are not only interlocking (Ball, 2003), but also reinforcing each other. They are inscribed in the selfsame system as much as its other constituent elements, such as the curriculum, the examination system, teacher training and so on. Indeed, the most stable and enduring characteristic of this system is its multiple and multifarious inequalities.

In what constitutes a well-developed field of inquiry, a lot has been written about the size of inequalities (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2003), the way they are transmitted (Ball, Vincent, Reay), some salient factors that explain their occurrence and reproduction (Devine, Reay, Ball, Skeggs). Fewer studies have dealt with the persistence of inequalities (Machin and Vignoles, 2005; Boliver, 2011) and even fewer with the

explanation of this remarkable phenomenon, namely the persistence of educational inequalities (Goldthorpe, 2010). In the remainder of this paper, I demonstrate the magnitude of educational inequalities and then move on to systematically link them to social outcomes. I discuss them as part of the social relations, which are social class relations. In doing so, I offer an account of recent transformations in the political economy and class relations in postwar UK.

1. Educational inequalities in the UK

In England, inequalities in attainment start well before the formal school-starting age, which is set at five. Specifically, there is evidence for differentials in cognitive development during the pre-school age. In a seminal study by Feinstein (2003), 22-months old children from low and high socio-economic backgrounds were tested on their cognitive development. The results showed that both groups had a promising development and no noticeable disparities among them existed. Twenty months later, though, children from high socio-economic groups were already ahead of their peers. Less than two years later, that is to say at the age of five, children from high socio-economic background with low scores at the age of 20 months, had almost caught up with children from low socio-economic background who had scored high at the age of 20 months. Similar trends were reported in a more recent report by Washbrook and Waldfogel (2010, p. 3):

Children growing up today in the UK from the poorest fifth of families are already nearly a year (11.1 months) behind those children from middle income families in vocabulary tests by age 5, when most children start school.

What is more, the cognitive difference between low-income and middle-

income groups is twice as big as that between middle and top-income groups (the difference in cognitive development between low and middle-income groups is, as mentioned above, 11.1 months whereas the respective gap between the middle and the top-income group is 5.2 months). The distance in cognitive development is conversely related to the income differences between the three groups. In other words, the income difference between the top and the middle-income families is 2.3 times bigger than the income gap between the middle and bottom-earning families. This suggests that children from low-income families pay a hefty penalty in terms of cognitive development in relation to all other families, while those from middle-income families have shorter distance to cover in order to be at the top of their cognitive development if compared with children from the top-income bracket.

As if this was not enough, these differences are accentuated and exacerbated during the primary-school stage. According to a report by the DCSF¹

[a] positive start in life has a significant and lasting impact: 94 per cent of children who achieve a good level of development at age five go on to achieve the expected levels for reading at Key Stage 1, and they are five times more likely to achieve the highest level – Level 3.86 per cent of children achieving a good level of development go on to achieve the expected levels in writing, and 94 per cent in mathematics. Research shows that the impact of this good start is felt throughout primary school and into secondary school. (2010, p. 6)

A series of studies conducted in the UK in the last twenty years have consistently demonstrated that the educational background of parents correlates strongly with the educational attainment of their children. Children with highly-educated parents fare better in standard tests of

school attainment than children with lower-educated parents (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006; Feinstein, Robertson and Symons, 1999; Gregg and Machin, 2000; Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Smith, Brooks-Gunn and Klebanov, 1997). Educational background, in turn, correlates strongly with parental social class, while some researchers have argued that there is a causal impact between family income and educational attainment (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2005). That is to say, there is an established trend, which shows that the higher parental income is, the higher their progeny's educational attainments are.

This trend is further attested to by findings in relation to socio-economic disparities in attainment at the primary school stage. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2009) reported that the attainment gap at Key Stage 2 between pupils who are eligible for free school meals² and those who are not, is 22.2 percentage points: only 53.3 percent of pupils entitled to free school meals reached the expected national level (i.e. level 4 or above) for English and mathematics in comparison to 75.5 percent of pupils not eligible for free school meals who reached that level.

At the secondary stage, the relevant gap in attainment is even wider. Pupils on FSM are half as likely to obtain good GCSE results in comparison to their peers who are not on FSM. While 54% of non-FSM pupils achieved 5+ good GCSEs including English and Mathematics, only 27% of FSM pupils did. In addition, the combination of being on FSM and belonging to any other group with low educational attainment, such as boys, those with an identified SEN and certain ethnic minority groups, can lead to very poor results (EHRC, 2010). An examination of the Youth Cohort Study in the late 1990s revealed that students from

deprived backgrounds, boys and ethnic minority children had all fallen behind (Roberts et al., 1999). Furthermore, the authors argued that 'the gulf in performance between rich and poor pupils in England and Wales has been widening for at least a decade' (Demack et al., in Slatter et al., 1999).

At age 16, the differences in achievement are well entrenched and consolidated. In a study that explored educational exclusion, it was found that the six percent of children who had experienced school suspension were more likely to come from families with low socio-economic background (such as in receipt of job seekers allowance, unemployed or lone-parent households) (Adelman et al., 2003). Similarly, Gordon et al. (2000) reported that poorer families are more likely to have disabled children, while special educational needs are also strongly associated with households' circumstances (Lloyd, 2006). The increasing propensity of mental health problems among children and young people throughout the postwar years is alarming, especially if we take into account the fact that these problems are closely associated with poverty (Quilgras, 2001, in Lloyd, 2006). Poverty has been kept at relatively high rates for a country with the wealth and economic growth that England has experienced over the last 60 years or so. Certain conditions that affect adults, such as maternal depression, also have severe consequences on children's outcomes and it has been found to affect people from disadvantaged households at high rates (Murray, 1992; Murray et al., 1999). This has to be projected against the overall pattern of educational attainment for SEN pupils who perform much lower than the national average. According to results published in 2009

52.5 percent of pupils whose primary need was visual impairment reached

level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 English and mathematics, 19.3 percentage points below the national average” and only “42.1 percent of pupils whose primary need was hearing impairment reached level 4 or above in Key Stage 2 English and mathematics, 29.7 percentage points below the national average (DCSF, 2009, p. 6).

Although not all SEN pupils come from families with a low socio-economic background a lot of them do, and while the type of relationship between SEN and low socio-economic background is not straightforward (i.e. no causality can be established), it is important to note that coming from a low-income family increases the risk of being diagnosed with SEN. What remains less clear is how education contributes to the attainment of children with SEN. Evidence suggests that education does not mitigate against SEN condition and SEN pupils, who as argued above in their majority come from poorer families, are further penalised by the education system through low levels of attainment.

In terms of ethnicity, while some groups perform higher than the national average (e.g. pupils of Chinese origin), other groups have a long history of underachievement. For example, at Key Stage 2 Black students' achievement is by 7.8 percent lower than the national average (DCSF, 2009) while only 84% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children attend regularly (Ofsted, 2003) and of those only 24.8% reached the threshold for English and Mathematics (Themelis and Foster, 2013). It is indicative that, despite inner group variations, the social situation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in the UK

is generally poor, as the majority of them live in neighbourhoods that are socially excluded or on inappropriate housing estates and sites in unsuitable locations, with high unemployment rates and poor living conditions (Cemlyn et al., 2009, in Themelis and Foster, 2013).

On average, pupils of Indian and Chinese origin outperform those from white background. Conversely, the educational attainment of Black, Pakistani, Bangladeshi pupils and those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller background tend to be the lowest among all ethnic groups (Hill, 2009). These differences in attainment are not spurious, but they form part of multiple, interlocking and persistent inequalities that permeate all education stages and have been confirmed by various studies over the years (see for example, Drew and Gray, 1990; Drew, 1995; Demack et al., 2000; Owen et al., 2000; Tomlinson, 2001; Haque and Bell, 2001). The overall picture in terms of educational attainment of ethnic minorities is linked to large socio-economic differentials among such groups. Given the over-concentration of some black and minority ethnic groups at the bottom of the class structure it “might therefore be expected that many of the inequalities in performance can be explained by the differential distributions of the major ethnic groups across the occupational framework.” (Rothon, 2007, p. 307). These differentials are a reason for concern for any country that has a commitment to equality, such as the UK. If the low socio-economic position of the first-generation immigrants is partly, though not fully, explained by the lack of recognition by employers of the skills and qualifications these people acquired outside the UK and their lack of employment experience in the UK (Rothon, 2007), then similar if not augmented differentials among the younger generations are hard to explain. In other words, an 'ethnic penalty' seems to operate that is not justified by the applicants' qualifications, experience and knowledge, but it has to be accounted for by other factors.

Ethnic minority underachievement and discriminatory treatment of ethnic minority children in primary and secondary education has been increasingly reported (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000; Gillborn and Youdell,

2000; Sivanandan, 2000). However we also need to pay attention to attainment in higher education. Shiner and Modood (2002) estimated that the advantage associated with white background gives white students a higher probability of being accepted to old universities in comparison to their peers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Conversely, new (that is post-1992) universities are more likely to admit ethnic minority students. According to Wolf (2002, p. 213) “middle-class teenagers are most over-presented in selective universities”, which is synonymous with old universities (known as ‘Russell group’ universities). For example, Oxford University only admitted five students of black Caribbean origin in 2012 and Cambridge eight (MacLeod, 2009). While both universities argue that they do not receive many applications from students of these backgrounds, it is also widely known that there are serious issues with the selection, recruitment and admission processes of old universities and especially the most élite and exclusive ones among them, such as Oxford and Cambridge. Access to and attendance at élite universities is not merely a matter of prestige but it comes with an array of benefits that translate into increased occupational opportunities and life-chances. Findings gathered by Power et al. (2004) showed that graduates from old universities earn on average a higher income than their counterparts from former polytechnics. What is more, the latter seem to enjoy a negligible income premium in comparison to holders of A-Level qualifications. Similar findings were obtained by the Sutton Trust (2009) in a much larger study of those who deferred university entry for a year.

More alarmingly, for the 16 to 24 year old group from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, the unemployment rates are higher than for any other group (Mason, 2003). According to Phillips (2005) the average annual rate of earnings for a male black person is £5,000 lower in

comparison to their white counterpart (with the same qualifications) and £6,000 lower for British-born people with Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin. In other words, certain ethnic backgrounds are associated with multiple disadvantages that are transferred from one institution to the other (i.e. from education to the labour market) and from one stage of life to the next. In the British case, it seems that the rigidity of the institutional arrangements systematically, chronically and consistently reward specific groups against others.

This is demonstrated through the truncated and somewhat problematic association between educational qualifications and labour market success of ethnic minority groups. As Li et al (2008) claimed

Education protects against lower employment rates and earnings levels only to a certain degree, and some disadvantaged groups do not enjoy the returns to education that might be expected from their investment. (Li et al. 2008, p. iv)

In other words, the premium enjoyed by increased education levels is not equally spread among all graduates. The labour market has its own mechanisms of selection, which are often based on discriminatory mechanisms. This is

clearly seen in the reported rates of job refusals and promotion blockages. At each level of education (in both 2003 and 2005), Black African men reported two to three times the incidence of job refusals and promotion blockages, with the next highest rate being among Black Caribbean men ... For women, Black Africans at each level of education also reported the highest incidence of unfair treatment ... It is notable that all ethnic minority women perceived injustice in both survey years and that this perception was growing for the highly qualified (ibid, p. iv).

In terms of gender, differences in attainment start as early as they can

possibly be observed. While the relevant gap is relatively small, girls' cognitive development at the age of nine months is still more advanced than that of boys (DfES, 2007)³. According to recent findings from the DCSF (2010) "Girls outperform boys in 11 of the 13 scales of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile" covering social, emotional and cognitive development. The widest disparities measured pertain to writing, where almost three-quarters (72%) of girls reach the expected level, compared to just over half (53%) of boys. Although gender inequalities in attainment have been a constant and stable trend in the English education system for over a century, the nature of the pertinent differentials has taken different forms over the years. Moreover, the recent past has shown that central planning and government policy are necessary in order to militate against a performance gap between boys and girls, but not adequate in ensuring that inequalities eclipse and new ones do not emerge. For example, it is by now well-established that until the 1980s boys used to outperform girls, while since then the trend has reversed with more girls achieving higher GCSE and A-Level grades than boys (Arnot et al., 1998). The Department for Education and Skills (2005) reported that

[s]ince 1988, on the threshold measure of 5+ A-C GCSEs, a significant gender gap in favour of girls has emerged. This gap quickly increased and subsequently became stable at around a 10 percentage points difference, with little variation since 1995. The gender gap is currently 9.6 percentage points: 63.4 percent of girls and 53.8 percent of boys achieved 5+ A*-C GCSEs or equivalent in 2006. (DfES, 2005, p. 2)

In some subjects the pertinent gap is smaller though the difference covered by girls over the last two to three decades is quite remarkable. In mathematics, for example, boys used to have a four-percent advantage over girls, but since 1991 girls have a one to two percentage lead (DfES,

2005). At A-Level stage, the situation is improved on two counts. First, both boys and girls attain higher pass rates than in the past. Second, the attainment gap between girls and boys is reduced to approximately four percentage points.

The gender differences discussed thus far are indicative of three things. First, there is no biological predisposition of girls towards higher educational attainment in comparison to their male counterparts nor an inherent inferiority or superiority of one gender over another. Girls are as capable in excelling in education as boys and vice versa. Only a short historical overview suffices to prove this. Second, while the direction of differential attainment has changed over the years (after the late-1980s girls outperform boys, while the reverse was the case before that), educational differentials have remained stable. In other words, losers have reversed places with winners, though no dismantling of the differences between them has occurred. Third, the differences attested to between girls and boys cannot be explained by micro and meso-factors, such as the dearth of positive male role models, the feminisation of the curriculum, the impact of the examination system, the potentially detrimental effect of (some types of) peer pressure on boys and other explanations that have been offered all too often to account for the gap in question. A closer look at what underpins these differences is the socio-economic differences. Put clearer, it is not gender that explains better differences in attainment, but social class. According to the DfES (2005, p. 4)

[t]he social class attainment gap at Key Stage 4 (as measured by percentage point difference in attainment between those eligible and not eligible for free school meals) is three times as wide as the gender gap.

This has received some confirmation from various national and international studies, which have invariably concluded that children from the professional and managerial classes outperform those from the manual classes by quite some distance (see for example Halsey et al., 1980; Blackburn and Marsh, 1991; Jonsson and Mills, 1993; Savage and Egerton, 1997). The connection, though, between educational inequalities and social outcomes, needs further exploration and I shall discuss further in the next section.

2. Educational inequalities and social policy

After the Second World War and despite the large scale of socio-economic devastation, the UK managed to recover and return to economic growth that enabled it to be consistently ranked among the top seven countries in the world according to its gross domestic product (GDP). This coincided with the restructuring of state forms and international relations, which from the late 1940s onwards were prioritised in order to avert a threat to capitalism similar to the one that occurred in the 1920s and led to one of the worst economic crises (the “Great Depression”) in capitalism's history and eventually to the emergence of Nazism and the Second World War. In doing so,

a class compromise was struck between labor and capital (Przeworski and Wallerstein, 1982; Wright, 2000; Harvey, 2010). This was predicated on the achievement of a fine balance among the state, the free market, and parliamentary democracy, which are the constituent elements of liberal democracy. (Themelis, 2013, p. 14).

This was chiefly achieved thanks to state intervention in the form of welfare for its citizens. For “the state in effect became a force field that

internalized class relations.” (Harvey, 2010, p. 11). In other words, the state-welfarist approach (or Keynesian, as it was championed by John Maynard Keynes (1936)), that emerged in the mid- to late-1940s was a byproduct of the new economic orthodoxy that postulated fiscal and monetary policies that could promote full employment and growth. In this way the workforce was kept active and it was expected to consume, hence further enhancing the economic growth of the country, while its involvement in class struggle for the radical transformation of society in socialist democratic terms, was effectively aborted. This set of developments allowed the state to play a prominent role through a range of interventions that included the industrial policy and, crucially, the creation of the welfare system. In the UK, as well as in other countries that embraced liberal democracy, this manifested through the rapid expansion of education, health provision, social care and other state-funded institutional provisions and arrangements. The increasingly active role of the state, therefore, is key in understanding the type of political economy constructed immediately after the Second World War in the UK and more broadly.

My focus for the purposes of this paper is on the intervention of the state through the linkages it attempted to facilitate between education and the labour market. This is gleaned through research findings that show the connections between expansion in educational provision and their relationship with occupational changes and social inequalities. In so doing, I aim to connect the discussion that opened in the previous section about the multiple and interlocking forms of educational inequalities with wider ones that concern institutional and state arrangements, such as aspects of welfare state provision and class relations. While state intervention will be explored through the role of education, the

understanding of educational inequalities as part of class relations is achieved through the presentation of some salient historical, political and socio-economic transformations within the English social structure.

As I noted above, the state acquired an actively interventionist character, which was supported by various social and political functions and mechanisms that aimed to constrain as well as to regulate the market, corporate entrepreneurial activities and associated powers. This implied state management or ownership of key sectors of economic activity, such as the extraction and processing of raw materials (e.g. the steel and coal industry), key sectors in the export market, such as chemical or metallurgic industry, car manufacturing, and so on. As I argued elsewhere

[t]his is the era of Keynesianism or 'capitalism with a human face', which rested upon the expectation that if capitalism was appropriately regulated by the state, its negative aspects could be harnessed, and therefore, its benefits diffused to all stakeholders, namely individuals, businesses, and nation states. Keynesianism did indeed confer to the Western world some of its promised benefits, such as economic growth, increased wages, living standards and employment, as well as social provision (Themelis, 2013, p. 15).

This is demonstrated nowhere more lucidly than in education, where investment and increased spending led to a step increase in access and participation rates. Education was perceived after the war as the optimum means for enhancing productivity and economic efficiency and to some good extent this was proven to be the case. According to some estimates, in 1867 the economic returns to skilled labour (typically predicated upon educational qualifications and training) in the UK amounted to 5-25 percent of the national income, while in 1967 they accounted for 48 to 56 percent of pretax household income (Brown and Lauder, 2001).

Furthermore, the increasingly closer association between education and the economy is attested to by government expenditure. Specifically, public spending in education as a share of national income increased steadily: from just under 3 percent of national income in the mid-1950s it rose to 6.4 percent in 1975/76, which is a peak point for all the postwar period (Chowdry and Sibieta, 2011). This rapid expansion was not only expected to increase productivity of the British workforce but also to keep the economy growing. In many cases this expectation was matched by a commitment to provide equal opportunities for all citizens and reduce social inequalities among them. This conjuncture, namely the expansion of education and the proliferation of educated workforce, was unequivocally a twin victory of Keynesianism. The assumption underpinning these developments was that educational qualifications were the optimum means of increasing productivity of the workforce, enhancing economic growth and competitiveness while at the same time enabling individuals to realise their full potential. Crucially what sustained this edifice was the expectation that education could lead to appropriate employment. However, in order for this to occur, these jobs have to be created in the first place (Brown, 2003). For at least two decades immediately after the War, there is evidence to suggest that this was the case insofar as England is concerned. However, the most important yet often unexplored ramification of this development was the transformation of the English society in socio-economic and class terms. State-supported expansion of the educocentric jobs and the parallel contraction in manual occupations led to the increase of the middle class (and the petit bourgeoisie) and the contraction of the working class.

2.1 First phase: The postwar consensus (1944-1979)

The postwar transformations have been widespread and deep-cutting. In terms of the structure of the economy three trends are discernible. The first one of them covers the years after the termination of the war until the 1970s. During this period dramatic changes occurred with a drastic increase in high-skilled jobs. Specifically, between 1951 and 1971 the proportion of people in higher and lower professions rose by 68% (Gallie, 2006). This means that throughout this time more people were attaining better jobs than their parents, a trend that led to a big increase in absolute social mobility, often described as 'the postwar social mobility wave'. Education seems to have played the role of the social elevator, that is of lifting people to higher social positions. However, this trend was short-lived. Between the early 1970s and early 2000s the qualitative upgrade of the occupational structure stalled, with the rate of high-skilled jobs being held constant each year (Cabinet Office, 2008). This is reflected in absolute mobility (that is the overall amount of people who moved to another social class) findings which show that male mobility over this period plateaued (Cabinet Office, 2008). However, it is worthwhile noting that findings for women's mobility suggest that there was a uniform trend since the 1930s, which points to a steady increase in women occupying better jobs than their parents and gradually increasing their absolute mobility rates (Cabinet Office, 2008). This is explained through the higher rates entry of women into the professional occupations, which has to be interpreted in the context of the originally very low prewar levels of female employment in similar jobs. Hence, the occupational structure did not become more equal nor qualitatively better *in toto*, for despite the improved mobility rates for men and women, social class differences continued to play a role in people's social class

outcomes. This is evident though relative social mobility rates⁴, which show that no difference in chances for people of different backgrounds has occurred over the last decades (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2008). Put plainly, people might have got better jobs than their parents but they are still unequal among each other. 'Better', therefore, has to be understood as entailing the attainment of non-manual jobs, but it does not connote any qualitative upgrade in the occupational structure⁵.

2.2 Second phase: The years of Conservative rule (1979-1997)

After this period of time, spending in education started to decline. This coincides with Thatcherism, which came to be recognised as a distinct political, ideological and moral project and spans not only the years Margaret Thatcher was in power but the whole duration of Conservative-party rule, namely 1979-1997. What is distinct about this period is the coordinated attempt to introduce and establish the neoliberal paradigm in England. In Hall's (2012, p. 16) words

In 1979 Thatcherism launched its assault on society and the Keynesian state. But simultaneously it began a fundamental reconstruction of the socio-economic architecture with the first privatisations.

Following Stuart Hall (or for that matter Gramsci, whose analysis Hall adopts) I shall argue that Thatcher's project was far more than a renewed approach to class domination. It was a coordinated and carefully planned rearticulation of class relations, a conscious ruling-class attempt to destabilise, restructure and reform the social relations in and of production. In a nutshell, it was a class struggle from above. It could be more effectively seen as a struggle to break up existing formations, such as the social democratic consensus of the postwar period, through

intervening into different spheres of activity, such as in the economic, civil society, intellectual and moral life. However, I part company with Hall in his foregrounding of the political-ideological aspect as well as forms of hegemonic power in order to make space for the articulation of these dimensions with the political and the economic. As Jessop *et al.* (1988) argued, the interactions of ideology, politics and the economy have to be examined together as functions of the modern state. In this vein, Thatcher's project has to be viewed as part of the neoliberal project to subjugate the productive forces to capital.

2.3 Third phase: The New Labour period (1997-2010)

This neoliberal project largely coincides with what has been termed as 'globalisation', a term as vague as 'knowledge economy' and the like, which were ushered in with the era of radical transformations in the realm of production. Here, globalisation is employed to connote forces that cut across and run through national states. These forces operate in the field of class relations and are often in opposition to the structures that were put in place after the war in order to keep in balance the antagonistic class forces. In other words, they are subversive and detrimental to the Keynesian apparatus that was carved up after the war and the class compromises it entailed. This is exemplified by the ideologies, discourses and policies of the New Labour party (1997-2010). Although the New Labour years were distinct in many ways from those of their Conservative party that preceded them, very little changed in terms of ideological and political priorities. As Hall and Massey (2012, p. 58) lucidly observed

New Labour's neoliberalism differed from Thatcher's - though they remained variants of the same thing. Thatcherism was anti-state, whereas New Labour

made a 'rediscovery' of 'active government'. New Labour said that they could do marketisation better than the Tories, who were running into trouble, and could avoid a huge political backlash by blurring the private/public divide, and letting the market buy out most of the public activities that were profitable, while the state concentrated on the technical management of the consequences.

The continuity between Conservative and New Labour policies is evident in educational expansion and social mobility trends, which since the late-1970s took a radically different trajectory than hitherto. For example, university student numbers increased considerably from 400,000 in the 1960s to two million students at the turn of the millennium (Greenaway and Haynes, 2003, in Blanden and Machin, 2004). Many commentators welcomed this expansion as a larger Higher Education sector was expected to raise skill levels in the labour market thereby contributing to national growth. Moreover, it was associated with an expectation for greater openness as increased educational opportunities are linked to higher levels of equality of opportunity, that is to say students from lower socio-economic backgrounds can occupy the newly-created positions (Blanden and Machin, 2004). Hence, between 1997 and 2010 participation in higher education among the 17-24 year old group, increased by approximately 50 percent, that is from 33 percent in 1997 to 45 percent in 2010 (Chitty, 2009). This was underpinned by a substantial increase in education spending, which rose from about 5 percent during the 1980s and 1990s to over 6 percent (reaching a new high of 6.2 percent in 2009/10) (Chowdry and Sibieta, 2011). Despite the substantial expansion in university student enrolment, openness did not occur nor a reduction in equalities of opportunities, let alone outcomes. According to Blanden and Machin (2004, p. 522)

The results are clear and show that, over this period, HE expansion has not

been equally distributed across people from richer and poorer backgrounds. Rather, it has disproportionately benefited children from relatively rich families. Despite the fact that many more children from higher income backgrounds participated in HE before the recent expansion of the system, the expansion acted to widen participation gaps between rich and poor children.

More recent findings by Blanden, Gregg and Machin (2005, p. 19) leave little doubt who benefited the most from the expansion in higher education under New Labour:

Young people from the poorest income groups have increased their graduation rate by just 3 percentage points between 1981 and the late 1990s, compared with a rise in graduation rates of 26 percentage points for those with the richest 20% of parents. The clear conclusion is that the expansion in higher education in England has benefited those from richer backgrounds far more than poorer young people.

The occupational restructuring that started with Thatcher was embedded thanks to New Labour party's economic, social and educational policies. Notwithstanding large sums of money directed at education, the income inequalities grew in concert with the differentials in educational attainments of the richest and poorest. What is more, research findings indicate that income and educational attainment are increasingly and causally related (Blanden, Gregg and Machin, 2005). In other words, one of the main aims of New Labour policy, namely to equalise educational attainments by redistribution, was being proven unattainable, because the selfsame policies were at the same time letting the markets attribute payment according to standards of productivity and efficiency, leading thus to higher income differentials and rampant inequalities. This is depicted in low levels of intergenerational mobility throughout this period of time discussed above and further explicated in the following section.

3.1 Educational inequalities and social outcomes

It must have become clear that early research findings on the role of education in upward social mobility (in technical terms, the ability of education to act as a mediating factor between social class origins and destinations), used to be significant (see, for example Glass, 1954; Blau and Duncan 1967). While this trend characterised the first two postwar decades, more recent trends point to a limited impact of education on occupational attainments. Although higher educational credentials have undoubtedly increased their incumbents' chances of entering a higher social class or status group in comparison to their concomitant occupational attainments without such qualifications (Heath, Mills and Roberts, 1991; Marshall, Swift and Roberts, 1997; Whelan and Layte, 2002), when the structural underpinnings of the increase in educational credentials are taken into account, this association is much milder. That is to say, if the overall growth in high credentials is taken into consideration, the mediative effect of educational attainment on class outcomes is negligible. As Jackson (2007, p. 269) claimed

[when] we control for the general increase in the acquisition of educational qualifications, we find that there has actually been relatively little change in the effects of educational attainment on occupational status. Furthermore, the effects of social origin clearly still persist, even after controlling for education.

While policy can have some impact, this has been proved to be circumscribed and temporal. For example, in 2004/5, Devine and Heath (2008) reported that 40 percent of men and 37 percent of women were in professional, higher administrative and managerial occupations (the salariat), which signifies an increase of three percent for men and five percent for women over the 1996/7 period. By the late-2000s, though, and

presuming that measurement is comparable, those in managerial and professional occupations in England made up 34 percent of the workforce (EHRC, 2010). If this is the case, then an occupational downgrading must have occurred in the relevant structure. This is quite plausible and is attested to by the high proportion of those who had never worked, were long-term unemployed, in full-time education or could not be classified: a staggering 19 percent. Indeed, radical transformations within the labour market have forced many, chiefly younger and often highly-qualified people, into self-employment or various forms of low-paid labour. In 2010 there were estimated to be 1.04 million employees and self-employed people working on a part-time basis because they could not find a full-time occupation. This is the highest figure since relevant records started in 1992. Combined with other statistics about the very high levels of youth unemployment and the very low proportion of younger working-age adults (i.e. below the age of 30) in managerial and professional jobs, it becomes manifest that the occupational structure and the labour market have taken yet another radical turn. Many of the new jobs created in the last 25 years require educational qualifications, but this does not automatically lead to a 'good' occupation. An increasing number of university graduates for instance are in jobs that require lower skills than they possess, if they are fortunate enough to be employed in the first place. Hence the decrease in intergenerational mobility rates in the same period of time

appears to have been an episode caused by the particular circumstances of the time. Social mobility worsened and took a step change downwards, leaving the UK near the bottom of the intergenerational league table of mobility, and on a different trajectory relative to other countries in the world where there is less evidence of changes over time (Blanden and Machin, 2007, p. 18).

As I have argued elsewhere (Themelis, 2013, p. 41), this downward social mobility trend was accompanied by a rise “in educational inequalities, which is explained by a big increase in the connection between educational attainment and family income as well as by the strong association among test scores, behavioral measures, and family income.” The latter, namely the connection among educational attainment and test scores, behavioral measures, and family income led Blanden and Machin (2007) to conclude that for more recent cohorts there is “little evidence of change and thus it appears that *changes in social mobility may well have flattened out*. However, at the same time, they have not reversed nor started to improve” (p. 19) (my emphasis).

The continuity and dominance of the neoliberal paradigm has been reasserted with the formation of the coalition government in June 2010. Now, as in the past, it is expected that economic growth will function as the tide that lifts up all the boats; not only will it put the UK back on the track of economic growth, but it will also give individuals increased chances of securing a better life. Sadly, nothing could be further from the truth. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Aldridge et al., 2012) has found that poverty affects not only those out of work, but increasingly those in employment too. Even among full-time workers, a significant amount of them find themselves unable to keep pace with the rising cost of life and the wage-suppression. Repossessions of private properties, bankruptcies and homelessness have all increased and are set to rise further regardless of whether the economy starts growing again. The reasons that keep the English population apart in socio-economic terms is not lack of employment, national wealth or willingness to improve one's own personal circumstances. It is the arrangements in the social structure and the organisation of production in flexible and ever more exploitative

terms, which are discussed next.

3.2 Linking educational inequalities with class relations

Thus far I presented the extent of educational inequalities as well as their historical continuity within the British education system. What I perceive as a more striking though less explored aspect of these chronic and rampant inequalities is that despite their continuous measurement and exploration, they are seldom explored as a social relation. In other words, they have become reified and ossified and are increasingly treated as a distributional feature of the educational and, by extension, socio-economic system. Such a treatment reduces them to mere variables that are invariably explored relationally to other factors rather than as embedded in the social relations of production. As such, against a backdrop of a voluminous corpus of research that has been produced over the last six decades or so, little has changed in the way we understand educational inequalities as part of the social totality. While links are usually made between social and educational inequalities, the latter are treated either as 'stand-alone' categories or epiphenomena of the former. It is characteristic that in pre-1970s inquiries, the term educational inequalities was treated as one (among many other) dependent variables, while after then and especially with the emergence of the so-called 'new' sociology of education, educational inequalities have frequently occupied the role of the independent variable. Both approaches though fail to recognise the historical, political and economic context within which they are generated and the social relations that underpin them. In the discussion, for example, on social class and its effects on educational inequalities, large groups are lumped together under the categories of 'students eligible for free school meals' and those who are not. In this way,

we are invited to approach students as separated by their eligibility or otherwise to have their meals covered by the state. Although this points to a distinction with economic basis, given that free school-meal eligibility is contingent upon parental income, we can hardly understand the FSM and non-FSM students are socially related nor the structural determinants of this distinction (i.e. between FSM and non-FSM students).

This lack of systematic connection of educational processes, outcomes and attendant issues as part of the social relations in and of production seems to have become the dominant approach in social and educational theorising. Hence, recent research has enriched our understanding about various ways that parental privileges are transmitted, the interaction among different types of inequalities as well as the way various forms of identities intersect, interact and contribute to educational inequalities. These selfsame privileges and disadvantages, though, are not transmitted in a random manner. They are passed down from parents to their progeny in ways that are shaped by strategies, networks, access to and possession of resources (and types of capital, such as cultural, social, economic), choices and preferences (or lack thereof), alliances, identities, family and community particularities, and a plethora of other factors. These factors are influenced by the structural location of social actors, which impinges, though not necessarily determines, the magnitude and quality of advantages and disadvantages transmitted to their children. In the English context the social actors who benefit from the transmission of advantages seem to have maintained over time their positions of advantage in relation to those actors who have not. This, though, is not a matter of mere demarcation confined to the realm of education. It hints to one of the most fundamental elements of the capitalist mode of production, that is to say the unequal differentiation of social agents along vertically and

horizontally organised social relations.

In the case of differential gender attainment, to take the other area of educational inequalities I discussed above, these explanations would be based on the distinct strategies of transmission of family resources, the differential availability of social networks, the ethos of the school, the curriculum and its affinity to the middle-class moral, cultural and social norms and predispositions, the values, perceptions, attitudes, codes and other important features the teachers carry with them, and so on.

Educational researchers usually invoke such explanations on how inequalities are re-produced, lived, transmitted and enacted by participants in schooling and the wider educational processes, as can be observed in Huckaby's (2007) account

[t]he practices of intelligence testing, norm-referenced testing, high-stakes testing, tracking, ability grouping, teacher expectations, teacher qualifications, school quality, fund allocations, segregation and the like are technologies that contribute to social inequality and result in disproportionate underachievement (in school and in life after school) of students socially subordinated because of their economic status, race/ethnicity, cultural background, language and/or citizenship status (Spring, 1976; Kozol, 1992, 2005; Suzuki & Valencia, 1997; Watkins, 2001; McLaren, 2002; Marzano, 2003).” (p. 517)

In such a manner, differential educational outcomes run the risk of being approached as mere epiphenomena of parental, school-based, teacher-based and other micro- or meso-foundations. In line with Canaan's (2013, this issues) argument, I suggest that this theorising makes an original and refreshing contribution to the thus far limited scope of sociological thinking, which quite often left out of its analysis cultural, political, family, community and other factors. However, this type of theorising needs to be enriched with insights that take into account the structural

locations of the family, school, community and other significant contexts where these processes occur. For example, what is invariably referred to as “middle-class” or “working-class” practices, cannot any longer serve as a terms that are unproblematically left to the reader to infer their relationship with the relations of production.

In order to do this, I suggest we pursue a systematic connection between the educational explananda and the foundations of the wider political economy. In order to achieve this I shall revisit some of the studies and findings reported thus far and make the connections between the educational and the wider socio-economic and political spheres of activity. My intention here is to link the wider political economy with the educational inequalities and offer an historical account that is informed by the structural determinants of educational inequalities. In so doing, I avoid the dominant approach within the sociology of education that propounds a temporal and mainly family or school-based explanation of educational outcomes. It will be noted that an overarching characteristic of my approach is to link the historical, with the political and economic spheres of activity, as they constitute the ensemble of social relations of production. That is to say, my explanation of educational inequalities is neither determined nor determining, to invoke the traditional dichotomy of postwar thinking. It is simply viewed through the prism of social class relations, which are contingent upon antagonistic relations between, sometimes even within, social classes. I shall explicate in the remainder how this is instantiated in the sphere of education through some poignant examples.

As noted above, a more educated workforce was expected to spearhead the new phase of the British political economy, which largely speaking

started in the 1970s and was accompanied by a large-scale deindustrialisation, the attendant shrinking of the industrial proletariat and the associated dislocation, abandonment and eventual death of a sizeable number of former working-class communities across the country. This has often been depicted as a deproletarianisation, and has purportedly been matched by an embourgeoisement of large parts of the population. While a partial embourgeoisement indeed occurred as the exiting numbers of the former industrial proletariat entered to some extent the professions and the burgeoning petit bourgeoisie, this has frequently been exaggerated and overstated. Wrigley (2013) for example (this issue), notes that a great proportion of the movement of working-class labourers mainly in manual occupations, was absorbed by low-skilled and equally low-paid work in the service economy. Wrigley (2013) insightfully remarks that the consequences of this proposition has been to associate occupational movements from manual to non-manual labour as a qualitative upgrade in the social structure in a way that implies the reduction of social inequalities among social classes. In order for this to happen, an equalisation of and within the social structure has to occur. The perception that this was the case after the war, has been promulgated in various government and other publications (see for example, Cabinet Office, 2011 or social mobility studies) and it is largely an artifact of the conventional measurement of social mobility through occupational movement. This approach has received a lot of criticism (Ainley, 1993; Hill, 1999; Hill and Cole, 2001; Kelsh and Hill, 2006; Rikowski, 2001; Wrigley, 2013) no less due to its occlusion of the antagonistic nature of class relations and the disappearance of the capitalist class from such inquiries (for a summary of the pertinent debate, see Themelis, 2013, ch. 2).

Notwithstanding the difficulties in including the capitalist class in class schemes for the measurement of social mobility, the findings presented in the first two sections can gain a fuller meaning if we consider them as aspects of the changing conditions in production concomitant class relations. According to a recent report (EHRC, 2010, p. 464) “wealth is distributed even more unequally than income as people are able to accumulate different levels of wealth throughout their lives, leading to wider inequalities in wealth than in income levels alone”.

Pursuant to this point, and all the more astonishingly, the total net household wealth of the top 10 percent of the population is at £853,000, almost 100 times higher than the wealth of the poorest 10 percent, which is £8,800 or below. If income inequalities between the two opposing ends of the social structure are so immense then what is the case in the middle of the structure? According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010), those in routine occupations possess about only a fifth of the wealth of higher professionals. Although this is a significant gap, it is not as wide as the one that separates the top from the bottom earners. In addition and in accordance with findings regarding educational and social inequalities discussed in Section 1, income inequalities cut across the ethnic divide and they are interwoven with the structural locations of their incumbents in the class structure. For example, the median wealth of White English households is 15 times higher than the respective one of Bangladeshi ones, a disparity so big that cannot be fully accounted for by the younger age profile of the latter group. (ibid., p. 464).

Further examination of wage inequalities reveals the distance of the top one percent of the income distribution and the rest has further increased,

from 8 percent of total (pre-tax) income in the postwar years to 13 percent in 2000 (Atkinson and Piketty, 2007). This increase is partly accounted for by the rise in managerial wages, “*which makes the fall in the wage share look more modest than it is in reality for the majority of the wage earners.*” (Onaran, 2010, p. 3). This is further demonstrated by data on bonus payments, which amidst the recession, that is from December 2009 to April 2010, grew

by 16% in the aggregate economy, and 25% in the financial sector. Although bonus payments still remain below the levels seen in 2006-07 and 2007-08, they are still 50% higher than they were in 2000 across the whole economy. (ibid.).

In a similar vein, the number of British “High Net Wealth Individuals (with investable assets above \$1 million) has increased by 23.8% in 2009 indicating a partial even if not complete recovery in the wealth of the HNWI.” (ibid.). The gains of the top of the social structure have been seriously enhanced thanks to a series of policies that prioritised privatisation of public utilities, deregulation, decentralisation and the like, which have been dominant throughout the post-1970s period. This is demonstrated further through fiscal and taxation policies, which brought about the reversal of progressive taxation and exacerbated even more widely related socio-economic disparities. Indicatively, from 83 percent of income tax that was applied to the top earners (i.e. those earning more than £90,500 in current prices), the respective top income tax level has been lowered to 50 percent and is only applied to those earning more than £150,000 per annum. Such policies are marked by historical continuity in the overall pattern of income, wealth and asset distribution and have facilitated the gradual dismantling of the postwar political economy and its Keynesian doctrine. In other words, the big winners of the economic

policies of the last 30 years have been those at the very top of the social structure. The increasing share of national income by the top one percent has to be approached as a concerted effort to compress wages for the majority of workers. This practice constitutes a rebalancing of class forces and rearticulation of class power and lies at the core of the mewed class relations that have been molded even more aggressively and actively after the global economic recession that started in the US in the summer of 2008. If we are to better understand socio-economic inequalities, we need to approach them as manifestations of such class dynamics and not merely as family or individual practices confined in the realm of education, labour market and so on. In short, they are practices embedded in the relations of production. That is to say, findings such as the ones discussed here are the prime loci of class antagonism as they operate through the conduit of the labour market. As such they have immensely assisted to the project of the restoration of class power in a way that points to a 'class war from above'. It is worthwhile pointing out that the global economic crisis that has plunged many countries into recession, has been used as the optimum means for rearranging class relations and restoring class power. In relation to the UK this has been optimised through a nexus of fiscal, monetary, economic, social and other policies, which have brought about spending cuts in most areas of public policy, reduction in social security, increase in unemployment and so on. Intriguingly, the selfsame policies have grounded economic growth to a halt if not outright recession. The benefits they have delivered so far are over-concentrated in the very top of the social structure, the very part that goes missing from mobility analyses as well as from similar ones related to educational inequalities. Class struggle therefore manifests itself as practices of the top one percent to increase their share of national income, an effort which is in line with spending cuts for the majority of workers.

Conclusion

So far, I have established the extent of educational and social inequalities and linked them to the prevalent social relations in the UK. Although I did not systematically show how class categories used in educational research relate to income or occupational groups, I nevertheless discussed the way various forms of inequality relate to class relations. I showed how in the age of globalised dependency on the circuits of capital and their repercussion for extraction of surplus value from increasingly exploited class of the 'working poor' (Shipler, 2004), social inequalities in the competition for a livelihood and intensification of 'positional' conflict (Hirsch, 1977; Brown, 2000) have eroded some certainties of the postwar era and have seriously disrupted the linkages between education and the labour market (Brown, 2003). More than that I approached these connections as aspects of the emergent social class dynamics, which point to an increasing polarization between the ruling and dominated classes. My account drew on recent educational and social policy in order to exemplify the historical continuity of educational inequalities. I showed that inequalities in the UK have never really been the real target of policy action. Rather, a more concrete policy target has been the support of the markets, which were expected to act an equalizing force of the aforementioned inequalities. Despite some modest attempts to reduce educational inequalities, such as the expansion of higher education in the late-1990s through to the late-2000s, it was shown that state action alone cannot mitigate against wider differentials, which are structurally interwoven and historically implicated in the British socio-economic and political relations.

Moreover, if there is any 'British exceptionalism' in relation to the salience and persistence of educational inequalities, this has to be located

in and explained through the specific development of British political economy rather than education per se. As Dowd (2009) argued “Britain was the first to seek and achieve the necessary depth and breadth of the processes systemic to capitalism: (1) expansion, (2) exploitation, and (3) oligarchic rule” (p. 11). Upon these three pillars of capitalism has been founded the modern British society and its institutions. While these three capitalist imperatives have changed over the years, they largely have retained their core elements. Expansion, for example, was formerly achieved through imperial conquest and acquisition, while it now takes the form of economic expansion through the markets, with military intervention often paving the way. In turn, the legacy of the British Empire has bestowed a glow of cultural, intellectual and moral superiority to the native ruling class, which to a large extent shapes educational outcomes, processes and practices to this date. Élite institutions in the UK have pre-existed mass education, while the proliferation of mass education has not reduced the privileges of the ruling class. Rather it has enabled both ruling and ruled to live in parallel universes and has precluded the abolition of the élites and the transformation of society along egalitarian lines. In other words, the constituent element of any capitalist society, that is to say class inequality, has never been radically challenged. If anything, it has become more accentuated and pervasive. In such a context, my contention is that inequalities of any sort cannot be reduced without challenging class inequalities, which, in turn, is predicated upon the challenging of the dominant class relations.

Insofar as explanations have to be invoked to explain the persistence of educational differentials in attainment and the attendant centrality of social class in these explanations, I suggest that the research interest is turned to the role of the élites and their contribution in the rearrangement

of class relations. As Goldthorpe (2010) argued, attention has to be directed to “the action of political élites, and of the organizations they command, which is specifically directed to modifying relations in labour markets and production units that constitute the matrix of class.” (p. 330). I perceive this as long-term project that requires a synergistic approach by all sections of the educational and social scientific community and more broadly.

Notes

¹ Currently named Department for Education.

² In the UK, eligibility for free school meals is used as a proxy for low socio-economic background and it allows for comparisons to be drawn with pupils who do not receive free school meals.

³ Findings refer to fine motor coordination and communication skills and were obtained from the Cohort Millennium Study (see Dex and Joshi, 2004).

⁴ Relative mobility chances refer to the chances an individual (or a group) has to become mobile in relation to his or her original position.

⁵ It rather denotes a shift away from manual to non-manual production, which was accompanied by an ideological and pursuant discursive, normative and moral abandonment of terms hitherto used and the adoption of new ones.

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