Book Review: What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Social Mobility? by Lee Elliott Major and Stephen Machin

In **What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Social Mobility? Lee Elliott Major** *and* **Stephen Machin** *give an account of the long experience of social mobility in the UK, its barriers and a possible way out. Offering a strong base for those who are new to the subject and fresh viewpoints to those more well-versed in the topic, this is a timely read for all, especially those in the social sciences and policymakers, writes* **Kishor K. Podh***.*

This review originally appeared on [LSE Review of Books](#). If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the managing editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk

---

What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Social Mobility? **Lee Elliott Major and Stephen Machin. SAGE. 2020.**

Access to success and social mobility in contemporary Britain is disproportionately advantageous to upper-class, privately educated, (mostly) urban elites who pursue higher education at select universities. UK society is increasingly facing downward mobility and rising wealth inequality. It has one of the lowest international standings on social mobility, ranked eighteenth out of 23 developed countries in the [2018 estimate of the OECD](#). The income gap between the richest and the poorest is further widening and deepening divides. Although sharing a similar social, cultural and historical background, Canada and Australia supersede the UK's income mobility. Comparative accounts show that British society is rigid and has less social fluidity than the US, where family backgrounds continue to play a significant role in determining future prospects. Children born into the highest-earning families are most likely to find themselves among the highest earners, and their lowest-earning counterparts are more likely to mirror their forebearers by remaining in the same low-earning class.

[*What Do We Know and What Should We Do About Social Mobility?*](#) gives a profound account of this long experience of social mobility in the UK, its barriers and a possible way out. Authors Lee Elliott Major and Stephen Machin meticulously define the 70-year journey of the UK's social mobility from the 1950s into the present, using a diagram divided into four ages (14).
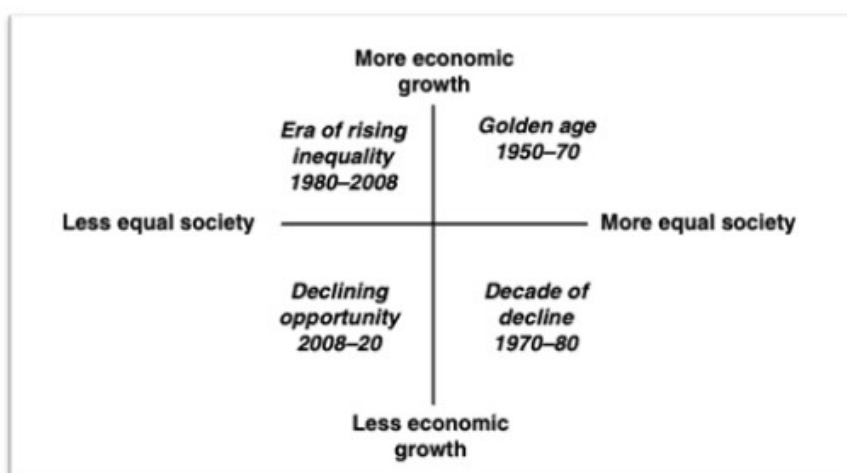

Image Credit: Figure 2.1 from Major, L.E. and Machin, S. *What Do We Know and What Should We Do About...? Social Mobility*. SAGE Publications, 2020, page 14. The

---

First, we witness the *golden age of absolute mobility* (1950-70), fuelled by a boom in professional jobs in the post-war economy. There was a widespread belief that a growing economy would improve the lives of everyone — a rising tide would lift all boats.

Second, the *decade of economic decline* (1970-80), triggered by a global recession, coupled with rising inflation (up to 25 per cent) and unemployment. Public expenditure on education significantly reduced, and the standard of education increasingly fell. While the participation of young people in university declined significantly during this period, private schools saw a marked improvement in academic performance.

Third, the *era of rising inequality* (1980-2008), characterised by increasing joblessness and a widening gap between the richest and poorest in UK society as those on the upper rungs of the social ladder became increasingly detached from the majority below. Those with less education increasingly lost out (18) as technological changes and the weakening of collective bargaining yielded labour market gains to more educated workers.

Finally, *the era of falling absolute mobility* (2008-20): coupled with the global financial crisis and austerity, this period experienced further shrinkage of opportunities and increased the divides in society. Again, along with previous downturns, in 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the world, triggering a global recession, with the most vulnerable workers — those on short-term contracts with low pay and minimal benefits — standing to suffer the most.

Improving social mobility is much more than capturing a few deserving individuals into the elites — it is about creating decent lives for all and ensuring that everyone can realise their potential whatever they choose to pursue (94). Globalisation and rapid technological changes have created bigger gaps between society's logical winners and losers. Widening inequalities in the workplace and the classroom are a toxic mix because they create even deeper societal divides for future generations (93). Therefore, social mobility is necessary to ensure equal opportunities, provide decent jobs and dignified life chances for all and to empower local communities.

The absence of adequate social mobility is not good for any society: it results in missing a sizeable talent pool in the country's leadership who could potentially contribute to society and the economy. Therefore, the movement of those from diverse backgrounds into the higher echelons would give the benefit of better leadership and decision-making abilities. Cognitive diversities, such as those relating to gender, ethnicity or economic and social class, could also potentially improve decision-making (3).

Despite the vast knowledge base on social mobility in the UK, it has made meagre progress in stopping the situation whereby a person's family background is predictive of their outcomes. The experience of the last 70 years (if not longer) of social mobility in the UK teaches us that the journey of access to education and success is not the same for all: for example, access to and participation in higher education is disproportionately disadvantageous to the poor, marginalised, BAME and geographically remote regions within the UK. Major and Machin highlight the importance of research and the accumulation of data to understand the status of social mobility and the role of government in funding such research. They rightly point out that 'data are the lifeblood of social science' (6) and highlight the importance of data-driven evidence-based policy frameworks. Further, they express concern about the government's funding cuts to social science research, which led to an absence of quality data for British cohort studies during the 1980s and 1990s.

> Major and Machin highlight the importance of research and the accumulation of data to understand the status of social mobility and the role of government in funding such research.

Major and Machin assess possible general principles that can lead to greater equality of opportunity and make society more open through credible policy. But they also observe the predominance of piecemeal policy approaches when it comes to dealing with social mobility in the UK. Therefore, they press the need for a long-term holistic approach through the involvement of all stakeholders to ensure social mobility.

They highlight spatial differentiation and the 'geography of social mobility': for example, 'London's doughnut problem', whereby the most high-value jobs and opportunities are in the capital's core districts. At the same time, its outer boroughs face higher levels of poverty, unemployment and crime. In addition, upward occupational mobility in England and Wales is considerably high in London and the South-East than the rest of the country (44).

Another reason for social immobility in Britain is the concentration of opportunities among a small number of households, who are traditionally elite, wealthy families, privately educated, capable and powerful enough to maintain their presence at select universities like Oxford and Cambridge. These people subsequently end up having greater life chances with high-paid respectable positions: 'children born into the highest-earning families are most likely themselves in later life to be among the highest earners' (51).

It is therefore crucial to establish a mechanism where access to education would be fair and equitable. The decentralisation and democratisation of education through community participation must be the priority. There is a need to reframe the goal of education from being a quest to identifying the best academic minds (important as this is) towards being the enabler of all talents. It is time to consider a genuine dual vocational and academic approach in upper secondary education, which will improve future prospects. Major and Machin also highlight the need for paid apprenticeships which help students from the lowest social and economic echelons to earn while learning: one of many recommendations that the authors give for improving equality and social mobility for all.

Although it addresses social mobility in the UK, this study primarily focuses on London; while it analyses the capital in great detail, it does not deal with the rest of the country with that same rigour. The situation in the UK's remote hinterlands may present different sets of challenges and require different solutions than big cities like London. However, aside from this limitation, this book accomplishes a lot in a short space. It offers a strong base for those who are new to the subject and provides plenty of fresh viewpoints for those who are well-versed in the topic. With the educational system's priorities constantly framed around social mobility, and the younger generation's potential opportunities looking bleaker than they have in decades, it is unquestionably a timely read for all, especially those in the social sciences and policymakers.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

Image Credit: Adapted from [Armand Khoury](#) via Unsplash.