

## EDUCATION AND EQUALITY: DEBUNKING THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores how in the postwar years education was constructed as the main way in which a meritocratic society could be created in Britain (but also elsewhere). The concept of meritocracy, that is to say of a just society in which equality of opportunities and education for all, would ostensibly provide the basis with which labor market allocation would be realized. As this article argues, nothing in education operates outside the wider political economy, which in capitalism is inherently unequal as it is underpinned by the existence of antagonistically opposed

social classes, separated from each other by unequal access to the means of production. As such, the circulation in the British social system that occurred in the early postwar years was not the result of decreasing inequalities within the class structure but rather the product of the occupational restructuring that fostered high rates of structural mobility. Consequently, “ascription” rather than “ability” continued to facilitate labor market stratification.

**KEYWORDS:** Education. Job market. Capitalism. Meritocracy.

## EDUCAÇÃO E IGUALDADE: DESMONTANDO O MITO DA MERITOCRACIA

### RESUMO

Este artigo explora como a educação pós-guerra foi construída como a principal forma pela qual uma sociedade meritocrática poderia aparentemente ser criada na Grã-Bretanha. O conceito de meritocracia de uma sociedade justa, em que há a igualdade de oportunidades na educação para todos, não importando origem nem classe social, aparentemente fornece a base segundo a qual a alocação no mercado de trabalho seria igualitária. Como este artigo argumenta, nada na educação opera fora da economia política mais ampla, o que no capitalismo é

inerentemente desigual, uma vez que é sustentado pela existência de classes sociais antagonicamente opostas, separadas umas das outras pelo acesso desigual aos meios de circulação e produção. O sistema social do Reino Unido que ocorreu nos anos do pós-guerra não diminuiu as desigualdades dentro da estrutura de classes, mas sim o produto da reestruturação do trabalho, o que promoveu altas taxas de mobilidade estrutural. A “atribuição”, em vez da “capacidade”, continuou, consequentemente, a facilitar a questão da estratificação no mercado.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação. Mercado de trabalho. Capitalismo. Meritocracia.

## EDUCACIÓN E IGUALDAD: DESMONTANDO EL MITO DE LA MERITOCRACIA

### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo la educación en los años de posguerra fue construida como si fuera la principal forma por la cual una sociedad meritocrática podría aparentemente ser criada en Gran Bretaña. El concepto de meritocracia de una sociedad justa, en la que hay igualdad de oportunidades en la educación para todos, no importa cuáles son sus orígenes de clase, aparentemente fornece aporte que resguarda la asignación igualitaria en el mercado laboral. Como argumenta este artículo, no hay nada en la educación que opere fuera de la economía política más amplia, lo que en el capitalismo es

inerentemente desigual, ya que se basa en la existencia de clases sociales antagonicamente opuestas, separadas entre sí por el acceso desigual a los medios de circulación y producción. El sistema social del Reino Unido que se produjo en los primeros años de la posguerra no mitigó las desigualdades dentro de la estructura de clases, sino más bien el producto de la reestructuración laboral, lo que fomentó altos índices de movilidad estructural. La “atribución” en lugar de la “capacidad” continuó, en consecuencia, facilitando la existencia de la estratificación del mercado.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación. Mercado de trabajo. Capitalismo. Meritocracia.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Education was the main institution that was entrusted with the key role of promoting equality in the early postwar years in Britain. Here I explore the complex and crucial role that education has had after the Second World War in a number of ways. My primary aim is to link its functions to issues of social equality and mobility in the context of modern social systems that adopted a liberal and, more recently, a neoliberal system of organization.

The central aim of postwar liberal democracy in Britain was the creation of an open society, which can be broadly defined as one permeated by the principles of equality of opportunity and participation in the various institutions and services, such as education. The latter, the institutions and services of liberal democracy, apart from a democratic ethos, have also to be characterized by the principle of fairness. In doing so, it was expected that education with its selecting, sorting, filtering and ranking functions could also solve the twin problem of production of highly skilled graduates and fair allocation of work - force into positions in the labor market. In other words, the expectation that education could deliver economic as well as social goods was the corollary of the postwar model of development that was shared by Western European countries, and more broadly by countries with liberal capitalist orientation. In order to shed light on education's potential to facilitate the creation of an open society (or not), I shall explicate the relationship between education (chiefly in the form of formal qualifications) and social mobility, and the way this relationship has developed throughout the postwar era. In doing so, I shall present the origins and evolution of the "meritocracy through education" debate and the role of ascription and achievement in the life chances of individuals.

## 2 THE EMERGENCE OF MERITOCRACY THROUGH EDUCATION

An interest in meritocracy is justified by the attention it has attracted in the postwar period and also due to its social and political significance in modern societies in promoting fairness. Although some concern for a fairer and more just society is familiar most Western countries from quite early on, it was chiefly in the last six decades or so that the concept of meritocracy gained momentum and acquired added political significance. Postwar policy makers

and politicians of all persuasions have maintained an ongoing interest in the organization of social systems and their institutions based on meritocratic principles. This interest remained, if anything, unscathed from the 1950s onwards and education came to be seen as the main mechanism for the fulfillment of the meritocratic ideal in modern societies.

The putative father of the term “meritocracy” was Michael Young. In his prophetic satire *The rise of meritocracy: 1870-2033*, Young (1958) aimed to warn about the consequences of the increasing importance of formal educational qualifications over all other considerations. Young (1958) defined meritocracy as the total amount of remunerations an individual can acquire thanks to their ability and effort. Put simply, in a meritocracy, IQ and effort are the ingredients of success rather than family background or other ascriptive traits. Analytically, Young (1958) linked merit with educational achievement, demonstrable through academic qualifications. The logic of this proposition is easy to follow: formally validated credentials stand the scrutiny of achievement that is based on fair and meritorious principles. Educational institutions are well placed to valorize and validate these traits, and, therefore, to become the sites of merit allocation. In other words, education can become the seal of approval on behalf of a society in which achievement prevails over ascription. In turn, this process also benefits both the participants in education and the labor market, which become the pillars of the smooth, efficacious, and fair operation of capitalism.

With this work, Young (1958) intended to alert his contemporaries, not just in Britain, but also in other modern societies with similar characteristics to the UK, such as those who adopted a market-based orientation (as opposed to those that adopted a state-controlled system favored in the countries of the so-called socialist block), about the consequences of the increasing importance of formal educational qualifications vis a vis other factors. Thus, with the rise of meritocracy, Young (1958) maintained, those unable to make it through education, such as a large number of able working-class students, would be rejected from school. This rejection would curtail their opportunities for a better occupation than their parents. On the other hand, the rise of a new exclusive, highly educated social class could form the conditions for the creation of a discriminatory practice similar in quality and magnitude to older ones used by privileged social groups and which are associated with social-class advantages. For example, those families who possess economic power as well as social and cultural capital, for short the middle class, could secure for their offspring the rewards of high educational qualifications and thus manage to

reproduce the associated class privileges. On the other hand, Young feared that the working class would be locked into their position of subordination by failing to capitalize on education and associated (upward) social mobility opportunities. Hence, social inequalities could be mediated through education, rendering in this way the latter a site of reproduction of social inequalities rather than of meritocracy.

This belief was underpinned by the major transformations Young saw occurring in postwar Britain (which were, by no means, restricted to Britain), namely the rapid expansion of the public sector, the restructuring of the occupational structure and, concomitantly, the labor market. As a result, new occupations emerged that were largely suitable for university graduates. According to Young (2001), these graduates would be able to fit into this restructuring through their high educational credentials. Thus, they were in a privileged position to occupy the newly created positions, for example, in public administration. Of course, this was the first step in the well-known strategy of reproduction of class privileges, which, once secured, could then be passed down to the next generation. Such practices are open for appropriation within any political system that is predicated upon the principles of freedom of choice, individual liberty, and self-determination, such as liberal democracy. In particular, liberal capitalism of the kind that was developed in economically advanced countries of Western Europe was premised upon the democratic functioning of its institutions and especially education. Could it be then that democracy, as a political system and mode of organization, is a misnomer, that is to say an innately flawed system, at least as far as equality of opportunities is concerned? According to Weber (2001, p. 240), capitalist democracies of a Western type were susceptible to this critique as they have the potential of allowing inequalities in the reward of merit to operate:

Democracy takes an ambivalent stand in the face of specialized examinations, as it does in the face of all the phenomena of bureaucracy – although democracy itself promotes these developments. Special examinations, on the one hand, mean or appear to mean a ‘selection’ of those who qualify from all social strata rather than a rule by notables. On the other hand, democracy fears a merit system and educational certificates will result in a privileged caste.

In a similar vein, Young aimed to offer a critique of the foundations of the system that fostered institutionalization of selection and, in effect, the creation of the conditions for the exclusion from society of a large part of the population, namely the working class. The value of

Young's remarks is high both for the lucid manner in which the analytical and the political arguments are synthesized and for their originality. Young believed that the education-based occupations that he saw proliferating from the 1960s onward, would bring closer education with the labor market. However, not in a desirable way.

This connection had the potential to engineer deep social changes as it would influence the aspirations of pupils and their families. The latter, the families, would usurp education in order to promote their children's careers and, more broadly, to enhance their children's life chances. The metaphor of education as the "key" to a better life, a passport to the labor market, or even a royal way, an "avenue par excellence" for (upward) social mobility, could never have taken a stronger meaning. The momentum, however, of educational expansion and, indeed, its increasingly closer connection with the labor market, exactly what Young feared, soon became part and parcel of a social and economic divide between the rich and the poor that was never seen before. Meritocracy, therefore, "[...] as it has been used in relation to education, could only serve the reproduction of this divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Hence, this trend of justifying education as an underpinning (if not reinforcement) of 'meritocratic inequality,' gained in support" (THEMELIS, 2008, p. 429). Education, then, instead of acting to limit privileges associated with ascription, such as wealth and family background, has actually augmented inequalities between those who can forge a successful pathway from the school to the labor market.

An array of functions and related institutions have been incorporated into the educational system over the years in order to safeguard this process. From examinations to the issuing of formal qualifications and from testing to the international accreditation of degrees, education has been engrossed in a process of distribution of rewards on the basis of putative meritocratic remuneration, that is achievement. However, nothing in education operates outside the wider political economy, which, in capitalism, is inherently unequal as it is premised on the existence of antagonistically opposed social classes, separated by each other through unequal access to the means of production. In other words, merit in education is not necessarily allocated to those who are able, but to those who know how to use the educational system as a class-advancement mechanism and climb up the "greasy pole of success" (SENNETT, 2004). This is something I examine in the following section.

### 3 BUILDING MERITOCRATIC CONSENSUS

Subsequent to Young's (1958) work about the role of education, the notion of "meritocracy through education" attracted considerable popularity and became an expedient tool of policy making. Proponents of this approach maintain that selection in education and employment should be driven by principles based on "achievement" rather than on "ascription". Turner (1960), for example, claimed that all children should receive the same educational provision and that by testing and selecting them on the basis of their school performance, a meritocratic system of occupying positions in the labor market would emerge. This was termed by Goldthorpe (2003b) as "education-based meritocracy", which appears to be "[...] a highly attractive 'progressive' goal to which center-left parties can commit themselves, while entailing no radically redistributive measures of a kind that might threaten the 'median voter' electoral strategies on which these parties typically rely" (GOLDTHORPE; JACKSON, 2008, p. 96). The main assumption behind such a process is that improved access to education is sufficient to remove barriers related to social mobility. This created the "equality of opportunity" consensus, which upheld that all children should be receiving the same education and by testing and selecting them on their education performance, a meritocratic system of occupying social positions would be available (TURNER, 1960). The supporters of this proposition argue that the school system should be "sponsoring" the academically able children. Thus, the inheritance of privilege would be avoided. This argument found expression in the policy initiatives implemented by countries with a liberal capitalist orientation and governments who believed in the importance of education in serving their economic exigencies. These exigencies were underpinned by the pursuit of economic growth and saw state intervention for the benefit of the smooth operation of the markets as a *sine qua non*. Pursuant to this logic was the expectation that educational reforms and expansion could safeguard equality of opportunities, through enhanced occupational access. Various reforming initiatives undertaken in the postwar years, such as the Education Reform Act of 1944 in Britain and the educational reforms of the 1960s in Ireland, come in support of this thesis. Ideologically, these efforts found recourse to human capital theory, which rests on the premise that individuals are "resources" within socio-economic systems and, as such, they have to be exploited to the greatest degree, regardless of their position or ranking in the social hierarchy. As I argued elsewhere:

[...] [t]his expectation, (that educational expansion and reforms are safeguards of the maximisation of human potential) carries the assumption that the ablest students are selected thus making irrelevant one's social origins and other family privileges, such as wealth or social networks. In other words, children from any social class background have in principle the opportunity to get as far in education as their abilities can take them and through the avenue of education to any occupation in the labor market. (THEMELIS, 2008, p. 430).

This came with the attendant expectation that benefits would accrue not only for individuals, but also for those nation states that would embark on the allocation of rewards and opportunities in a way that ability would match educational performance and (high) educational performance would lead to labor market success. This was to become one of the most enduring and influential myths of liberal democracies and the pillar of many reforms and policies that emerged from 1950s to date.

A derivative of this approach in the field of social mobility was the "liberal theory of industrialism" or modernization, which held that economic development will increase absolute mobility rates (KERR et al., 1960). In addition, economic competition was expected to promote those with the highest educational qualifications to enter the best jobs (TREIMAN, 1970). This position was further developed by Daniel Bell (1973) who argued that there was a shift in the economy after the Second World War from the production of goods to the production of services, which took various forms, such as financial, educational, health and so on. This resulted in major transformations in the occupational structure, such as the decrease in blue-collar occupations and a concomitant increase in the professional and technical occupations<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, Bell (1973) argued that the common feature of the growing group of service-based labor force was high educational credentials. Among this group, there was a scientific and technical elite, who was considered by Bell (1973) as the driving force of much of the postwar economic growth and general prosperity<sup>3</sup>. This elite would replace "economizing" thinking with "theoretical knowledge" and would "become the key source of innovation and policy orientation for both the economy and government" (ROSS, 1974, p. 335).

Similarly, schooling would "sponsor" academically able children, thus limiting or even preventing the inheritance of privilege (ascription) and fostering a system whereby the allocation

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<sup>2</sup> This lies at the heart of the "post-industrialization" thesis, whose major tenet is that as long as the blue-collar workers outnumber white-collar ones, a society can be characterized as "industrial"; if, however, the white-collar labor force overtakes arithmetically the blue-collar, this signifies the emergence of the "post-industrial" society.

<sup>3</sup> Since the American society was perceived by Bell (1973) as the vanguard of social and economic changes in the world, other countries, he speculated, would soon follow suit.

of occupational positions would be based on individual achievement (BELL, 1978). As a result, there “would be rewards that were gained within an increasingly ‘open’ form of society from which all unfair, ascriptive influences were being eliminated” (GOLDTHORPE; JACKSON, 2008). In this way, education could secure the provision of equality of opportunities to all students and through the process of selection, only the most able could progress and occupy high educational credentials and top positions in the social structure. The pattern of social stratification that is thusly created “can claim legitimacy not only on the grounds of societal efficiency but on moral grounds also” (BREEN; GOLDTHORPE, 2001). In a nutshell, Bell’s (1973, 1978) understanding of meritocracy entails educational achievement and (high) qualifications as the precondition for the recruitment to the best occupations and to the highest social positions. This type of thinking is still discernible in our days and has infiltrated most (neo-)liberal societies, which invariably subscribe to the idea of “meritocracy through education” as a cornerstone for the efficacious function of their capitalist requirements.

#### **4 EDUCATION-BASED MERITOCRACY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY**

Social mobility researchers have attempted to shed light on the existence or not of meritocracy through education from mainly two different perspectives: on the one hand, some adopted Young’s definition of merit, as IQ plus individual effort, while, on the other hand, other scholars followed Bell’s understanding, which puts emphasis on educational qualifications. For the former, educational qualifications and their importance were customarily underplayed although not totally ignored. A prominent advocate of this approach is Saunders (1995, 1997), who examined the preponderance and extent of meritocracy in modern Britain. Saunders’s (1997) findings suggested that a large proportion of his sample (52 percent) had been intergenerationally mobile and they have mainly experienced upward rather than downward mobility<sup>4</sup>. In terms of the causes of the observed mobility, Saunders argued that “[...] ability is an important influence on occupational placement *over* and *above* any effect it might have through formal qualifications. Not only do brighter people tend to perform better in exams, but they also

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<sup>4</sup> To be precise, the type of social mobility that was evident was “short distance movement” (WESTERGAARD; RESLER, 1975), that is, within white – or blue – collar occupations rather than across these groups.



tend to continue performing better once they enter the labor market” (SAUNDERS, 1997, p. 276-277, emphasis in original). Saunders (1996, 1997) further concluded that the British society has been, broadly speaking, a meritocratic one, where the intergenerational transmission of advantages and disadvantages are waning in comparison to the importance and influence they exerted in the past. In other words, achievement prevails in modern-day Britain, while the role of ascription is more limited than has been in the past. This has significant ramifications for the openness of the social structure and the attendant distribution of opportunities within it. For Saunders (1997), no ascriptive barriers would impede somebody’s move from a low-class position into a higher one provided these individuals are able and motivated enough. As long as the system secured equality of access for all, Saunders (1997) continued, rewards will follow those who showed the highest ability. As I argued (THEMELIS, 2008), in this kind of theorization, social class destinations are justified ex post facto, provided one has shown that they are obtained due to the ability and motivation that individuals possess (i.e. due to their IQ and effort). The focus is not on the reproduction of social class advantages and disadvantages, but, rather, on the justification or not of the system in place regarding the allocation of social positions. That is, if we follow Saunders's logic, for those who manage to secure the best occupations for their children, thus reproducing their class advantage, this reproduction is of less significance. Instead, we should be examining whether those who secure these positions are the ablest amongst all the participants in the competition system. Indeed, Saunders’s findings confirm his hypothesis, therefore justifying the reproduction of social classes. The middle class manage to secure for their offspring the same class position because their children are equally able and motivated as their parents. Conversely, the working class lack in ability and motivation, and this is why they stay behind in the class advancement process. As a confirmation to this runs the finding that there are a few working-class children who enter the best occupations and achieve middle-class positions: these children are the ablest and most laborious among their working-class counterparts, and for these virtues they are rewarded with upward mobility.

Saunders’s position rests on weak foundations, both politically/ideologically and also theoretically/epistemologically. Apart from concerns that one could raise regarding the IQ tests upon which the assessment of ability is obtained, Saunders propounds a social-Darwinian justification to social-class inequalities and social mobility. Furthermore, Saunders’s line of

thinking implies that the “fittest” and ablest get a bigger share of the resources available in the social system, hence leading to the “naturalization” of unequal rewards. This is in accordance with Saunders’s functionalist view of society, which approaches the existence of inequalities as acceptable and even desirable.

The second definition of merit is in line with the meaning Bell attached to it, whereby ability is indicated by the educational qualifications one holds. Scholars who adopt this definition have attempted to assess the meritocratic hypothesis through analyses of academic qualifications and their use and value in the labor market. Machin (2003), for example, showed that the amount of intergenerational mobility decreased between an earlier cohort (respondents who were born in 1958) and a later one (respondents born in 1970). In addition, for the more recent cohort (those born in 1970), parental income was more closely associated with earnings and income of their children than for the earlier cohort. A significant amount of this variation, Machin (2003) argued, can be accounted for by the role of education. That is to say, people from higher economic backgrounds benefited more from the sizable educational expansion that occurred during the lifespan of these cohorts. Crucially, this expansion resulted in a decrease in the degree of social mobility between the two cohorts. In other words, the movement (upwards and downwards) across the two cohorts had decreased, and education expansion “[...] rather than acting to equalize the chances of people from lower income backgrounds, [it] has actually acted to reinforce and increase inequalities across generations” (MACHIN, 2003, p. 197).

A more elaborate variation of the achievement-versus-ascription argument was advanced by Jonsson (1992). Jonsson (1992) developed the “Increased Merit Selection” (IMS) thesis, which, apart from educational qualifications, also took into account other factors. Various researchers have put the thesis to empirical scrutiny (MARSHALL; SWIFT; ROBERTS, 1997; HEATH; CHEUNG, 1998). Notably, the analyses produced did not indicate much disparity between them and they reached similar conclusions regarding the role of education after the Second World War. That is, the significance of education in influencing labor market prospects and promoting social mobility was high during the immediate postwar period, but it has decreased since then (BREEN; GOLDTHORPE, 2001). Breen and Goldthorpe (2001), who conducted secondary analysis of Machin’s data, included in their operational definition of merit, characteristics from both Young’s and Bell’s approaches, that is IQ plus effort as well as educational qualifications. Their findings

suggest that the significance of merit, in all its forms, has declined over the years rather than increased, offering little support to the argument about the existence of meritocracy in Britain. Similar findings were obtained by Goldthorpe and Mills (2004) for male and female respondents born in Britain in 1973 and 1992. Although educational attainment had a significant influence on relative mobility chances of men and women, the actual role of education in mobility processes has been decreasing in importance. This can be explained by other reasons that may mitigate against a strong effect of education on mobility rates, such as the increasingly changing criteria upon which employers make their choices in a free-market economy.

Likewise, studies about the the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland offered little support to the IMS thesis. Two studies conducted in Northern Ireland (BREEN, 2003; LAYTE; WHELAN, 2004) suggested that although absolute social mobility has been high from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s, with upward offsetting downward mobility, this did lead to a more meritocratic social system. Likewise, in the Republic of Ireland, people with the same educational qualifications experienced different occupational trajectories, suggesting that education alone does not suffice to improve one's class destination (BREEN; WHELAN, 1993). In Scotland, where education seems to have played a positive role in upward social mobility, a closer look suggests that this was chiefly the outcome of a restructured labor market and employment structuring (IANNELLI; PATERSON, 2006). Furthermore, evidence suggests that the effect of educational qualification on class destinations has decreased in more recent years as class strategies for intergenerational transmission of advantages have been reignited and consolidated: "middle class parents must be finding other ways to give their children an advantage in life" (IANNELLI; PATERSON, 2006). Further studies from Britain (BREEN; GOLTHORPE, 2001) have also led to similar conclusions, that is to say, educational qualifications have ceased to be the main promoters of upward social mobility.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

The findings presented thus far indicate that there is currently less movement between social classes in the UK than in earlier periods. Moreover, the observed circulation in the UK social system in the early postwar years was not the result of decreasing inequalities within the class

structure but rather the product of the occupational restructuring that fostered high rates of structural mobility. At the same time, the importance of education on social mobility has weakened over the recent years (CABINET OFFICE, 2008; THE PANEL ON FAIR ACCESS TO THE PROFESSIONS, 2009), which is partly due to the proliferation of academic qualifications through the expansion of Higher Education and the corresponding inability of the labor market to absorb the rising educated workforce.

Although there is no consensus over the extent of meritocracy in contemporary British society, the existing evidence points to the fact that “merit”, however one defines it, has a limited impact on determining class destinations of individuals. Put simply, achieved characteristics, such as educational qualifications, are important but not sufficient in securing access to high-class positions. As ascribed characteristics seem to play a decisive role in determining class destinations, regardless of attributes and assets that may be gained throughout one’s life course, key family practices and assets, such as social, economic and cultural capitals, seem to be in a better position than educational credentials to shed light on this “meritocratic failure”. As Brown and Tannock (2009, p. 389) argued, “[...] the equality of opportunity that is promoted by meritocratic ideology is a poor substitute in progressive politics for previous commitments to equality of social and economic outcome”.

This disjointed connection between educational qualifications and the labor market outcomes has also been highlighted in more recent studies. In a recent study on social mobility and education in Greece (THEMELIS, 2013), I discussed the continuous expansion of Greek education from the early 1950s onward and the attendant restructuring of the Greek labor market to accommodate this trend:

In the early 2000s, the labor market was evidently more enriched with people with higher-educational credentials than in the previous decades. The improvement in educational participation was spread throughout all age-groups and both genders. Especially in relation to women, it was evident that in the new millennium, their rate of participation in the labor market was substantially improved than in the previous decades. What is more, women were increasingly found in occupations that required high educational credentials, from which they were underrepresented hitherto (KANELLOPOULOS; MAYROMARAS; MITRAKOS, 2004). (THEMELIS, 2013, p. 85-86).

However, I also highlighted the problematic relationship between educational qualifications and the labor market and emphasized the alarmingly high levels of unemployment among graduates:

[...] 40 years of university expansion and concomitant labor market transformations were abruptly brought to a halt [with the economic crisis]. What is more, the current socioeconomic and political conditions indicate anything but a reversal of these trends. It is expected, therefore, that the low employment levels of university graduates will increase, escalating further the social pressure and limiting even more the ability of the Greek family to play the role of the safety net for its unemployed offspring. (THEMELIS, 2013, p. 79).

Moreover, in the case of Greece as in the UK, it is evident that “[...] educational expansion does not lead any more to better career prospects but to a precarious future” (THEMELIS, 2013, p. 87). Evidence indicates that neither Greece nor the UK (and a host of other countries with a market economy) have ever been a meritocracy, if by the latter the selection of the most able to perform the best jobs is understood. A set of historically established political developments and conditions, cultural practices and social mechanisms, and, crucially, class practices, have hindered the creation of the 'meritocratic condition'. In order for the latter to be fulfilled, that is to say the creation of a meritocratic society, we not only need to change the system of allocation of rewards and opportunities in the labor market, but the entire system of socio-economic and political organization. In sum, meritocracy cannot operate where equality is denied and capitalism seems well placed to do just that: deny societies the opportunity to become meritocratic and individuals the right to be equal.

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