

Tiziana Nazio

Fabrizio Bernardi Gabriele Ballarino (Eds.). Education, Occupation and Social Origin. A Comparative Analysis of the Transmission of Socio-Economic Inequalities. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2016, 304 pp.

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Book Review

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The debate on the intergenerational transmission of opportunities, i.e. the triangular association between social origin, education and labour market outcomes, has a long tradition in the social sciences. This book enriches the debate with a focus on the direct effect of social origin (DESO) by adding a multidimensional view on the indicators employed to assess the existence and measure of the phenomena in a large comparative effort. The collection of chapters also explores how much the transmission of social inequality has changed over time and across birth cohorts. It questions whether the massive educational expansion that has taken place in all the advanced economies has contributed to leverage increasing social equality. Further, it also contributes with a clearer understanding on whether DESO is educational-level specific, which is to say, whether the direct association between social origin and destination varies by the educational level achieved. Are occupational returns to education diminishing along with the educational expansion? Is it equally so for all educational levels?

The authors of this book target the root of social stratification by exploring the social transmission of opportunities across generations through the association between parental and children employment outcomes, net of educational investments. The book focuses on the following questions: Is it there (still) an association between individuals' and their parental quality of employment, net of education? Has this association decreased in recent times or is it lower for higher educational levels, where the influence of social origin is expected to be weaker? And have returns from education changed over time in a way that might have offset individuals' educational gains? This book admirably provides contextualised, country specific answers to these relevant questions for fourteen different national contexts, ranging from Russia to Israel, Japan and the USA, through many European countries: the United Kingdom, Sweden, Norway, Germany, The Netherlands, France, Hungary, Switzerland, Italy and Spain. Along the lines of other famous large efforts in this field of study [Shavit & Blossfeld 1993; Shavit & Müller 1998; Breen 2004] it brings together national experts on each country case on the background of a common theoretical and empirical framework. While the book focuses on exploring changes in the association between social origin and occupational outcomes, net of educational achievements, its taking into account the dynamic changes of both labour markets and educational expansion is what makes its contributions particularly valuable.

In the first chapter the editors introduce the debate and contextualise the rest of the contributions, while their last chapter summarises the results, comments on weaknesses of the approach and provides concluding remarks. All other chapters provide independent analyses for the same dependent variables (the outcomes in the labour market in terms of income and job quality, based on status or class, to the highest possible similar degree) and their direct association to social origin, net of the educational level achieved.

The country specific contributions not only share methods, concepts and nationally representative similar data, but also allow for country specific measures that reflect the great heterogeneity of contexts and salient characteristics therein. Together, they provide an accurate and timely description of the processes underlying social stratification, and how they differ across national contexts (or for specific groups within countries, like for example for former East German residents within Germany). The authors clearly document all efforts made to render country cases comparable, and overall find associations whose direction and sizes are in line with previous analyses, but bringing new, more detailed insights.

The reasoning behind this large comparative empirical endeavour being that, if education is to be the “great social equaliser” that promised to be in the eyes of many theorists and policy makers, equally educated individuals from different social backgrounds should be able to achieve also similar labour market outcomes. Or at least should increasingly do so over time. Even in the scenario of diminishing returns from education, the authors expect to find decreasing differentials in the occupational outcomes of equally educated individuals over time.

New nationally representative data have enabled social scientists to make innovative advances in the theoretical understanding and empirical test of social inequalities in comparative studies, of which this book is a good example. However, what it is new in this book is not only the addition of more recent birth cohorts of individuals with newly available data and the breadth of the countries covered, but also its multidimensional measurement of outcomes (income and occupational quality in individuals’ first and current occupations). Although the book main focus is on establishing the presence and size of the direct origin-destination association, it also provides detailed insights into the different institutional contexts. The collection of chapters brings together and presents an impressive wealth of information around country cases in a concise and straightforward manner. Worth mentioning is also authors’ ability to tackle the large difference among educational systems across this variety of countries, while keeping distinct several levels of education (general or vocational) from tertiary (lower or higher).

In the final chapter the two editors provide a useful summary of country chapters with clear summary tables and discuss some of the mechanisms possibly underlying the continued process of social transmission of (dis)advantage. They briefly discuss concepts such as compensatory and boosting advantages, and illustrate the pervasiveness of a direct socio-economic association between parental and children’s occupational outcomes. Despite a large educational expansion, editors’ disheartening conclusions point to a lack of equalisation of life chances in most countries, where educational expansion did not seem to significantly lower the association between social origin and occupational status achieved in any country (except Sweden, and to some extent The Netherlands). Country chapters testify how wealthier strata of the population are continuously better able to avoid demotion in the next generation. Not only by securing higher educational achievements to their offspring, but also by compensating education disadvantage, when existing, or by boosting occupational success (especially income) for their more highly educated children.

Bernardi and Ballarino observe that results from the country chapter are compatible, on the one side, with the idea of a compensatory advantage provided by the wealth-

ier parents to their less performing children. Better-off families seem better equipped to compensate for school failures of their less performing children and help them achieve a good occupational positioning despite relatively low educational attainment. But ascribed inequalities display in a twofold capacity of better-off families to increase their advantage across generations by boosting the relative success of subsequent ones. Results from the quantile regressions on different segments of the earnings distributions, for the countries that estimated them, also reveal evidence of a second “boosting effect” for high achievers at school and among the top earners. More privileged background families seem also better able to take advantage of increasing income inequalities by maximising income returns to education for their academically high achieving members. In the countries where better-positioned families not only can shield their less performing children from experiencing demotion, but can also foster the income returns from higher level studies for their higher achievers, the social background inequality becomes even larger among high earners and tertiary educated. This is an especially interesting finding in light of the current trend of increasing income inequalities. Its originating mechanisms, however, should be tested further with better data on more specific field of study, type of school, as well as possibly with measures of networks and soft-skills, attitudes and aspirations, and with dynamic analysis on the early career routes to successful employment.

Overall, the empirical evidence from the book provides support for a somewhat higher degree of meritocracy in the labour market for graduates, as well as hints of a positive self-selection into higher studies, on talent and motivation, by lower social background individuals. But the editors conclude that educational expansion has not proven to be the key leverage to a more meritocratic society when it comes to accessing employment and pursue of a working career, at least not for all individuals equally. Also the hypothesis of a diminishing association between social origin and occupational quality (ISEI, class or prestige) achieved for – at least – higher educational levels is not supported by the analyses in most countries. Over time, there seem to be no significant changes in the association between social origin and labour market outcomes, undermining the very idea of meritocratic, equal societies.

Worth noticing is that the associations between social origin and occupational quality estimated by the authors through their analyses are not negligible in size: an average direct effect of social origin, net of education, of 6 points, like the one characterising the difference between a child whose parent is a medical doctor or a semi-skilled worker, is “what separates a university professor from a high school teacher, or a taxi driver from a window cleaner” [p. 258] for example. Furthermore, these differences also add to other penalties for unequal occupational returns of education associated with ethnicity and gender.

However, despite concluding that education is not the social leveller that many had hope it would be, and that investing in education may not be sufficient to secure a more equal society, the editors also stress that higher education remains a crucial investment worth pursuing. Even when, despite educational expansion, higher education *per se* is not sufficient to overcome social (dis)advantage as reflected in the labour market, which is rather linked to a “basic cause” of unequal distribution of resources across households, it is still an investment with many other positive externalities for individuals. Among others, for its fostering a more active and critical participation in our democracies as

citizens and for its positive association with the average levels of happiness, healthier life styles and behaviours.

Delving into the testing for the possible different mechanisms driving these associations, whether they are brought about by parental networks, direct transmission of resources, prolonged and/or more varied support, guidance through the labour market, the provision of soft-skills, attitudes, reference models or aspirations, and how they vary across different national contexts is left to future research.

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