

Class, Mobility and Merit

The Experience of Two British Birth Cohorts

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The controversial issue of ‘meritocracy’ can be most productively addressed if it is treated as one of direction of change over time: i.e. whether individual merit, understood in terms of ability, effort, or educational attainment, is growing in importance in processes of social selection. To test the thesis of ‘increasing merit selection’, we analyse data from two British cohort studies relating to children born in 1958 and 1970 respectively. We find that, from the later to the earlier cohort, the pattern of relative rates of class mobility changed little; and that individual merit, as we are able to measure it, did not play a greater part in mediating the association between class origins and destinations. In fact, the effects of ability and educational attainment on individuals’ relative mobility chances diminished somewhat. These findings, we argue, are less surprising than they may at first appear if viewed in the context of the problematic relationship between the idea of meritocracy and the operation of a free-market economy.

Introduction

The idea of ‘meritocracy’ has had a rather chequered history. It originates, of course, in Michael Young’s celebrated sociological fantasy, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) in which Young sought to warn against various tendencies apparent in post-war British society which, he believed, threatened to reshape its stratification into a yet more rigid and demoralizing form. These included, for example, the reliance on psychometric testing to allocate children to different kinds of school; the acceptance that in such schools children would be systematically prepared for different grades of employment; and the consequent emphasis on education as a means rather than as an end in itself.

Young’s work then received a rather remarkable reception in liberal, and especially American liberal, circles. Its satirical and critical qualities were largely overlooked, or at all events discounted, and ‘meritocracy’ became understood rather as an ideal, the incipient realization of which was to be celebrated. Thus, Bell (1972, 1973) argued that the emerging

‘post-industrial’ society was a meritocracy in its functional logic. Education and qualifications serve as the basis on which individuals are allocated to different positions in the division of labour and thus acquire differing levels of income and status. And the pattern of social stratification that is in this way created can then claim legitimacy not only on grounds of societal efficiency but on moral grounds also: for in a meritocracy ‘both material and symbolic benefits’ are ‘genuinely earned, *deserved* rewards’ (1973: 453).

More recently in Britain – and with parallels in other European countries – yet further twists in this ‘career of a concept’ have occurred. On the one hand, ‘free-market’ neo-Conservatives, once suspicious of the idea of meritocracy, have come increasingly to see its attraction as a basis for maintaining that apparent inequalities of opportunity in modern society do not in fact reflect any serious social injustice but simply the varying capacities of individuals, whatever their social origins, to take up

the opportunities that are available to them. In explicit support of this position, Saunders (1996, 1997; cf. also Bond and Saunders, 1999) has sought to show empirically that present-day Britain is in fact 'to a large extent a meritocratic society' (1996: 72). In this line of argument, in contrast to that pursued by Bell, education and qualifications tend to be played down as indicators of merit and the emphasis is rather on Young's original definition: merit equals 'IQ plus effort'. Thus, Saunders contends that where individuals end up within the class structure is primarily a matter of whether or not they are 'bright' and whether or not they 'work hard'. On the other hand, though, 'meritocracy' has also come to figure prominently in the political rhetoric of New Labour and in the ideological quest of the centre-left to find 'the Third Way'. In this case, it would appear, the aim is to uphold meritocracy as a goal, and indeed as one that is within political reach, as a means of shifting the focus of policy concerns onto problems of equality of opportunity and away from those of equality of condition which are seen as far less tractable and also as far more likely to be disturbing to middle-class voters.

Not surprisingly, then, the idea of meritocracy attracts controversy. It stands in fact at the centre of a complex debate, involving both political and sociological issues that are closely interrelated. In a previous paper (Goldthorpe and Breen, 1999), we have sought to intervene in this debate by presenting a reanalysis of the same dataset as was used by Saunders. This reanalysis shows that, contrary to what Saunders would believe, present-day Britain is still some way from being a meritocratic society. If merit is understood in terms of individual ability and effort, then the results we report would indicate that merit in fact plays only a rather limited role in processes of intergenerational class mobility and in no way annuls the effects of individuals' class origins. If, alternatively, merit is understood in terms of educational attainment, in the way favoured by Bell, then its importance is clearly increased but is still far from being overriding. Even when the level of individuals' educational qualifications is held constant, we find that a significant, and often quite strong, association between class origins and destinations persists (cf. Marshall, Swift, and Roberts, 1997). And this is indeed also the case if education, ability, and effort are held constant *together*. In other words, whichever

definition of merit is adopted, it does not seem possible to give any convincing meritocratic legitimation to the inequalities in class mobility chances that contemporary British society displays. Rather, we conclude, the prevailing situation is one in which children of less advantaged origins need to show substantially more 'merit' – however understood – than do children from more advantaged origins in order to enter similarly desirable class positions in the course of their adult lives.

While we expressed confidence in the robustness of this conclusion – a confidence that we retain – we did at the same time note the serious problems likely to be encountered in attempts to establish the precise degree to which, at any one time, social selection does or does not operate on a meritocratic basis. For one thing, difficult technical questions arise in determining – as, say, in the context of a regression analysis – the relative importance for mobility chances of 'merit' and 'non-merit' variables, where, as is usually the case, these variables cannot be represented by a common metric (cf. Goldberger and Manski, 1995; Heckman, 1995; and more generally King, 1986; Kruskal and Majors, 1989). And there are then the further and yet more basic issues of just which measures of such variables are to be utilized and of their relative validity. In this regard, it is essential to recognize that 'merit' or 'non-merit' variables may appear as being more or less important in any empirical analysis for no other reason than that they are measured in better or worse ways.

We were thus led to suggest at the end of our paper that these problems might be made more manageable, and the discussion of meritocracy moved onto more productive lines, if the meritocracy thesis, as applied to Britain or any other economically advanced society, were to be considered in its tential form. That is, as holding not that an effective meritocracy is already in being but rather that selection by merit, in the sense of ability and associated effort or of educational attainment, is becoming more dominant over time. In this way, then, the thesis becomes essentially the same as that which claims that in modern societies selection on the basis of achievement comes increasingly to prevail over selection on the basis of ascription (cf. Blau and Duncan, 1967; Treiman, 1970; Treiman and Yip, 1989; Treiman and Ganzeboom, 1990) – with the proviso that the educational system need not be taken as the

only or even the prime locus of achievement. This version of the meritocracy thesis, which Jonsson (1992) has in fact more precisely labelled as the ‘increased merit-selection’ (IMS) thesis, ought then to be open to more refined and reliable empirical testing in that the possibility exists of comparing the experience of individuals over time – for example, the experience of individuals in different birth cohorts – while seeking to retain the same conceptualization and measurement of the key variables involved. On this basis, the issue of whether or not a particular society is becoming increasingly meritocratic might then be usefully addressed, even if the exact extent of its approximation to a ‘true’ meritocracy would still remain contestable. In the present paper, we aim to implement such a strategy in the British case.

We believe, however, that there are grounds, both empirical and theoretical, for some initial scepticism concerning the extent to which the IMS hypothesis is likely to hold. Empirically, we would note that, in the British case, the changing effect of education on relative mobility rates has in fact already been the subject of a number of studies, using different datasets and analytical methods. These studies have all come to essentially the same conclusion: namely, that however much education may have increased in importance as a determinant of employment prospects or channel of social mobility in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, there is no evidence of this increase extending through to the present and that, if anything, the effects of education are now weaker than they were in the 1960s and 1970s (see e.g. Mills and Payne, 1989; Heath, Mills, and Roberts, 1992; Ganzeboom, Heath, and Roberts, 1992; Marshall, Swift, and Roberts, 1997: ch. 6; Heath and Cheung, 1998).¹ What we can add here to this previous research is consideration of the effects of the further merit variables of ability and effort. We are therefore in a position to test the argument, which authors such as Saunders might wish to make, that even if steady progress towards an ‘education-based’ meritocracy is no longer being sustained, it could still be that in an alternative conception meritocracy continues to advance.

Theoretically, our grounds for doubting the IMS thesis – some of which we have earlier outlined (Goldthorpe, 1996; Breen, 1998) – have to do with the relationship between meritocracy and the free-market economy. Advocates of the IMS thesis have

argued that the process that it claims is crucially driven by the market. It is the context of constant or indeed intensifying economic competition, together with rapid technological change, that in effect compels employers to become the agents of meritocracy. They cannot afford to recruit, retain, or promote employees on any other basis than that which will best serve to maximize productive efficiency – i.e. that of merit. Considerations of ascriptive or other non-meritocratic criteria have to be eliminated, even if employers would still wish to take them into account, ultimately as the price of survival. However, in the same way as Hayek (1960: chs. 5, 6; 1976: ch. 9), a leading theorist and defender of economic liberalism, we would see the relationship between the idea of meritocracy and the realities of the free-market economy as being in fact highly problematic, and would in turn regard the foregoing argument as in various respects flawed.

To begin with, it may be thought to exaggerate the degree of selectivity even of present-day ‘globalized’ markets, and thus to underestimate the scope for discretion and variation in their labour and personnel policies that remains available to employers. Further, though, and more seriously, the argument rests on the supposition that there exists one, relatively well-defined, conception of merit – i.e. one that can be captured by measures of (primarily cognitive) ability and associated motivation or of the educational attainment that these make possible – and that it is then this conception of merit that employers in general recognize and of necessity implement. Such a supposition would, however, seem highly questionable. In so far as a free-market economy is in operation, there is no way in which any particular conception of merit can actually be imposed upon employers. They are at liberty to define merit in regard to their employees, actual or potential, in whatever way, or ways, they please – albeit, of course, with responsibility for the consequences. And while there is no question that in modern economies ability, motivation, and formal qualifications are indeed widely taken as being relevant indicators of merit, it would at the same time seem difficult to deny that a range of other indicators, relating to other understandings of merit, are also very frequently utilized.

For example, in many occupations in the expanding services sector – in sales, personal services, and

different forms of ‘people processing’ – evidence of appropriate social skills and personal ‘style’ may be thought no less important than evidence of cognitive skills. Again, the ‘advanced personnel policies’ or ‘human resource management programmes’ favoured by modern enterprises place great emphasis on personality characteristics as indicators of such meritorious qualities as ‘loyalty’, ‘commitment’, ‘adaptability’, and ‘capacity for teamwork’. And still from a more traditional standpoint, employers may set a premium, for many grades of employee, on ‘responsibility’, ‘steadiness’, or a simple willingness to comply (see further Goldthorpe, 1996; Marshall, Swift, and Roberts, 1997: ch. 7; Breen, 1998). As a result of such considerations, it is moreover entirely possible that the distinction between merit and ascription breaks down. Ascribed attributes, including ones that are linked to class origins, may be regarded by employers as having economic value and as therefore constituting merit from their point of view – which, in a free-market economy, is the only point of view that counts.²

From this position, therefore, we have no particular reason to expect that the IMS thesis should hold good in present-day Britain or in any other economically advanced society. While ability, effort, and educational attainment do clearly play a significant role in determining employment prospects, and thus in mediating class mobility processes, there is no mechanism apparent to us that would ensure that this role should steadily grow until merit understood in terms of these criteria becomes totally dominant. Rather, our expectation would be that in modern societies the importance of merit defined in this – or indeed in any other – way, is likely to fluctuate over time, in relation to a variety of factors affecting the economic, and also the social and political, conditions under which employing organizations operate and the labour and personnel policies that they in turn adopt.

Data, Design, and Variables

In our previous paper, we followed Saunders in exploiting the dataset of the National Child Development Study (NCDS). This comprises data referring to all children born in Great Britain in one week in March 1958, which were collected at

birth and then in five further surveys at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, and 33. For our present purposes, we again use the NCDS dataset but now in conjunction with that of the British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70). This relates to all children born in Great Britain in one week in April 1970, for whom data were collected at birth and again in four further surveys at ages 6, 10, 16, and 26. In both cases the original cohort comprised just over 17 000 cases. Drawing on these two studies, our basic concern is to design our data analyses so that we can, first of all, make reliable comparisons of the experience of intergenerational class mobility among individuals in the two birth cohorts represented; and then, secondly, reliably examine how far changes are evident, from one cohort to the other, in the extent to which the patterns of association that we observe between class origins and destinations are mediated through what could be regarded as ‘merit’ variables. In total, therefore, five key variables are involved: those of class origins and destinations, and three measures of merit – ability, effort, and educational attainment. We next consider these variables in turn, with particular regard to the degree of cross-cohort comparability that our two datasets allow us to achieve.

Class Origins and Destinations

In order to compare individuals in the two cohorts at similar stages in their adult lives, we have to draw on the NCDS survey carried out (in 1981) at respondents’ age 23 and on the BCS70 survey carried out (in 1996) at respondents’ age 26, this latter being a postal survey. From the NCDS survey, we have information (N6134)³ on each respondent’s current Socio-Economic Grouping (SEG), from which, as is well known (cf. Heath and McDonald, 1987), a fair approximation to the Goldthorpe class schema in its seven-class version can be derived. In the BCS70 survey, information is directly available on respondents’ current class as coded to the full eleven-class Goldthorpe schema (GOLDTH90). By collapsing this latter variable to the seven-class level, we can then establish a close similarity in our treatment of class destinations across the two cohorts.⁴ It should, however, be further noted that in the BCS70 survey, in contrast to the NCDS survey, no information was obtained from respondents not currently in

employment about their last previous employment. We cannot therefore follow the standard practice of using such information to accord a class position to unemployed individuals or to those outside the labour market. Consequently, our major analyses of class mobility have to be restricted to individuals who were found in employment at the time of interview, but we have undertaken supplementary analyses in which we use unemployment as itself a 'destination' category.

As regards class origins, the NCDS age-11 survey contains information (N1175) on the current SEG of the respondent's father (or other male family 'head') while the BCS70 age-10 survey has corresponding information (BACK10P). In both cases, then, we can again approximate the Goldthorpe seven-class schema. That is to say, with class origins, as with class destinations, we can match our variables in a generally satisfactory way; and we have, therefore, the basis for constructing intergenerational mobility tables for individuals in our two cohorts for which a high degree of comparability can be claimed.

Ability

In the context of the debate on meritocracy, ability has in fact been generally understood as cognitive ability or 'intelligence' and at the same time has been distinguished from actual educational attainment, as reflected, say, in teachers' reports on children or in the examinations they pass and formal qualifications they acquire. In the NCDS dataset, the best measure of ability in the sense in question is provided by the results of the General Ability Test that was administered at age 11 (N920). These results, given on an 80-point scale, can, it appears, serve as a good proxy for IQ scores (Douglas, 1967: 33–6). In the BCS70 dataset, a seemingly very similar measure is afforded by the British Ability Scales, scores on which are available for children at age 10 (SCORE20). In this case, too, a close relationship to IQ scores has been claimed (Elliott, Murray, and Pearson, 1978). In using these two measures, we can then feel reasonably confident that we are treating ability in a comparable way across our cohorts. We further took the step of standardizing each measure so that, within each cohort, it has a zero mean and unit variance.

Effort

The understanding of effort, considered as a component of merit, is less clear than that of ability. However, it is perhaps most often – and, we would believe, best – treated as effort in early life and especially therefore that made in relation to schooling.⁵ From this standpoint, the most obvious variable to take in the NCDS dataset is that represented by scores on an Academic Motivation Scale, even though the test was administered at the rather late age of 16. These scores are in fact the sum of those resulting from eight five-point Likert scales measuring responses to statements about school and schoolwork. Unfortunately, no directly comparable measure of effort is available within the BCS70 dataset. The closest 'functional equivalent' would appear to be offered by scores on motivational tests that were administered in the age-10 survey, in the planning of which the view was taken that measures focusing on self-esteem and 'locus of control' would prove more relevant to explaining educational performance than would more immediate measures of attitudes towards schooling (Butler and Bynner, 1997). In the event, the 'locus of control' scale – otherwise known as the Caraloc Scale (Gammage, 1975) – proved to work particularly well in this regard (Butler and Bynner, 1997). This scale derives from responses to a total of twenty items designed to test how far children see their level of school achievement as lying within their own control or, rather, as being 'externally' determined – with the latter orientation being interpreted as destructive of effort.⁶ We have therefore used the Academic Motivation Scale (N1760) as our effort variable for the 1958 cohort and the Caraloc Scale (NEW65) as our effort variable for the 1970 cohort, with scores in both cases again standardized to have a zero mean and unit variance. However, we have in this respect to recognize that the extent to which we have achieved comparable measures must remain in some degree problematic.

Educational attainment

In the NCDS age-23 survey, respondents' (highest) educational qualifications were coded to the categories used in the General Household Survey (NEWGHSQ). In the BCS70 age-26 survey, they

were coded to the six National Vocational Qualifications levels (HQUAL26), which range from 'none' to 'degree level and higher'. However, the former classification can be coded fairly closely to the latter, so we can in effect use the NVQ levels, treated as a six-point scale, for both cohorts alike.

Finally here, one other problem that must be noted is that of missing data, full details of which are given in Table 1. There are two main aspects of the problem. First, as indicated in Panel A of that table, both the NCDS and the BCS70 have suffered some considerable attrition of respondents across successive surveys. So, at the ages with which we are concerned, NCDS had lost almost 30 per cent, and BCS70 44 per cent, of their initial cohorts, although some of this was due to the depletion of the original cohort through death or emigration. However, the respondents to a given sweep are not

a subset of those who were included in an earlier one because, to a non-negligible extent, respondents leave and re-enter the surveys over time. Thus, of those who were interviewed in the age-23 sweep of NCDS, around one-fifth had not been included in one or more of the earlier rounds. For BCS70 the figure is over one-third. Given that we draw on data from several different sweeps of each survey in our analyses it is therefore the figure on the third line of Panel A that tells us the impact of sample attrition and against which the magnitude of the second problem – that of item non-response – must be judged.

Panel B of Table 1 shows the number of valid values for the five variables we use in our analyses. Class origins, ability, and effort were measured in the same sweep, at age 10, in BCS70, while in NCDS the former two variables were measured at

Table 1. *Details of missing data in the two studies*

Panel A: sample sizes

	NCDS		BCS70	
	N	%	N	%
Included at birth	17414		16135 ^a	
Sample at age 23/26 ^b	12537	72	9003	56
Sample in all sweeps including age 23/26	10048	68	5661	35
After omitting cases with missing values ^c	5721	33	4189	26
After omitting those not in labour force ^c	4196	24	–	
After omitting those not in employment	3566	20	3970	23

Panel B: Valid Cases

Variable	Number of valid cases	
	NCDS	BCS70
Class origins	13306	11955
Ability	14134	12482
Effort	11468	12429
Class destinations	9751	6416
Educational qualifications	12537	8366

^aDoes not include children born in Northern Ireland who were not represented in the survey after 1975.

^bWhere the items we use are taken from sweeps made at earlier ages, this figure overestimates the size of sample available to us before the omission of cases with missing values.

^cThe figures in the fourth row for the BCS70 and the fifth row for the NCDS show the sample size we have for analyses including the unemployed. This is because in the BCS70 individuals not currently in the labour force do not have a class position and are thus omitted as not having a value on this item. The figures in the sixth row are for both studies the sample sizes we have for analyses excluding the unemployed.

age 11 and the last at age 16. Class position and education were both measured in the age 23 sweep of NCDS and the age 26 sweep of BCS70. Variables measured at later sweeps have fewer valid cases, because of sample attrition, but the within-sweep variation in item response is very small and, indeed, overall item non-response is generally quite modest. For example, in the NCDS we have data on current class position for 9751 out of 12 537 respondents to the age 23 sweep (a response rate of 78 per cent) and full information on educational attainment. For the BCS70 comparable figures are a 71 per cent response rate for class (though, in this case, information on class was sought only from those currently in paid work) and 93 per cent for education.

Reverting to panel A of Table 1, the fourth, fifth and sixth lines show the sizes of the samples used in our analyses. The difference between these final figures and those shown in the third line is the result of the substantial *cumulative* effect of the rather modest levels of individual item non-response (and also of the exclusion of respondents who were not working at the time of the age 23 or 26 sweep). The central question is then that of the degree to which the working through of these factors leaves us with samples in which selection biases, if any there are, are substantially different between the two cohorts.

As far as sample attrition is concerned, it has proved possible in both studies to monitor closely the evolving rate and pattern of non-response, and while it is clear that various biases have emerged, these would appear to be mostly small and moreover to be on much the same lines from one study to the other (Despotidu and Shepherd, 1998). In both cases alike, low levels of response are most apparent among those with minority ethnic status, with disadvantaged class backgrounds, with teenage or single mothers, and with low levels of educational attainment. A similar situation might reasonably be supposed to hold for item non-response. We can find no reason for supposing that this was on a significantly different pattern between the two cohorts, either in the extensive documentation of the two studies or in the results of our own analyses. Rather, it seems to us that although non-response does indeed introduce biases into the remaining samples it does so in a very similar fashion in both NCDS and BCS70.⁷ A recent review of the representativeness of NCDS and BCS70 (Nathan, 1999: 22) does in fact

conclude that 'Although cumulative attrition is found to be high . . . the evidence on its effects does not show serious biases except with respect to certain small sub-groups of the population. Overall, representativeness can be considered as being attained, to a high degree.'

Mobility Tables

In order to provide a descriptive context for the analyses that follow, we show in Tables 2 and 3 the absolute rates of intergenerational class mobility, in outflow form, that we are able to derive for men and women in our two cohorts. (The actual cell counts are available on request.) From these tables, it would appear that the mobility experience of individuals differed markedly across the cohorts and was generally more favourable for those born in 1970 than for those born in 1958 – especially as regards their chances of being found in a Class I position and their risk of being unemployed. It is, however, important to consider the various possible or actual sources of the differences that are displayed.

First, the tables show intergenerational mobility at a quite early stage in the adult lives of respondents and, at this stage, the difference in age at time of interview, although only three years – 23 for members of the 1958 cohort and 26 for members of the 1970 cohort – could be expected to have some significant consequences. However, one difference that might have been anticipated, the number of individuals in full-time education, turns out to be negligible – 300 in the 1958 cohort and 303 in the 1970 cohort.

Secondly, Tables 2 and 3 reflect contrasting conjunctural conditions. In 1981, when members of the 1958 cohort were interviewed, the British economy was in recession, whereas in 1996 when members of the 1970 cohort were interviewed a pre-election boom was under way. The differing risks of unemployment for members of the two cohorts that are suggested in Tables 2 and 3 are therefore exaggerated. At age 33, in 1991, the proportion of men in the 1958 cohort who were unemployed had fallen to 6 per cent as against the 17 per cent recorded ten years previously, and the proportion of women to 3 per cent as against 13 per cent.

Table 2. Rates of intergenerational outflow mobility of men: 1958 cohort, upper rows; 1970 cohort, lower rows; at ages 23 and 26 respectively

Origin class	Destination class								
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	U	N
I Upper service	13	27	16	7	4	13	8	13	183
	41	22	12	1	5	8	7	4	361
II Lower service	10	27	11	9	5	17	8	13	352
	28	19	10	3	8	12	12	7	429
III Routine nonmanual	4	17	19	7	4	18	14	16	229
	22	21	12	—	9	15	12	8	141
IV Petty bourgeoisie	7	13	10	18	2	25	16	8	126
	17	15	6	7	8	18	23	6	216
V Supervisors etc.	3	17	13	5	7	29	11	16	144
	16	19	9	4	6	21	22	3	216
VI Skilled manual	3	13	9	5	8	29	16	17	777
	13	13	8	3	7	21	26	9	523
VII Nonskilled manual	2	9	9	4	6	23	25	22	502
	12	16	6	3	7	18	25	12	250
Per cent all	5	16	11	7	6	23	16	17	2313
	22	17	9	3	7	16	18	7	2136

Table 3. Rates of intergenerational outflow mobility of women: 1958 cohort, upper rows; 1970 cohort lower rows; at ages 23 and 26 respectively

Origin class	Destination class								
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	U	N
I Upper service	5	40	40	2	0	1	2	10	182
	25	35	30	1	2	2	3	3	374
II Lower service	4	32	48	3	—	2	3	8	360
	23	31	29	2	2	3	7	3	439
III Routine nonmanual	2	28	50	2	0	3	5	12	197
	16	30	33	0	3	4	12	2	128
IV Petty bourgeoisie	2	27	43	2	0	2	12	12	98
	16	20	32	4	3	6	15	4	209
V Supervisors etc.	6	29	41	2	1	2	6	13	126
	17	18	37	1	2	5	14	4	201
VI Skilled manual	2	25	43	2	1	3	10	15	588
	16	21	35	1	3	6	15	4	475
VII Nonskilled manual	2	25	35	2	2	4	15	17	332
	12	16	34	1	2	9	22	3	227
Per cent all	3	28	43	2	1	2	8	13	1883
	19	25	32	2	2	5	12	3	2053

Thirdly, Tables 2 and 3 reveal the effects of secular change in the shape of the class structure. The differences in the column marginal distributions for the two cohorts, although in part, perhaps, the result of the difference in age at interview, do also reflect

the long-term growth within British society of the service class, or salariat, and the corresponding decline of the working class. It is through this expanding 'room at the top' that members of the 1970 cohort most obviously enjoy an advantage

over members of the 1958 cohort: that is, in facing an objective opportunity structure clearly more favourable to the experience of upward mobility into the service class or of intergenerational stability within it.⁸

One further point might be noted about the patterns of mobility that are shown up in the two tables. If for each cohort the rows of outflow percentages are compared with the corresponding column marginal distribution, it could well be thought that deviations from the standard of ‘perfect mobility’ are not so great as are usually observed in such tables – and especially in the case of men. Here again, though, the relatively early age of the respondents should be kept in mind. By their mid-30s, one could expect a stronger association between their class origins and destinations to have become apparent as a result of worklife mobility, including, and again especially among men, processes of ‘counter-mobility’ through which individuals are returned to the same class as that in which they originated after some initial movement away from it (cf Goldthorpe, 1987: 54–5, 124–31; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 286–90).⁹ For our particular purposes, however, no major problems are created on this account. The important point is that we shall be considering the part played by individual merit in the mobility experience of members of our two cohorts over a more or less similar life-cycle phase.

Models, Analysis, and Results

In our earlier work we proposed that claims regarding meritocratic selection could best be tested by adopting a two-stage strategy on the following lines. First, seek to fit a loglinear model to mobility tables with the aim of capturing the prevailing pattern of association between origins and destinations through a relatively small number of parameters that are a function of odds ratios. Then, secondly, in rewriting the loglinear model for grouped data as a multinomial logit model for individual-level data (Breen, 1994; cf. Logan, 1983), introduce measures of individual ability, effort, and educational attainment and examine the effects of so doing on the parameters initially estimated.¹⁰ To the extent that these parameters shift towards zero, the association between class origins and destinations can be

regarded as being mediated by the merit variables that have been brought into play; and the coefficients for the latter will indicate the extent of their influence on relative mobility chances. Here, we follow essentially the same strategy, although, of course, with a particular interest in changes across our two cohorts.

The type of loglinear model that we favour in the first stage of the analysis is a ‘topological’ model, under which each cell of the mobility table is allocated to one of a disjoint set of levels. These levels reflect the strength of association between the rows and columns by which particular cells are defined, and so all cells placed at the same level are posited to show the same strength of association between class origins and destinations.

In Table 4 we give the design matrices for the models that we adopted for men and for women, following the convention that cells at level 1 are expected to display the strongest association, those

Table 4. *Design matrices for topological models for men’s and women’s mobility tables*

Men		Destination class							
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	U
Origin class	1	2	2	4	5	6	6	(6)	
	2	2	3	4	4	5	5	(5)	
	3	3	2	4	3	4	4	(4)	
	3	3	3	1	4	4	3	(6)	
	3	3	3	4	3	3	3	(3)	
	5	4	4	4	3	3	3	(3)	
	5	4	4	4	3	3	2	(2)	
Women		Destination class							
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	U
Origin class	1	1	2	2	4	5	5	(4)	
	1	1	2	3	3	4	4	(4)	
	2	2	1	3	1	3	3	(4)	
	2	2	2	1	3	3	3	(4)	
	2	2	2	3	2	2	3	(4)	
	4	3	2	3	2	2	2	(3)	
	4	3	2	3	2	2	1	(3)	

Table 5. *Fit of topological models with varying and common levels parameters to mobility tables for men and women in the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts, and common levels parameter estimates (standard errors in parentheses)*

Men (6 level model)

	G^2	df	p	% misclassified
Varying parameters	62.1	62	0.47	4.6
Common parameters	73.2	67	0.28	5.1
Difference	11.1	5	0.05	1.5

Common levels parameters

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	0	-0.47 (0.10)	-0.87 (0.11)	-1.10 (0.11)	-1.40 (0.11)	-1.73 (0.14)

Women (5 level model)

	G^2	df	p	% misclassified
Varying parameters	69.9	64	0.29	4.5
Common parameters	76.2	68	0.23	4.7
Difference	6.3	4	0.18	0.2

Common levels parameters

	1	2	3	4	5
	0	-0.33 (0.06)	-0.47 (0.07)	-0.82 (0.09)	-1.79 (0.22)

at level 2 the next strongest, and so on. The source of these models is in the eight-level topological model developed by Goldthorpe (1987: ch. 4 and Table 4.4. esp.) for the intergenerational class mobility table for men (age 20–64) derived from the Oxford Mobility Study of 1972. Our model for women is essentially a simplified – i.e. ‘collapsed’ – five-level version of this earlier model, while that for men is a collapsed six-level version which, however, also embodies a number of modifications that appeared necessary in order to accommodate the fact that men in their early or mid-20s would still not have completed a number of well-established paths of worklife mobility (cf. Goldthorpe, 1987: ch. 5).¹¹

There is by now much evidence to indicate that patterns of association between class origins and

destinations – or what may be alternatively described as relative mobility rates or patterns of social fluidity – tend to have a high degree of stability over time (see e.g. Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: ch. 3). An initial question was then that of whether such stability would hold across our two cohorts, which, even though only twelve years apart, are characterized, as we have seen, by markedly different absolute mobility rates. In Table 5 we give the results of fitting our topological models to mobility tables for our two cohorts in two different ways: first, with levels parameters being allowed to vary by cohort and then, secondly, with common levels parameters for the two cohorts being imposed. (The estimates for these common parameters are also given.) As can be seen, in moving

from variable to common parameters, some loss of fit is incurred. However, for the women's tables, the difference is not statistically significant at the 5 per cent level, and for the men's tables it is barely so. Moreover, in terms of the percentage of cases misclassified, the improvement made by the models with varying parameters over those with common parameters is rather slight. There would therefore seem little reason for us to forgo the parsimony that the latter models offer.

The upshot of the analysis so far is, then, that despite the differences in absolute rates that are shown up in Tables 2 and 3, the relative rates underlying the experience of class mobility of individuals born in 1958 and in 1970 can be regarded as very largely the same. If, therefore, increased selection by merit has occurred from one cohort to the other, it has not, at all events, served to reduce inequalities in relative rates to any appreciable degree. And it is apparent from the common levels parameters reported in Table 5 that these inequalities, treated in terms of odds ratios, must in many cases be quite marked, even though the men and women in our cohorts are still at a relatively early stage in their working lives.¹² We are thus led on to the issue that is here of central concern to us: namely, how far can the inequalities in question be accounted for – and in turn legitimated – in terms of merit; and, more specifically, are there any indications that, although relative rates may not have become any more equal as we move from the 1958 to the 1970 birth cohort,

the extent to which they reflect individual differences in merit has none the less increased?

To repeat, we aim at this stage to proceed by rewriting our topological loglinear models of mobility tables as multinomial logit models, into which individual-level measures of ability, effort, and educational qualifications can be introduced. The results of the analyses that we make on this basis are given in Tables 6, 7, 8, and 9.¹³

In Table 6 we show results from multinomial logit models that are obtained from the rewriting of the two versions of our topological models that were compared in Table 5: i.e. those in which levels parameters are allowed to vary by cohort or in which common parameters are imposed. Column (1) of the table, headed 'levels only', simply repeats the main result from Table 5 favouring the latter models and thus indicating that relative rates of mobility remained essentially constant across the two cohorts. Columns (2) to (5) then show the fit of 'varying' and 'common' levels parameters models as our merit variables are introduced: first ability, then ability and effort together, then educational qualifications, and finally all these three variables together. The effects of ability, effort, and education are of course themselves always allowed to vary between the cohorts (see further n. 13).

If, as the IMS argument would imply, intergenerational class mobility is becoming more strongly influenced by individual merit over time, then what we would expect to discover from Table 6 is that,

Table 6. Deviance for multinomial logit models with varying and common levels parameters across cohorts

	Variables included				
	Levels only (1)	Levels + ability (2)	Levels + ability + effort (3)	Levels + ability + education (4)	Levels + ability + effort + education (5)
Deviance					
<i>Men</i>					
Varying	13765	13298	13189	12866	12682
Common	13776	13306	13197	12857	12690
Diff. (for 5 df)	11.1	8.5	8.5	9.1	8.0
<i>Women</i>					
Varying	10278	9973	9910	9529	9444
Common	10285	9977	9913	9534	9447
Diff. (for 4 df)	6.3	3.3	3.3	4.3	2.9

with the inclusion of merit variables, ‘varying’ levels parameters models should represent an improvement over ‘common’ ones, since controlling for merit should reduce the levels parameters in the later cohort to a greater degree than in the earlier cohort. But in fact no such tendency is in any respect apparent. As can be seen, across columns (2) to (5) the former kind of model does not fit significantly better than the latter. In other words, we cannot reject the hypothesis that, as well as relative mobility rates being largely the same in the two cohorts, so too are the effects of our merit variables in mediating mobility as measured by the degree to which their inclusion reduces the strength of the association between class origins and destinations.

In Table 7 we then accept this hypothesis and show what follows from it regarding the actual extent of the mediation of mobility by merit across our two cohorts alike. Column (1) simply reproduces from Table 5 the common levels parameters for our topological models; and columns (2) to (5) then show how far these parameters are reduced as the merit variables are brought into play (on the same pattern as in Table 6). It can be seen that for both men and women the levels parameters do tend to fall as one moves across from the first column to the fifth. It is

also apparent that merit understood as educational attainment has a greater effect in this respect than does merit understood as ability and effort – at all events, as we are able to measure these variables for each cohort. Indeed, the fact that the reduction of the parameters as between the fourth and fifth columns is rather slight, where it occurs at all, indicates that the effects of ability and effort largely operate via education. At the same time, it has to be noted that even in the fifth column of the table only one parameter – that referring to level 3 of the model for the women’s mobility table – becomes non-significantly different from zero. We are thus again led to the conclusion that, to some quite substantial extent, class inequalities in mobility chances are not open to explanation, nor thus to justification, in terms of meritocratic selection.

We do not, though, wish to dwell here on the question of how closely present-day British society approximates the meritocratic ideal as opposed to that of whether or not, whatever its actual condition, British society could be said to be moving in the direction of this ideal over time. From the models of Table 7, and specifically from those of column (5) in which all three of our merit variables are included, we can in fact return to this latter question

Table 7. *Levels parameters under models including ‘merit’ variables*

	Variables included				
	Levels only (1)	Levels + ability (2)	Levels + ability + effort (3)	Levels + education (4)	Levels + ability + effort + education (5)
<i>Men</i>					
Levels parameters					
2	-0.47	-0.45	-0.44	-0.35	-0.35
3	-0.87	-0.82	-0.81	-0.68	-0.68
4	-1.10	-0.98	-0.96	-0.84	-0.79
5	-1.40	-1.22	-1.20	-1.01	-0.96
6	-1.73	-1.45	-1.41	-1.14	-1.06
<i>Women</i>					
Levels parameters					
2	-0.33	-0.23	-0.22	-0.15	-0.13
3	-0.47	-0.28	-0.27	-0.14	-0.10 ^a
4	-0.82	-0.51	-0.49	-0.34	-0.25
5	-1.79	-1.33	-1.29	-1.08	-0.94

^aParameter not significantly different from zero.

Table 8. *Coefficients for partial effects of ability, effort, and educational qualifications on log-odds of men in 1958 and 1970 cohorts being found in different classes of destination relative to being found in Class I (coefficients more than twice their standard errors in bold)*

		Destination class logit					
		II/I	III/I	IV/I	V/I	VI/I	VII/I
Ability	1958	-0.12	-0.08	-0.48	-0.73	-0.68	-0.71
	Difference	0.09	0.05	0.14	0.62	0.47	0.30
	1970	-0.03	-0.03	-0.34	-0.11	-0.21	-0.41
Effort	1958	0.05	-0.04	-0.36	-0.26	-0.41	-0.34
	Difference	-0.13	0.01	0.20	0.12	0.26	0.17
	1970	-0.08	-0.03	-0.16	-0.14	-0.15	-0.17
Education	1958	-0.63	-0.81	-0.87	-0.85	-0.90	-1.24
	Difference	0.40	0.55	0.07	0.11	-0.08	0.27
	1970	-0.23	-0.26	-0.80	-0.74	-0.98	-0.97

Table 9. *Coefficients for partial effects of ability, effort, and educational qualifications on log-odds of women in 1958 and 1970 cohorts being found in different classes of destination relative to being found in Class I (coefficients more than twice their standard errors in bold)*

		Destination class logit					
		II/I	III/I	IV/I	V/I	VI/I	VII/I
Ability	1958	-0.57	-0.54	-0.41	-1.37	-1.15	-0.98
	Difference	0.62	0.58	0.60	1.33	0.92	0.56
	1970	0.05	0.04	0.19	-0.04	-0.22	-0.42
Effort	1958	-0.08	-0.10	-0.06	-0.51	-0.14	-0.16
	Difference	0.07	-0.00	-0.42	0.43	-0.17	-0.02
	1970	-0.01	-0.11	-0.48	-0.08	-0.30	-0.18
Education	1958	-0.36	-1.05	-1.00	-1.22	-1.32	-1.42
	Difference	0.32	0.52	0.33	0.71	0.47	0.53
	1970	-0.04	-0.52	-0.66	-0.51	-0.85	-0.89

and treat it from a somewhat different angle. In Tables 8 and 9, we use further results from the models of column (5) to show, for men and women respectively, the partial effects of merit, in the three ways that we have measured it, on their relative mobility chances. For each merit variable in turn we report, first, the estimated coefficients for its partial effect on the log-odds of an individual in the 1958 cohort being found in each other destination class relative to being found in Class I (i.e. the higher service class, which is taken as the reference category); secondly, the differences between these coefficients and the corresponding coefficients for the 1970 cohort; and, thirdly, the 1970 coefficients

themselves. Coefficients or differences in coefficients that are more than twice their standard errors are printed in bold.¹⁴

In interpreting Tables 8 and 9, we may begin with the middle panels relating to the effects of effort. Table 7 already suggests that, under our models, the effects of effort in fact add rather little to those of ability and education, and the results of Tables 8 and 9 are consistent with this. Most effort coefficients, whether for the 1958 or the 1970 cohort, are non-significant, as are the differences between them. There is perhaps some suggestion that the part played by effort is decreasing between the two cohorts for men while increasing for women but it

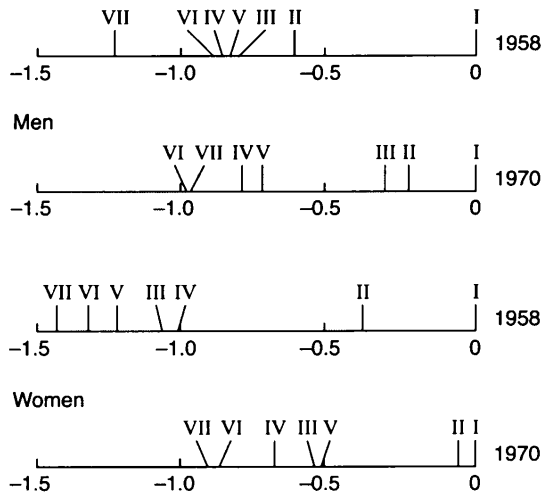


Figure 1. *Coefficients for partial effects of educational qualifications on chances of being found in different classes of destination relative to being found in Class I*

would be dangerous to give too much weight to this. We may then concentrate our attention on the role of ability and education.

The partial effects of ability on relative mobility chances could be said to show a general decline between our two cohorts in the case of men and women alike. From Tables 8 and 9, it can be seen that the range of the ability coefficients is clearly narrower for the 1970 than for the 1958 cohort, and all of the reported differences in coefficients between the two cohorts are positive.¹⁵ Among men in the 1958 cohort, ability most clearly differentiated the chances of their being found in Classes I, II, and III, the ‘white-collar’ classes, rather than in Classes V, VI, and VII, the ‘blue-collar’ classes. Among men in the 1970 cohort, this same differentiating influence remains discernible but is considerably reduced. In the case of women, the decline in the effects of ability is still more striking. Among women born in 1958, ability played a quite substantial role in determining mobility chances: in particular, the chances of being found in Class I rather than in Classes II or III and, further, the chances of being found in any of the former classes rather than in Classes V, VI, or VII. However, among women born in 1970, such ability effects largely disappear: only one coefficient is significant. The obvious interpretation here is that women in the earlier cohort often lacked educa-

tional opportunities appropriate to their ability, or chose not to take up such opportunities, so that much scope still remained for their ability to influence their mobility independently of educational qualifications. In contrast, women in the later cohort far more consistently translated their ability into educational attainment, and thus, in their case, effects of ability over and above those of education are no longer much in evidence.

As regards educational qualifications themselves, Tables 8 and 9 would suggest that their effects also tend to decline. There is again some reduction in the range of coefficients from the earlier to the later cohort, and again, too, the differences in coefficients between cohorts that are shown are positive in all cases but one. Even if, then, for women at least, the effects of ability have become increasingly expressed through educational qualifications, there are no grounds for supposing that such qualifications have thus come to exert a greater influence on relative mobility chances – whether for women or men. However, what is also of interest here are the indications not only of changes in the strength of education effects but also of accompanying changes in their pattern. The latter are perhaps best brought out if the relevant information in Tables 8 and 9 is re-presented in graphical form, as in Figure 1.

From the graphs it can rather clearly be seen that with the 1958 cohort, in the case of both men and women, educational attainment had a major impact on mobility chances in at least two respects. Among men, education strongly differentiated their chances of being found in Class I rather than in any other class and then, in addition, their chances – or risks – of being found in Class VII rather than in any other class. Among women, education strongly differentiated their chances of being found in Class I rather than in Class II and then, further, their chances of being found in Class I or II rather than in any other class. With the 1970 cohort, in contrast, educational attainment – again for men and women alike – shows a substantial impact at just one point. For men, education is most important in differentiating their chances of being found in Classes I, II, and III, rather than in other classes; and for women, their chances of being found in Classes I and II rather than in other classes.¹⁶ In other respects, the effects of education appear as relatively modest. What lies behind these changes,

at the micro-social level, is a question that would repay detailed investigation. But, for present purposes, the main conclusion to be drawn is that for members of the 1970 cohort, in comparison with those of the 1958 cohort, educational qualifications were neither so powerful overall nor so discriminating in the ways in which they conditioned their relative mobility chances.

It is, then, evident enough that our findings, as presented in the foregoing, can give little support to the IMS thesis, whether merit is defined in terms of education or of ability and effort. The strength and structure of the association between class origins and class destinations can be taken as being, for both men and women, basically the same within the 1958 and the 1970 birth cohorts; and, further, the part that is played by merit variables in accounting for this association – however one might wish to evaluate its importance in absolute terms – shows no sign of increasing. It might perhaps be argued that since the two cohorts are only twelve years apart, little if any change in these respects could in fact be expected. However, so far as ability and educational attainment are concerned, our results would indicate that some change has occurred, although in the opposite direction to that which the IMS thesis would predict: i.e. the influence of these variables on individuals' relative mobility chances diminished – as, presumably, in a context in which such chances remained more or less constant, the influence of other factors, whether 'meritocratic' or not, correspondingly grew.¹⁷

Finally, in this section we should report on the further analyses that we undertook in order to check whether our main findings might be affected by the fact that they refer only to individuals who were in employment at time of interview: i.e. in 1981 for members of the 1958 cohort and in 1996 for members of the 1970 cohort. It is the difference in the numbers unemployed at these two dates, as already discussed, that gives greatest cause for concern. Since we could not allocate unemployed persons in the 1970 cohort, in the same way as those in the 1958 cohort, to class positions on the basis of their last previous employment, we had to take these individuals into account through a different approach. That is, for men and women in both cohorts we treated unemployment as being an additional 'destination' to those represented by our seven

classes, and thus began with 7×8 rather than 7×7 intergenerational mobility tables. We had thus to extend the design of our topological models – in the way indicated in the extra (bracketed) columns shown in Table 4 – but we could then proceed exactly as before.

Our results are not presented here (they are available on request) partly for reasons of space but also because bringing the unemployed into the analysis does little to alter the general impression that is created by Tables 8 and 9. The main points of additional interest concern the effects of merit variables on the relative chances of being found in unemployment. Once again these tend to weaken over our two cohorts, suggesting perhaps that the incidence of the less extensive unemployment of 1996 was more structurally determined than that of the more extensive unemployment of 1981. But it is also noteworthy that in both cohorts alike neither ability nor education do all that much to differentiate the chances of individuals being found in unemployment rather than in employment within Classes IV, V, VI, or VII.¹⁸

Discussion and Conclusions

The results that we have reported may well be found surprising, and not only, perhaps, by those who subscribe to the thesis of increased merit-selection or of the growing prevalence of achievement over ascription. At least as regards educational attainment, there are many sociologists who would see this as indeed being ever more crucial to employment prospects in industrial and post-industrial societies, even though they would still question whether it is greater meritocracy that is thus indicated – rather than, say, the extent to which, to quote Halsey (1977: 184), 'ascriptive forces find ways of expressing themselves as "achievement"'.¹⁹

In so far, then, as surprise may engender doubt, a possible response to our results would be to suggest that they are in some degree artefactual: i.e. that they derive from a lack of comparability in our treatment of the two cohorts and, in particular, from a failure to measure merit variables as adequately for the more recent cohort as for the earlier one. In attempting to counter such an argument, we face the difficulty of proving a negative but the following observations may be made.

First, so far as educational qualifications are concerned, we use exactly the same classification, the NVQ levels, for both cohorts. The measure of this variable could then only be weaker for the 1970 than for the 1958 cohort if the NVQ classification had in some way become a less appropriate one between these two dates. We are not aware of any evidence that would indicate this.¹⁹ Secondly, while our measures of ability do differ by cohort, both, as we have earlier noted, have been regarded as giving good proxies for IQ scores by specialists in educational testing; and we know of no reason why the 1970 measure might be thought to serve less well in this respect than the 1958 measure. Thirdly, as regards effort, it is certainly the case, as we earlier recognized, that the comparability of our measures is here open to question. However, not only could our 1970 measure be seen as better grounded, both theoretically and empirically, than our 1958 one, but, as we have observed, the effects of effort are in both cohorts alike much less important than those of either ability or education (and are less consistently in decline). The implications of our findings overall would not, therefore, be all that greatly affected if those relating to effort were simply discounted.

In sum, while we cannot demonstrate that our results are unaffected by measurement problems, we would believe that, in the light of the foregoing, it must fall to those who would wish to see them as being thus compromised to make out the case to this effect.

Assuming our results to be generally valid, we would then go on to suggest – and in the light of our theoretical critique of the IMS thesis – that of particular relevance to their explanation are two features of the period within which members of the 1970 cohort completed their education and spent their early working lives: that is, features that could well be the source of the generally reduced effects in this cohort, relative to that of 1958, of the merit variables that we consider. First, this was a period of educational expansion and of rapidly rising levels of educational qualification;²⁰ and even if one discounts any idea of, as it were, an intrinsic devaluation of qualifications, as a result, say, of declining standards of teaching or examination, it could still be argued that as any particular level of qualification becomes more widespread in the population, the less information it provides to employers about the

potential, as employees, of those who possess it. In such circumstances, employers may then have good reason to give increased attention to other indicators of what they would regard as merit – different from, and even in conflict with, those privileged by supporters of the IMS thesis – and at the same time to rely more on ‘particularistic’ rather than ‘universalistic’ recruitment procedures as, say, by exploiting social networks (cf. Breen, 1998).

Secondly, the period was one in which Conservative governments sought to give employers greater freedom of action in labour markets, as against legal restraints and trade union power, and, further, to reduce the size of the public sector of the economy and to introduce ‘market’ principles into its operation. In this way too, then, the influence on employment prospects of merit in the sense of the IMS thesis, and especially of educational attainment, would seem likely to have been reduced. For, as indicated in several previous inquiries, British and other (e.g. Heath, Mills, and Roberts, 1992; Jonsson, 1992), education most strongly determines employment prospects where, as in some heavily unionized industries or in the public sector, linkages between formal qualifications and certain occupational grades are mandatory. We are not here concerned, we should stress, with the issue of whether such ‘credentialism’ does or does not serve economic efficiency, but simply to make the point that a ‘freer’ labour market implies *inter alia* greater freedom for employers to take note of qualifications or to disregard them, as they wish.²¹

In sum, we have compared two British birth cohorts, of men and women born in 1958 and in 1970, and have presented evidence to show that their experience of class mobility reflected an essentially similar pattern of underlying relative rates; and, further, that merit, as indexed by measures of ability, effort, and educational attainment, did not exert a greater influence in mediating such mobility or in determining relative mobility chances among members of the later cohort than among members of the earlier one. To the contrary, the importance of merit would in certain respects appear to have declined over the years separating the two cohorts. Our results therefore call into question the thesis of meritocracy in its tendential form – that is, the IMS thesis – and likewise the cognate idea of the steadily growing prevalence of achievement over

ascription as the determining principle of class stratification in modern societies. We have drawn attention to the importance of the way in which ‘merit’ variables are measured and, more specifically, to the problems that we faced in trying to obtain comparable measures from one cohort to the other. However, there is no readily apparent reason for regarding our results going contrary to the IMS thesis as being artefactual rather than as reflecting the reality of mobility processes. So far at least as educational attainment is concerned, they serve to confirm and develop the results of earlier research. And our findings overall are of a kind that would be expected from our own understanding of the relationship between merit and the working of a market economy. Rather than the exigencies of such an economy compelling employers to select their employees on the basis of merit, in the sense of the IMS thesis, employers are able to define merit how they wish and may, moreover, often find themselves in situations in which it is entirely rational for them to define it in a much wider and more differentiated way. Even if, then, the distinction between achievement and ascription is not entirely broken down, individual attributes that are in general more ascribed than achieved may well come to count as merit in employers’ eyes. In turn, therefore, there are no clear grounds for supposing that inquiries undertaken in modern societies will invariably provide support for the IMS thesis as this is usually formulated. The relative importance of the merit variables that this thesis privileges in regard to employment prospects and mobility chances could in fact be expected to vary significantly from one period to another under the influence of a range of more or less contingent factors. Politicians of whatever persuasion for whom the idea of meritocracy appears attractive as a means of legitimating social inequalities that they wish to protect, or at all events not to challenge, could thus find that it represents a rather insecure basis for their ideological constructions.

Notes

1. Similar findings have moreover been reported for other advanced societies. See, e.g. for Sweden, Jonsson (1992, 1996); and for the Republic of Ireland, Breen and Whelan (1993) and Breen (1998).
2. Other ascribed attributes that might similarly take on economic value could of course be related to gender, race, or ethnicity. The importance of ascribed attributes, it should be noted, is not necessarily reduced, and may even be increased, where personnel selection is carried out in a formalized, apparently ‘universalistic’, way. For example, Keegan (1976/1998: 272) has observed that ‘the British army of 1939–45 put officer selection on a scientific basis, making all applicants for commissions submit to tests of their intelligence, stability, companionability, leadership potential and the like, considerations which favoured the middle-class over the working-class candidate.’
3. Here, and in all subsequent cases, we identify the variables that we use from the two datasets by what we take to be their official reference numbers or labels.
4. ‘Destinations’ may well seem here a somewhat inappropriate word in view of the ages of our respondents. We are indeed concerned with ‘early life’ intergenerational mobility. However, we are not, other than in the case of a rather small minority of respondents, concerned with mobility only to ‘first jobs’, and therefore well-known problems with this concept are do not arise to any significant extent.
5. It would seem particularly important that data on effort should not refer to a point in individuals’ lives more or less contemporaneous with that at which the supposed consequence of effort is being measured. This, for example, occurs when Saunders (1996) takes as an indicator of effort attitudes to work at age 33 – the age at which he also determines individuals’ destination class or occupational grade. In such a case, effort can of course scarcely be treated as exogenous. Hauser (1998: 10–11, n. 9) makes an analogous point regarding the measurement of ability and notes in this regard the advantage of being able to draw on longitudinal data in the way that we do here.
6. Illustrative items are: ‘Do you feel that most of the time it’s not worth trying hard because things never turn out right anyway?’; ‘Is a high mark just a matter of “luck” for you?’; ‘When bad things happen to you, is it usually someone else’s fault?’; ‘Do you usually get low marks, even when you study hard?’
7. A thorough analysis of the selection bias induced by sample attrition and item non-response is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, to try to gauge the likely extent of the problem we undertook several analyses, one of which dealt with the relationship between class origins and ability. As Table 1, panel B, shows, in both the NCDS and BCS70 these are the two variables for which we have the largest number of valid cases. More importantly, how far ability can be expected to mediate class origin inequalities in

- mobility chances depends crucially on, *inter alia*, the nature of the relationship between these two variables. It is therefore important to know whether sample selection distorts this relationship. Taking those respondents for whom we had full information on class origins and ability (a total of 22 356, 12 387 from NCDS, 9969 from BCS70) we compared the distribution of ability across class origins among that subset who were included in the analyses we have reported (3566 from NCDS and 3970 from BCS70, as shown in Table 1, panel A) and the remainder who were excluded. We found that there was indeed a significant difference between the two subsets. But what we did not find was that this difference itself differed according to whether we analysed the NCDS or BCS70 data. In other words, although processes of selection cause a change in the relationship between class origins and ability, the resulting bias does not in fact differ significantly between our two cohorts. According to our best fitting model, sample selection affects the relationship between class origins and ability in both surveys alike in the following way. The difference in mean ability between those included in our analyses and those excluded increases as one moves from origins in Class I to origins in Class VII. Thus, with individuals of Class I origins, the mean ability of the included respondents (taking both studies together) is .02 standard deviations lower than that of the excluded – though this difference is not significant. With individuals of Class II origins the mean ability score of the included is .08 standard deviations above that of the excluded; and as we move to the other classes this gap widens to a maximum of .19 standard deviations for those of Class VII origins. Full details of the analyses are available from the authors on request.
8. It is also probable that between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts women's chances of access to a service-class position improved more than did men's on account of some degree of reduction in gender discrimination.
 9. Counter-mobility would appear to be particularly important in bringing individuals, and especially men, of Class I and Class IV origins back to positions in these same classes.
 10. Bond and Saunders (1999: 245, n.1) claim that this approach is unduly crude in that the individual-level variables can then only be treated as categorical. This claim is of course completely mistaken. We can, and do, treat ability, effort, and educational attainment alike as continuous variables in the manner earlier indicated.
 11. Specifically, the I–III and I–IV cells, previously both at level 3, were put to levels 2 and 4, respectively; the IV–VII and V–VII cells previously at level 4 were put to level 3; and the VI–III and VII–III previously at level 3 were put to level 4.
 12. Thus, to give an example, if the levels parameters of Table 5 are taken in conjunction with the design matrices of Table 4, the formula given in Goldthorpe (1987: 119), can be used to calculate the odds ratio for men of Class I origins being themselves found in Class I rather than in Class VII as against men of Class VII being found in Class I rather than Class VII as 14.3; and the corresponding odds ratio for women as 13.6.
 13. The multinomial logit models used may be specified in more detail as follows. The dependent variable is respondent's class, the seven categories of which give rise to six identifiable logits for each of which we take Class I membership as the reference category. The explanatory variables are class origins, ability, effort, and educational qualifications, and we also fit a dummy variable for cohort (taking the value 1 for the 1970 cohort and 0 for the 1958 cohort) the inclusion of which allows the distribution of respondent's class to differ as between the cohorts. Ability, effort, and level of qualifications are each entered into the models as continuous variables and their effects are also allowed to differ by cohort. Thus, the various models fitted include parameters for the effects of one or more of these three variables in the case of the 1958 cohort and also for their interaction with the cohort dummy variable. The latter measures the difference in the effect of each variable as between the two cohorts. The effects of class origins are captured through the levels parameters of the topological models discussed in the text above. These in effect impose equality constraints on the full set of 36 possible class origin effects, so reducing their number to five for men and four for women. The results reported in Table 6 compare the deviances of models in which these levels effects are required to be the same in both cohorts with the deviances of models in which they are allowed to differ by inclusion of the interaction between the levels and the cohort dummy.
 14. It should be noted that to thus examine the effects of our merit variables on individuals' relative mobility chances is to address a somewhat different question to that of the degree to which the association between class origins and destinations is reduced when these variables are controlled. It would in principle be possible – though we would think sociologically rather unlikely – to have a society in

which this association was strong and only moderately mediated by merit but in which the effects of merit on individuals' relative mobility chances still was greater than in another society of a generally more meritocratic character. In the former society, both meritocratic and non-meritocratic influences on mobility chances would be greater than in the latter – in which influences that could not perhaps be characterized as either meritocratic or non-meritocratic or purely chance elements would in turn play a larger part.

15. The coefficients of Tables 8 and 9 are most safely read row-wise, with attention focusing on the overall range of the coefficients relative to that for the reference category (here Class I) which is set at zero and on the differences between coefficients. It is these values that are constant regardless of the choice of reference category. The differences between corresponding coefficients in the two different rows in each panel – i.e. the rows for the 1958 and 1970 cohorts – would not in fact all be positive with all reference categories, although the majority would be. In some cases a few, slight negative differences would arise as a result of changes in the relative position of classes within the narrowed range.
16. In so far as Class III positions are often held by young men *en route* to eventual destinations in Class I or II, the discriminating effects of education could in fact here be regarded as essentially the same for men and women.
17. It should of course be recognized that analysing data from two birth cohorts that are twelve years apart offers much better chances of detecting any over-time differences than does analysing data from two general population surveys conducted twelve years apart.
18. This result may to some extent reflect the fact that we are here concerned with unemployment of all kinds, including purely 'transitional' unemployment.
19. One possibility that might be further explored in this regard, though it is not possible to do so with the data we use, is that degree and equivalent level qualifications have become, in employers' eyes at least, increasingly stratified, and that education effects would therefore be increased if the classification of qualifications were to be refined to take this into account. One might also ask whether our results owe something to the assumption that education has a linear effect. An obvious alternative would be to use dummy variables for each educational level, but we rejected this on the grounds that it would lead to a plethora of parameters which would be extremely difficult to interpret. We did, however,

carry out some investigation of possible non-linear effects of education (details of which are available from the authors on request), from which we conclude that our comparison of the levels parameters across models (as in Table 7) is wholly unaffected by any such non-linearity and that any changes in the results of our comparison between cohorts in the impact of education (as in Tables 8 and 9) are likely to be very minor.

20. The difference in overall levels of educational attainment between our two cohorts is quite striking: 22% of the earlier cohort had no formal educational qualifications and only 7% (at age 23) had a degree or equivalent qualification, while for the later cohort, the corresponding figures were 3% and 22% (at age 26).
21. A meritocracy based strictly on educational qualifications perhaps came nearest to realization in the post-war Communist societies of east-central Europe. A close correspondence was imposed by the planning authorities between qualifications and type and level of employment, which employing organizations had, in theory at least, only limited powers to modify. The main deviation from meritocratic principles arose of course with the advantages that were gained, in employment as otherwise, from Party membership.

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