

School of Social Sciences



Working Paper Series Paper 32



The Opportunity Trap: Education and Employment in a Global Economy

Phillip Brown

February, 2003

ISBN 1 872330 78 9

Abstract

The opportunity to make a better life is enshrined in democratic societies. In recent decades the growth in personal freedom and the rhetoric of the knowledge economy have led many to believe that we have more opportunities than ever before. We are told that the trade-off between efficiency and justice no longer holds in a global knowledge-driven economy, as the opportunity to exploit the talents of all, at least in the developed world, is now a realistic goal. This article will challenge such accounts of education, opportunity and global labour market. It points to enduring social inequalities in the competition for a livelihood and an intensification of 'positional' conflict. Our 'opportunities' are becoming harder to cash in. The opportunity-cost is increasing because the pay-off depends on getting ahead in the competition for tough entry jobs. Middle class families in competitive hot spots are adopting increasingly desperate measures to win a positional advantage. But the opportunity trap is not only a problem for individuals or families. It exposes an inherent tension, if not contradiction, in the relationship between capitalism and democracy. It will be argued that the legitimate foundations of opportunity, based on education, jobs and rewards is unravelling. Within education, this not only represents further symptoms of the 'diploma disease' but a social revolution that fundamentally challenges our understanding of education, efficiency and social justice.

Introduction

The opportunity to make a better life is enshrined in democratic societies. It is one of the few constants in a maelstrom of technological, economic and social change. Virtually everyone believes in it. It does not rob the rich and offers hope to the poor. It has been the social glue that binds the ambitions of diverse peoples. In recent decades the growth in personal freedoms and high skilled jobs, have led many to believe that we have more opportunities than ever before. We are told that the trade-off between efficiency and justice no longer holds in a global knowledge-driven economy, as the opportunity to exploit the talents of all, at least in the developed world, is in prospect.

Such ideas have pushed education to the centre-stage of social and economic policy agenda. Within the OECD, widening access, raising standards and further investment in education are believed to deliver opportunity, prosperity and justice. The growing importance attached to educational credentials symbolises a tightening bond between education, jobs and rewards. We are told that 'the more we learn the more we earn', as better credentials are believed to lead to good jobs and higher rewards, at the same time offering an efficient and fair means of selection based on individual achievement. Credentials are the currency of opportunity.¹

This paper challenges such accounts of education and the labour market in a global economy. It points to social inequalities in the competition for a livelihood and an intensification of 'positional' conflict (Hirsch, 1977; Brown, 2000). Expectations of middle class lifestyles and careers have risen within affluent societies and with more women entering the competition for managerial and professional work. These expectations have been fuelled by the rise of mass higher education that is sucking more people into already congested labour markets for elite jobs. Moreover, free market policies have heightened the importance of finding waged work as welfare provision has been cut and the stakes attached to winning and losing have increased with a widening of wage inequalities, especially in the Anglo-Saxon economies, including the United States and Britain (Brown and Lauder, 2001).

The personal costs incurred in realising our 'opportunities' are increasing because success depends on getting ahead in the competition for tough entry schools, universities and jobs. Middle class families are adopting more desperate measures to win a positional advantage. They are having to run faster, for longer, just to stand still (Boudon, 1974).² Yet if all adopt the same tactics nobody gets ahead. But if one does not play the game, there is little chance of winning. This is the *opportunity trap* as few can afford to opt out of the competition for a livelihood.³ Moreover, the opportunity trap is not

restricted to finding initial employment, it has become lifelong. There are few labour market shelters from the 'risk' culture of global capitalism (Beck, 1992). Insecurity has been democratised, as the competition for career advancement has intensified in 'lean' organisations constantly looking to reduce labour costs. In the absence of permanent employment, people are being forced to exploit their 'opportunities' for permanent employability (Kanter, 1995; Carnoy, 2000).

The opportunity trap is not only a problem for individuals or families. It exposes an inherent tension, if not contradiction, in the relationship between capitalism and democracy. Opportunity, delivered through expanding education and social mobility has kept the democratic dream of individual achievement and social justice alive throughout the twentieth century, at the same time as fulfilling the imperatives of economic growth. This paper will argue that the legitimate foundations of opportunity, based on education, jobs and rewards is unravelling. Within education, this not only represents further symptoms of the diploma disease (Dore, 1976), but a social revolution that fundamentally challenges our understanding of education, efficiency and social justice.

Education, Opportunity and Positional Competition

Within the social sciences there is a vast literature that has demonstrated long-term patterns of inequalities in educational and occupational opportunity. This research has made an invaluable contribution to our understanding of education and social stratification. But the root cause of the problems identified in this article cannot be explained solely in terms of how socially disadvantaged groups enter the competition for a livelihood on unequal terms. We must return to a consideration of the role of education in the social structure of competition.

Durkheim (1956) believed that the education system has two key roles. The *socialisation* of the young into society, including preparation for their future adult roles, and *selection* into the occupational structure based on individual achievement. The rise of the credential over the last century owes a lot to the fact that it captures elements of both. On the one hand, the credential represents a measure of the quality of educational experience. It signifies the acquisition of knowledge (at least on the day of the examination). On the other hand, the credential is a way of judging relative, as well as absolute, performance. Therefore, over the last century, as employers have extended the use of credentials to screen potential employees, they were also seen by some as a way of extending opportunities to all.⁴

Fred Hirsch describes this dual quality of education in the following terms, 'There is an absolute dimension, in which quality is added by receptive students, good teachers, good facilities, and so on; but there is also a relative dimension, in which quality consists of the differential over the educational level attained by others.' (1977: 6). This leads him to conclude that 'To the extent that education is a screening device...the possibility of general advancement is an illusion' (p.6).⁵ The same is true of the labour market where the opportunities for good jobs can be increased through the upgrading of skills within the workforce, but at the same time it functions to allocate job seekers within a hierarchy of jobs, offering different working conditions, incomes and social status.

To further our understanding of this duality we can say that the absolute dimension refers to the *performance* imperatives of individuals, institutions or societies. This highlights the way schools, companies or governments try to meet their goals, by improving the quality of teaching, learning and examination results, through raising productivity and profit margins or through increasing economic growth. While *positional* imperatives refer to relative performance, to how one stands compared to others within an implicit or explicit hierarchy (Hirsch, 1977). Again, this can refer to individuals, organisations or nations, such as when universities or companies seek to enhance their reputational capital (Brown et al. 2003), or national governments their international economic competitiveness. Scarcity value is an inherent feature of positional goods, such as credentials.

Therefore, opportunities can be extended by widening access and through improving the quality of teaching and learning, but as long as the educational system has a selective role, inequalities in outcome are inevitable. This is a key point as it recognises that equality of outcome is impossible, if we mean by this that everyone ends up with similar credentials or jobs. Within the social sciences 'equality of opportunity' usually refers to the degree to which the distribution of education, qualifications or jobs reflects the class, gender and ethnic make-up of society (Halsey, 1975; Arnot, et al., 1999). It is for this reason that social mobility studies frequently refer to odds ratios (Marshall et al., 1997). Hence, the rhetoric of expanding educational opportunities should not disguise the fact that the value of credentials is strengthened by exclusion and weakened by inclusion. Success is meaningless without failure. While we can all be encouraged to do our best, we cannot all be the best.

Any weakening of the selective value of credentials would simply mean that selection is delayed until entry into the labour market where candidates would be screened and sorted by other criteria. Indeed, as the hierarchy of jobs has become more differentiated the impact of selection on life chances has grown. Our understanding of these issues has also been challenged by trends in economic globalisation. To date, education and labour market opportunities

have been based on 'closed' competitions limited by national boundaries (Brown and Lauder, 2001). The nature of opportunity in a context of increasing globalisation will be discussed in the following discussion.

To advance this discussion we will contrast two theories of education and labour market opportunities. Within the social sciences the positional quality of education has been widely acknowledged. The main focus has been on whether the competition for credentials is fair and efficient (Bell, 1978). A large body of research has highlighted persistent inequalities in the competition for a livelihood and patterns of social mobility based on class, gender and race. Although writers such as Herrnstein and Murray (1994) in America and Saunders (1995) in Britain have argued that much of these differences in academic performance can be explained in terms of innate rather than social inequalities. We begin with *positional consensus theory* as it captures many of the ideas that inform 'official' international policy debates. Here positional competition is not interpreted as a source of social conflict but of social justice and cohesion.

Positional Consensus Theory

The global integration of financial markets; advances in information and communication technologies; corporate restructuring; and the increasing significance of multinational companies within the world economy, all herald a transformation in the means of production, where knowledge, skills, and human capital are seen to be more important than capital or natural resources (Drucker, 1993; Stewart, 2001). Societies can be defined by their 'stage' of technological development, as it is technological innovation that is viewed as the driving force of social change.⁶ Today, the shift towards a knowledge-based economy represents a further, more complex, stage in the technological evolution of capitalist economies.

Therefore, the more technologically advanced a society becomes the greater the demand for technical, scientific and professional workers who require extensive periods of formal education and training, whilst the proportion of semi- and unskilled jobs declines over time (Kerr et al.1973). The rapid expansion of higher education since mid-century reflects the exponential increase in scientific and technical knowledge, which has led to greater investment in tertiary education to supply the 'knowledge' workers required in today's economy.

It is also argued that the technological upgrading of the economy is characterized by high rates of social mobility because inequalities in the opportunity to advance within the education and employment are inconsistent

with the assignment of occupational roles: 'Industrialisation...is against tradition and status based upon family, class, religion, race, or caste.' (Kerr et al. 1973:53). The political determination to achieve economic efficiency and social justice is reflected in what Parsons (1959) described as the 'axis of achievement' in industrial societies. Here, efficiency and justice are seen to work with the grain of knowledge capitalism. It is concluded that getting the most talented people into senior managerial, professional and executive positions has become even more crucial as the knowledge base of the economy expands.

The role of the labour market is to match the supply and demand for technical skills and competence, based on objective measures of future productive capacity. Technological progression will lead to a growing numbers of workers establishing technical, managerial and professional careers, which had previously been restricted to a small elite. This involves a further democratisation of capitalism. In the previous era, power and control were almost exclusively in the hands of employers. Some entered white-collar work in large private or public organisation that offered the prospect of career progression based on time-serving and sponsorship by senior managers. This ensured a high degree of dependency on the company as career progression depended on long-term loyalty to the company. Today, there has been a power shift because intellectual capital can no longer be controlled by organisations. This has led to a significant increase in the economic power of knowledge professionals. Thus the knowledge-driven economy not only transforms the nature of work but also transforms the nature of capitalism (Cortada, 1998).

Freed from the emasculating powers of the corporation, new ways are having to be found to attract and retain talent without the aid of bureaucratic careers, which are judged to be inappropriate to the needs of individuals and companies (Bridges, 1995; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). This is believed to generate new opportunities for jobs that offer excitement, creative fulfilment and personal development. Work is the new consumption.

From this perspective there is an emphasis on expanding opportunities for education and fulfilling jobs. A tightening bond is assumed between education, jobs and rewards that highlights the technological imperative of individual achievement. Although the spread of opportunities will lead to inequalities in income and status, they reflect legitimate differences in talent, achievement and contribution. Indeed, these inequalities create the necessary incentives to ensure that the most talented are motivated to engage in intensive and extensive periods of education and training (Davis and Moore, 1945).

For our purposes, it is interesting to note that widening opportunities within education are not identified as a problem because the demand of skilled

workers is assumed to increase, creating more room in the middle if not at the top of the occupational ladder (a form of technological trickledown). This obviously has an impact on the way the positional competition is understood. It is a competition in the sense that all should be given an opportunity to express their innate potential in comparison with others, rather than a power struggle over access to education, credentials and jobs.

We also need to consider in more detail how the consensus view interprets recent trends towards global integration, which has led to the view that domestic competitions for education and jobs have become less relevant. Good jobs can be achieved by most if not all if they can become a 'magnet' economy (Brown and Lauder, 2001) attracting a disproportionate share of high skilled, high waged jobs within the global labour market. Equally, widening income inequalities are believed to reflect the value of human capital within a global labour market (Reich, 1991).

This is not only seen to increase opportunities but to transform established thinking about the link between opportunity and social justice. Given that good jobs were in short supply and the education system was assigned the role of deciding who should do what (at least in the limited sense of feeding the job market with graded human products), the basis of opportunity was to give people an equal chance to gain the top vocational prizes. This led to much discussion about class, gender and racial inequalities in educational outcomes. However, in the context of globalisation, such issues are seen as secondary to that of raising overall standards of performance. The problem is no longer one of equalising opportunities within domestic competitions for education and jobs. The positional competition now depends on the relative performance of *national* education systems. This presents an opportunity to attract a disproportionate share of high skilled, high wages jobs within the global marketplace if nations can succeed in outsmarting others (Brown and Lauder, 2001). But it is also recognised that the role of government is limited to providing all with the opportunity to enhance their employability, as national governments can no longer guarantee employment in a competitive global environment.

Positional Conflict Theory

If positional consensus theory focuses on the upgrading of skills and the expansion of labour market opportunities for knowledge workers, conflict theorists have traditionally focused on positional issues such as the exclusionary tactics of elites and the reproduction of educational and occupational inequalities. One of the most fruitful critiques of 'positional

consensus' derives from Weber's writings on social closure (Parkin, 1979; Murphy, 1988). Here the competition for a livelihood is explained as a conflict between groups of competitors, who will try to mobilise 'power in order to enhance or defend a group's share of rewards or resources' (Murphy, 1984: 548). This would apply to both the way status groups seek to monopolise entry requirements into a 'profession' by restricting access, and to the way that powerful social groups will attempt to structure the competition for places to favour those with the appropriate cultural capital (Collins, 1979). The increase in employer demand for 'certified' labour is therefore explained in terms of the exclusionary tactics of professional enclaves seeking to restrict the number of entrants to a given profession by raising entry requirements (Collins, 1979; Friedson, 1986).

This focus is exemplified by Weber's explanation of the popularity of credentials in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century:

'When we hear from all sides the demand for an introduction of regular curricula and special examinations, the reason behind it is, of course, not a suddenly awakened "thirst for education" but the desire for restricting the supply of these positions and their monopolization by the owners of educational certificates. Today the "examination" is the universal means of this monopolization, and therefore examinations irresistibly advance' (Weber, 1945: 241-2).

The expansion of higher education is not believed to reflect changes in the demand for high skilled workers, but credential inflation (Collins, 1979; Offe, 1976). The idea of credential inflation is akin to that of monetary inflation. If the supply of money is greater than the supply of goods and services it leads to an increase in the cost of those goods and services (inflation). In other words the Euro in your pocket buys less. Equally, if more people gain the qualifications previously required for professional or managerial jobs, and if the numbers of these jobs does not expand to meet the supply of qualified people, there is credential inflation. Where inflation occurs the exchange value weakens (Berg, 1970). As a result, 'Students who want to get ahead are forced to go back to school for longer periods, to get advanced degrees and professional specializations. One can predict that the process will continue to repeat itself at the more advanced level too. If in the future everyone had a Ph.D., law degree, M.B.A., or the like, then these advanced degrees would be worth no more than a job in a fast food restaurant, and the competition would move on to still higher degrees' (Collins, 1994:146). Credential inflation is also seen to reinforce inequalities in opportunity because it will favour those with the personal and family resources that are able to meet the costs associated with an extended competition (Hirsch, 1977).

While these ideas make an important contribution to understanding positional conflict they need to be modified and extended if we are to understand the causes and consequences of the opportunity trap. Earlier conflict accounts have under-estimated changes in the relationship between credential competition and the occupational structure. Positional conflict theory also needs to give greater attention to how positional competition is experienced by individuals and social groups. Again Hirsch (1977) makes a useful distinction between forms of positional power that derive from mobilising material, cultural, and social capital to stay ahead in the race, from the mobilisation of social groups seeking to change the rules of the game. Market power, for instance, can mean the 'command over economic resources *in* the marketplace' or 'influence over markets (of a monopolistic kind)' (p.153).

This distinction between competition 'ranking', that involves the use of resources in the marketplace, and competition 'rigging' that focuses on influences over markets (Brown 2000:637), assumes additional importance in a context of economic globalisation. Indeed, the trend towards international integration can itself be seen as an example of how power elites have extended their influence over markets (Korten, 1996). The MNCs have been the major benefactors of market deregulation as they are able to achieve economies of scope and scale on a worldwide basis (Reich, 1991). But while it has increased the market power of the MNCs, it challenges the power of professional interest groups to rig domestic markets as they are exposed to international competition. Moves toward the globalisation of professional services including management consultancy, financial and legal services will make it more difficult for the 'professions' to maintain monopolistic controls over domestic markets. This is leading professional organisations to develop international alliances with similar groups in other countries to find ways of sheltering from increased competition. A consequence of the professional classes feeling that their exclusionary powers over markets (rigging) are threatened, is that it heightens the importance of being able to capitalise on their material, cultural and social assets within 'ranking' tournaments.

We need to understand both rigging practices and ranking tournaments in order to develop a comprehensive theory of the social structure of competition. Such analyses need to include an understanding of how individuals and social groups mobilise their cultural, economic, political, or social assets in positional power struggles, whatever form they take. Within the English education system, for instance, the shift from 'meritocratic' to 'market' rules (Brown, 1990; Ball, 1993), can in large part, be understood as a consequence of middle class attempts to lift barriers that previously limited the use of material and cultural assets in credential competitions. This does not give them monopolistic powers that guarantee success, but it greatly increases their chances of a high ranking. Thus rigging and ranking are not mutually exclusive. Even if those who have the power to define the rules of the game

are the most likely to win it, they still need to take part in order to develop their intellectual capital and to proclaim the legitimacy of their success. When this is applied to the competition for a livelihood, success for individuals and their families is not guaranteed (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Devine, 1999).

Positional Conflict Theory therefore needs to show how positional competitions are structured and how individuals and social groups fare within the 'rules of the game'. We need to incorporate the insights of other social researchers such as Bourdieu and Bernstein.⁷ Bourdieu's work on forms of capital, for instance, offers important insights into how individuals and social groups play-out a ceaseless competition for positional advantage in many spheres of contemporary life (Bourdieu, 1986; 1998).

This approach remains firmly grounded in the neo-Weberian tradition that rejects the consensus view of a politically neutral, open and fair contest within education and the labour market in the advanced economies. The organisation of positional competition will inevitably reflect a power struggle between competing interest groups. This has led to significant variations in the way competition rules are drawn up and how they relate to labour market opportunities in different countries (Esping-Andersen, 1999; Brown, et al. 2001). It also recognises differences in the power of individuals and social groups to deploy their material, cultural and social capital in the competition for credentials and jobs. Finally, it also rejects the view that globalisation has transformed the nature of opportunity and positional competition.

Theorising the Opportunity Trap

Taking this approach to the study of education, employment and the labour market in the twenty-first century can throw conceptual light on the social structure of opportunity and how this has changed over time. It can help us to understand why positional conflict has intensified and why it cannot be resolved through educational reform or economic globalisation. Our argument is that as opportunities for education increase, they are proving harder to cash-in. The problem is rooted in the relationship between capitalism and democracy. The mass ranks of the middle classes and those from aspirational working class families, have high hopes of what the knowledge economy has to offer, fuelled by the expansion of higher education. At the same time people are more dependent on the job market for their economic welfare as the gap between winners and losers has grown (Frank and Cook, 1995). The problem is that the labour market cannot keep pace with social expectations of work, rewards, and status.

The opportunity trap has exposed further limitations to individual freedom. To be judged by our own efforts is sacrosanct in Western cultures, but our best efforts are not enough. Even extraordinary efforts to improve one's performance will count for little if everyone else does the same thing. This is something my university students understand. I recently asked them whether they would prefer to gain a first-class degree along with half of all university students in the country, or an upper-second class degree, if they were in the top twenty-five percent of achievers. Only one out of over a hundred students opted for the first-class degree, because they saw the necessity to gain an advantage in the hunt for tough-entry employment.

What these students understand is that opportunity depends on the opportunities of others. Absolute performance is not sufficient because cashing in one's opportunities depends on access to scarce credentials, jobs, and networks. For societies, this means that what can be offered to the winners cannot be offered to the population as a whole. There are simply not enough good jobs to go around. An important part of the attraction of elite universities or blue-chip companies, is the fact that they offer social status and life styles that are in short supply. They are sought after because they are exclusive rather than inclusive.

Not Enough Good Jobs?

A major trend since the early 1980s has been an increased demand for technical, managerial and professional workers *and* a more intensive struggle for competitive advantage in education and the labour market (Brown, 1995; 2000). This does not negate the impact of credential inflation, but it recognises that the absolute number of middle class occupations have increased, but British data shows that this remains far below that required to meet current demands (Falstead et al. 2002; Brynin, 2002).

The American and British economies have failed to raise skill levels throughout the economy. They are characterised by enclaves of 'knowledge' work alongside large swathes of low waged, low skilled jobs (Brown, et al., 2001:240). A recent study of work skills in Britain found that the proportion of degree-level jobs rose from 10 per cent in 1986 to 17 per cent in 2001 (Falstead, et al., 2002). But is also found that whereas there are under three million economically active people aged 20-60 who possess no qualification, there are 6.5 million jobs that require no formal qualifications to obtain them (2002:11) (See Appendix Figure:1).

Hence, although the relationship between credentials and jobs looks superficially convincing (Appendix: Figures 2--4), what these figures do not show is increasing

within-group differences, both in terms of the quality of employment and rates of return. Moreover, if those with higher education continue to expand at the same time that the demand for skilled labour weakens, returns may not be as clear-cut as the rhetoric of 'learning is earning' would have us believe (Levin and Kelly, 1997; Wolf, 2002). Previous returns may not be an accurate guide to future income. Indeed, data for the United States on education and income offers a surprising finding. Much of the difference in financial returns from investments in education does not stem from differential increases in income that conforms to the human capital idea that learning pays, but due to the decline in the earning power of non-university graduates. Figure 3 in the Appendix shows that while educational levels have been improving in the U.S. many students at the end of the 1990s were earning little (or no) more than they did in the 1970s.

Moreover, changes in skill requirements not only reflect an increase in technological complexity but changes in models of organisational efficiency and control (Thompson and Warhurst, 1998). The shift from bureaucratic to flexible paradigms of organisational efficiency (Atkinson, 1985), does not necessarily mean that workers are being given greater opportunities to use their initiative and creative skills. The primary concern of employers is rarely the release of the creative energies of the workforce but how to maintain managerial control in flatter, leaner and more flexible organisations. The inculcation of corporate mission statements, teamwork techniques and staff appraisal schemes tied to remuneration, are all ways of controlling the work force (Rose, 1999).

The power shift in the direction of knowledge workers has been greatly exaggerated. Most 'knowledge' workers are only able to capitalise on their knowledge within employment. They remain vulnerable to redundancy as the recent cull of knowledge workers in Silicon Valley testifies. Power remains decisively with the employers. As Georg Simmel (1990 [1907]) observed almost a century ago, the freedom of employees is invariably matched by the freedom of employers in a money economy. Therefore, while employees are free to change employers, they are not free from the need to make a living in a wage economy. In turn, the modern idea of employability frees employers from the moral and social obligations to employees, and for white-collar workers this means the provision of long-tenure career opportunities (Fevre, 2003).

The insecurity that this imposes on the workforce greatly limits their sense of freedom, precisely because they are not free from the necessity to earn a living. In a buoyant labour market the balance of power between employees and employers is disguised by a healthy supply of job opportunities, but when the economy begins to slow and unemployment increases, the realities of flexible labour markets are thrown into sharp relief. Even the winners now live under a permanent stewards enquiry.

Rising Stakes and Insecure Ladders

Differences in the life styles and life chances of winners and losers within employment have always existed. But the race to inequality in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States and Britain has led to a dramatic increase in the stakes.⁸ This is exacerbated by the obsession with waged work as the only meaningful way to improve one's life chances or expression of social contribution. Rather than alleviate the problems associated with unemployment the government has removed the safety blanket that offered social welfare to the losers within the capitalist system. But the costs of failure have been exaggerated by downgrading the quality of welfare support.

Equally, the ladder of opportunity is distinctly unstable. For much of the twentieth century, when there was an economic downturn it was unskilled blue-collar workers who bore the brunt of redundancies. The down sizing of companies in recent decades has had a dramatic impact on the job tenure of knowledge workers, including engineers, managers, administrators and executives. They have experienced a democratisation of job insecurity, and must now constantly defend their position if in employment. This is associated with an intensification of work leading to a culture of long hours, and a lack of clearly defined career opportunities (Sennett, 1998). This has not only left them worrying about their own future but also that of their children. There are few guarantees that children from the middle and professional classes will maintain, let alone surpass, the social positions of their parents. Their positions are not guaranteed. This is true for all categories of workers, who are required to stay fit in their present job, if they have one, and to remain fit to compete in the wider job market. This transforms the progressive idea of lifelong learning, as the expansion of advanced programmes such as professional doctorates, can be interpreted as an extension of the opportunity trap.

Too Many Contestants

The qualitative shift in the nature of waged work is also coupled with the problem of too many contestants chasing too few prized jobs. Mass higher education and the decline of blue-collar work has led to rising expectations of middle class life-styles. Giddens (1991: 6) has noted that 'class divisions and other fundamental lines of inequality, such as those connected with gender or ethnicity, can be partly *defined* in terms of differential access to forms of self-actualisation and empowerment'. But this depends on finding ways to exploit their opportunities in education and the labour market, at the same time that there has been an influx of serious contestants due to changes in the class structure and gender relations (Crompton, 1999; Devine, 1999). The growth of the middle classes since the 1950s has increased the proportion of the student

population that not only aspired to a middle class career, but expect to make one. This has served to intensify competition for the 'best' schools, colleges and universities that are judged to give access to the most prestigious vocational prizes.

In the United States there is evidence of the seriously rich attempting, and succeeding, to rig inheritance laws to make it easier for them to pass wealth onto their sibling. In a context of increasing positional competition they are seeking to reproduce their advantage through wealth and ownership rather than credential competition. This is not to say that they will not buy access to elite kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities, as this is an important source of cultural and social capital, but economic security has been bought in advance. The extent to which this is happening and whether it represents a precedent that other developed economies will follow remains unclear.

However, this is not an option for the middle classes that need to translate their cultural advantage into 'personal capital' both in the form of 'hard' (credentials) and 'soft' (personal qualities) currency to be exchanged in the market for jobs (Brown, et al., 2003; forthcoming). We previously noted that credentials have become more important as employers have formalised their recruitment practices, where certified knowledge is used as a basic screening device. This is clearly reflected in the transformation of elite education. It has shifted from that of an elite 'finishing' school to that of a credential factory.

Access to marketable knowledge, certificates and networks, holds the key to inheritance for the middle classes. They may inherit some material wealth but usually this represents a fringe benefit. It pays for skiing holidays, a second home or private education, but it is inadequate to support a middle class life-style. This depends on a reasonable degree of success in the job market. Failure for the middle class is not met with a material springboard, but poverty. The middle classes have little option other than to capitalise on their cultural assets via education, given the need to acquire credentials from tough-entry schools, colleges and universities as employers introduced formal entry and promotion procedures throughout the twentieth century (Bourdieu and Bolanski, 1978).

For the lower socio-economic classes the limitation of inheritance is altogether different. The digital divide, lack of money for books, cramped housing conditions, and poor job prospects, placed them at a distinct disadvantage. A commitment to equal opportunities and positive discrimination offers virtually the only chance of breaking the cycle of disadvantage, through the formal economy. The decline of bureaucratic work organisation has made the access to credentials even more important, as there is less scope for occupational mobility within the lean organisations of today.

Competition has also become more intense as women are now encouraged to compete on equal terms with men. Although inequalities in subject choices, pay and promotion prospects remain, women, especially from middle class backgrounds are serious contenders for professional and managerial employment (Osborne et al., 2000; Crompton, 1999). The academic performance of women, especially from middle class backgrounds has intensified the competition for elite credentials (Arnot, et al., 1999).

This has made it difficult for Western governments to resist calls for wider access to higher education. In an elite system of higher education the possession of a graduate qualification represents a passport into professional and managerial occupations. The recent move towards mass higher education in a number of European countries has removed the problem of access to higher education from middle class families.⁹ It has also opened new opportunities to working class, 'mature' and ethnic minority students to gain graduate qualifications. This has resulted in a significant increase in the numbers of university graduates entering the labour market. But while the expansion of higher education appears to extend access to professional and managerial employment to more people, and raises expectations of middle class lifestyles, 'more means different' as it has led to a greater differentiation in the perceived 'quality' of both students and universities. In short, the rapid expansion of higher education and lifelong learning is a symptom of the opportunity trap, not its resolution.

The myth of globalisation and positional competition

Finally, the view that workers now have to operate in a global rather than a national market is a simplification of existing realities for most workers. This is because the global labour market does not operate as a 'free' market (Castells, 1996; Held et al., 1999). Nationality continues to operate as a vital tool for restricting the competition for jobs by excluding millions of well qualified workers from other parts of the world such as skilled software engineers from India competing for IT jobs within the European Community or North America (Kobrin, 2000). These restrictions are sometimes loosened when there are national labour or skill shortages, such as the current use of H1B visas in the United States for IT workers, or the foreign talent scheme in Singapore. This also applies at the other end of the labour market for those who are willing to work as 'guest' workers to undertake the jobs that the indigenous workforce are unwilling to consider given the long hours, poor remuneration and bad conditions involved in a lot of this work (Sassen, 1988; Fevre, 1998).

Moreover, there are already a number of bi-lateral agreements that extend labour market opportunities (and risks) but these by definition are intended to

limit the competition for human capital rather than to make it global in scope. The free movement of labour is enshrined in the statutes of the European Community, where people are assumed to be judged on the basis of their knowledge, skills and experience. Graduates from Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal may find themselves in increasing competition for technical, managerial and professional jobs in international agencies and MNCs (Brown, 2000). But these graduates are largely sheltered from direct competition from graduates from Moscow, Lahore and Beijing.

For most workers, most of the time, where they are born and grow-up continues to structure their labour market opportunities within local or national contexts. This does not mean that limitations on the physical movement of labour undermine the importance of global economic trends. It is capital that has greater mobility than workers. Workers from different countries come into competition based on *market* rules of inclusion and exclusion, when companies make decisions about where to invest in new plants, offices or research capability. These decisions will include a number of considerations such as proximity to markets, political stability, transportation networks, social overheads, wage costs, incentives in the form of cheap rents, tax holidays, government grants and well as skill levels and the quality of education and training.

Workers from different parts of the world also come into competition as a collective resource rather than as individuals, not only in situations where companies are deciding where to inwardly invest, but also in circumstances where companies may be deciding to re-locate to another part of the world. The fact that these decisions will be made on market rules is exemplified by the problem confronting low skilled workers. In capitalist markets a successful strategy to lift the skills base of the whole population may lead to low-skilled jobs disappearing as the workforce is seen as too expensive or 'over educated' relative to workers in developing nations (Wood 1994). However, evidence shows that a large proportion of low skilled jobs in the service sector are no more subject to the rules of international trade than the services they produce, given that they are highly localised (Esping-Andersen 1999).

There is also little evidence to support the claim that income polarisation reflects the operation of a global labour market (Freeman, 1994). This is because the comparative evidence is very weak. In a global context it is to be expected that all the leading economies would reveal the same pattern of income polarisation, but in Germany, for instance, income inequality during the 1980s actually narrowed. A more plausible explanation is that it is those countries that have adopted a neo-liberal agenda of social, political and economic reforms including Britain and the United States, that have experienced the race to inequality. Polarisation is therefore to be explained in terms of how countries have responded to globalisation rather than in terms of

a convergence based on the global value of human capital (Brown and Lauder, 2001).

Hence, the consensus view of positional competition is politically impoverished. Questions of social justice cannot be resolved through the operation of the global labour market. Indeed, if the creation of a high skill, high waged economy depends on a general upgrading of the skills of the labour force, tackling the problem of domestic inequalities in income and opportunities has become *more* rather than less important with economic globalisation. Globalisation does not resolve the problem of domestic positional competition. The rich and the poor are still related. Access to elite schools, colleges, and universities along with the credentials they bestow, remains a key factor in determining future life chances. Therefore, the question of social justice will continue to depend on how individual nations states frame the competition for a livelihood.

Some Sociological Implications

The Hobbesian Condition in the Twenty-First Century

The opportunity trap highlights a tension at the heart of modern societies. We have been brought up to believe that societies should be efficient and fair. We want people in positions of responsibility to be properly trained and competent at fulfilling their occupational roles. It is also deeply engrained in democratic societies that all should have an opportunity to become a scientist, surgeon, pop star, or president. Although this endorsement is muted when it is put in terms of giving all an equal opportunity of being the person who empties the garbage!

Whilst most people in liberal democracies would subscribe to this view, it may directly contradict the interests of individuals and families. This problem stems from a basic fact of life and death - it reflects the limits to inheritance. Children from affluent or wealthy backgrounds can inherit the car, television, house or mansion, but they cannot directly inherit cultural capital. There will never be a software package that parents can use to transfer all the knowledge and experience that will be required to maintain, if not enhance, the social status of family members.

This inherent tension between the interests of the family and society has a long history. In the seventeenth century Thomas Hobbes (1881; 1961) argued that unless societies can find a cohesive force to bring people together they confront an unending war of 'all-against-all'. Hobbes believed that although

humans may vary in terms of strength, ability or energy, such differences were less apparent than their common human capabilities. The result is a constant struggle between equals that offered little prospect of a solution. Hobbes answer was to impose the will of the state as the only authority able to command the obedience of the people.

Subsequently, the Scottish economist Adam Smith and the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, had other ideas. They believed that the organisation of work held the key to resolving the problem of social order. Through a commitment to economic growth it was assumed that both efficiency and justice were possible. Indeed, Durkheim argued that efficiency would come to depend on extending individual opportunities to all.¹⁰ By matching individual capabilities to work roles on the basis on personal achievement, everyone could agree about the question of 'who does what?' and 'who gets what?' In short, he concluded that 'labour is divided spontaneously only if society is constituted in such a way that social inequalities exactly express natural inequalities' and this rests on 'absolute equality in the external conditions of the conflict' (Durkheim, 1933:377). In the second-half of the twentieth century they seemed to be vindicated. Old class antagonisms were destroyed as new opportunities for education and skilled employment were extended to all classes. All social groups appeared to benefit from improvements in productivity and the expansion of white-collar work. This led Dahrendorf (1990) to conclude that 'wherever possible, people will try to make headway by their own efforts. In the United States, this has long been the dominant mode of conflict. Today the same is true in most countries. Individual mobility takes the place of the class struggle' (p.159).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Hobbesian problem has returned. Opportunity, rather than being the glue that bonds the individual to society, has become the focus for intense social conflict. This in turn presents a serious threat to efficiency, justice and social cohesion. Instead of a normative commitment to equality of opportunity (Parsons, 1959) there are civil knowledge wars, that have incited a scramble for tough-entry schools, universities and jobs. The postwar commitment to 'comprehensive' education has been sacrificed in the battle for positional advantage. The parents of elites and the middle classes have mobilised whatever material or cultural resources they can bring to bear on the outcome of the competition. The use of private education, tutors, counsellors, and career specialists, has become *de rigueur*. It is an expression of doing the best for one's child, rather than cheating on society. It has brought *merit* and the *market* into a head-to-head. In the age old battle between family and merit described by Michael Young (1961) we can see that the commitment to meritocracy has been defeated by a new form of ascription, where millions are being excluded from any chance of receiving an education that would allow them an equal chance of competing with the sons and daughters of the wealthy.¹¹

Rather than offering unprecedented opportunity and prosperity to all, we have entered a zero-sum game where the winners take most, if not all. While millions joined the paper chase for marketable skills and strive for a decent job, many have failed to stay in touch with the democratic dream, while others live in gratuitous affluence. But positional conflict has not only cast the rich against poor, but has led to internecine struggles within the professional classes (Brown, 1995; Ball and Vincent, 2001). The losers are not only the disadvantaged who find themselves excluded from attaining a decent life for themselves and family members, but also many of those from more affluent backgrounds who may have done all they can to get ahead but have little to show for their efforts. However, it must be remembered that in the opportunity trap, some are more trapped than others. The extent of entrapment will continue to reflect social inequalities in the power of social groups to rig competition rules in their favour and to prosper in ranking tournaments.

This analysis also raises the question of whether social elites are increasingly defining the competition for credentials and jobs in international, if not global, terms. We cannot rule out the possibility that as the middle classes become more aware of the opportunities and threats posed by economic globalisation, it will lead them to mobilise resource to compete at a global level.

There are significant efforts being made to standardise the qualification frameworks of different countries to give them greater comparability (OECD 1994; 1997). There are international bench-marked tests which offer a comparison of student performance from different countries (Hirsch, 2002). In the European Community a substantial number of students attend universities in other Member countries as part of their undergraduate and postgraduate studies, many universities offer distance learning programmes in other parts of the world; and many students from Asia obtain their degrees by studying overseas in North America or Europe (OECD, 2002; Appendix Figure 6). It is currently estimated that 40 per cent of graduate students in engineering, mathematics and computer sciences in the United States are classified as foreign student (Johnson, 2001).

Polster and Newson (1998) suggest that arriving at international standards of the performance and funding for universities 'may allow for the creation of a single global system' which would permit the 'production of a tiered higher education system extending horizontally across countries as opposed to simply vertically within them. A multilateral tiered higher education system may be seen as a more efficient means of providing multinational corporations with a smaller but more broadly distributed skilled workforce' (p.180).

In the short-term these trends do not substantially alter the national character of credential competition as previously noted. However, it is those elites who

have been able to mobilise their material and cultural resources in the acquisition of credentials and other personal qualities, on the basis of 'market' rules rather than being unencumbered by the demands of domestic meritocratic competition, who are likely to benefit most in a global competition for high skilled jobs.¹² Competition systems based on meritocratic rules may avoid some of the problems of polarisation in the domestic competition for a livelihood, but social elites within these countries may feel that they are being held back in the global competition, when compared to students in market systems who have received intensive hot-housing as part of an academic elite.

Consequently, not only will market rules be endorsed by social elites who already play by these rules, but the social elites from other countries such as Germany, France and Sweden, may also press for the same rules if they are to maintain a level playing field beyond their national boundaries. A consequence of market rules being introduced into national education systems is that while it may lead to greater equality between elites from different countries, it would increase problems of social exclusion and polarisation within societies. Hence, if elites from other developed countries follow the Anglo-Saxon model of market education, there is the prospect of growing international class conflict, where elites will seek to maximise their labour market power unencumbered by the demands of the societies in which they live (Brown, 2000).

Credentials: The Currency of Opportunity

People are encouraged to invest time and effort to get qualified that will payoff in terms of a good job and high incomes (Collins, 1994; Ashton and Green, 1996). Although academic success never came with a job guarantee, restrictions on access to higher education gave university graduates the status of a labour market elite. It has been argued here that the opportunity bargain has been seriously strained if not broken. This has led to a spiral of inflation as more enter the labour market with better grades and higher qualifications, leading employers to lift their entry requirements in an attempt to reduce the flood of applicants. But these inflationary pressures can lead to a different outcome. For many jobs more advanced forms of education and training may be seen as counter productive (i.e. too academic, specialised, or leading to 'unrealistic expectations'). Rather than constantly lift entry requirements, employers may increasingly differentiate in terms of the 'quality' of the credential (this is rarely the case with money among people holding the same currency). Does it, for instance, carry the imprimatur of an 'elite' or a 'second chance' institution?

These inflationary pressures can also lead employers to place less emphasis on credentials by extending their recruitment criteria.¹³ As one employer

explained, 'paper qualifications are the first tick in the box and then we move onto the real selection'.¹⁴ Thus, there is a change in the way companies appropriate credentials. Previously, they were seen as a certificate of cultural suitability. However, employers argue that the kinds of people they are looking for has changed and the credential tells them less about what they need to know about a candidate when making their recruitment decisions. The credential represented discipline, perseverance, and rule following behaviour, highly valued in bureaucratic organisations. Now there is much greater emphasis on personal drive, self-reliance, and interpersonal skills (Brown and Scase, 1994). The devaluation of credentials increases the value of *barter* between the individual and the recruiter. For tough-entry jobs individuals not only need the required credentials, but they must sell themselves to the employer by demonstrating, through interview, psychometric tests and group exercises, that they are more employable than other candidates (Brown et al. forthcoming).

Opportunities do not come without responsibilities. Employability has been introduced to bridge the chasm between education and jobs. It reflects the devaluation of the academic currency. Credentials remain important but entry into employment depends on broader personal qualities that are beyond the state's remit to control. Personal responsibility for employment is the price for widening opportunities to education. Opportunities have to be paid for because governments are finding it increasingly difficult to manufacture the connection between credentials and jobs creation. Employability becomes an inevitable feature of a knowledge-driven economy not because it reflects the high levels of knowledge and skills required by most of the workforce and the demand for rapid retraining and lifelong learning, but because mass higher education has closed the *knowledge gap*. Differences in 'knowledge' between the higher educated and other groups of workers has been used by employers to justify differences in training, rewards and career development. The problem today, as the participation rate in high education moves towards fifty percent, as is already the case in a number of countries, is that many graduates may find themselves in inferior jobs, despite having the same 'knowledge' as their senior colleagues. This has weakened the differentiating power of knowledge (credentials) in the legitimization of labour market and workplace inequalities.

We have entered a period of 'educational stagflation', where inflationary pressures on credentials continues, at the same time the job market cannot create enough of the jobs that many expect. However, is not necessarily a bad thing from an employer perspective as flexible labour markets depend on a reserve army of knowledge workers. As most of the employment growth is in the service sector, university graduates are invaluable not because of their knowledge of a particular field but because of their communication skills in dealing with customers, although this is obviously not the case of all graduates! However, the wages, jobs, and intrinsic rewards associated with

many of these jobs are not commensurate with what university graduates expect. The knock-on effect is that as more graduates are under-employed opportunities for the less qualified becomes ever more limited (Berg, 1970; Wolf, 2002).

New Strains of the Diploma Disease

Ronald Dore (1967) argues that the 'diploma disease' not only leads to wasteful competition, but it infects the very purpose of liberal education. When education is dominated by grading competitions, 'the pupil is concerned not with mastery, but with being certified as having mastered. The knowledge that he gains not for its own sake and not for constant later use in a real life situation – but for the once-and-for-all purpose of reproducing it in an examination. And the learning and reproducing is all just a means to an end – the end of getting a certificate which is a passport to a coveted job, a status, an income. If education is learning to *do* a job, qualification is a matter of learning in order to *get* a job' (1976:p.8).

We can therefore distinguish *inquisitive learning* from *acquisitive learning*. Inquisitive learning is driven by an interest in knowledge and learning for its own sake, whereas acquisitive learning is consumer driven. It involves learning what is necessary to pass examinations. It is based on a model of individual rational calculation where the moral foundations of education have been lost (Lawn, 2001).

Since Dore's original diagnosis of the diploma disease in the 1970s the symptoms have worsened. Acquisitive learning is now widely believed to define the purpose of education. There is a considerable wastage of effort and resources as many compete for the prizes that only a few can achieve (Frank and Cook, 1996). The opportunity trap lures people into 'fashionable' areas of study at the same time that there are skill shortages in less popular fields often based on science and engineering. But these are modest problems when set against the individual and social costs associated with the social limits to opportunity.

More and more effort, time and money is being spent doing what is necessary rather than for any intrinsic purpose. Rather than 'opportunities' extending our freedom and fulfilling our dreams, they are making people increasingly self-centred, stressed and unfulfilled. The pursuit of success harbours the danger of turning the self into a commodity (Rose, 1999). If the diploma disease signifies a shift in the purpose of education, employability is a shift in the meaning of life. We are, in short, being economically enslaved by our opportunities. It has been argued that even the winners now live under a permanent stewards enquiry, as their positions are not guaranteed for life.

One must enter a lifelong campaign to stay fit in one's present job and to remain fit in the wider job market in case one join the ranks of surplus employees.

This has a significant impact on the way we bring-up our children. The priority is to treat and train our children in ways that are demanded for success in this new rat race, rather than in ways that benefit the child as an intelligent and well-rounded member of society. Many of our young are 'growing up absurd' (Goodman, 1956). They now confront batteries of tests from the time they leave their pushchairs; a lengthening obstacle course that extends into their late twenties; and intense supervision giving children little room for creativity, freedom or individual expression. We are creating hoards of smart conformists. They know what they have to do to get ahead, but they have little understanding of why they do what they are doing. In England, a student can expect around 105 formal examinations before their eighteenth birthday.

At this point it is easy to miss the broader significance of the diploma disease. For Dore, and others who cling to the idea of an aristocracy of talent, much of the diploma disease reflects the 'dumbing down' of education and declining standards as credentials are offered to those of dubious intellectual potential (Murray and Herrestein, 1994). While there is clear evidence of credential inflation, what the opportunity trap also reflects is a silent revolution. The overheated competition for credentials and jobs reflects the fact that the capabilities of a few have been greatly exaggerated, while those of the major have been greatly underestimated. The opportunity trap reflects the fact that the hierarchy of jobs does not conform to a hierarchy of talent as Durkheim envisaged. Nor does the hierarchy of job holders give us much confidence that it reflects innate differences rather than the product of class, gender, racial or spatial inequalities in opportunities.

The opportunity trap can be explained by the economic limits to high skilled, high waged employment rather than the innate limits of human capacities. It exposes the dim view of intelligence for what it is, a social fiction (Brown and Lauder, 2001). It is the social rather than the human limits to opportunity that represent the main problem in developed economies. The issue here is not simply that some people may be better than others at some tasks, but that academic study reflects general intelligence. This conflates relative performance with absolute capability. Indeed, employers recognise that those with the highest grades are not necessarily the 'best' employees. It is time to rethink the basic assumptions that inform our understanding of justice, opportunity and efficiency.

This conclusion also offers an explanation of why the educational and social inequalities identified by social scientists have not had more profound economic consequences. These inequalities have not seriously dented

productive efficiency because human capability is not in reality how it is commonly understood, as characterised by a limited pool of talent, that places a premium on getting the most talented into the most intellectually demanding jobs. An alternative explanation is that with the appropriate cultural capital, training and motivation, most people could perform most jobs reasonable well. The problem this poses for the left is that it removes much of the economic argument for social justice. The problem it poses for governments of all persuasions is that the wealth of human capability that is being nurtured within schools, colleges and universities, coupled with the explosion of knowledge via new technologies and the internet, challenges the legitimization of how capitalist democracies have resolved the questions of 'who does what' and 'who gets what'. They have become victims of their own success!

Conclusion

The opportunity trap has become a defining feature of the risk society (Beck, 1992). The problem is not only how to find decent jobs but how to maintain them. We have argued that people have been forced to depend on gaining a positional advantage, as more and more people are chasing the same rewards and the inequalities between winners and losers have increased.

The opportunity trap can be applied to governments as well as individuals, groups, or classes. 'Opportunity' represented the democratic solution to the distributional questions of what education, what jobs and what rewards. But what looks like an extension to personal freedom, limits freedom. The division of labour can no longer bear the aspirations of individuals, families and social classes. Democracy has exceeded the limits of knowledge-driven capitalism as 'opportunity' has become disorganised (Lash and Urry, 1987).

Governments, especially in America and Britain, have not been passive bystanders. They have pursued policies for over two decades that greatly exacerbate the trends identified in this paper. They deliberately sought to increase the stakes, given a blind commitment to market individualism. Some conservative thinkers believed that greater market competition would attune aspirations with available job opportunities and education would 'diversify as society required' (Scruton, 1984). However, market reforms had exactly the opposite consequence because they have made people more and more dependent on credential competition. Equally, if the market is to be the arbiter in the competition for a livelihood, there is little scope for the state to limit access to credentials in the 'national' interest. In other words, the moral foundations of opportunity, justice and efficiency have been reduced to the logic of the market. What this leaves unresolved is that self-interest is not the grass roots equivalent of the common good (Bell, 1953; Fevre, 2003). It then becomes an act of faith that the number of decent jobs will grow

commensurate with the supply of qualified people entering the labour market (Brown, et al. 2001).

Equally, as governments focus on the supply side, the demand side becomes increasingly beyond their control. Yet governments have been printing paper qualifications at an alarming rate, in ways they could not do with money because of the financial markets that take a dim view of inflation. In education there are no such concerns. Indeed, the increasing numbers of credentials in circulation is seen to reflect widening of access and opportunities. But governments are reluctant to admit that this has led to a growth in wasteful competition and a weakening of the opportunity bargain, as they persist with the slogan 'learning is earning'. Yet we need to be wary of defining this as 'over-education' as it smuggles in a utilitarian view of education, that its only purpose is to prepare people for the job market or to increase lifetime earnings. It denies the value of education and learning as an end in itself. The problem is that given the way we have organised our life-support systems (work, incomes, dignity, quality of life), these broader goals of education remain but lip-service in a world that hardly exists.

This article also raises the issue of whether the opportunity trap, as characterized here, is to be found in all the developed economies or whether there are important national differences in the social structure of positional competition. Moreover, it raises the issue of whether societal differences in competition rules will converge or diverge from the Anglo-Saxon model. The prospect of enduring societal differences in the way the competition for a livelihood is organised and experienced needs to be fully explored in a context of increasing European and global integration. However, comparative differences in university graduation rates suggest that important differences remain in the organisation of education, employment and the labour market. The graduation rate in Germany, for instance, is far below that found in the United Kingdom or the Netherlands. The 'dual system' in Germany channels large numbers of young adults into training programmes that offer access to decent job opportunities without the requirement of higher education. But whether the dual system can continue to perform this role is a moot point (Streeck, 1997; Lauder, 2001).

In conclusion, we have shown that the opportunity trap is not simply an educational problem but it does pose problems for education. The education system reflects rather than 'compensates' for society (Bernstein, 1970). The solution cannot be found within the confines of education, but requires little short of a social revolution (Brown and Lauder, 2001). However, there is a high degree of collusion with the rhetoric of 'learning is earning' within the educational establishment, as schools, colleges and universities try to pursue their own positional advantage in the competition for students, resources and reputational capital. But unless a realistic re-evaluation of the role of

education, efficiency and justice is mounted, another political denunciation of the failings of education is inevitable.

References

Arnot, M., Weiner, G. and David, M. (1999) *Closing the Gender Gap: The Post War Era and Social Change*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Aronowitz, S. and De Fazio, W. (1994) *The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Arthur, M.B. and Rousseau, D.M. (1996) (eds.) *The Boundaryless Career: A New Employment Principle for a New Organisational Era*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Ashton, D. and Green, F. (1996) *Education, Training and the Global Economy*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar.

Atkinson, J. (1985) 'The Changing Corporation', in D. Clutterbuck (ed.) *New Patterns of Work*, Aldershot: Gower.

Ball, S. (1993) 'Education markets, choices and social class: the market as a class strategy in the UK and USA', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 14, 1, 3-19.

Ball, S. and Vincent, C. (2001) 'New class relations in education: the strategies of the "fearful" middle classes', in J. Demaine (ed.) *Sociology of Education Today*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage.

Bell, D. (1973) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Bell, D. (1978) 'On meritocracy and equality', in J. Karabel and A.H. Halsey (Eds.) *Power and Ideology in Education*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Bendix, R. (1956) *Work and Authority in Industry: Ideologies of Management in the Course of Industrialization*, New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Berg, I. (1970) *Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery*, New York: Praeger.

Bernstein, B. (1970) 'Education cannot compensate for society' *New Society*, 387, 26 February, 344-47.

Bernstein, B. (1975) *Class, Codes and Control* (2nd edition), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Boudon, R. (1973) *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality: Changing Prospects in Western Society*, New York: John Wiley.

Bourdieu, P. and Boltanski, L. (1978) 'Changes in Social Structure and Changes in the Demand for Education', in S.Giner and M.Archer (eds.) *Contemporary Europe: Social Structure and Cultural Change*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1986) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1997) 'Forms of Capital', in A.H.Halsey et al. (Eds.) *Education: Culture, Economy and Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, Cambridge: Polity.

Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Braverman, H. (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Bridges, W. (1995) *Jobshift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs*, London: Nicholas Brealey.

Brown, P. (1995) 'Cultural capital and social exclusion: some observations on recent trends in education, employment and the labour market', *Work, Employment and Society*, 9, 29-51.

Brown, P. (2000) 'The globalization of positional competition?', *Sociology*, 34, 4, 633-53.

Brown, P. and Scase, R. (1997) 'Universities and Employers: Rhetoric and Realities', in A.Smith and F.Webster (eds.) *The Postmodern University?*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Brown, P. & Lauder, H. (2001) *Capitalism and Social Progress: The Future of Society in a Global Economy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Brown, P., Green, A. and Lauder, H. (2001) *High Skills: Globalization, Competitiveness and Skill Formation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, P., Hesketh, A. and Williams, S. (2003) 'Employability in a Knowledge Economy', *Journal of Education and Work*, Spring.

Brown, P. and Hesketh, A. with Williams, S. (forthcoming), *Employability in a Knowledge Economy: Competition, Diversity and the Management of Talent*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brynin, M. (2002) 'Graduate Density, Gender and Employment', *British Journal of Sociology*, 53, 3, 363-81.

Cappelli, P. (1999) *The New Deal of Work: Managing the Market-Driven Workforce*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Carnoy, M. (2000) *Sustaining the New Economy*, Boston: Harvard University Press.

Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Collins, R. (1994) *Four Sociological Traditions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Collins, R. (1979) *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, New York: Academic Press.

Cortada, J.W. (1998) (ed.) *Rise of the Knowledge Worker*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Crompton, R. (1999) (ed.) *Restructuring Gender Relations and Employment: The Decline of the Male Breadwinner*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Currie, J. and Newson, J. (1998) (eds.) *Universities and Globalization: Critical Perspectives*, London: Sage.

Dahrendorf (1990) *The Modern Social Conflict*, Berkeley: University of California.

Davis, K. and Moore, W.E. (1945) 'Some principles of stratification', *American Sociological Review*, 10, 242-9.

Devine, F. (1999) 'Class analysis and the stability of class relations', *Sociology*, 33, 23-42.

Dore, R. (1976) *The Diploma Disease: Education, Qualification and Development*, London: George Allen and Unwin,

Dore, R. (1997) 'Reflections on the diploma disease twenty years later', *Assessment in Education*, 4, 1, 189-206.

Drucker, P. (1993) *Post-Capitalist Society*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Durkheim, E. (1956) *Education and Sociology*, Transl. S.D.Fox, New York: Free Press.

Durkheim, E. (1933) *The Division of Labour In Society*, Transl. G. Simpson, New York: Macmillan.

Elliott, L. and Atkinson, D. (1998) *The Age of Insecurity*, London: Verso.

Erikson, R. and Goldthorpe, J. (1992), *The Constant Flux: A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Societies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Esping-Andersen, G. (1999) *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Felstead, A., Gallie, D. and Green, F. (2002) *Work Skills in Britain 2001*, London: DfES.

Fevre, R. (1998) 'Labour migration and freedom of movement in the European Union: social exclusion and economic development', *International Planning Studies*, 3, 1, 75-92.

Fevre, R. (2003) *Economy and Morality: The Sociology of Economic Behaviour*, London: Sage.

Frank, R. & Cook, P. (1996) *The Winner-Takes-All Society*, New York: Free Press.

Friedson, E. (1986) *Professional Powers*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fromm, E. (1949) *Man for Himself: An Enquiry in to the Psychology of Ethics*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.[pb1]

Gellner, E. (1983) *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Cambridge: Polity.

Goodman, P. (1956) *Growing Up Absurd*, New York: Vintage Books.

Halsey, A.H. (1975) 'Sociology and the equality debate', *Oxford Review of Education*, 1, 9-23.

Halsey, A.H. with Webb, J. (2000) (eds.) *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Halsey, A.H., Heath, A.F. and Ridge, J.M. (1980) *Origins and Destinations*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Herriot, P. (1989) *Handbook of Assessment in Organisations*, Chichester: Wiley.

Herrnstein, R. and Murray, C. (1994) *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, New York: Free Press.

Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998) *Employability: Developing a Framework for Policy Analysis*, EfEE Research Briefing No.85.

Hirsch, D. (2002) 'How good is our global education?', *OECD Observer*, 15 March. <http://www.oecdobserver.org/news/>

Hirsch, F. (1977) *The Social Limits to Growth*, London: Routledge.

Hobbes, T. (1881) *Leviathan*, Oxford: James Thornton.

Hobbes, T. (1961) 'Of the natural condition of mankind', in T.Parsons, E.Shils, K.Naegele and J.Pitts (Eds) *Theories of Society*, Volume One, New York: Free Press.

Jackson, B. and Marsden, D. (1966) *Education and the Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Johnson, J. (2001) 'Trends in Higher Education in Science and Engineering, Center for International Higher Education, Boston College. http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News24/text002.htm

Kanter, R. (1995) 'Nice work if you can get it', *The American Prospect*, Vol.6, Issue 23, Sept.21.

Kerr, C., Dunlop, J., Harbinson, F. & Myers, C. (1973) *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Korten, D. (1996) *When Corporations Rule the World*, London: Earthscan.

Lash, S. and Urry, J. (1987) *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Cambridge: Polity.

Lauder, H. (2001) 'Globalization, multinationals, and the labour market', in Brown, P., Green, A. and Lauder, H., *High Skills: Globalization, Competitiveness and Skill Formation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lawn, M. (2001) 'Borderless Education: Imagining a European Education Space in a Time of Brands and Networks', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 22, 2, 173-84.

Levin, H and Kelly, C. (1997), 'Can Education Do It Alone', in A.H.Halsey, et al. (Eds.) *Education: Culture, Economy and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

MacLeod, J. 1995. *Ain't No Makin' It*. Oxford: Westview Press.

Marchak, P. (1990) *The Integrated Circus: The Neo-Liberal and the Restructuring of Global Markets*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Marshall, A. (1920) *Principles of Economics*, London: Macmillan.

Marshall, G., Swift, A. and Roberts, S. (1997) *Against the Odds: Social Class and Social Justice in Industrial Societies*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Michaels, E., Handfield-Jones, H. and Axelrod, B. (2001) *The War for Talent*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Murphy, R. (1984) 'The structure of closure: a critique and development of the theories of Weber, Collins and Parkin', *The British Journal of Sociology*, XXXV, 4, 547-567.

Murphy, R. (1988) *Social Closure: The Theory of Monopolization and Exclusion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

OECD (1994) *Making Education Count: Developing and Using International Indicators*, Paris: OECD.

OECD (1997) *Preparing For Life?: How to Measure Cross-Curricular Competencies*, Paris: OECD.

OECD (2002) 'Indicators on internationalisation and trade of post-secondary education', OECD/US Forum, May, Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C. (web address)

Offe, C. (1976) *Industry and Inequality*, London: Edward Arnold.

Osborne, M., Rees, T. et al. (2000) *Science Policy in the European Union*, Brussels: European Commission.

Parkin, F. (1974) (Ed.) *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*, London: Tavistock.

Parkin, F. (1979) *Marxism and Class Theory: A Bourgeois Critique*, London: Tavistock.

Parsons, T. (1959) 'The school class as a social system: some of its functions in American society', *Harvard Education Review*, XXIX, 297-318.

Polster, C. and Newson, J. (1998) 'Don't count your blessings: the social accomplishments of performance indicators', in J. Currie and J. Newson (eds.) *Universities and Globalization: Critical Perspectives*, London: Sage.

Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, 2nd Edition, London: Free Association Books.

Sassen, S. (1988) *Cities in the World Economy*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Saunders, P. (1995) 'Might Britain be a Meritocracy?' *Sociology*, 29, 23-41.

Scruton, R. (1984) *The Meaning of Conservatism*, London: Macmillan.

Sennett, R. (1998) *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York: W.W.Norton.

Simmel, G. (1990) [1907] *The Philosophy of Money*, Edited by David Frisby, London: Routledge.

Stewart, T.A. (2001) *The Wealth of Knowledge*, London: Nicholas Brealey.

Streeck, W. (1997) 'German capitalism: does it exist? Can it survive?', *New Political Economy*, 2, 2, 237-56.

Thompson, P. and Warhurst, C. (1998) (eds.) *Workplaces of the Future*, Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Trow, M. (1978) 'The second transformation of American secondary education', in J.Karabel and A.H.Halsey, (Eds.) *Power and Ideology in Education*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Weber, M. (1945) *From Max Weber*, H. Gerth & C.W.Mills (Eds.) London: Routledge.

Weber, M. (1968) *Economy and Society*, Ed. G. Roth & C. Wittich, New York: Bedminster Press.

Wilensky, H. (1960) 'Work, careers, and social integration', *International Social Science Journal*, 12: 543-60.

Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour*. Farnborough: Saxon House.

Wolf, A. (2002) *Does Education Matter? Myths about Education and Economic Growth*, London: Penguin.

Young, M. (1961) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Ralph Fevre and Sara Williams for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. As always, I am also indebted to Hugh Lauder.

Contact Details:

Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University.
BrownP2@cardiff.ac.uk

¹ This is far removed from debates about the 'diploma disease' (Dore,1976; Collins, 1979) and class reproduction (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) in the 1970s. The 'diploma disease' highlights problems of credential inflation caused by the failure of the jobs market to meet the rising demand for technical, professional and managerial jobs, as educational opportunities have expanded (Berg, 1970). It also focused on how the paper chase has undermined the ideals of a liberal education as this article will go on to argue.

² Boudon (1973) was interested in the fact that the 'distribution of social status has changed less rapidly than the distribution of levels of education' (1973: 4). He draws on C. Arnold Anderson's (1961) paper 'A Skeptical Note on Education and Mobility' in J. Floud and A.H.Halsey's edited collection, *Economy, Education and Society*. Boudon notes 'It is well known that all industrial societies are characterized by a high level of inequality of educational opportunity. Thus individuals who have a better educational level are also more likely to have a better social background. But it is also more difficult for them to reach a higher social status than their father, simply because the father's status is more likely to be high in the first place.' (1973: 6).

³ The opportunity trap does not imply an equality of condition. Some are more trapped than others. Social mobility for the working classes has, for instance, long depended on gaining credentials, but in entering the competition for middle class occupations they are forced to compete with those with significant cultural and social advantages (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Equally, the further they advance the greater the social distance between themselves and family members, in effect they are trapped between two cultures (Jackson and Marsden, 1966). The inequalities of opportunity confronting those from disadvantaged backgrounds has, if anything, worsened as education in England and the United States is organised on the principles of 'parentocracy' rather than 'meritocracy' (Brown, 1995). This is an important dimension of the opportunity trap because the more congested the competition for the 'best' school, colleges, universities and jobs, and the more the middle classes are willing to 'invest' in winning a positional advantage, the more difficult it will be for those from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve long-range social mobility (Halsey et al., 1980). But the opportunity trap today is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the competition for a livelihood in the past. It is the sheer scale of the credential enterprise, most notably the expansion of higher education in countries such as Britain, the Netherlands and the United States. There are far more people still in the competition for profession and managerial work in their early twenties, many of whom would have entered the labour market by their eighteenth birthday in previous decades. This has created serious social congestion that the labour market cannot clear (see below). It is also qualitatively different in the way opportunities are now experienced. Opportunities have not only become 'individualised' given an emphasis on self-reliance and employability, but they have also become 'disorganised'. Occupational careers are more opaque and contingent. One is encouraged to create one's own opportunities within institutional structures (education, work and the labour market) that are more insecure and inherently risky. For example, the career path associated with managerial jobs were laid out in advance, whereas the emphasis is now on individual career management and self-development (Brown, et al., 2003).

A key feature of the opportunity trap is the idea that the competition for a livelihood gives little choice as to how this is to be achieved. The entrepreneurial route is by definition a high risk strategy which is most likely to succeed if it is based on the acquisition of advanced technical knowledge and skills. However, conscientious objectors are likely to be found at both ends of the social spectrum. Some of those from disadvantaged backgrounds will feel that the system has been rigged to ensure their failure (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1995). As disadvantaged social groups are dependent on the currency of credentials to improve their live chances the consequences of educational failure is invariably the reproduction of disadvantage. At the other end of the spectrum it can be argued that the seriously rich, most notably in the United States where there are plans for a significant reduction in inheritance tax, are seeking to reproduce their advantage through wealth and ownership rather than credential competition.

⁴ The use of credentials as a currency of opportunity, depend on the individuation of achievement (Trow, 1978). Within liberal democracies it is asserted that educational and occupational selection should be based on individual achievement rather than according to social class, gender or race. Formal examinations were seen to offer an objective and universal standard for assessing individual achievement rather than social background. Opportunities were then extended throughout the class structure by giving all a chance to follow the same syllabus leading to common examinations. However, the purpose of 'meritocratic' competition was never equality but an equal chance to be unequal (Young, 1961; Halsey, 1975).

⁵ Positional Consensus Theory contests this because they assert that the nature of positional competition is transformed in a context of economic globalisation (see below).

⁶ This interpretation of the relationship between education and employment conforms closely to 'technocratic' theory (Kerr et al. 1973; Collins, 1979).

⁷ See, for example, the Special Issues of the British Journal of Sociology of Education, Volume 23, number 4 (2002) devoted to the contribution of Basil Bernstein.

⁸ The same trend has not been found in continental Europe, where neo-liberalism is less evident.

⁹ The picture in Europe is uneven in terms of graduation rates. Figure 7 in the statistical appendix show significant differences between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom as opposed to Germany. It highlights the importance of a comparative perspective as the social construction of positional competition is subject to importance variations (Lauder, 2001).

¹⁰ Marx of course had his mind set on revolution rather than reform.

¹¹ As I have noted elsewhere, educational selection is increasingly based on the wealth and wishes of parents rather than the abilities and efforts of students. Here the equation, 'ability + effort = merit' is reformulated into 'resources + preferences = choice' (Brown, 1995; 2000).

¹² These differences in competition rules reflect contrasting social priorities. Meritocratic rules, for instance, involve restrictions on the middle classes in the use of their superior market power in the interest of social cohesion or state legitimation (Brown, 2000).

¹³ Unlike money, credentials are not a currency of exchange but one of entitlement. If you have the appropriate qualifications you are entitled to enter the competition for specific kinds of employment. It confers an entitlement to barter.

¹⁴ See Brown and Hesketh (forthcoming)