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Individual success, collective failure? The process and consequences of social (im)mobility in neo-liberal times

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Public dialogue about social mobility in many countries has recently been dominated by the myth of meritocracy and uses a neo-liberal vocabulary of aspiration, ambition, and choice, considering mobility as an individual project of self-advancement involving moving up in the social hierarchy (Lawler & Payne, 2018; Friedman & Laurison, 2020). Meritocracy suggests that whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for ‘talent’, when combined with ‘effort’, to ‘rise to the top’. This idea is one of the most prevalent social and cultural tropes of our time (Littler, 2017).

In this discourse, social mobility is the new panacea for wider historic and social ills, and the answer to the increase in classed and racialised inequalities. This special issue aims to challenge this widespread public and political discourse by deploying the sociological perspectives of social mobility and asking how (upward but also downward) mobility works, how fluid our contemporary societies are, what mobility means for those experiencing it, and what the social implications are of ‘individual [...] success at the cost of collective failure’ (Reay, 2018). As an educational sociologist and academic with a working-class background, Diane Reay (2013) argues,

at the collective level, social mobility is no solution to either educational inequalities or wider social and economic injustices. But at the individual level it is also an inadequate solution, particularly for those of us whose social mobility was driven by a desire to ‘put things right’ and ‘make things better’ for the communities we came from and the people we left behind. (Reay, 2013, p. 674)

The papers in this issue are testimony to the theoretical stance that upward social mobility cannot be seen as an individual project but needs to be understood and analysed in the wider context of social inequalities (among others, Lawler & Payne, 2018; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). The authors tackle the topic of social mobility from two perspectives. The first group of the research papers measure and analyse social mobility processes using the conventional occupation and education indexes and the not-so-conventional ‘soft’ variables of the intergenerational transmission of parental capital(s) on mobility outcomes. Beyond these mainstream mobility studies, the second group of

articles consists of ‘marginal research’ (Lawler & Payne, 2018), or small-scale investigations that provide readers with insights into how upwardly and downwardly mobile people experience mobility when they have to travel through social spaces, leaving behind one class and adjusting to life in another.

1 The mobility problem

Social mobility in the most general sense means a change in the social position of an individual (or a family: Andorka, 1982) or, to put it another way, a movement in the social space (Bourdieu, 1985). Traditional intergenerational mobility research (using quantitative approaches) examines this phenomenon by measuring and then comparing the social position of respondents and their parents. Social position can be determined in a number of ways, including education, occupation, and income, but in most cases individuals are classified into occupational classes based on their occupation and labour-market situation. International social mobility research is typically based on the so-called EGP scheme (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1993) or the European Socio-economic Classification (Rose & Harrison, 2010). If someone is in the same occupational class as their parents, they are considered immobile, while those who are classified into another one are considered mobile. Mobility may be further broken down by the direction of change of social position: the upwardly mobile are those who move upwards in the occupational hierarchy, while the downwardly mobile are those whose positions change in an unfavourable direction.¹

Mobility research also makes a distinction between absolute and relative mobility. On the one hand, the basic measure of absolute mobility is the total mobility rate, which shows the share of individuals whose class position is different from that of their parents. The total mobility rate is on the one hand determined dominantly by how much the class structure itself changes. If the size of different occupational classes changes significantly from one generation to the next, this forces individuals to move in the social space: they leave their class of origin and move to another class. A significant share of total mobility is therefore due to structural changes. On the other hand, relative mobility measures filter out the effects of structural changes and show the relative chance of individuals leaving their class of origin. Relative mobility, alternatively called social fluidity, is most often expressed in the form of odds ratios that show the relative chances of someone originating in class A moving to class B, compared to the mobility chances of those who originate in class B. Based on this relative measure of mobility, we can conclude to what extent the principle of equality of opportunity prevails in any given society (e.g. Marshall, Swift & Roberts, 1997; Breen, 2010).

Social mobility is generally seen as a positive phenomenon, although this is not always and necessarily the case. First, it is difficult to imagine or consider desirable a society where the mobility rate is close to one hundred percent. This would presumably result in a rather unstable social formation. Second, it is useless to have a high mobility rate if social mobility basically means downward mobility. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that upward

¹ Most research also uses the concept of horizontal mobility in cases when the class of origin and the class of destination cannot be arranged in a clear hierarchy.

mobility has or may have costs. Social mobility means that someone leaves their social milieu of origin and moves to another one. This movement in the social space, especially when it covers long social distances, may contribute to the deterioration of an individual's previous personal relationships and make it difficult to develop new ones, which can lead to loneliness, stress, and various forms of psychological strain (e.g., Sorokin, 1959; Durst & Nyíró, 2021).

It is much more of a problem if, on the one hand, the total mobility rate shows a declining trend due to a decrease in upward mobility. This would suggest that upper occupational classes are not growing and, as a result, the class structure is becoming more and more rigid. On the other hand, it is also a problem if relative mobility is low or declining. This means that, regardless of structural changes, there is little chance that someone can leave their parents' class position – i.e., that class of origin strongly determines the place of individuals in the class structure.

It is precisely these problems – the decline in upward mobility and the strong association between the class position of parents and children – that have recently brought the issue of social mobility back into the focus of social science research and even public debate, particularly in the United States and Great Britain. In Great Britain a parliamentary committee was even set up in 2011 to monitor recent developments in social mobility and to make related policy recommendations.² In Eastern European countries (and especially in Hungary), however, the issue of social mobility is on the agenda only sporadically and marginally, although it deserves much more attention based on the unfavourable results that are available and presented in this issue.

2 Inequality and social mobility

According to early, optimistic expectations, social mobility increases as modernisation and industrialisation progress (Treimann, 1970). With the dissolution of feudal constraints, the significance of parental background and other ascribed factors fades, and the social position of individuals becomes increasingly determined by their effort, especially by their individual achievements in a democratizing educational system. This implies that country-level differences in mobility are mostly due to differences in economic and technological development, but with the unfolding of modernisation countries will converge and these differences decrease. Economic and social change thus move in the direction of an education-based meritocracy (Bell, 1976).

Empirical research on social mobility has not supported this scenario. The results of different investigations are often inconsistent and even contradictory, but the thesis of a steady increase in social mobility cannot be supported at all.

In terms of absolute mobility, in the decades after World War II, the golden age of social mobility in the Western world, the total mobility rate – and within that the rate of

² Information on the work of the committee is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/social-mobility-commission/about>. For the British debates about social mobility, see e.g., Blanden et al., 2002; Goldthorpe, 2013; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019. For results on the United States, see above all Krueger, 2012; Chetty et al., 2014; 2017; Putnam, 2015.

upward mobility – indeed increased in most industrialised countries. Today, however, the situation has fundamentally changed, with upward mobility declining in most Western countries, while the proportion of downward mobility is increasing (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1993; Breen, 2004; Bukodi, Paskov & Nolan, 2019; Eurofound, 2017; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022). This process is particularly true of post-socialist countries, including Hungary, where the total mobility rate has been steadily declining since the 1970s and where the proportion of downward mobility is also increasing (especially for men) (Andorka, 1982; Róbert & Bukodi, 2004; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2010; Jackson & Evans, 2017; Robert, 2018; Huszár et al., 2020; 2022). These changes in absolute mobility are mainly due to structural reasons. In the post-war period, an increasing number of positions were created in the upper segments of the occupational hierarchy that stimulated upward mobility (Ferge, 1969; Andorka, 1982). However, after the transition to market economy, this upgrading of occupational structure slowed down and polarising tendencies were observed (Bukodi & Záhonyi, 2004; Huszár, 2015; Huszár & Záhonyi, 2018).

Changes in relative mobility also do not support the optimistic expectations. Although some examples partly support the thesis of increasing social fluidity, others tend to highlight the high degree of stability of relative mobility. When there is a change, it does not seem to follow a definite direction, but rather seems to involve trendless fluctuation, which may mostly be explained by national characteristics and political factors (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1993; Breen, 2004; Bukodi, Paskov & Nolan, 2019; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019). For instance, in Hungary social fluidity increased until the 1980s (with slightly different dynamics regarding genders) and Hungary was among the most open countries in international comparison (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1993; Róbert & Bukodi, 2004). However, in the period after the transition to market economy relative mobility clearly decreased in Hungary – similarly to in other post-socialist countries – and today it is among the most closed countries in European comparison (Róbert & Bukodi, 2004; Jackson & Evans, 2017; Bukodi, Paskov & Nolan, 2019; Eurofound, 2017).

Based on the traditional sociological approach to social mobility, comparable time-series results are mainly available only for the Western world. According to estimates, however, in a global context it is not surprising that relative mobility is highest in the Nordic countries, while it can be considered moderate in most European and North American countries (and, for example, also in Japan and South Korea). Among the countries with low relative mobility are primarily Eastern European (Hungary, Poland) and Southern European (Italy, Portugal) societies, as well as emerging countries from Asia, South America and Africa, such as China and India, Mexico and Brazil, and South Africa (OECD, 2018, p. 38). Thus, research on social mobility does not suggest that modern industrial or post-industrial societies are moving in the direction of an education-based meritocracy. However, there is growing consensus among mobility scholars about another issue. Namely, there seems to be an inverse relationship between social inequality and social mobility; that is, the greater the inequalities (of income, wealth, or education), the weaker social mobility is (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). This is especially significant, because the American dream is fuelled precisely by the belief that these two are not closely attached to each other. That is, the latter involves the belief that although there is a significant distance between the lower and upper groups of society in the United States, this distance can be overcome by talent and individual effort. This belief has been strongly questioned by research findings of recent years. Among these, perhaps the greatest attention was paid to the ‘Great Gatsby Curve’, which provides empirical evidence

that countries with greater income inequality (expressed in terms of the Gini index), have lower intergenerational social mobility (measured by income elasticity) (e.g., Andrews & Leigh, 2009; Corak, 2013; OECD, 2018).

Another study by Hertel and Groh-Samberg (2019) that covered almost forty countries and used the traditional sociological approach of occupational mobility also concluded that the greater the inequalities between the occupational classes, the lower the level of relative mobility is.

In this context, the policy relevance of social mobility research is particularly important. Educational systems are often referred to as the main channel for promoting social mobility. Accordingly, it is also education systems that are typically criticized because of the low degree of social fluidity and their failure to eliminate initial inequalities but rather to contribute to their reproduction. However, these expectations about education systems are exaggerated, and the greater the social inequalities that should be eliminated, the more illusory they are. In fact, education-related policy instruments have limited capacity to promote social mobility or equality of opportunity, but those that aim to reduce pre-existing inequalities may be much more effective. As Anthony B. Atkinson puts it:

Inequality of outcome among today's generation is the source of the unfair advantage received by the next generation. If we are concerned about equality of opportunity tomorrow, we need to be concerned about inequality of outcome today. (Atkinson, 2015, p. 11)

3 Structure of the thematic issue

The papers in this thematic issue draw attention to the limitations of traditional, one-dimensional mainstream quantitative social mobility studies when trying to understand the factors that contribute to the rather complex processes and consequences of social (im)mobility. The research findings presented here cover the geographical area of some transitional societies in Central Eastern Europe.

Addressing the topic of education-based meritocracy, the study of Judit Durst, Zsanna Nyíró, Fanni Dés, and Julianna Boros shows how the intersection of racial(ised) and class inequalities in the labour market offers insight into the fallacy of individualized explanations about the role of merit in social ascension. Drawing on 103 interviews with first-in-family (FIF) minority Roma graduates in Hungary, and using the lens of intersectionality, they explore the hidden barriers to career advancement for those Roma professionals whose parents do not have a degree. Their paper shows how the intersections of class and racialised differentiation (racial subordination) matter regarding which career one can occupy in the labour market. It illuminates why FIF Roma professionals rarely enter elite occupations and why, career wise, they tend to concentrate in jobs dealing with 'Roma issues'. It explores the effect of the dynamic interaction of structural hidden mechanisms and the Roma's response/adaptation to them that contribute both to Roma professionals' labour-market segmentation and to the phenomenon of the glass ceiling. The paper calls these two characteristics of the labour-market situation of FIF Roma graduates the 'racial glass ceiling'.

Employing a similar line of thinking, Zsuzsa Árendás and Vera Messing's article investigates the reasons for the low proportion of educated Roma in the business sphere; a sector which has the greatest potential for occupational and social mobility. They shed light on

a phenomenon that is also observed among other racialised minorities – the fact that many educated Roma individuals may formally fit job requirements, yet not succeed in taking up the related positions. In other words, they explore how the upward mobility of a racialized minority works, especially through the lens of a sector which emphasizes ‘merit’ more than any other part of our society. Benefiting from a mixed-method research study that uses a survey dataset of educated young Roma and also relies on in-depth interviews with youth from the same group, the authors identify some of the main barriers to the Roma’s employment in the business sector, despite their commensurate educational qualifications. Using a Bourdieusian analytical lens, and drawing on Friedman and Laurison’s work (2020), they point out that individuals who belong to different segments of society (e.g. to majority or [racialised] minority groups) have different capacities to ‘cash in on’ their ‘merit’ and make full use of their ‘talent’. The authors argue that despite having the necessary technical capital (formal education, diplomas, employment experience), companies often perceive young Roma as ‘unfit’ and ‘not matching’ their need for ideal candidates. The paper also elucidates different individual mobility strategies and the role of different forms of capitals, such as resilience capital, in the educated Roma youth’s early professional careers. One of the authors’ main arguments is that the Roma young adults’ alternative forms of (cultural) capital often remain unrecognized and unacknowledged by employers in the business sector in situations of job-search or career progression.

Eszter Berényi’s article also sheds light on the myth of (education-driven) meritocracy. Education is considered to be one of the most important channels of social mobility, and it is a key question to what extent the educational system is able to compensate for the inequality of opportunity experienced by children from less advantaged family backgrounds. The paper investigates to what degree the education system helps children from poor families move up the social ladder through their academic performance. The author explores the functioning of the education system in Hungary from this perspective. More specifically, she examines those early selective grammar schools that – in contrast to traditional secondary school tracks which last four years – offer six or eight year-long academic periods of study. According to her empirical findings, successful application to these highly competitive schools is the result of a complex selection process that involves several steps, including, among others, the very decision to apply and the proper preparation for the entrance exam that requires both parental and tutorial assistance. The result of this complex selection process is that students from an unfavourable social background have almost no chance of entering these grammar schools. Thus, they serve poorly as a channel for social mobility, but rather contribute to the reproduction of social inequalities.

However, some students from socioeconomically disadvantaged family backgrounds ‘against the odds’ manage to continue with further study, not only at upper secondary level but also in higher education. In her paper, Zsuzsa Plainer identifies the factors that facilitate some Roma from poor families in Romania becoming educationally mobile. Based on Yosso’s (2005) cultural wealth model (a critique of Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of cultural capital), she takes stock of the forms of capital that her Romanian Roma sample make use of during their upward educational trajectories. She does this by analysing narrative interviews as a means of generating an improved understanding of the meaning and functioning of capitals. The paper explores the workings of conformist and transformative resistant capital and aspirational and family capital, and highlights the role of institutions in the process of capital acquisition and conversion. It argues that orphanages, religious congregations, and Roma

educational programmes can be considered matrixes of resources that enable not just access to different sources of capital, but also to their conversion, that facilitate upward educational mobility.

Krisztina Németh also applies a Bourdieusian conceptual framework to elucidate the impact of geographical mobility on social mobility and on mobile individuals' habitus. Relying on semi-structured family history interviews, she examines how social and spatial mobility are intertwined in the case of a woman who, after spending almost fifteen years in the UK, bought an old farmhouse and moved back to her birthplace that is located on the periphery of a Hungarian rural town ('*tanyavilág*'). Her paper focuses on the process of change in habitus that occurs as a result of the combined effect of transnational and social mobility. It is a story about how one can reconcile different dispositions and values and create continuity with family background despite migration and social advancement.

It is not only in this special issue but in social mobility studies too that researchers have dedicated overwhelming attention to the question of upward mobility – but, as Oksana Zabko argues, very little academic work has explored the reasons for and consequences of downward mobility. Zabko's paper aims to fill this gap. This is a contribution to our knowledge about the perceptions of downward mobility from the perspective of the downwardly mobile themselves. In accordance with the normative approach to social mobility, scholars tend to describe the detrimental implications of downward mobility, measured by downward movement in the occupational class hierarchy. According to this line of thinking, downward mobility is perceived as a loss of individual status, prestige, income, and social ties. The impact of these negative effects on the downwardly mobile's subjective well-being is usually explained in the light of Sorokin's (1959) dissociative thesis, or Newman's (1999) 'falling-from-grace' concept. Zabko's paper, however, challenges this widespread knowledge. Instead, through analysing personal experiences of downward occupational mobility in Latvia she explores those factors that explain individuals' perceptions of downward occupational mobility as a positive experience, contributing to subjective well-being by increasing work satisfaction through the perception of accomplishing 'meaningful work', and through achieving labour-market security, among other factors.

The topic of downward mobility is not only important in the Latvian context, but also in many Central Eastern European (CEE) countries where downward movement in the social space is more common than upward. Among many CEE countries, in Hungary, according to recent studies, both absolute and relative mobility have declined since the 1970s. Relying on educational data, Ákos Huszár, Karolina Balogh, and Ágnes Győri examine how these processes have evolved in the lower and upper segments of the social structure. In the upper segment of society, immobility means that parents in a more favourable position manage to pass on their privileged social status successfully to their offspring. In the lower segment, however, the decrease in mobility implies that those starting from below are less able to overcome their disadvantages. The authors examine in their study how far these processes have occurred simultaneously in the past almost twenty years, and to what extent have they taken place independently. Is the decline in mobility more due to processes taking place in the upper or rather the lower segment of society? According to the authors' results, a decrease in social mobility can be detected in both the lower and upper segments of society. However, processes at the two poles have not followed the same dynamics over the past nearly two decades.

Going beyond the classic approach to social mobility research that focuses on the transmission of parental capital – that is, on the link between parents' and their offspring's education, occupation, or income – Péter Róbert, Nikolett Geszler and Beáta Nagy examine the impact of 'softer' variables: the effect of the intergenerational transmission of subjective well-being on social mobility outcomes. Their results suggest that family background affects not only the 'hard' variables that are regularly examined in mainstream mobility research, but also 'soft' ones such as personal and behavioural characteristics and the subjective well-being of individuals. They also point out that it is not only the economic or cultural capital of parents that is important in the intergenerational transmission of advantages and disadvantages, but also factors such as the satisfaction of parents with their family and social relationships.

Last but not least, Svetlana Mareeva, Ekaterina Slobodenyuk, and Vasilij Anikin also address the relationship between inequalities and social mobility through the problem of the 'tunnel effect'. Their research setting is Russia – a country that has undergone significant economic and social change over the past two decades, bringing with it a striking rise in living standards and a rapid decline in poverty. According to the tunnel-effect hypothesis developed by Albert Hirschman, tolerance of social inequalities is greater if the proportion of upward mobility is high in a society. The authors ask whether (actual or expected) social mobility impacts that individuals support the government reducing income inequality in today's Russia. Their results show that despite the rapid and large-scale socioeconomic changes, perceptions of inequality have remained almost constant in Russia. Accordingly, the impact of mobility is also very limited in the country. Neither the mobility experience of the past, nor expected mobility in the near future affect significantly the demand for reducing income inequalities.

Overall, the contributions to this thematic issue highlight the downward mobility trends in the transitional societies in Central Eastern Europe and the fallacy of (the myth of) meritocracy. Instead of individualised explanations of social mobility, they draw attention to the complexity of the socially and historically embedded processes of moving between social strata in the social space. Our editorial manifesto can be summarised as advocating both qualitative and quantitative mobility studies that aid understanding, beyond country-specific, national social mobility trends, of the hidden mechanisms of classed, gendered, and racialized inequalities and factors that drive and hinder the movement of discriminated minorities among social strata that seem to be prevalent in many societies. We also advocate more reflection on the individual consequences of mobility under circumstances of socioeconomic inequality in contemporary Europe.

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