

Book review

How Inequality Runs in Families: Unfair Advantage and the Limits of Social Mobility

Gideon Calder

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Social justice, social inequality and social mobility are concepts that frequently appear in public, including political, discourse in the United Kingdom. Its society is characterised not only by unequal outcomes – notably in income and wealth – but also by inequality of opportunity, with many citizens unable to achieve their full potential because of their class, gender, ethnic or other position. A more equal society would reduce, if not remove, these current barriers, stimulating greater social mobility so that any inequality in outcomes would reflect only merit (plus perhaps the amount of effort invested), and not be strongly influenced by family and other background factors.

Calder's analysis of these inequalities focuses on a tension between family and the state/society, between one institution – the family – in which a prime goal is promoting the interests of the next generation in life's contest, and another – the state – whose prime concern is promoting the best interests of all, and thereby achieving an optimal outcome for society. That the goals of the family usually win – that unfair advantage triumphs over equality of opportunity – is a frequent critique of contemporary society, and its removal a rhetorical, if often inconsequential, aim of much public discourse and policy.

The title of Calder's book suggests that it might offer further empirical evidence of the socially unjust ways in which contemporary society operates. Disappointingly it contains little such evidence and no detailed analyses. Indeed, one of its few pieces of evidence of unfair advantage, with which the book starts, is so poorly presented that would-be readers might be put off proceeding further. A graph on page 1 is entitled 'School performance and class background'. The vertical axis extends from 0 to 100, but is not labelled; there is no key; and nothing in the text helps one deduce what the numbers refer to. The graph comprises six trend lines – not necessarily linear – although the horizontal axis apparently has only three points on it, labelled Percentile KS1, KS2 and KS4 – terms that are nowhere defined (the discussion in the text refers to children's ages). We are informed that the story told by the graph is 'shocking', because it shows 'how well kids do at school is strongly linked to how well-off they are' (p.2) – but its lack of clarity means that we have to take that on trust.

However, once you read beyond that introductory story the book's main thesis regarding the tensions between family and state/society becomes clear: it is a challenging, largely philosophical debate and not a detailed empirical analysis. The core of the argument comes through in the first main chapter on 'The family and social justice', which addresses the question of how far families should be allowed to promote their children's interests, to the probable disadvantage of those who have fewer resources – not only financial but also social and cultural – on which to base such promotion. Is it acceptable for parents to read bedtime stories to their children (increasing their cultural capital), but not to buy a superior education for them – through sending them to a private school, for example, moving to expensive housing in the catchment area of a 'good comprehensive', or employing private tutors? The answer is 'yes' to the bedtime stories but 'no' to the bought education – with a range of other benefits (such as bequeathing property and sending them to dancing schools) in-between. The benefits of 'inherited luck' – our genetic inheritance – are acceptable in a just society, but those of 'sociological luck' – class position – are not. This is followed by a further chapter on 'Social mobility and class fate' which addresses how the class system – in which families are the main players – impedes social mobility, increasingly so as the economic, social and cultural divides widen. The conclusion is that high levels of social mobility should not be used as a justification for high levels of social inequality: equality of both opportunity and outcome is the desideratum of a just society.

The next chapter – 'Unpacking equality of opportunity' – addresses a fundamental issue within arguments for an equal-opportunity society: how can you ensure equality of opportunity for one generation if equality of opportunity for the previous generation resulted in unequal outcomes? The starting line for the first generation may be level, but that for the next will not be if, for example, the best and most-rewarded jobs go to those best qualified to fill them (and have been prepared to work to get those qualifications). The answer is that only by severely constraining the outcome differentials for successful first-generation families can equality of opportunity be recreated for the next generation, and again for the next generation after that. In effect, the family might not become redundant as the arena in which children's life chances are formed, but its role in their meritocratic promotion would have to be very severely constrained: a strong meritocracy cannot operate if families in some groups are able to manipulate its operation to their children's advantage. And if such a meritocracy could be created, the result would be that those at the bottom in the distribution of outcomes would 'deserve' to be there, and so there would be little sympathy for them from those who succeed: a successful meritocratic society need not also be socially just.

So how can we create a less unequal, more just, more socially mobile society (one in which, for Calder at least, the acquisition and deployment of financial capital appears to be more important than social and cultural capital)? Following Fishkin, Calder identifies three main principles underpinning current liberal egalitarian theory: equality of life chances; the allocation of rewards based on merit through fair competition; and the autonomy of the family. But all three cannot operate together, since giving the family considerable autonomy to promote its children's interests and life chances operates counter to the other two. A society wanting to be just is thus on the horns of a trilemma. Which of the three will have to be abandoned, or at least substantially restricted in its operability, for the other two to thrive? Calder's 'converging conclusion' is that "when the tensions between equality and family autonomy bite hardest, it's on the side of the latter that something has to give" (p.106). So do we want a society in which parents can perhaps help their children obtain cultural but not financial capital – and how about social capital, which is so often linked to the latter (as in the allocation of internships, for example)?

And if we do, how might it be done? Calder makes 'three modest suggestions': replace inheritance tax by an accessions tax; invest more in pre-school support for low income families; and redistribute childcare. But he admits that these are piecemeal interventions, and it remains doubtful whether they would substantially erode, let alone remove, the exclusive privileges currently enjoyed by families in some classes in order to give all children a fair start in life.

How inequality runs in families is a challenging book, with a strong overall theme and many intervening contentions – in the 1950s-1970s, for example, did grammar schools aid social mobility for some, or would those people have succeeded anyhow, without the apparent benefits a grammar school education bestowed on the 'brightest', because of the opportunities that opened up in society's changing class structure? If the school system brought no benefits, could the re-introduction of grammar schools do the same in a society where the class structure is now much more fixed? Such questions, and the wider argument regarding the relative roles of the family and the state could be the basis of many tutorial and seminar discussions. Calder is to be congratulated on producing a book that merits wide reading, not only by social science/social policy students, even if the detailed evidence on inequality, injustice and immobility has to be sought elsewhere. While it does not provide all the answers, nevertheless it makes a valuable contribution to the canon – and, as such, it should be read alongside *The rise of the meritocracy* and similar classics.

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