Foreword

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The Paired Peers project, from which this excellent book emerges, will surely go down as a landmark study in British sociology. Spanning nearly 12 years, this unique and groundbreaking qualitative research has followed the lives of 90 working-class and middle-class students as they first traversed entry into, and progression through, university and now as they negotiate the precarious and uncertain graduate labour market. Reading The Degree Generation, I am struck by the ways in which the latest instalment of this project has once again moved our understanding on. These distinct contributions are made possible not only by the quality and the sensitivity of the analysis undertaken by the team (who themselves come from a variety of different class backgrounds), but also by the unique longitudinal research design undertaken. It is clear, for example, that the research team has built very important and deep relationships with their participants over the years, and this has clearly yielded insights that simply would not have been possible using other methodological tools.

The first of these is the simple observation that labour market futures are not the sole focus of graduates. Sociological and policy work in this area, particularly studies that focus on inequalities of outcome (like my own), tend to overlook the fact that young people emerging from university are not just concerned with constructing a career; rather, they are also building a life. Spending extended periods of time with participants, this simple reality becomes abundantly clear: they are not always making decisions with an instrumental emphasis on career success, occupational status or high earnings; instead, they are thinking about how to forge relationships
with friends and family, how to enjoy their leisure time, or how to look after their mental health. This is important because it asks us to reconsider conventional understandings of ‘graduate success’ and instead think about young people’s broader quest to find meaningful work and to live a life of, what the authors call, ‘personal value’.

Second, however, while this book certainly spotlights a uniquely broad understanding of the graduate experience, it also pulls no punches in simultaneously underlining the corrosive inequalities that stratify the UK graduate labour market. Here, in particular, they highlight how notions of ‘graduate value’ tend to be tied not only to particular universities and particular degree courses, but also, more broadly, to a certain performance or image of merit. This is rooted, they argue, in the embodied cultural capital (modes of comportment, self-presentation and aesthetic style) inculcated via a privileged class background (and inextricably tied to intersections of race and gender), which are then misrecognized as legitimate by gatekeepers. This, they write in Chapter 9, ‘constructs some bodies as a ‘natural’ fit and others as out of place’ in the elite graduate labour market.

Of course, the question that flows from this is: how should organizations, policy makers and government respond to these findings? What can and should be done to address these inequities? It is certainly true that, in recent years, discussions about class have at least begun to take place among many of the UK’s key graduate employers. For example, there is now the widespread collection of workforce data on class background. This has allowed employers not only to understand their internal class composition and the class pay gaps or class ceilings that might exist around career progression, but also to see how the class backgrounds of their staff intersect with other characteristics, such as race and gender. Some firms have even taken the step of publishing class background data publicly and setting targets to increase the representation of those from working-class backgrounds at partner or senior management level.

Beyond data, though, there is much more that graduate employers must do to be part of the solution. The most significant of these is to grapple with how ‘talent’ and ‘merit’ are defined and rewarded in graduate recruitment. The key point highlighted in this book, as well as other allied studies, is that the identification of merit is often intertwined with the way in which merit is performed (in
terms of classed self-presentation and arbitrary behavioural codes) and who the decision makers are whose job it is to recognize and reward these attributes. This is a thorny issue that is hard to tackle, especially where there is contestation within professions about what merit or skill look like. Yet, it is pivotal that employers embrace this contestation, critically interrogate the supposedly ‘objective’ measures of merit they rely on and aim for a more transparent, inclusive and widely agreed-upon idea of what merit looks like in the workplace.

There are certainly, then, some concrete ways in which graduate employers are tackling class inequality. However, at the same time, it is important to register an important caveat to the celebratory narratives that often surround professional employers’ ‘social mobility strategies’. This is simply that the interventions they envisage may be a necessary part of tackling class inequality in the graduate labour market, but they are certainly not sufficient. Fundamentally, this is because they only address one aspect of class inequality, namely, equality of opportunity and the fair allocation of rewards within the workplace. However, as a range of sociologists have argued, including Nicola Ingram, one of the authors of The Degree Generation, this narrow focus on social mobility is not, and cannot be, the solution to class inequality. Indeed, as Ingram and Sol Gamsu (2002), have recently pointed out, discussions about the relationship between graduate employers and inequality must engage with the work professionals do, as well as who they are. Here, they point to the paradox that the employers taking class most seriously internally are arguably the same ones accentuating class inequalities in the work they do externally. Similarly, as Louise Ashley has noted, many professional employers are directly implicated in driving the kind of high pay that has contributed so profoundly to growing income inequality in many Western countries.

In this way, Ashley has gone on to argue, it is important to recognize that organizational social mobility agendas often act as a form of cultural legitimation, allowing professional employers to align themselves with egalitarian values while obscuring their role in perpetuating class inequalities in society more broadly. This blind spot in government and organizational social mobility agendas was a source of much frustration to me when I sat on the UK government’s Social Mobility Commission between 2018 and
2021. While on the commission, I repeatedly argued for a broader ‘class agenda’ among professional employers that focused not only on social mobility, but also, more broadly, on class or socio-economic inequality. Yet, as only one of 12 commissioners, and as someone lacking the rhetorical skill to win over their hearts and minds (and perhaps the appetite to be a truly confrontational figure), I was largely unsuccessful in making this case.

My hope, though, is that forceful books like this can provide the kind of evidence-base we need to continue to advocate for more radical policy goals. Concretely, I would suggest that a realizable policy aim may be the enactment of the ‘Socioeconomic Duty’ contained within the Equality Act 2010. This section both speaks to equality of opportunity in making class origin a protected characteristic (meaning it would be against the law to discriminate against someone on the basis of class origin), but also goes significantly further, requiring government and all public bodies to have due regard for reducing inequalities of outcome, especially as they relate to socio-economic disadvantage. While successive governments have declined to bring this section into effect, perhaps it is high time that graduate employers stepped in to fill the gap.

Reference