

Book Review: Education, Occupation and Social Origin: A Comparative Analysis of the Transmission of Socio-Economic Inequalities by Fabrizio Bernardi and Gabriele Ballarino

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Bernardi, Fabrizio, and Gabriele Ballarino, eds. *Education, Occupation and Social Origin: A Comparative Analysis of the Transmission of Socio-Economic Inequalities*. Northampton: Edward Elgar, 2016. xiv + 292 pages. Hardcover, \$135.00.

The discussion of socio-economic inequalities has permeated the literature on education for the past several decades. In *Education, Occupation and Social Origin: A Comparative Analysis of the Transmission of Socio-Economic Inequalities*, sociologists Fabrizio Bernardi and Gabriele Ballarino probe the education-based meritocracy (EBM) theory where education becomes the social equalizer. This idea has long permeated different circles but this comparative study takes a look at the *social origin—education—outcome* triangle and sets out to better understand the “intergenerational transmission of advantage” in fourteen developed countries (p. 3). The authors focus specifically on the relationship between the socio-economic status of the individual and his or her parents as well as the idea that education is the ‘great equalizer’ in occupational achievement. They assert that if, on average, affluent individuals are receiving the better jobs, then the social equalizer theory is disproved. In fact, the data that connects individual family income, education, and occupational outcome clearly show that regardless of education an individual’s job level is still largely associated with their social origin. Thus, the idea of a meritocratic society is largely a fiction.

Fabrizio and Ballarino build on studies dealing with the increase in equality with educational opportunities such as Shavit et al.’s (2007) *Stratification in Higher Education*. The current study fills a gap in the literature on studies of social mobility and educational opportunities, adding a nuance with a comparative approach and asking in-depth questions that help educational researchers understand the issue from multiple locations and perspectives. In each of the fourteen countries that were studied there were four main questions that framed the study which centered around: 1) the correlation between origins and outcomes when individuals have the same educational background; 2) the patterns of intergenerational associations; 3) the changes in intergenerational associations over time; and 4) changes in education and outcomes.

The fourteen countries that were used in this comparative study were: France, Germany, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each study traces the direct effect of social origin (DESO) on occupational achievement and each found that there was a substantial relationship between the two. While it may seem apparent by reading this book that education is not the great equalizer, the data does lend itself to the idea of a “weakening of social stratification” over time, which is something that has been ignored in previous studies (p. 259). Bernardi and Ballarino recommend a reorientation of Hout’s (1998) “Economic and Social Returns to College” which interprets a university education as the great equalizer. The authors argue that occupational outcome becomes more meritocratic at the university level and on many occasions students from lower social backgrounds are favored due to their motivation. Bernardi and

Ballarino are at their best when discussing this topic but further research will have to be done on this subject.

Bernardi and Ballarino have done a fine job expanding the conversation with regards to Horace Mann's age-old saying that education is the great equalizer. This book has a thought provoking and relevant thesis; however, with its many highly theoretical works, it is laden with jargon and sometimes difficult-to-follow concepts. I do recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in learning more about education policy, social educational inequalities, and the history of social mobility. While this book is clearly meant for an academic audience, its message could and should strike a chord with a general readership.

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