

# The Meritocracy of International Class Formation

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**Abstract:** Education enjoys the reputation of being one of the main tools for enabling social mobility. The rise in popularity of meritocracy, the capability approach and equality of opportunity, among others, have further reinforced the idea that social mobility is attainable and is determined by personal effort given a fair set of consequences. This perspective contrasts with the observed role of education in social reproduction by sociologist like Pierre Bourdieu. This paper presents a case study to test the role of education as a tool for social mobility in an international master program by using the method of Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza (2014). The findings do not support the argument of social mobility and instead present education as playing a role in social reproduction.

## Introduction

Inequality has been increasingly gaining importance to become one of the main issues of our time throughout developed and developing nations (Stiglitz 2011, 1-3). Ever since the turn of the century the stark disparities between the extremely rich and the rest of society have become progressively more visible. Some examples of this are the boom of luxury commodities such as vehicles that can cost several million dollars, a rising market for private jets, and private yachts that could rival cruise ships in size but are designed for a handful of occupants instead of thousands. This divide within many societies across the world has kindled a debate between two camps: those who see inequality as a major issue, and those who disregard it outright or relativize its importance (Dorling 2014). On one side we see significant social movements demanding the introduction of more comprehensive social and redistributive programs that should be funded with an increase in taxation of the rich (Bourguignon 2017). On the other side are those groups who are well off with the current system, who argue that it is fair and that those who are worse off today are still doing far better than the poor of the past.

The current outcome is by no means accidental but rather a consequence of the structure of modern states and capitalism, especially following the end of the Cold War and what Francis Fukuyama called “the end of history” (1992). The guidelines of international capitalism spread during the last decades have been guided by a Rawlsian logic of equality: “we should all have equal chance to achieve any position in society” (Grcic 2009). Under this logic, the state is a separated bubble from the economic bubble, which works under its own rules, and whose main task is to do as much as to allow the economic bubble to thrive, as this is portrayed to be the most beneficial for everyone. Following this logic, the main policies aimed at combating poverty were channeled through investments in public goods that are available for all members of society like infrastructure, healthcare, and education (Dufour 2010, 178-192). This has become so relevant that the amount invested in these fields as a share of the country’s GDP is usually used as an

indicator of development (Miller 2007). Being a system based on opportunities and not on results, the inequality dynamic was of little concern under this framework.

Regarding inequality, it often sees an emphasis within education, as it is argued that education does not only work in enriching societies but also functions as the main engine behind social mobility and combating inequality inside the Rawlsian logic. This argument is based on the almost universal observation that income and education are positively correlated; that is, a higher education achievement is correlated with higher income throughout life (d’Hombres, Weber and Elia 2012). Based on this and the reputation that some professions have, it has been argued that a higher education is not only the key to a higher income but also a gateway to social mobility (Kerckhoff 1995, 323–347). This has had a significant impact on the way in which education is perceived in developed countries as the USA, as well as in developing nations such as Argentina; from a basic right which forms citizens, it becomes a pathway to a different social class (Liu 2011, 383–397; García 2006, 1–17).

Perhaps the most evident example of the rise of popularity in this way of thinking is the adoption of the term Meritocracy in mainstream discourse as a way of implying someone belongs, or is worthy of a certain position (Park and Liu 2014, 36–64). Expanding this idea to broader society, meritocracy is observed as the process by which those who are more capable, or apply greater effort, achieve higher levels of attainment within a society. Contrary to this perception of meritocracy today, the term was originally coined in the book *The Rise of Meritocracy* by the British sociologist Michael Young in 1953, as an attack on the idea of a society ruled by merit (Young 1958). Young stated that his motivation for writing this book was based on the incongruence that he observed between the egalitarian idea upon which most modern states were founded and the high stratification that a society based solely on merit would create. Unfortunately for Young, his work was repeatedly misinterpreted and instead of being taken as a critique, *The Rise of Meritocracy* was seen as a challenge that proposed the further adoption of merit as a guiding principle for a fair society (Young 2006, 73–77).

Meritocracy, or the importance of merit, rose in popularity among neoliberal thinkers and established a connection between merit and a common good mediated through the market. It established that something valuable for society would have a high value in the market and would therefore be well rewarded. This mindset provoked a departure from an equality of result approach to one based on equality of opportunity (Strauss 1992, 171–188). Outcomes in life under this concept are determined by fair and unfair inequalities known as circumstances and effort. Circumstances dictate unfair inequalities as the individual has no control over them and they are not relevant for the market, like skin color or gender, while effort is responsible for fair inequalities as they are determined by the individual, like academic achievements or a career choice (Carpantier and Sapata 2013, 281–311). The rise in popularity of concepts such as equality of opportunity or Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen’s famous capability approach (Sen 1999) led to the development of a different narrative that acknowledges a component of the condition of the poor and undermined groups within a society. Following this logic, as long circumstances are fair in a society, those who are doing well deserve it due to their effort, and those who are not doing well also deserve it due to lack of effort (West 1996, 995–1020).

These concepts also popularized the logic that a free market is a fair and democratic allocator of outcomes in life (Strauss 1992, 171–188). Furthermore, the quantitative analysis of poverty defined in terms of income, access to goods, professions, and education in growing and enriching societies leads to an image of classless societies where social mobility is determined by effort

(Portes 2010). Although social classes are still popular in other fields, they are rarely used in economic studies of inequality (Yitzhaki 2010, 7–22).

Contrary to this take, qualitative studies on social structures present a different picture and support the use of social classes to study inequality (Williams 2019, 356–382). This paper will depart from a definition of social class that follows Pierre Bourdieu's work in *Distinction* (1984). In *Distinction* Bourdieu elaborates on the quantitative and qualitative criteria that relate to belonging to a certain class. Although some criteria are quantifiable, many that are necessary for drawing a full picture of class like social or cultural capital, habitus and space are not (Fröhlich and Rehbein 1995). Furthermore, a social class cannot be clearly explained by a single or multiple criteria but rather by the structure of relations between all the relevant criteria (Bourdieu 1984).

The reproductive role of education in the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is also relevant in this paper, as this comes in opposition to the facilitating mobility role that is usually associated with education. From Bourdieu, education is not seen as a tool of social mobility but as another element that is part of belonging to a certain social class (Fröhlich and Rehbein 1995). For example, Bourdieu argues that grading and testing work as a major tool of education for social reproduction: “the dominant class uses IQ testing to reproduce itself by transmitting cultural capital, which appears embodied and has, therefore, an apparently natural and innate quality” (Baez 2004, 285-306).

The nature of the formation of the elements that establish a belonging to a certain social class makes it hard to reconcile the idea of social mobility with a Bourdieuan logic. Habitus can be understood as the embodied preferences and practices that are built because of the interaction in different physical and social fields with one's cultural and social capital (Chong 2014, 637–648). The formation of the habitus and the socialization necessary to belong to a social class occur early in life and happen in spaces that are separated and exclusive. Furthermore, the role of family is very significant and is everlasting throughout life. It is therefore possible for someone to qualitatively resemble a different social class to the one they grew up in, but this individual will not fully participate in all the other elements of the members of this new class (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza 2014, 16–27).

This broader definition of class is not compatible with meritocracy. Regardless of how difficult moving up in quantitative terms could be, in the end this mobility would hardly include full acceptance in a different class, and it is likely that the person will remain an outsider to this group, despite having on paper all that is required to belong to this group. This works both ways, meaning that both ascending and descending from social class is unlikely. It is worth noting that this does not mean that economic mobility is impossible, but that social mobility does not depend solely on income or wealth; examples of this are easy to come by. For instance, a rich footballer would still have a hard time blending in with the established high social class, despite having a significant economical capital. In the same way, a famous and respected academic would still depend on a job and intellectual property to cover his expenses. Despite all the power that a politician could attain, their high position in society relies entirely on it. The opposite is also the case; someone from a very privileged background would have a difficult time blending into a more modest environment, and in a way, is protected, either by his family or connections, from falling into a lower class (Rehbein 2015).

Finally, the limitations of education in generating social mobility have been described in plenty of studies in several countries, both developed and developing (Mikutaviciene 2012, 32-41; Per-

agine and Serlenga 2008, 67–97; Mayorga Henao and Ortíz Véliz 2020, 171–189). This however is not enough of a statement to disprove the idea that meritocracy at least partially works. As the argument goes, meritocracy is not intended to work for all, but it is fair as long as it works at least for some. These observations often put more emphasis in policies based on the capability approach rather than re-evaluating meritocracy as a concept.

The guiding hypothesis of this article is that higher education plays a stronger role in social reproduction than in facilitating social mobility. The main objective is to find evidence regarding social mobility that was facilitated through education. These findings should also provide evidence regarding the role of meritocracy in education in moving from one social class to another, or whether it is rather an element in the social reproduction dynamic.

## Methodology

As described before, a purely quantitative study could provide a high reach with robust results but would omit the qualitative components that are necessary for a class study following the logic of Bourdieu. For this reason, a case study will be made to test the hypothesis. Being meritocracy and class associated with education, an ideal group of study is one composed of graduates of a higher education degree where any traces of social mobility could be observed. An international cohort would enable the testing of the hypothesis under a varied set of backgrounds and would allow, at least partially, for the consideration of differences between different models of state.

A program that fits these two characteristics is the Global Studies Programme that is hosted by the Humboldt University of Berlin<sup>2</sup>, the University of Freiburg<sup>3</sup>, FLACSO Argentina<sup>4</sup>, the University of Cape Town<sup>5</sup>, the Jawaharlal-Nehru University<sup>6</sup>, and the Chulalongkorn University<sup>7</sup>. There is also a big diversity among the alumni of this program, with every batch being composed of students from very different nations.

The research was conducted in two stages, one compulsory and the second one optional. The first stage collects quantitative information that can be used to establish the social class of the individual from a quantitative point. This information has to do with major quantitative variables such as country of origin, education of the parents, education path and financial information. Collecting this information has a double purpose; in the first place it provides an overview of the socio-economic situation of the alumni and their family backgrounds that allows for a traditional class analysis from a quantitative only perspective; in second place, this information would be used during the interpretation of the interviews for those who participate in the extended interviews. The Bourdieuan methodology for constructing social classes is however limited, as there is no explicit structured methodology that can be extracted from his work. In order to complement this vacuum and being in the necessity of identifying the social classes of the participants of the study, the habitus hermeneutics methodology implemented in the book *Inequality in Capitalist Societies* would be used (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza 2018). This methodology is also practical due to the international context, or the sample, as although interviews need to be adjusted for national context, very similar social structures have been observed in the different countries it has been implemented (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza 2018).

This methodology relies on qualitative interviews and provides a good tool to do a comparative study of social class. Open ended interviews are performed and after being coded they are

analyzed with colleagues to establish the social class of the participant. Social classes are defined in a similar way to Bourdieu, with habitus as well as capital playing a significant role, but the barriers between them are established by the lines that no individual can cross (Rehbein 2015). That is, the dividing lines are the lines across which no mobility is possible. After implementing this methodology in different countries, four different social classes and 3 divisor lines have been identified. These are: the dignity line, the established line, and the aloof line (Jodhka, Rehbein and Souza 2018).

The first line divides the marginalized and the fighters; it is called dignity because it separates those living in non-dignified conditions from the rest of the society. Prime examples of this are homeless individuals, those chronically unemployed, people who suffer from addiction or those who live from crime. Individuals who are below this line hardly ever overcome this situation and join the next group, known as the fighters. The fighters are those who are above the dignity line and are characterized by their aspiration of normality. This brings them to assign an utmost importance to financial stability and a career to be able to maintain an established level. This also creates a break between the labor and personal spheres, as the guiding factor is to have a stable and high enough income in the labor sphere to have freedom in the personal sphere. That means that decisions in the work sphere are mostly motivated out of economic necessity instead of other criteria. This class is very big and encompasses a wide portion of the population where social mobility is possible. The lower part of this class is known as defensive fighters, those whose motivation is to not fall below the dignity line, and the higher part of this class is known as the aspiring fighters: those who have secured some significant concentration of different sorts of capital but are not part of the established.

The line that separates the fighters from the established is called the expressivity line. This line is defined, as its name implies, by a closer connection between an individual's actions and their habitus, something that is not present in the fighters. Although early socialization and the resulting habitus play a major role in decision making across all social classes, actions are not solely determined by preferences, but are also dependent on means, or ultimately, different sorts of capital. The wide and ample assortment of capital that the established have is what allows them to live their habitus through their actions while simultaneously preventing fighters from belonging to the established.

Furthermore, capital plays a dual role for the established as it allows for higher stability and opens opportunities that are not available to fighters. On the one hand, capital works as a safety net and ensures that the individual is not at risk of losing their social position. For example, an individual can start a very risky business with the certainty that if it were to fail, their economic means, professional formation and social connections would protect them from losing their social position. Secondly, the diverse sorts of capital that someone from the established has, opens opportunities that are not available to other individuals. For example, many highly regarded positions in society are only available to individuals with a very specific background and relevant connections in the field. It is possible for an aspiring fighter to have a high degree of one sort of capital (usually economic capital) but they would per definition have very different cultural, social and symbolic capital than an established, and this would in turn shape their actions differently. Importantly, this further increases the importance of the economic sphere for the fighters, as their position inside the fighters relies mostly on it. A clear example of this situation can be observed in the closer interaction between the labor and the personal sphere in the class of the established in opposition to the primacy of the economic motivation in the case of the fighters. For the established, their career choice is not solely motivated by economic interests and there is

instead a big influence of the personal sphere, while for a fighter, working and higher earnings are the backbone of their social status.

The final dividing line is that of the aloof, and separates the most powerful individuals in each society from the rest. Billionaires, monarchs, hereditary wealth, and political families usually fall on the other side of this line as they are not even subject to the limitations that the established are. Where the established set themselves goals to fulfill in life, the aloof approach goals with disenchantment as most things are available to them with relative ease.

A guideline for the interview was designed to determine to which of these social classes the alumni belonged and evaluate if they present a mobility or a social replication story. A first trial was done to refine the guiding set of questions that would be used to guide the conversation. The quantitative data collected from the respondents was also used during the analysis of the interviews in order to have an overview of the characteristics of the participating alumni.

## Quantitative Results

The first part of the study includes the quantitative data collected from the Alumni of the program.

<b>Country of Origin</b>	
Canada	1
Chile	1
Colombia	1
Germany	17
Hong Kong	1
Italy	1
Russia	1
Sweden	1
Switzerland	1
The Netherlands	1
USA	2
N/A	5

Being an international program, the sample shows the diverse nationalities of the graduates of the GSP Program as well as the year they graduated. Although not that uncommon nowadays, the diverse nationalities of the alumni are remarkable; it is also notable that the program includes a great variety of nationals from developed and developing countries. The big share of respondents who represent German Alumni can be associated with the fact that the program is based in Germany.

<b>Academic level of parents</b>	
PhD	10
Master	7
Vocational Training	6
University	8
High school	2

When it comes to the first sign regarding the background of the students comes from the highest academic achievement of their parents. Not only do most of the students have parents who attended college, but a third of them have parents with a PhD. This says a lot considering that PhD graduates always represent a small minority of the population in all countries; nowhere near the value of the sample.

<b>Parent Occupation<sup>8</sup></b>	
Overqualified Job	1
Qualified Job	27
Retired	2
Unemployed	1
Unqualified Job	2

The occupation helps complement this picture, as only 2 of all the respondents reported having a parent performing a non-qualified job and most of the parents of the Alumni do perform a qualified job. One of the relevant differences between the fighters and the established comes down to their relation to work. The fighters do not see their jobs as a way of developing themselves and thereby would take all their career decisions based on what makes more economic sense. In contrast, established put goals and ideals first and leave the economic aspect as a second priority when making career decisions. Although it cannot be established a priori belonging to one class or the other, one can already start ruling out that any alumni come from a marginalized background. It is also worth noting that the two alumni that responded with unqualified are from northern European origin.

<b>Academic level of parents</b>	
From 1.000 to 10.000 € /year	1
From 10.000 to 50.000 € /year	11
From 50.000 to 150.000 €/year	14
More than 150.000 € / year	2
N/A	5

The same can be said with the information regarding income. Although the income distribution of the Alumni's family is very diverse and this is correlated with the country of origin of the Alumni, it is remarkable to see that the average income is average for a developed country and high in relation to the world. The only exception is the one respondent whose reported family income falls between 1.000 and 10.000€/year; in this case however, the source of income is being a government servant, which further rules out the possibility of their belonging to the marginalized class.

## Education

<b>Private or Public Education</b>	
Entirely Public	20
Entirely Private	2
Public and Private	10
N/A	1

Regarding education, we already see some mixture between public and private education. The main motivation behind private education is usually higher quality or a specialized curriculum. Although the sample has a higher percentage of people with public education, this is explained by the high share of German and European Alumni where private education is not so present. Alumni from other countries tended to have attended at least one stage of private education in their life.

<b>Need to work</b>	
No	7
Sometimes	11
Yes	15

The majority reported they needed to work while studying at least partially, which could be correlated with not enough income from the household. However, this does not completely fit with the idea of a privileged group that was drawn from parental education and income. An alternative explanation can be given from a cultural standpoint, as many cultures value a relatively young entry into the job market as a very important part of belonging in society.

## Career Choice and Financial Stability

<b>Financial Support during</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>GSP</b>
Just Family	5	5
Just Government	6	3
Just Yourself	1	4
Just Inner Familiar Circle	1	1
Family	17	15
Government	6	7
Yourself	14	13
Foundation	6	6
Inner Familiar Circle	3	1

The table shows the different ways students financed their higher education, be it in the case of those who only had one way of financing their studies or the case of those who received support from different fronts. Although there is not a single common thread in the way the Alumni financed their studies, there are some remarkable facts that point at the class belonging. First of all, family support is present for most students, at least partially and those who did not have support from their families, reported having financed their studies by themselves. This can be



understood as an investment for higher returns in the long run or a sacrifice necessary to achieve a determined goal. The role of different organizations in the financing of the studies of many Alumni also speaks of their abilities and the sorts of capital they have that are necessary to work around the different systems of securing public or private support for education.

<b>What are/were your post GSP plans? Check all that apply</b>	
Find a Job Outside your Country	24
Go Back to Find a Job in Your Country	18
Continue Studying Abroad	7
Find a Job Anywhere	4
Continue to study in Your Native Country	2
Find a Job on the Transnational Level	1
Continue Studying Abroad	1

The plans following the GSP also reveal the work philosophy of many of the Alumni. A very career-oriented move comes from the goal of finding a job outside the native country. This goal can be associated with a desire for a higher wage, usually if the person comes from a developing country, but also as a goal for a better career in the long term as usually working abroad counts as an international work experience that requires a specific set of skills. The same can be said for those who want to return to their home country, as this reflects the desire of bringing the knowledge acquired abroad to the country or being recognized by the time spent abroad. From all the answers, finding a job anywhere can be seen as a sign of belonging to the fighters, but can also imply an openness to new opportunities instead of an immediate financial need.

## Perceived Privilege

A quick view of the quantitative data reveals that the Alumni do not belong to the marginalized nor the aloof. Although some elements point towards being part of the established, it is not entirely conclusive. The quantitative data reflects a group that has middle to high incomes and comes from relatively privileged backgrounds. To get more information relating to their position in society, five open questions were asked, aiming at a felt or experienced level of privilege by the respondents.

<b>Do you consider you belong to an elite of any sort in your country of origin?</b>	
No	17
Yes	16

Despite having a mix of answers, many of the respondents reported being aware of the level of privilege that they enjoy. It is very remarkable that the same response was given both in developed as well as in developing countries. For example:

Given the uneven reality of Chile in regard of income, education, etc. I would say I do belong to an "educated elite" (a kind of "intelligentsia"). Nevertheless, since Chile's economic model is still hugely neo-liberal and promotes business and material and monetary productivity, being highly educated (especially in social sciences) doesn't give anyone access to the truly empowered elites of the country, the economic elites.

In Colombia only an extended elite can study abroad.

Just by having the opportunity to go to higher education, especially doing a master's program, financed partially by my family, makes me part of a small percentage of German citizens. Moreover, acquiring relevant knowledge on politics and society in general through my studies makes it easier for me to find ways to possibly influence politics which I would consider more difficult without higher education and/or a family background with higher education.

I have the privilege of being born into a family that values education highly, which means I have always had the support network (morally and financially) to pursue my interests. That this is a privilege is quite clear, which means that, unfortunately, I belong to an educated elite.

<b>Have you ever been referred to as an elite by any co-national?</b>	
No	26
Yes	7

The answers in this question were clearer and most of the Alumni reported never having been called an elite. However, their answers also show that although they have never been called elites, others have alluded to their individual privilege. Some are also aware of intangible levels of privilege they were born into, like certain economic or racial groups:

Many in Chile, especially those belonging to poorer strata with less access to education, still perceive those with higher education as empowered or elite (even if their real influence is greatly diminished).

I assume that people who have had to work to make a living from an early age and never had the opportunities I had due to my parents' financial and moral support would perceive me as belonging to a privileged elite.

Again, not the classical elite but the above point might be perceived ... not as "elite" but as "different" for sure.

Yes, given that I am not African-American I am generally perceived to have been born into privilege in the United States.

<b>Do you think it is likely that any co-national would perceive you to belong to an Elite?</b>	
No	15
Yes	18

This question aimed at deepening the idea of being perceived as an elite or someone privileged by others. It reveals that the Alumni are aware of the existence of more and less privileged social

groups than them. Most reject the idea of being part of the elite but also recognize that they are very privileged in comparison to a big share of the population:

Even if it isn't explicit, people consider having an university education as almost the only valid tool for social mobility. I can't recall if I've been called "elite" explicitly, but the social treatment has been there many times, especially considering that I got my secondary education in a rather expensive private school.

By people from other regions of my county I met abroad.

No, I don't think so, because the debate about elites within one country and the debate who is this elite, who forms part of it and what an elite is- is only done by a certain part of society of which a big part belongs to the aforementioned elite.

<b>Do you consider that an international program like GSP would help you to achieve a better social status in your country of origin?</b>	
No	16
Yes	17

The final question tries to see if they believe that through achieving the master's program, they will be able to reach a different social level. The results are very congruent among the respondents. Although they agree that having the masters will allow them to find better job opportunities and earn more money in the long run, they also agree that it is very unlikely that this will change their social status. If anything, it could give the perception of it but not bring a real change:

No, I don't think so, because the debate about elites within one country and the debate who is this elite, who forms part of it and what an elite is- is only done by a certain part of society of which a big part belongs to the aforementioned elite.

It does not necessarily give me a higher social status, but with all the travelling involved it might increase the perception mentioned earlier.

International degree is considered a big advantage (reputation of the foreign universities, especially in Europe, is really good).

Masters Programs in general greatly improve credibility in the US. Since I will be working in the international sector, this will be a great asset.

International relations and experiences are getting more and more important in a time in which knowledge itself is so easy to access.

Education is prestigious in my country of origin and therefore higher education increases the social status as it is required to some extent and provides better possibilities for employment.

This segment helped elucidate how the respondents feel about their position relative to others in their national as well as international context. Almost all admit feeling that they have a relatively good position in society and that they can be considered by many to be part of a small, privileged part of society. At the same time, the majority of respondents don't expect to experience a drastic change in their social standing through education. Instead, they see it as a way that can open more career paths and better job opportunities. They may be better paid but nothing that will substantially change their social stance from their current one. This is very relevant information for the hypothesis of this paper, as the respondents themselves clearly state that they do not believe education will help them move to a different social group and rather argue that they were all born in relatively privileged environments. The data also supports the hypothesis that most of the Alumni belong to the established and evidence no change. Further evidence from the open interviews will help to cement this idea.

## Open Interviews

After analyzing the interviews, the answers regarding several topics were aggregated to give an overall perspective on these topics from the viewpoint of the Alumni.

## Social Mobility and Education

German respondents were critical of the role of education in social mobility and blamed institutions and structures for making the situation worse for many underprivileged students; for instance, by separating classes between those with good and those with bad grades. However, a student from the global south remarked that due to the small share of the population with a college degree, this still had some sort of recognition in society. In general terms the interviewees agreed that in the case that there is social mobility, this is mostly due to factors other than education. Regarding the education system, they do not see it as a big motor of social mobility but rather focus on its issues.

## Education and Social Status

The respondents clearly noted that they have not experienced any change in social status due to their academic achievements. They wonder, however, if this could have been different had they chosen a career with a more acknowledged reputation like law or medicine. Apparently, only their inner family and friend circle seemed to value their academic achievements, but this was also expected.

## Social Pyramid and the College Graduates

Regarding the position of college graduates inside society, respondents had mixed responses. All agreed that graduates do not belong to the elites per se, and that if they do, this is not due to

them having finished college. As elites, respondents considered renters, capital, and landowners and “old money” as the typical members of this group. The majority also agrees that a title can contribute to some social recognition, but other factors play a bigger role in the social status of a person. Curiously, most respondents ranked politicians near the top of the social pyramid, implying through this that power is a principal component of being an elite.

## **The Academic Merit**

An apparent contradiction occurs when discussing the validity of academic merit as the guiding factor in academic life. Although most complain about the unfair parts of the education system and academics, the idea that the person with more merit should be prioritized also generates a great deal of support. This can be seen as further proof of the resilience of a concept such as meritocracy as a fair ideal.

## **Recognition of Academic Achievements**

There was a fair majority who agreed that a master program improves job opportunities. Many admit that in the case of this master, it may not have to do with its contents but rather because it symbolizes to a potential employer that the applicant has certain desirable characteristics, or belongs to a special part of society that is “international ready.” In this case, the master is working more as a token that helps the alumni to prove belonging to a certain group of individuals. In this sense, the master works under the Bordieuan logic and not as a meritocratic element.

## **No Signs of Mobility**

Although the open interviews do not enable a categorical conclusion for everyone, the analysis of all the performed interviews points out that at least a big share of the Alumni belongs to the established class. The interviews reveal that the respondents are guided towards goals when it comes to their careers and that they would not enter a lifelong career they do not like simply in order to make more money. It is possible that some of the respondents would fall in the fighter’s class, especially those who manifested bigger concerns about money and the future, but the quantitative data proves that all the respondents are also relatively privileged, be it globally or at least in their local societies. It is also clear that the belonging to this class comes from a significant time before the master’s degree. Respondents also do not expect it to imply a relevant social change for them; on the contrary, it is more likely that they were expected to achieve these goals.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, no argument can be made for meritocracy leading to social mobility from the experience of the Alumni from the GSP master program. From the interview analysis as well as from the quantitative data, most of the Alumni grew up with at least some level of privilege and admit that the fact that they studied this master only helps to further prove their privilege, rather than offering an opportunity for social mobility. The only significant outliers to this trend were two people who reported an unqualified working background. Further research would be necessary to elucidate if they are part of actual social mobility. A priori, as both come from

northern European countries with big social states and report having grown up in relative comfort, it's very unlikely that they come from a totally underprivileged part of society. The absence of a significantly diverging story from all the respondents make the GSP Alumni a very cohesive group. One could hypothesize that this could also be the case for many other different cohorts or groups of graduates, or for people in a traditional position of social mobility like medicine or law.

Merit is still very present in the minds of the respondents and retains validity. However, respondents were aware that merit is correlated and inseparable from the socio-economic background of the Alumni. Merit serves as an objective concept that adjudicates who is more capable at some tasks, but it is unfair as it is heavily influenced by factors that individuals had no influence on, like the environment during their childhood, the vocation of their parents, their social connections, and economic capital. The expected higher future salaries after completing the master's degree also reflect one of the issues with relying only on quantitative data. What can be perceived as a relative enrichment that can contribute to social mobility is a calculated investment with an expected return. The progressive enrichment of societies can easily lead to the impression of accelerated social mobility when this responds to a different process altogether.

Although this is a small sample, studies like this show the value of adding qualitative data to the studies of social mobility. It also shows that social mobility is far rarer and harder to achieve than quantitative data can show. The self-reflection of all respondents shows that when confronted with the ideas of meritocracy and social mobility, people can realize that the position they are in is not entirely dependent on their individual choices, and rather relates to a series of factors they had little control over. This could be a good step to start overcoming a narrative that justifies the privilege of the rich and condemns the poor for not improving their condition.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup><http://global-studies-programme.com/>, accessed November 15, 2021.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.gsp.uni-freiburg.de/>, accessed November 15, 2021.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.gsp.uni-freiburg.de/institutions/flacso-argentina>, accessed November 15, 2021.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.sociology.uct.ac.za/masters-global-studies>, accessed November 15, 2021.

<sup>6</sup>[https://www.jnu.ac.in/sss/csss-global\\_atudies\\_programme](https://www.jnu.ac.in/sss/csss-global_atudies_programme), accessed November 15, 2021.

<sup>7</sup><https://pgschula.org/>, accessed November 15, 2021.

<sup>8</sup>The possible answers were qualified, unqualified, and unemployed. However, some respondents provided the additional responses that are shown on the chart.



## Appendix 1 - Questionnaire

### Personal Information

P1. Age

P2. GSP batch (i.e. year you began GSP)

P3. Familiar Education Background

What is the maximum educative degree attained in your inner familiar circle?

- a) None
- b) Primary
- c) Secondary Education
- c) Vocational Education
- d) University Studies
- e) Master
- d) PhD

P4. Familiar Occupation

How would you describe the main occupation of your inner familiar circle?

- a) Unemployed
- b) Unqualified Job
- c) Qualified Job
- d) Retired
- f) Living on social help
- g) Other, please be specific.

P5. Familiar Income

Please select from the ranges the income level of your inner familiar circle.

- a) less than 1.000 €/year
- b) From 1.000-10.000€/year
- c) 10.000-50.000 €/year
- d) 50.000€-150.000€/year
- e) more than 150.000€/year

### Admissions and Financing of higher education

P1. Private or public Education

Did you assist to public or private education? Choose all that apply

Primary School

- a) Public
- b) Private

Secondary School

- a) Public
- b) Private

Higher Education

- a) Public
- b) Private

**P2. Education Support**

Who financially supported your education?

- a) Inner Familiar Circle
- b) Tutor
- c) Government/Foundation
- d) Other, please be specific

**P3. Working**

Did you had to work while undertaking your studies?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Sometimes

**P4. Education Support 2**

Who is paying for your GSP studies?

- a) Inner Familiar Circle
- b) Tutor
- c) Government/foundation
- d) Other, please be specific

**The Elites and You**

P1. Do you consider you belong to an elite of any sort in your country of origin?

- a) yes
- b) no

P2. Have you ever been referred to as an elite by any co-national?

- a) yes
- b) no

P3. Do you think it is likely than any co-national would perceive you to belong to an Elite?

- a) yes
- b) no

P4. Do you consider an international program as GSP would help you to achieve a better social status in your country of origin?

- a) yes
- b) no

**Appendix 2 - Interview**

P1. Please do a little summary of the academic background of your inner circle, including the institutions which you have attended, those of your parents and grandparents, if possible, did you go to the same institutions they did?

P2. How relatively hard was it for you to gain entrance to Higher Education? was it clear from the beginning that you would go into College/University? Do you think that only your merits (academic or otherwise) played a role in your admission or rather some other factors had an influence?

P3. Do you think that social mobility is more likely in your country thanks to the education system? are there some people excluded from this system?

P4. Did you perceive yourself to gain any social status by finishing your bachelor's degree? has there been any unfulfilled promise in relation to employment or opportunities?

P5. If the society in your country is a pyramid, where would you locate the academics? who would be above and beneath them?

P6. Do you think that using academic merit to limit the access to higher education is fair?

P7. Do you consider that participating in an international program as GSP would help you to gain a position in a better social class? yes/no why?

P8. Do you consider that you belong or come from a privileged class, or even an elite, of your country?

P9. Do you think that some other people consider you to be privileged or belonging to a privileged class? has it ever happened to you that you were referred to as a privileged individual or belonging to the elites?

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