Chapter 3

Education-Based Meritocracy: The Barriers to Its Realization

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THE IDEA of "meritocracy" originates in sociological fantasy—that is, in Michael Young's remarkable piece of social science fiction, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which was first published in 1958.

In this book, the recent history of British society is recounted from the standpoint of 2033. The narrator describes how a meritocracy was created in Britain in the late twentieth century as a work of enlightenment. Merit, defined as "IQ plus effort," was taken to be expressed primarily through educational attainment. A strict relationship was then established between such attainment and the social positions that individuals obtained. The educational elite formed the governmental elite and assumed responsibility for using their exceptional abilities in the best interests of society at large. However, the narrator's main concern is with the increasing discontent generated by the operation of meritocracy. Indeed, he tells how, at the time of his writing, the lower classes, encouraged by certain dissident elements within the elite, are in open rebellion against the meritocratic order. He expresses his confidence that the rebellion will fail, since the lower classes, being deprived of their more able members by several generations of meritocratic social selection, could never again be anything more than "a rabble," and as a loyal member of the elite, he looks forward to verifying this prediction "when I stand next May listening to the speeches from the great rostrum at Peterloo" (Young 1958, 190). But a concluding editorial note explains that at Peterloo the author of the work we have read unfortunately perished in what was apparently the massacre that ended the "rule of the cleverest" in Britain—and without even having had the opportunity to correct his proofs.[1]

Michael Young meant his fantasy to serve as a warning. He was disturbed by how postwar governments in Britain were interpreting the purposes of the Education Act of 1944. The 1944 act established "secondary education for all." It was intended to give all children a greater opportunity to realize their academic potential and develop their abilities, whatever form or level these might take. But, Young believed, the act was being increasingly used in a purely instrumental fashion—that is, as a basis for the social selection of children for different, and invidiously distinguished, types of education and, in turn, for different grades of employment with differing levels of reward. And further, he feared that a consequence of such selection in the name of "merit" was the creation of a new kind of social stratification that would be no less extreme and at the same time psychologically yet more punitive than that which already existed. In a supposed meritocracy, those who did badly would tend to be regarded by others—and might even come to regard themselves—as being not merely unfortunate but as in fact having deserved no better.

The Rise of the Meritocracy was a notable success. It attracted wide and generally sympathetic attention. Young's warning seems to have been well understood. It is therefore all the more remarkable to find that, within little more than a decade of the book's publication, the term "meritocracy" was being widely used, in social commentary and debate, in a way that, for Young, must have been highly disturbing—that is, without any ironic or critical connotation but rather in an essentially positive sense. This rapid transvaluation of the concept seems to be attributable primarily to its adoption during the 1970s by a group of American intellectuals who were of what might be described as a "cold-war liberal" persuasion, among whom Daniel Bell (1972, 1973) was perhaps the most influential figure.

For Bell, it was evident that, in the modern world, meritocracy—and indeed, education-based meritocracy—was a functional imperative. "The post-industrial society," he wrote, "is, in its logic, a meritocracy" (Bell 1972, 30; see also Bell 1973, 454). High-level qualifications are essential if individuals are to meet the present-day requirements of professional and managerial employment. Economic and social efficiency demand that key positions should no longer be obtained merely as a result of birth and family. Rather, the prime criterion of social selection has to be educated talent as this is demonstrated through formal qualifications: achievement necessarily replaces ascription.[2]

Further, however, Bell seeks to uphold the idea of meritocracy from a normative as well as a functionalist standpoint. In the new social order, differences in educational and in turn occupational attainment inevitably form the main basis of class stratification. Nevertheless, Bell maintains, it is possible for the inequalities in income and wealth that thus arise to be provided with a moral grounding. Not only do class inequalities serve as incentives for individuals to disclose, develop, and utilize their abilities, but further, under appropriate conditions, high rewards can be regarded as being quite fairly earned or, in other words, as being "merited." What is necessary is to create a broad equality of opportunity for educational attainment through the expansion and reform of educational institutions. Insofar as this is achieved, a meritocracy can be something more than a mere technocracy: it can become what Bell calls a "just" meritocracy. Given equality of educational opportunity, differences in the rewards deriving from subsequent achievements in occupational life can be seen as largely reflecting individuals' application and effort, and thus as having their own inherent legitimacy.

For Bell and other liberals of similar persuasion, the idea of meritocracy was of key importance as a basis for countering egalitarian arguments that were more radical than they were themselves ready to uphold and that, indeed, they viewed as being dangerously "socialist" in inspiration: that is, arguments not just for greater equality of opportunity but also for greater equality in *outcomes*, which, as well as having various forms of populist expression, had also gained a powerful philosophical statement in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). What was found unacceptable in such arguments was that, in their preoccupation with social inequalities among different collectivities, such as social classes, they seriously neglected *individual differences*, and differences not just in natural endowments but also in such respects as readiness to take up opportunities, to work at the acquisition of skills and competencies, to deploy them diligently, and in general to "make an effort" (see Bell 1972, 53–59; 1973, 440–55). The theory of a just meritocracy, it was believed, could serve to underpin the class inequalities that radicals wished to call into question, and it could do so in terms *both* of individuals' differing societal contributions *and* of due rewards for the display of qualities that were ultimately of a moral character.[3]

In other words, then, exactly the ideas that Michael Young had sought to warn against were reasserted: that in modern societies the educational system can, and indeed *must*, serve as the primary determinant of merit, and that an appeal to merit can in turn provide justification for the differentiation of rewards obtained in labor markets and the wider social inequalities that follow.

Subsequently, it should be added, the positive conception of meritocracy that resulted from the American reception of the term moved back to Europe. In the more recent past it has in fact become an important element in the ideology of various center-left political parties, following the lead given in Britain by New Labour. Meritocracy, or more precisely, education-based meritocracy, represents an apparently "progressive" goal that center-left parties can pursue, but one that does not entail any radically redistributive policy measures—that is, measures that could appear threatening to the "median voter" electoral strategies that these parties see as essential to their success.

Significantly, in one of his last publications before his death, Michael Young (2001) returned to the issue of meritocracy and launched a forceful attack on Prime Minister Tony Blair for having "caught on to the word without realising the dangers of what he is advocating." Young again stressed the adverse psychological consequences that a (supposedly) meritocratic social order would bring by encouraging the self-satisfaction of those who have done well for themselves and, worse, the demoralization of those who have not. "It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that." Rather than celebrating meritocracy, Young urged, New Labour would do better to drop the word from its political vocabulary and return to more genuine egalitarian commitments.[4]

All of the foregoing is by way of background. In what follows, our main concern is to examine the idea of education-based meritocracy (henceforward EBM), not primarily from the standpoint of its history or of its philosophical or ideological implications—though related issues will inevitably arise—but rather from the quite different and, we believe, neglected standpoint of its *sociological viability*. All else aside, is the creation of, or even significant progress toward, an EBM a feasible project within the context of modern market-based economies and societies? Or, more generally, is it possible for educational attainment to provide a new moral basis for the class inequalities that are inherent to such economies and societies?

Movement in the direction of an EBM could be said to require three main processes of social change:

1. The association between individuals' social origins and their educational attainment must increasingly reflect *only* their level of demonstrated academic ability as other factors that might prevent the full expression of this ability are removed or offset.
2. The association between individuals' educational attainment and the level of employment they eventually achieve must *strengthen* as qualifications acquired through education become of dominant importance in employers' selection procedures.
3. The association between educational attainment and level of employment must become of *similar* strength for individuals of all social origins as all other considerations in social selection, being irrelevant to the principles of an EBM, are discounted.

On this basis, we will now develop a twofold argument. First, at an empirical level, we will show that these processes of change are not in fact going ahead in the way that those who favor the idea of an EBM would wish to see, *and in large part on account of the powerfully countervailing force of social class*. In particular, we present evidence to indicate that individuals' class origins continue to exert a major influence on their educational attainment

even when demonstrated academic ability is controlled; that individuals' educational attainment is not of increasing importance in determining their level of employment and thus the class positions that they eventually attain; and that the part played by education in this respect is not the same for individuals of all class origins.

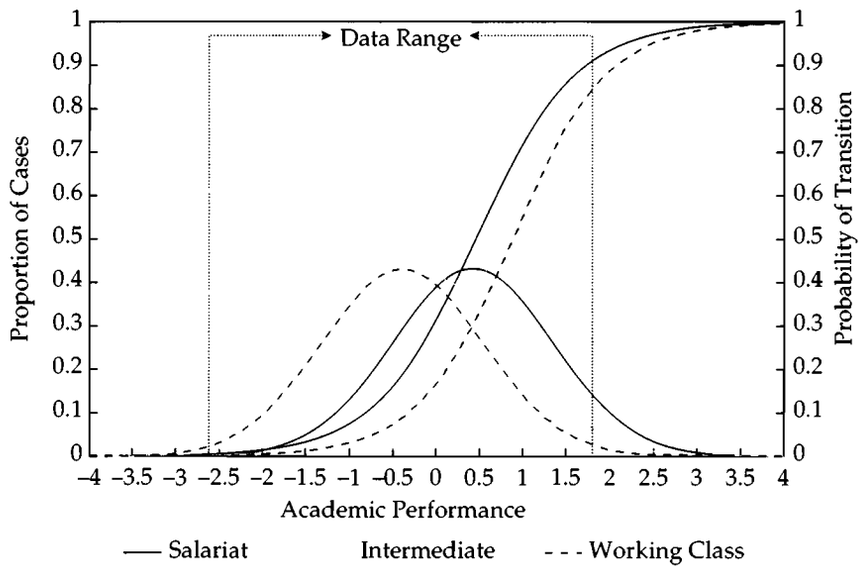
The concept of class we use is one that has been developed over recent decades within a European theoretical tradition (Goldthorpe 2007, vol. 2; Goldthorpe, with Llewellyn and Payne 1987) and that is now widely applied, via the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP or CASMIN) class schema, in European research on educational inequalities and social mobility (Breen 2004; Breen et al. 2007; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979).[5] Class is treated as a form of stratification that arises out of the social relations of economic life, and more specifically, class positions are seen as being determined by the employment relations in which individuals are involved and, in the case of employees, by the differing forms of their employment contracts. It should be noted that class, as thus understood, is conceptually quite distinct from social status (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007), and also from synthetic notions of "socioeconomic status" as widely used in American stratification research. Our empirical findings come chiefly from several different lines of research in which we are ourselves currently engaged, together with various colleagues. This research is restricted to modern British society, but by referring to a range of other work, we are able to provide ample indication that results of the kind we report are by no means specific to Britain.

Second, at a theoretical level, we set out reasons for believing that the general lack of movement toward an EBM is not attributable to difficulties of a merely transient kind that might be expected to weaken simply with the passage of time. Rather, we argue, the barriers that stand in the way of the realization of an EBM are ones that could be overcome only through political intervention of a quite radical kind or that must be accepted as integral to all societies with class structures deriving from the operation of free-market economies.

Social Origins, Academic Ability, and Educational Attainment

If an EBM is in the making, then any association that exists between individuals' social origins and their educational attainment should, to a steadily increasing degree, reflect only their demonstrated academic ability. We examine whether or not such a process of change is in operation in the case of one crucial educational transition that arises in England and Wales. This is the transition that may be made by students, at around age sixteen, to 'A-level' courses—the courses that typically need to be taken to secure university entry—as against the alternatives of leaving full-time education for the labor

Figure 3.1 Regression of Transition to A-Level Work on Academic Performance for Students from Three Different Class Backgrounds, 1974



Source: Authors' calculations from National Child Development Study (NCDS) data set.
Note: N = 4,323.

market or staying on in school or college to take less academic, more vocational courses (or some combination of these two latter possibilities).

In figure 3.1, we show a set of results derived from analyses of the data of the National Child Development Study (NCDS), a cohort study based on all children born in Britain in one week in 1958, who thus reached age sixteen in 1974.[6] This figure may best be understood by looking first at the three bell-shaped distributions. These are the distributions of demonstrated academic ability—that is, the actual academic performance—of students from three different social class backgrounds. They are based on (standardized and normalized) grades obtained in public examinations in English and mathematics taken at around age sixteen.[7] The distributions overlap a good deal, but students of salariat (professional or managerial) background show the highest levels of performance overall, followed by those of intermediate-class background, and then by those of working class background. These distributions can be taken as expressing what may be called "primary" effects in class differentials in educational attainment (see Boudon 1974):

that is, effects that stem from the fact that children of more-advantaged class backgrounds tend on average to do better in school than children from less-advantaged backgrounds on account, one may suppose, of a complex interplay of sociocultural and genetic factors.

We turn now to the three S-shaped curves. These derive from binomial logistic regression analyses in which academic performance—as indicated by the bell curves—is the explanatory variable in relation to the transition (or nontransition) to A-level courses. The S-curves thus show, separately for students from each of the three classes, their estimated probabilities of opting for A-level courses (the vertical axis) at each point on the performance axis (the horizontal axis). What is chiefly notable is that the curve for students of salariat origin always lies above that for students of intermediate-class origin, which in turn always lies above that for students of working class origin.

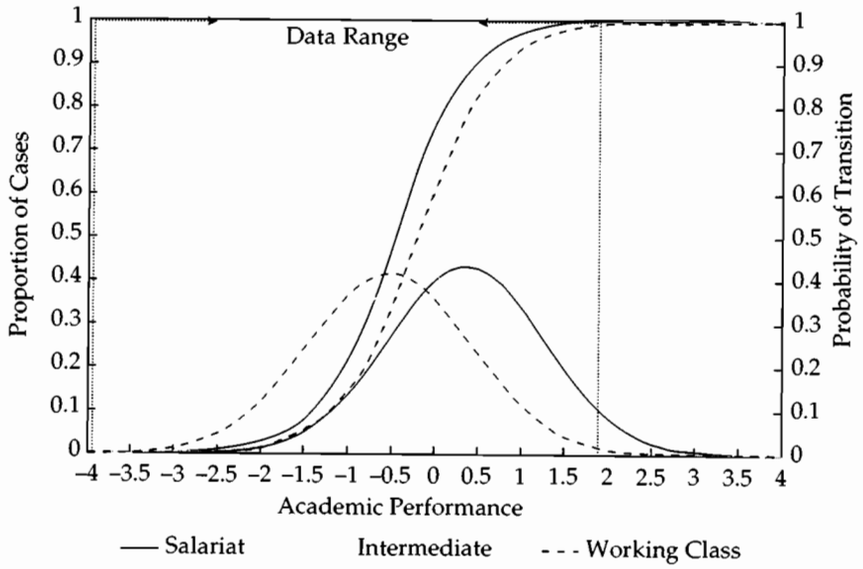
In other words, in 1974 students of more-advantaged class origins were more likely to take up A-level courses than were those of less-advantaged origins *at all levels of previously demonstrated ability*. The presence of such "secondary" effects in class differentials does therefore indicate that, at this time, class background—through whatever mechanisms—played a significant part in children's educational careers and thus in their eventual educational attainment *over and above* the influence it exerted on their actual performance at any particular stage. That is to say, an EBM was still some way off.

To investigate whether this situation has changed, we can turn to the results of identical analyses we have carried out using data from the 2001 Youth Cohort Study (YCS), a survey commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills and based on a probability sample of all young people in England and Wales who reached age sixteen in that year (see Jarvis, Exley, and Tipping 2005).

As can be seen from figure 3.2, the pattern of results that emerges is essentially the same as that shown in figure 3.1. In figure 3.2, the S-curves start on a steeper upward rise further to the left, because increasing proportions of students from all class backgrounds and at all levels of performance have gone on to A-level work. But the gaps between the curves are little changed. Thus, in 2001, as in 1974, the gap between the curves for students of salariat and working class backgrounds is at its widest—at some fifteen to twenty percentage points—at around, or a little above, the average level of performance.

In the light of these results, there is little reason to suppose that, over the last quarter of the twentieth century, demonstrated academic ability became of any greater importance, relative to class background, in determining the probability of students continuing to A-level courses. And insofar as secondary effects in class differentials in this crucial educational transition are found to persist, a lack of movement toward an EBM must in turn be implied. The ultimate distribution of educational attainment in the popu-

Figure 3.2 **Regression of Transition to A-Level Work on Academic Performance for Students from Three Different Class Backgrounds, 2001**



Source: Authors' calculations from Youth Cohort Study (YCS11) data set.
Note: N = 11,683.

lation will *not* reflect *only* academic performance. For students of less-advantaged class origins, the full realization of their academic potential will remain to some degree impeded.

Moreover, where data on differential educational attainment can be presented in the form of figures 3.1 and 3.2, it is in fact possible to move on to at least an approximate quantitative assessment of the relative importance of primary and secondary effects. Using a methodology that we have described in detail elsewhere (Erikson et al. 2005), we estimate (Jackson et al. 2007) that in the transition to A-level work over the period we cover secondary effects account for at least one-quarter, and possibly for up to as much as one-half, of class differentials, as these are conventionally measured by odds ratios.[8] In turn, we can calculate that if, for example, in 2001 an EBM *had* prevailed in England and Wales—that is, if only previously demonstrated ability (as we measure this) and not class background had determined the probability of continuation to A-level work—then even on our lowest estimate of the relative importance of secondary effects, 13 percent more students of

intermediate-class background and 20 percent more students of working class background would have made this transition. In other words, not only is movement toward an EBM difficult to discern, but the gap between this ideal and the prevailing social reality remains substantial.

Finally, in this regard it should be noted that secondary effects in themselves are by no means a British peculiarity (for a review of relevant research, see Goldthorpe 2007, vol. 2, ch. 2), and results from several analyses similar to the analysis here have confirmed that their importance is far from negligible (for example, for Sweden, see Erikson 2007; for the Netherlands, see Kloosterman et al. 2007; for other studies, see EQUALSOC, n.d.). It may thus be taken that the barriers to the realization of an EBM to which this body of research points are quite generally present, even though it is possible that societies may differ in the actual extent to which in this regard they fall short of the requirements of an EBM.

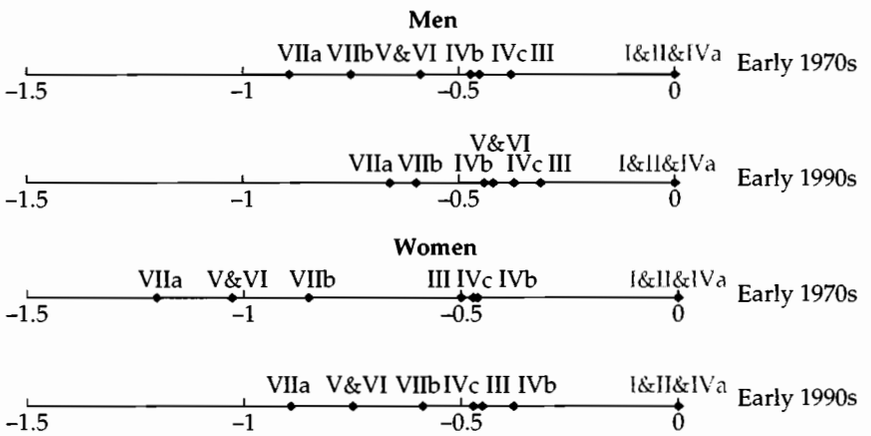
Educational Attainment and Level of Employment

If a society is moving toward an EBM, then the association between individuals' educational attainment and the level of employment, and thus class position, that they eventually achieve should be steadily strengthening. To investigate whether a trend of this kind is in evidence in contemporary British society, we turn, first, to results from repeated cross-sectional analyses from the early 1970s through to the early 1990s based on the data set of the General Household Survey (GHS) (see also Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005).[9]

Figure 3.3 shows coefficients, from multinomial logistic regression analyses, for the effects of educational qualifications on the chances of individuals being found in different classes of destination, with class of origin controlled. As can be seen, a seven-class version of the EGP schema is used, while educational qualifications are ordered according to an official seven-level classification that ranges from no qualifications to degree-level or equivalent.

The easiest way to understand the graphs presented is as follows. If education had *no* effect on class of destination, then all the points for different classes of destination would be piled up at zero, together with that for the reference class, I&II&IVa, which comprises the professional and managerial salariat plus employers. Correspondingly, the more these points are strung out to the left, the more difference education makes in regard to class of destination. As can be seen, education does indeed make a good deal of difference—the points *are* well strung out, and in a generally unsurprising way. For example, educational attainment clearly counts for more in determining the chances of someone ending up as an unskilled worker in class VIIa or VIIb rather than in the reference class than it does in determining the chances of someone ending up as a routine nonmanual worker in class III rather than in the reference class.

Figure 3.3 **Coefficients for the Partial Effects of Educational Qualifications on the Chances of Men and Women Age Twenty-Five to Fifty-Nine, Employed Full-Time, Being Found in Different Classes of Destination Relative to Being Found in Class I&II&IVa, with Class of Origin Controlled**

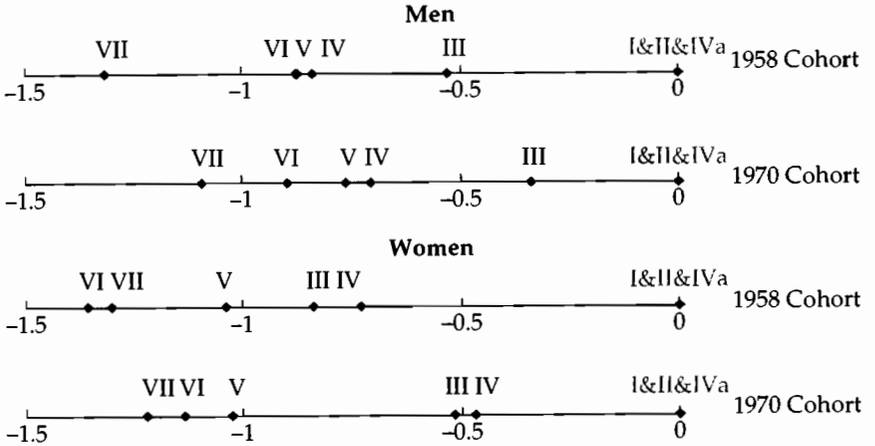


Source: Authors' compilations from General Household Study (GHS) data set.
Note: N = 38,614 men and 41,811 women.
Classes:
I&II&IVa—Professionals, managers, and employers
III—Routine nonmanual employees
IVb—Self-employed workers
IVc—Farmers
V&VI—Supervisors, technicians, and skilled manual workers
VIIa—Nonskilled manual workers
VIIb—Agricultural laborers

However, for present purposes, it is a further feature of the graphs that is of main significance: namely, that the points referring to destination classes are *less* strung out in the graphs for the 1990s than they are in the graphs for the 1970s. In other words, over the period covered the dependence of class position on educational attainment would appear not to be increasing but rather decreasing. Thus, if we were to translate from the log scale of the graphs into multiplicative terms, we would find that across this period the range of the estimated effects of education falls for men, from clearly above to clearly below a twofold effect, and for women from over a threefold effect to less than a two-and-a-half-fold one.

The analyses presented in figure 3.3 run only up to the early 1990s. To bring us more up-to-date and also to allow us to treat the issue that concerns

Figure 3.4 **Coefficients for the Partial Effects of Educational Qualifications on the Chances of Men and Women Employed Full-Time Being Found in Different Classes of Destination Relative to Being Found in Class I&II&IVa, with Class of Origin Controlled**



Source: Authors' compilations from National Child Development Study (NCDS) and British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70) data set.
Note: N = 6,123 men and 3,349 women.
Classes:
I&II&IVa—Professionals, managers, and employers
III—Routine nonmanual employees
IV—Self-employed workers
V—Supervisors and technicians
VI—Skilled manual workers
VII—Nonskilled manual workers and agricultural laborers

us in a different perspective, we can again turn to the data set of the NCDS, relating to children born in 1958, taken together with that of a follow-up study, the British Cohort Study 1970 (BCS70), which is based on all children born in Britain in one week in that year.

In figure 3.4, we show graphs that have an essentially similar form to those of figure 3.3—that is, they show coefficients, from multinomial logistic regressions, for the effects of educational qualifications on individuals' class positions, with their class of origin being controlled. The same educational classification is used as in figure 3.3, but a somewhat different version of the class schema—a six-category version rather than a seven-category one—has to be applied. And further, since we are here working with birth cohort rather than cross-sectional data, we are concerned with the class positions

that individuals had achieved at a particular age: age thirty-three for respondents in the NCDS (sweep of 1991) and age thirty for respondents in the BCS70 (sweep of 2000).[10]

Notwithstanding these differences, what is chiefly notable about the graphs of figure 3.4 is that they reveal essentially the same features as do those of figure 3.3. The points for the different destination classes are well strung out to the left, and in a sequence of a kind we might expect, but there is no indication that the level of individuals' educational qualifications is of increasing importance over time for the classes in which they are found. If anything, the contrary conclusion is again suggested. For men at least, the range of the estimated effects of education is clearly *lower* for those in the 1970 cohort than for those in the 1958 cohort—falling, in multiplicative terms, from almost a fourfold to around a threefold effect—and a similar decline for women also shows up, although the difference here falls just short of statistical significance.[11]

Once more, then, our empirical results must lead to the conclusion that in contemporary British society the realization of an EBM is not in fact under way. Whether we analyze repeated cross-sectional or birth cohort data, we find no evidence that the association between educational attainment and class position is strengthening in the way that would follow from the development of an EBM. In turn, then, there is little reason to believe that educational qualifications are becoming increasingly dominant in processes of social selection within labor markets and production units. In their personnel policies, employers appear not to be acting as the unswerving agents of an EBM. They are not, it seems, progressively increasing the weight that they give to the formal qualifications of employees, or potential employees, and to the exclusion of their other attributes.

Moreover, we would add that, although the results we report may strike some readers as counterintuitive and perhaps lead them to suspect that, if valid, they apply only to Britain, there are in fact no good grounds for taking such a view. Results of a broadly similar kind to those presented here—that is, results indicating a declining or at least an unchanging association between education and class position attained—have of late been reported for most other advanced societies for which relevant analyses have been undertaken (for European societies, see Breen and Luijkx 2004).

Educational Attainment and Level of Employment Across Social Origins

We come finally to the question of the strength of the association between educational attainment and level of employment for individuals of differing social origins. The results presented in the previous section show that, for individuals of all class origins, the association between education and

level of employment, as indicated by class position, has certainly not strengthened over recent decades. But now we must ask whether this association differs in its strength *across* class origins. In an EBM, it should obviously not do so. Individuals' education should determine their class destinations to the same (quite dominant) extent, whatever their class origins might be. Qualifications should have the same "payoff" for individuals of all class origins alike.

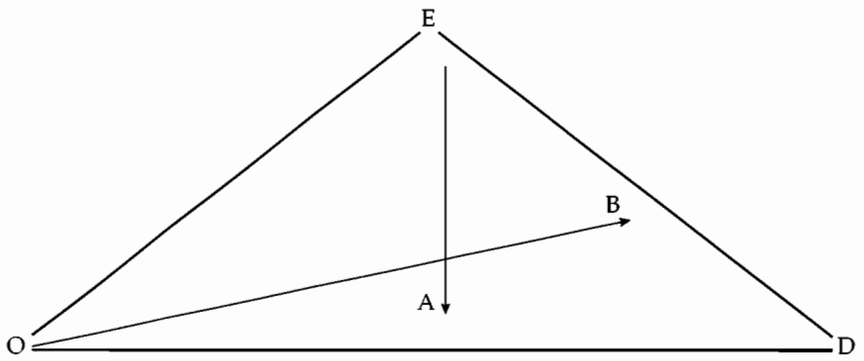
An issue that arises in this regard is that of whether, in the three-way relationship between class origins, educational attainment, and class destinations, there is an interaction effect. In fact, such an effect has been shown for many national cases through loglinear analyses of appropriate three-way contingency tables. However, this effect has then usually been interpreted in a way that, for present purposes at least, is not the most pertinent.

Figure 3.5 shows the three-way relationship in question, and the interpretation of the interaction effect so far most commonly given is that indicated by arrow A: that is, the strength of the origin-destination (OD) association is taken to vary with level of education (E). And given the interaction parameters that are typically returned, it can then further be said that the origin-destination association tends to be *weaker* the *higher* the level of education attained. For example, Michael Hout (1988) has reported that among American university graduates, the association between origins and destinations completely disappears: all of the association between O and D occurs at lower educational levels (for France, see Vallet 2004; for Sweden, see Breen and Jonsson 2007). The idea behind this interpretation of the OED interaction is that those individuals who attain higher levels of education are thus able to enter segments of the labor market in which, because of the technical demands of the work involved, selection does tend to be predominantly meritocratic—that is, education-based—and social background, in itself, counts for little.

However, an alternative interpretation can be suggested. Following arrow B in figure 3.5, we might say that the strength of the ED association varies with O. And if this interpretation is taken, then the interaction parameters typically returned would allow us to say that the association between education and class of destination tends to be *weaker* the *more advantaged* the class of origin. Here the underlying idea is the following. For children from less-advantaged backgrounds, whether or not they do well educationally is likely to be quite crucial for their chances of upward mobility, but for children from more-advantaged backgrounds, other resources may be available to help them maintain their parents' position even if their educational attainment is only modest (see Goldthorpe 2007, vol. 2, ch. 7).[12]

Furthermore, if we move from the loglinear modeling of contingency tables to a logistic regression approach, then conditioning on O rather than

Figure 3.5 Two Interpretations of the Interaction Effect in the OED Relationship



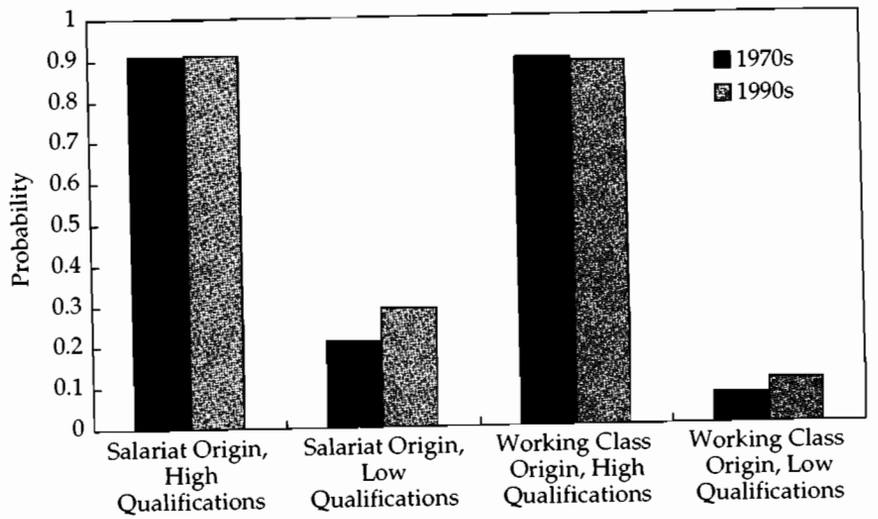
O = Class Origin
E = Educational Attainment
D = Class Destination

Source: Authors' compilation.

on E would seem the more natural way of treating the interaction (see Cox 1984). D is the dependent variable, and O and E are the explanatory variables, with O being treated as an "intrinsic" variable that is given (individuals cannot change their class origins) and E as the "treatment" variable on which individuals could in principle take a different value to that they actually have. (Individuals' educational attainment could be different depending on opportunities or choice.) So we then ask how the effect of E on D varies across different levels of O.

We have followed such a regression approach, using once more the General Household Survey data set—which gives us the advantage of relatively large numbers—in order to investigate the part played by education in access to the professional and managerial salariat (rather than the nonsalariat, excluding the self-employed) in Britain in the mid-1970s and during the period 1989 to 1992. We find, first of all, that having a high-level qualification—a degree or the equivalent—was in fact somewhat *less* predictive of access to the salariat by the 1990s than it was in the 1970s: in other words, we confirm our finding from our previous use of the GHS and the two birth cohort studies of a probably declining effect of education on class position attained. Second, however, we also find that, during both time periods, the importance for access to the salariat of having a degree was *less* for individuals who were born into the salariat than it was for individuals who originated outside the salariat. In other words, education is more important

Figure 3.6 Estimated Probabilities of Entering the Salariat (Rather Than the Nonsalariat, Excluding the Self-Employed) for Individuals of Differing Levels of Qualification and Class Origins



High qualifications = Degree level and above
Low qualifications = O level/GCSE or below

Source: Authors' compilation from General Household Surveys (GHS) data set.
Note: N = 71,074.

for intergenerational *upward mobility into* the salariat than it is for intergenerational *immobility within* the salariat.

In figure 3.6, we show some probabilities estimated under our logistic regression models when all control variables are held constant at their mean values.[13] It can be seen that individuals with degree-level qualifications have around a 90 percent chance of entering the salariat, regardless of whether they are of salariat origin or not, and that there is little difference in this respect between the 1970s and the 1990s. However, for individuals with relatively low educational attainment—those with no more than lower secondary qualifications—*their* chances of gaining access to the salariat do clearly differ according to their class origins. And it is further revealed that while poorly qualified individuals of salariat origin still had almost a 20 percent chance of being themselves found in the salariat in the 1970s, this rose to as much as a 35 percent chance in the 1990s.[14]

Once more, then, insofar as any change is apparent, it is clearly not in the direction of an EBM. Upward mobility into the salariat does appear to

be largely mediated through high-level qualifications, according to the principles of an EBM. But education is less important in maintaining intergenerational stability within the salariat—or, we might say, low educational attainment does not bring about the amount of *downward* mobility out of the salariat that an EBM would require. And at least up to the 1990s, this "deficit" in downward mobility would appear, if anything, to have been increasing.

Alternative Explanations of the Empirical Findings

In the foregoing, we have sought to show empirically that three processes of change essential to the creation of an EBM are not in fact evident in present-day Britain—nor, it would seem, in most other advanced societies. By way of conclusion, we turn to the question of how, in general terms, this situation is to be explained.

One possible line of argument would be to the effect that progress toward EBMs is no more than stalled. Barriers may stand in the way of their realization, but these are ones of a largely contingent kind that sooner or later will be overcome—by the fact that, as Bell would have it, modern, postindustrial societies are meritocracies in their functional logic. An opposing line of argument, however, would regard the barriers to EBMs as being of a more deeply rooted kind: that is, ones that could be overcome only by forceful political intervention or, indeed, ones that have to be regarded as integral to any society with a market economy and in turn a class structure. Consequently, these barriers cannot be expected to disappear simply with the passage of time. In what follows we try to spell out how these two rival arguments might be developed in relation to each of the three processes of change we have identified as crucial to the development of an EBM and to indicate why we believe that it is the second explanatory approach that is in general the more convincing.

To begin with social origins, academic ability and educational attainment, and, more specifically, the problem of persisting secondary effects in class differentials in such attainment, an argument might run on the following lines. The failure of students from less-advantaged backgrounds—and the failure of working class students especially—to take up opportunities for translating their ability into qualifications in the same way as do students from more-advantaged backgrounds reflects a low level of aspirations and, related to this, an inadequate appreciation of the economic returns that education brings. But, the argument would continue, such difficulties are to be seen as only transient ones. In time—through, say, various "demonstration effects"—these students will form more rational expectations of the returns to education, and their educational aspirations will thus rise.[15]

However, in contrast to this, secondary effects could in fact be seen as the outcome of action that is already of a quite rational kind. For students from less-advantaged backgrounds, taking up more ambitious educational options typically entails *a greater degree of risk*, in terms of potential costs and benefits, than it does for students from more-advantaged backgrounds. It is therefore entirely rational for, say, working class students to require a relatively high probability of success as a condition for pursuing more ambitious options, and their previous academic performance is the obvious indicator of this probability (for elaboration of this argument, see Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Breen and Yaish 2006; Goldthorpe 1996; for an evaluation of related evidence, see Goldthorpe 2007, vol. 2, ch. 4). It is in this way that secondary effects are chiefly to be explained, and the further implication then is that eliminating such effects will call for something more fundamental than change simply at the level of expectations and aspirations. It will be necessary, through appropriate policy measures, to reduce the inequalities in class conditions—in economic security, stability, and prospects—that create differential risk for young people in exploiting educational opportunities up to the full limits of their ability.[16] In other words, it will be necessary to return to what Michael Young saw as more genuine egalitarian commitments than those embodied in the idea of meritocracy, and in opposition to which, as we have noted, the "positive" version of meritocracy was developed.[17]

Second, as regards the apparently persisting tendency for employers to attach importance to attributes of employees or potential employees other than their educational qualifications, a functionalist position might be developed on such lines as these. For employers to act in ways that ignore the increasing requirement for formally warranted knowledge and skills in a modern economy has to be understood as merely a reflection of "traditional" attitudes or of various prejudices or biases on their part, and of a kind that cannot be indefinitely sustained. Given the rational and highly competitive character of modern economic life, employers who persist in applying non-meritocratic criteria in their personnel policies are unlikely to flourish or indeed survive.

In this case, the counterargument would turn on two main points. First, as forcefully maintained by Friedrich Hayek (1960, 1976), in a free-market economy it must rest with employers, and only with employers, to determine what counts as merit—or at least as productive value—in the case of their employees.[18] And second, in present-day economies employers may often in fact have good reasons for *not always* giving formal qualifications an overriding role in their selection procedures.

In earlier work (Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005), we have drawn on content analyses of several thousand job advertisements (see also Jackson 2002, 2007) in order to show that the attributes of individuals to which employers attach greatest weight do indeed vary, widely but quite

intelligibly, with the type of employment for which they are recruiting. And we have also shown (in further analyses of GHS data) that the more important qualifications are *in general* for access to a particular class of destination, the more variation there is in the importance of qualifications for access to different occupational subgroups *within* that class. Thus, while entry into the salariat does on average call for higher levels of qualification than entry into other classes, professional positions within the salariat are clearly more demanding of such qualifications than are managerial positions, and managerial positions in production and transport are more demanding than those in sales and personal services. There would, moreover, seem little reason for questioning the judgment that employers seemingly make that in certain positions cognitive or technical abilities of the kind most readily certified by formal qualifications are likely to be of less relevance—at least above some threshold level—than are various other attributes: for example, social and communication skills, general savoir faire, and a range of personal characteristics, whether of a physical, psychological, or subcultural kind, that involve "looking good and sounding right" (see Warhurst and Nickson 2001).

Moreover, insofar as employers do choose to focus on other attributes of employees or potential employees aside from their formal qualifications, this is not a tendency that would appear open to "correction" via public policy aimed at the promotion of an EBM. To return to Hayek's point, it is difficult in a liberal-democratic society to see not only how the imposition of any single criterion of merit, such as educational attainment, could be justified, but how it could in any event be achieved. "Merit," at least in the context of labor markets and production units, can be no more than whatever particular employers may deem it to be.[19]

Finally, then, as regards the greater part played by education in upward mobility into the salariat than in maintaining immobility within this class, it might once again be held that, even if this effect appears stable for the moment, it is still a residue of an earlier period. At one time, the argument would go, more-advantaged families could fairly readily protect their educationally less able or undermotivated children against any radical déclassement through such nonmeritocratic means as nepotism, patronage, "contacts," and so on, but in the context of modern, "knowledge-intensive" economies such strategies are outmoded and must eventually lose their effectiveness.

However, the alternative view here follows directly from what we have already said. As shown in figure 3.6, obtaining high-level qualifications is indeed the surest way for children of salariat origins to maintain their parents' position. But as also shown in figure 3.6, even if these children do not do well educationally, they still have some chances—far better than those of children of working class origins—of entering the salariat themselves. And this, we would suggest, is because they are more likely to have other

attributes that are of productive value—in particular, the "soft skills" and personal characteristics that employers are looking for in the kinds of work that have more "high-touch" than "high-tech" requirements. In other words, in this respect too, as well as that of educational attainment, the children of the salariat have a clear "edge" over the children of the working class. And it needs further to be recognized that despite all the talk of the knowledge-intensiveness of modern economies, it is in fact in the service sector, especially the personal services sector, rather than the science-based sector that the growth of employment at all levels tends at the present time to be strongest. Modern economies thus provide widening rather than narrowing opportunities for individuals who can meet employers' requirements for attributes of a kind less likely to have been learned in schools and colleges than acquired simply through socialization within appropriate family, community, and peer-group contexts.[20]

Moreover, it is difficult, again, to see on what basis any change in this situation might be sought or indeed proposed. The question of whether attributes acquired outside of education can be truly regarded as reflecting "merit" is not likely to be a matter of much concern to employers. And insofar as educationally underachieving children from advantaged class backgrounds are still protected against downward mobility by their general socialization, this does not involve practices, whether on the part of these children or their parents, that could be considered in any sense illegitimate.

Conclusions

The idea of education-based meritocracy may well continue to have appeal for some social commentators and party ideologues, although it would now appear to be attracting increasing criticism from those who, like Michael Young himself, find it philosophically problematic and morally questionable (see especially Barry 2005). But, however controversies over meritocracy may develop at a normative level, there is, we would maintain, little empirical basis for believing that modern societies are being transformed into EBMs, or indeed are likely to be so transformed. Some movement toward a more genuine equality of educational opportunity might be achieved that would be consistent with the realization of an EBM—although it would be equally consistent with the realization of more radical egalitarian principles under which education would be viewed in more than a merely instrumental light. And the kinds of policy intervention necessary to eliminate even secondary effects in class differentials in educational attainment—let alone those necessary to tackle the deeper problem of primary effects—would be likely to take proponents of an EBM precisely in the "socialist" direction they so clearly wish to avoid.

Furthermore, even if educational attainment did come more closely to reflect academic potential as well as demonstrated ability, other barriers to

the emergence of an EBM would remain, and these are barriers that would appear to lie beyond the reach of public policy in any form, at least within the context of free-market liberal democracies. In particular, the crucial role that has to be given to employers, rather than to governments and the state, in deciding what importance should attach to educational attainment in processes of social selection in labor markets and production units means that such selection is in fact likely to proceed according to a wide variety of criteria. In turn, it is likely that some of these criteria will be ones that could not be very plausibly linked to individual merit under any description, such as those, in the case we have taken, that favor attributes that are far less the result of ability and effort than of the happenstance of socialization, but that are nonetheless of real productive value to employers in certain economic sectors.

Our main conclusion, then, is that the idea of an EBM is likely to remain in large part merely utopian or dystopian, according to sociopolitical taste. For those who share in the beliefs and values that led Michael Young, half a century ago, to expose the psychological dangers of the idea of meritocracy in his brilliant fantasy, this conclusion will be a welcome one—even though they will be aware that many dangers remain from continued misguided attempts to pursue meritocracy. However, a further implication is that for those who would wish to see prevailing economic and social inequalities provided with some form of moral grounding, the efforts of the American liberals of the 1970s must be recognized as steadily losing in persuasive force. If such inequalities are to be given some further legitimation than that supplied in classical liberalism—that is, as the often arbitrary and essentially amoral consequences of acceptance of the overriding value of liberty—then some other basis than that of educationally achieved merit will need to be discovered.

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Notes

1. Readers unfamiliar with the details of British social history may wish to know that the original "Peterloo" massacre occurred on August 16, 1819—four years after the battle of Waterloo—when a crowd of over fifty thousand, gathered at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, to hear radical speakers campaigning for universal manhood suffrage and the repeal of the Corn Laws, was charged by cavalry of the local militia. Eleven people were killed and over four hundred injured.

2. In arguing thus, Bell was to a large extent simply attaching the idea of "meritocracy" to lines of thinking already quite current in American sociology; see, for example, Parsons (1960, chs. 3, 4; 1967, chs. 4, 15) and Blau and Duncan (1967, ch. 12).
3. Some tension may, however, be observed in Bell's position in that at certain points (for example, Bell 1973, 453) he stresses the importance of individual demonstrations of competence in occupational roles as against mere "credentialism," while in general still maintaining that educational institutions, and especially the universities, are the key institutions of postindustrial societies. It is also important to note that Bell supposes that the classical liberal view of the market "as the arbiter of differential reward, based on scarcity or demand," is now becoming outmoded "as economic decisions become politicized and the market replaced by social decisions"—and that, as a consequence, economic inequality will decrease (451). In this, as in other respects, Bell's "venture in social forecasting" was not very successful.
4. It may also be noted that in an American edition of *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Young (1994) took the opportunity in his preface to note and deplore American misperceptions of the point of the book; see also Briggs (2001).
5. It is a feature of the class schema that it can be used in different, more or less elaborated, versions depending on the analytical task at hand and also depending, more importantly perhaps, on the quantity and quality of the data available. As will be seen, in the analyses that follow several different versions are used. In each case, descriptive class labels are provided. Readers wishing for further information on the construction of the classes of the schema and for the results of various validation exercises may consult the sources cited in the text.
6. For further details on this research, see Jackson et al. (2007). For information on the NCDS and other British cohort studies, see the website of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk.
7. We concentrate on these grades because, while students can, and do, take examinations in widely differing numbers and varieties of subjects, almost all take English and mathematics. Moreover, grades achieved in these subjects can be shown to correlate quite highly with those achieved overall. We here work with the most basic, three-class version of the EGP schema in order to maintain adequate numbers within each class.
8. Our methodology exploits the fact that normal and logistic curves of the kinds used in figures 3.1 and 3.2 to show class-specific levels of academic performance and transition propensities (given performance) can be (numerically) integrated. This allows us to make counterfactual analyses, substituting the performance or transition curve of one class for that of another, which in turn provides a basis on which the relative importance of primary and secondary effects can be determined, although, for reasons we set out, with some important qualifications.
9. These analyses cannot be continued to a later date since, unfortunately, after 1992 the GHS no longer collected any information on respondents' social origins.

10. It is usually supposed in mobility research that by their early thirties men have reached a stage of "occupational maturity," following which the probability of further change in occupation of a kind that would also imply a change in class position falls off rather sharply. But this age range is more problematic in the case of women, since many are likely to be in the stage of active motherhood, at which time, if not out of the labor market, they may take employment at a lower level than that in which they were previously engaged.

11. It may be noted that the effects of education appear generally stronger in figure 3.4 than in figure 3.3. This is likely to result in part from the more restricted reference category used in figure 3.4—the salariat rather than the salariat plus employers. But, further, the cross-sectional data on which figure 3.3 is based cover many individuals who were born in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, and we would think it very probable that educational attainment did play a greater part in determining the class positions of those born in the second half of the century, if only because of the previously very low variance in such attainment. Recognition of this point does not, however, detract from our argument that there is little evidence of a *continuing* increase, up to the present, in the strength of the association between educational qualifications and class position.

12. Low ED associations tend also to arise with children of the petty bourgeoisie—small employers and self-employed workers—as well as with those of the salariat, since in this case there is the possibility of the direct intergenerational transmission of the family business or of capital deriving from it. It should be added here that the two interpretations of the OED interaction are not incompatible—both are indeed based on the same interaction parameters—and so it is not surprising to find that some authors shift between them. For example, Hout (1988, 1388) at one point notes that "the log-odds on a higher-status destination versus a lower-status one rise sharply with origin status among workers who lack a college degree."

13. The full results from the regression models from which the probabilities shown in figure 3.6 derive are available from the authors on request.

14. This change is driven by the generally weakening effect of education on class destinations, not by a strengthening of the main effects of class origin or of the interaction term.

15. Arguments on these lines are advanced in Britain by New Labour politicians and some of their economic advisers when, for example, they seek to downplay the effects of rising costs on the readiness of (qualified) students of working class background to enter university.

16. We recognize the possibility that, in different educational systems, secondary effects may be created in other ways that would call for different policy responses: for example, in the American case (see Lareau and Weininger, this volume), through more-advantaged parents interfering more often and more forcefully with teachers and administrators than less-advantaged parents are able or ready to do in order to influence decisions affecting their children.

17. And of course from this same egalitarian standpoint measures designed to reduce primary effects too—such as high-quality preschool programs for children from disadvantaged backgrounds—would likewise be given priority over any celebration of meritocracy (see Barry 2005, pt. 3).

18. American liberals, it should be noted, were greatly perturbed by Hayek's critique of meritocracy in that it was made not from a standpoint that could be denigrated as "socialist" but rather from that of classic European liberalism. See, for example, the despairing essay of Irving Kristol (1970) and Hayek's ruthlessly honest reply (Hayek 1976, 73–74).

19. The societies that have perhaps come closest to being EBMs were the post-war communist societies of Eastern and Central Europe that operated "command" economies and whose governments were able, at least in principle, to closely coordinate educational and manpower policy. But how functionally efficient this system was is, of course, open to serious question, and exceptions to meritocracy in these societies, most obviously in the case of children of the nomenklatura, must also be noted.

20. More detailed analyses that we have undertaken show that children of salariat origin with low educational qualifications who nonetheless gain access to the salariat are disproportionately found, by around a factor of two, in managerial positions in services. Those children of working class origin with low qualifications who enter the salariat are also disproportionately found in these same positions to a similar degree but, as we know from figure 3.6, constitute a far smaller minority.

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