Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Globalisation, Societies and Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgse20

# Education cleavages, or market society and the rise of authoritarian populism?

Susan L. Robertson & Matias Nestore

**To cite this article:** Susan L. Robertson & Matias Nestore (2022) Education cleavages, or market society and the rise of authoritarian populism?, Globalisation, Societies and Education, 20:2, 110-123, DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2021.1955662

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1955662



Published online: 19 Jul 2021.

GLOBALISATION, SOCIETIES AND EDUCATION
2022, VOL. 20, NO. 2, 110–123
https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2021.1955662

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# Education cleavages, or market society and the rise of authoritarian populism?

Susan L. Robertson and Matias Nestore

University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores how, in what ways, and with what outcomes, deep structural transformations have reconstituted higher education in England, and are deeply implicated in the rise of authoritarian populism. We focus particularly on the ways in which our understandings and lived experiences of class, social mobility, meritocracy, social inequality, and social justice have been transformed. We explore three transformations in higher education that have created fertile conditions for the rise of authoritarian populism: (i) the individualizing of the self and neoliberal ethics; (ii) the erasure of collective class politics and the creation of a new class identity based on consumption; (iii) the creation of a neoliberal meritocratic social order. We argue that cleavage theory which links level of education to contemporary populism is too dichotomous (educated cosmopolitan versus low-education nationalist). Such accounts overlook the extent to which three decades of neoliberalism and the creation of a market society has produced new social inequalities that are paradoxically normalised whilst fuelling a politics of resentment [Cohen, Jean L. 2019. "Populism and the Politics of Resentment." *Jus Cogens* 1 (1): 5–39.].

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 8 July 2021
Accepted 9 July 2021

**KEYWORDS**
Populism; higher education; meritocracy; social class; market society; neoliberalism

## Introduction

As Geiselberger (2017) points out in his aptly titled edited book – *The Great Regression* – we are living through a period of such dramatic change few could have imagined possible a decade ago. Brexit, Trumpism, the rise of extreme right movements, the resurgence of nationalisms and xenophobia, and an assault on democracy and liberal values, have all cast long shadows over many societies around the world (Brubaker 2017). Steger and James (2020: 188) have called this the 'Great Unsettling' – shorthand for ' … the intensifying dynamics of instability, disintegration, insecurity, dislocation, relativism, inequality, and degradation that are threatening familiar lifeworlds' (188). These defractions and paradoxes have led Steger and James (2020: 188) to observe, ' … we are witnessing processes of contradiction and unsettling that require new lines of enquiry leading to alternative understandings'.

Whereas in the 1970s Hall (1979) referred to a similar period of unsettling as 'the great moving right show', over this past decade we now witness in countries like the UK, France, USA, and Brazil, amongst others, the move to the political Right of a decisive number of voters which has catapulted populist leaders into power (Piketty 2018). Railing against the cosmopolitan elites as the 'guilty party' – populist leaders like Donald Trump in the US, Nigel Farage in the UK, and Jair Bolsonaro

**CONTACT** Matias Nestore matiasnestore@gmail.com University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

argue it is this class who has sold off the wealth of the nation generated by 'the people', and denied them their self-respect (Steger 2019: 126). That Trump, Farage and others were themselves wealthy elites who had benefitted from three decades of neoliberal globalization is somehow overlooked. Instead, populist resentments were directed toward the enemies – the educated elites above and unwelcome strangers within – under an anti-globalization umbrella (Steger 2019).

As writers in this Special Issue all point out, the current rise of right-wing populism based on discourses of Nation and ethno-religious identities (Chacko 2018; Malešvic 2019) has generated a resurgence in debates over how best to understand populism (as ideology, strategy, or political style) (cf. Mudde 2004; de la Torre and Mazzoleni 2019; Steger 2019). It has also posed important questions around causes (Cohen 2019). Broadly, there is some agreement that nearly three decades of deep social and structural transformation, given specific form by the globalizing of neoliberalism, the rise of globally competitive knowledge economies, the making of market societies, and new forms of identity-making, has expanded the opportunities for populism and its outcomes.

We take Steger and James (2020) challenge as the starting point for this paper. Our argument is that higher education is deeply implicated in the culture of the new capitalism and the production of populist politics. This is particularly visible in those societies where higher education has been mobilised to create globally-competitive knowledge economies whilst its internal dynamics are governed using market logics (Robertson 2020). Bovens and Wille (2018) explicitly link higher education to populist voting behaviour, arguing this education cleavage – of well-educated cosmopolitans on one side and low-education/low-income nationalists on the other – both reflects and shapes populist politics (Bovens and Wille 2018). Piketty (2018) adopts a similar argument. Where once left-wing political parties were associated with low-education/low-income voters, now high-education elites vote for the left, whilst high-income elites now vote for the right. This divide places well-educated cosmopolitans on one side versus low-education/low-income nationalists on the other. Whilst interesting arguments, in our view, Bovens and Wille (2018) and Piketty (2018, 2020) tend to see higher education in dichotomous terms. In essence, they 'black box' higher education rather than explore the processes at work in the sector that are implicated in authoritarian populism.

In our paper we explore three socio-structural transformations in higher education which shape the cultural politics of the new capitalism and fuel populist politics: (i) the decoupling of collective class politics and ethics, and the articulation of a neoliberal ethics of the self (Magalhaes and Stoer 2003; Fraser 2009, 2017) which prioritises competition and entrepreneurialism (Smith 2000; Fraser 2017; Angebauer 2019); (ii) the transformation of education into a consumer good valorizing choice and the fetishizing of consumption as a new form of class identity; and (iii), the rise neoliberal meritocracy (Littler 2017; Martini and Robertson 2021) which legitimates unequal educational outcomes through the narrative of individual effort (Mijs 2019; Sandel 2020). We argue that taken together, and in the context of a sense of deepening crises that included the economy, refugees, the war on terror, democracy, security, and anxiety created a perfect storm (Brubaker 2017: 377) that was exploited by the populist right.

## From state-organised capitalism to knowledge economy and market society

A great deal has been written about the transformation of education over the past forty years following a shift in the post-war OECD welfare states and ex-colonial developmental states away from state-organised capitalism toward a free-market economy. At the heart of this account are two imaginaries: advanced neoliberalisation as an organising ideology aimed at creating and normalizing market societies (Slater and Tonkiss 2001; Leys 2003), and the development and enhancement of knowledge-based economies (Robertson 2009). How and why did this happen, and what have been the implications for higher education in the UK, and its relationship to authoritarian populism?

A key moment indicating a dramatic shift in class power was the iconic global 'oil shocks' in the 1970s (Harvey 1989). However, by the late 1960s, it was evident that economic growth in the

industrialised world had slowed, with internal markets saturated, and profit margins falling (Streeck 2014). Firms went in search of new export markets for surplus output and relocated to places with lower labour costs and fewer government regulations (Harvey 1989, 141–142; Peck 2018).

The 1970s global recession opened up a new terrain for political and economic struggles – between Hayekian neo-liberals and Keynesians (Hobsbawm 1994, 409), and subaltern groups (gender/ethnicity/race) opposed to their subordination to bureaucratic, patriarchal, and racial structures that they deemed forms of violence (Fraser 2009). Though a Hayekian victory was not immediate, Peck (2013) argues the continuing shortfalls of Keynesianism (one size fits all bureaucratic governing/state patriarchy) created a set of conditions that tilted in the direction of those claiming liberal freedom through the market, on the one hand, and calls for the recognition of difference beyond class (Fraser 2009), on the other.

> Rejecting the exclusive identification of injustice with class maldistribution, second-wave feminists joined other emancipatory movements to burst open the restrictive, economistic imaginary of state-organized capitalism. Politicizing 'the personal', they expanded the meaning of justice, reinterpreting as injustices social inequalities that had been overlooked, tolerated or rationalized since time immemorial. (Fraser 2009, 103)

As Fraser (2009, 97–98) went on to argue, the unravelling of the critique by second-wave feminism, and the selective enlistment of recognition and identity concerns over class, converged with an 'emerging new form of capitalism' (100). Fraser was later to describe this development as progressive neoliberalism, where individual identity politics over-rides class.

It can be shown that the basis for a new economic development model for the West was not immediately obvious, though there were contenders (cf. Robertson 2009). This included the idea of a knowledge-driven economy (OECD 1996; Foray 2004), with higher education as its engine, alongside a well-educated, creative class (Florida 2002) of symbolic analysts (Reich 1991) as its energy and fuel. At the same time, higher education sectors were being refashioned through the competition state's (Cerny 1997) rolling out of neoliberalism to create institutional efficiencies, while universities were tasked with investing in talent and driving innovation in a global 'race to the top' (Sainsbury 2007).

Arguably one of the more successful European countries in transforming key aspects of social life into a market society has been England.[1] By 2003, the creation of a higher education market was legitimated by narratives like public savings, fairness to those not accessing universities, and a 'graduate premium'.[2] According to Government, the urgent policy question had become how to '… widen access and sustain and improve standards of university excellence in an increasingly pressured global context and in a more constrained public spending environment' (Department of Business Innovation and Skills 2009, 3). In other words, how best to open up more places in higher education without increasing the longer-term financial burden on the government. This question, first placed on the table in 1997 via the Dearing Review (Dearing 1997), continued to appear on the policy agendas of both political parties, though after the 2008 financial crisis, a discourse of austerity legitimated cuts in spending in social policy arenas and boosted arguments for the creation of higher education markets.

Indeed, it was the financial crisis, alongside an already existing case for HE efficiency, that set the terms of reference for the 2010 *Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance* (led by John Browne, former Chief Executive of oil and gas multinational, BP). The Browne Review (Browne 2010) built into its recommendations the withdrawal of the annual block grant to social sciences, humanities, and arts (with science and technology protected). It also recommended lifting the ceiling on under-graduate student fees to enable universities to charge full fees. Fee increases were justified with the following observation: that in 2006, the ceiling of the Graduate Student Contribution had been raised to £3000, and that this had not discouraged students from seeking places. Instead, demand for student places had increased (Browne 2010, 20). The Review proposed a readjustment of the student loan system which placed the ultimate burden on students of the costs of their undergraduate degrees. The effect of setting an upper limit (£9000 at the time;

now £9,250) meant most universities in the sector, irrespective of their mission, status or social class intake, charge students at or close to the ceiling, and not the recommended £6000.

Importantly, these new funding arrangements opened the door to for-profit private providers of higher education to enter the sector, whose students could now access the state-backed student loan book.[3] Prior to this, for-profit providers had been excluded. Through processes of progressive commodification and financialization, the English higher education sector was inching closer toward being organized using market principles: of choice and competition. Streeck (2014) shows that the shift in power from the state to the market eventually gave rise to new levels of public and household debt. The privatization of education debt to households was made possible by more generous opportunities for access to credit and unprecedented levels of indebtedness (Streeck 2017). Precarity and indebtedness are not simply statistical representations of a state of affairs. They are lived experiences and mediate our understandings ourselves and our relations to others.

In concluding this section, we would be remiss in not pointing to the extent to which higher education was itself not only enrolled in policing the war on terror but was also legally obliged to monitor and report potential radicalization of terrorists through programmes like Prevent (Robertson 2020). A surveillance culture in the academy around us and them is deeply divisive and has created further ruptures and fissures that have fed anxieties and resentments.

Neoliberalism and new forms of imperialism thus set in motion the unravelling of the modern social contract, whilst the extension of capitalism into previously decommodified social policy realms, such as higher education, has reshaped both institutional life and the life-worlds of individuals. Sennett (2006) describes this shift as the culture of the new capitalism, characterized by competitive individualism, the development of entrepreneurship and talent, and innovation. It is this culture that was to produce a competitive knowledge-based economy and market society has given shape to new forms of social stratification and cleavage along educational lines (Bovens and Wille 2018).

## *Cleavage as a social and political concept*

A number of researchers have sought to explain the rise of authoritarian populism in Europe, the UK, and the USA, through an exploration of shifts in attitudes and voting patterns of different social groups. They argue the traditional distinction between 'right' and 'left' leaning voting aligned with political parties is becoming obsolete, and that the new political divides are the manifestation of an educational cleavage (Bovens and Wille 2018; Wille and Bovens 2019).

The concept of cleavage was first put forward by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) to describe ' … a specific type of conflict in democratic politics that is rooted in the social structural transformations that have been triggered by large-scale processes' (Bornschier 2009, 1). Structural transformations have included the emergence of nation states, and the Industrial Revolution. Wille and Bovens (2019, 3) argue that in modern democracies we can see a ' … socio-economic cleavage over the distribution of economic resources' giving rise to political conflict, for example around social class and property ownership. Other cleavages include religion (e.g. Catholic versus Protestant in the Netherlands) and language (e.g. Flemish versus Francophone in Belgium). The broad argument is that as societies modernise, traditional cleavages erode, though researchers disagree as to whether cleavages have disappeared altogether, or whether new cleavages are emerging whose divides are underpinned by new structures.

Recent research and conceptual analyses of Western societies point to a shift in the structures that underpin new political divides so as to now include age, generations, gender, new cultural professionals (Deegan-Krause 2006), and education levels (cf. Bornschier 2010; Regt, Smits, and Mortelmans 2012; Piketty 2018). Wille and Bovens (2019), for example, argue a new cultural and social divide in Western societies is emerging based on level of education which translates into well-paid positions in the labour market. It is this cleavage, they argue, between those who are well-educated and those who are not, which explains their different interests, attitudes and political preferences

around immigration, ethnic diversity, and European integration. These differences now manifest in two distinct social groups with significant attitudinal differences: well-educated 'cosmopolitans' versus less-well educated and low-income 'nationalists' (Bovens and Wille 2018). Cosmopolitans are presented as more tolerant and open-minded on issues of migration, religious, and ethnic, and thus less populist in their political imaginaries. Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (2007, 569) reflect on why this might be the case. They suggest that knowledge, cognitive skills, cultural competences and tastes, all emphasised in institutions of higher education, create new status groups which in turn become more homogenous in lifestyle, life chances and attitudes. The division between cosmopolitans' and nationalists' attitudes coincides with the education gap – between those who are well-educated and those with a lower secondary school-level education, and populist voting behaviour which is argued to be one based on resentment about being looked down on. Populist leaders have exploited this resentment by claiming to act in the name of the people and against the elites.

Brubaker (2017: 362) describes this as a vertical form of opposition characteristic of Mudde's (2004) definition of populism; of 'the people' against the elites. It neglects what Brubaker calls a horizontal opposition between 'the people' and outside forces – such as migrants, asylum seekers, or terrorists.

In rather different kinds of critique of Bovens and Wille (2018), as well as Kuppens et al. (2018), provide evidence from a series of experimental studies which challenges the view that the well-educated are morally enlightened and less prejudiced compared to their less-educated counterparts. Their findings undermine the simple dichotomous reading of populism suggested by Bovens and Wille (2018). Kuppens et al. (2018) studies reveal more that the more highly educated show more education intergroup bias than do the less educated; that the less educated are evaluated more negatively than the poor or the working class by the well-educated; and that the well-educated demonstrate that perceived personal responsibility for one's educational level plays an important role in evaluations of less well-educated people. Kuppens et al. argue that these results have important consequences for the changing nature of social inequality, and citizens' attitudes to inequality.

> If education is regarded as being an individual's own responsibility, then people are likely to be less critical of social inequality that stems from differences in education. Relatedly, more highly educated status groups can use references to education as a means to justify and legitimise their position. (Kuppens et al. 2018, 445)

In recent work Thomas Piketty (2018; see also 2020) also engages with the link between higher education and populism. He argues that one might have expected to see rising political demand for redistribution following the rise of income inequality over the past three decades. Instead, he notes, we see various forms of xenophobic populism and identity-based politics. Piketty (2018, 43–44) draws on data from post electoral surveys in the UK, US, and France, and using the political parties/political cleavage literature, argues there has been a shift in voting patterns to a multiple elite system of a highly educated elite who have increasingly moved from the Right to the Left (referred to as the Brahmin Left), whilst the less well educated/ low-income voters have moved from the Left to the Right. High income/high wealth elites (referred to as Merchant Right) have remained on the Right. He argues that this reveals a complete realignment of the party system along 'globalists' (high education/high income) vs 'nativist' (low education/low income) lines (Piketty 2018, 45). Like Bovens and Wille (2018) and Kalmijn and Kraaykamp (2007), Piketty (2020) argues new political cleavages have emerged out of structural shifts that include the rise of globalisation/migration, on the one hand, and the expansion of higher education, on the other. So whilst Piketty gestures in the direction of both vertical and horizonal oppositions (see Brubaker 2017: 362) fuelling contemporary populisms, he is unable to show the processes at work giving rise to these outcomes.

We also have other concerns. We agree that the expansion of higher education and allied credentials in Western societies over the past three decades has paralleled changes in the organisation of work, giving rise to a different basis of access to the professions, and to well-paid jobs. However, education cleavage theorists do not pay sufficient attention to neoliberalism's distinct social ontology and the creation of market societies characterised by deep social inequalities (Mijs 2019),

including education inequalities. In essence, higher education is both 'black boxed' and highly dichotomised, whilst assumptions about the well-educated versus the less well educated are energized through normative tropes (open versus closed).

In the UK context, studies by Dorling (2016) show that the 'leave' vote in the Brexit Referendum included voters in the deindustrialized north and even larger numbers in the wealthier south. Dorling blames more than three decades of cuts in public spending in the UK that have increased economic and education inequalities. Antonucci et al. (2017) also provide evidence that the leave vote is associated more with intermediate levels of education rather than low or absent education, as suggested by Bovens and Wille (2018). Furthermore, with growing differentiation in higher education – between super – elite (Oxbridge), elite (Russell Group), the post-1992 comprehensives (million plus), and the for-profit alternative providers (Fielden and Middlehurst 2017), we see very different kinds of opportunities for using one's investment in elite schooling and higher education to access a well-paid job and get on in society. Inequalities had widened by 2017 and led Alan Milburn (2017) to declare that Britain was emerging yet again as a deeply divided nation. In our view, this was an outcome of the making of a market society. The issue to be explored is how these injustices are legitimated, and for our purposes, the role higher education plays in this.

## *Opening the black box of UK higher education*

In this section, we set out to open the black box of UK higher education to explore three socio-structural transformations in higher education which shape the cultural politics of the new capitalism: (i) the decoupling of collective class politics and ethics, and the articulation of a neoliberal ethics of the self (Magalhaes and Stoer 2003; Fraser 2009, 2017) which prioritizes competition and entrepreneurialism (Smith 2000; Fraser 2017; Angebauer 2019); (ii) the transformation of education into a consumer good valorizing choice and fetishizing consumption as a new form of class identity; and (iii), the rise of neoliberal meritocracy (Littler 2017; Martini and Robertson 2021) which legitimates unequal educational outcomes through the narrative of individual effort (Mijs 2019; Sandel 2020).

(1). Transforming politics: from collective moral order to an ethic of the (entrepreneurial) self

Davies' definition of neoliberalism which we referred to earlier argues that it involves a transformation in social norms and social orders through the use of competition as both principle and ethos. Similarly, Harvey (2005, 2) argues neoliberalism is ' … a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework which is characterised by strong property rights, free market, and free trade'. However, despite this more capacious definition, Angebauer (2019, 51) notes that Harvey does not develop his analysis of neoliberalism beyond representing it as an ideology driving class struggle, despite acknowledging the importance of neoliberalism also as an ethic.

To understand the pervasive effects of neoliberalism, as both ideology and a particular kind of rationality or ethic, we need to flesh out what kind of rationality it is, what is at stake, and how it is constitutive of new structures and subjectivities in higher education. In essence, we need to ask what kind of logics, practices and ethics are at the heart of this rationality? Like Davies (2017), Angebauer (2019) argues what ties the different forms of neoliberalism together are two key principles: the universal principle of competition, and entrepreneurialism. Competition as a cultural narrative places individuals, departments, institutions, nations and regions into a Darwinian relationship with others such that the survival of the fittest is self-styled around an entrepreneurial self. Competition is at the heart of the world university rankings, the research excellence frameworks, 'best professor' competitions, the best student awards, best city, and so on.

Competition is also the logic built into the myriad ranking systems that derive their power from a vertically-organized system of measurement that presumes each entity is equal, then compares and represents those at the top (winners) and those at the bottom (losers) so as to drive improvement (Sorensen and Robertson 2020). Yet stripping out complexity erases differences, suggesting the terrain on which individuals compete is relatively flat, and a fair process (Friedman 2005). This implies there are no spatially structured geographic differences, that markets are equitable and apolitical, and that in market societies each individual has an equal opportunity to flourish if they invest in themselves. This leads to the second point – the neoliberal subject is distinctly entrepreneurial. It is the entrepreneur who figures as the hero of the neoliberal narrative of universal competition in higher education. Yet as Brown (2015) observes, the neoliberal self is an intensely constructed and governed piece of human capital, tasked with improving and leveraging its competitive positioning, and with it, enhancing its own monetary and non-monetary portfolio value.

Angebauer (2019) points to a further articulation of the ethic that neoliberals converge on: ' … the choice of an institutional framework of market society – property rights, among others, is subject to the same rationale as the choices within the market'. Neoliberals invoke Locke's theory of the self as a form of property, and self-ownership a condition for freedom. This implies ownership of oneself as an ' … entrepreneurial subject, running its own existence like a firm through the acquisition, investment and reassessment of human capital' (Angebauer 2019, 56). The ownership of oneself as property implies one's right to sell oneself. Human capital contracts are examples here where individuals 'sell' to investors a share of their future earnings (Angebauer 2019; Robertson and Komjlenovic 2016) in exchange for investing in the seller's cost of higher education. Whilst implying an individual's freedom is derived from one's ownership of oneself as property, there is considerable evidence that certain individuals (white, male, middle, and upper class) are likely to have a higher value in the wider labour market.

The more disturbing aspect is the ethical impoverishment that follows such assumptions about human beings, which is deeply depoliticizing and yet highly political in character. Not only does the focus on the individual and an ethic of conduct in relation to the market install a regime of self-censorship, but it undermines the capacity for class identity and collective action (Smith 2000). As Lazzarato (2012) points out, to make an enterprise of oneself means taking responsibility for the risk of unemployment, poverty, precariousness and low wages, with the 'entrepreneurial self' potentially giving way to the 'indebted self'. As Brubaker (2017: 377) points out, these are the ingredients of a perfect storm – the explosion of authoritarian populism.

## (2). Transforming class identity: from a social relation to act of (education) consumption

The rise of neoliberalism, whose agenda was in part to use markets to tame politics, had the effect of blunting the emancipatory potential of the 1960s and 1970s social movements through the ways in which class, political economy and the state were downplayed (Fraser 2009). Instead, a new cultural politics emerged around difference and identity which seemed to thrive alongside and even coalesce with the rise of neoliberalism. As Fraser notes: 'What had begun as a needed corrective to economism devolved in time into an equally one-sided culturalism' (2009, 108) that was now disconnected from a critique of capitalism.

At the same time, capitalism was remaking itself, with the bureaucratic hierarchies that characterized Fordism giving way to horizontal teams and flexible networks in the growing services sectors whose work was distributed globally (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Sennett 2006).

> The political divide that mattered … was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. In an open world, success depends on education, on equipping yourself to compete and win in a global economy. This means national governments must ensure that everyone has an equal chance to get the education on which success depends. (Sandel 2020)

Where strong class identities tied to production had characterized the post war years until the 1970s, now new identity claims have emerged in a context of an open economy and competitive

individualism, and the promise of the new cosmopolitanism. The increased mobility of money, goods and people, paved the way for the process of the financialization of the economy (Andreotti, Benassi, and Kazepov 2018, 11).

> Those who reaped the economic bounty of global markets, supply chains and capital flows had come to rely less and less on their fellow citizens, as producers and consumers … As the winners of globalization pulled away, they practiced their own kind of social distancing. (Sandel 2020, 5)

In considering Sandel's argument, higher education is key because it is now the premier sorting machine in the open economy (Sandel 2020). If access to high-paying jobs is mediated through education in prestigious positions, then higher education and being educated now plays an important part in the relationship between those who have risen and those who have been left behind. As competition has increased and deemed central to higher education, then elite institutions are particularly targeted by those from the wealthy classes as a mechanism to secure their movement into the labour market, and especially those sectors with high-paying jobs.

In this sense, education has taken on the status of a positional good (Brown 2000). Getting ahead in education and the labour-market demands ongoing investments of time, resources, and networks. Access to elite universities and advantage in the UK is profoundly shaped by what kind of school a student has attended. Montacute and Cullinane (2018, 11) show that in 2015, 80% of the students who attend Oxbridge were in the two highest social classes, with Oxford and Cambridge having the smallest numbers of students from state schools of all UK universities. Geography also matters; the two Oxbridge universities offer close to half of their places to students applying from London and the South-East. As Montacute and Cullinane (2018) note, these disparities in intake into the elite institutions are the outcome of complex processes that those without cultural, social, and economic, capital find impenetrable. Just 8 top schools (private) have as many Oxbridge acceptances as some 2894 schools and colleges put together (Montacute and Cullinane 2018, 20).

Furthermore, those who come from higher income versus lower income households, even if both attend an elite university, will fare differently in the wider labour market after graduating from university (up to 60% more for males; 45% more for females) (Britton et al. 2016). Britton et al. (2016) suggest that students from wealthier households are likely to have more financial support to relocate to cities like London or to the South East, where incomes are considerably higher. This matters, as it is this group who are the elite in society and who shape social life. Oxbridge graduates from high income families dominate the top professions as journalists, barristers, Members of Parliament, and Cabinet Ministers.

There is considerable evidence that significant resources are invested in the children of elite families to enable a better chance to access elite universities like Oxbridge that then translate into high-paying jobs (Britton et al. 2016). Holloway and Kirby (2019) point to a GBP £2 billion industry that has grown up alongside the formal education system, with the capacity to buy expensive private tuition mediated by class: those from higher income families are twice as likely to access quality private tutoring than those from a lower-income household (173).

Arguably consumption politics particularly in the context of the culture of the new capitalism is also erasing old class identities and creating new ones (Therborn 2020). In an essay published in 2020, Therborn reflects on the different meanings now attached to identifying as middle-class. How you identify as middle-class is reflected in your capacity to consume, and consumption centres on education, health, and housing. Consumption politics also recalibrates identity claims, not only on the basis of class, but also in relation to race (Holloway and Kirby 2019).

As we argued earlier, the paradox is that the working and middle classes have faced growing class inequalities, particularly in OECD countries like the UK. In 2008, in a report called *Growing Unequal*, the OECD looked at the extent to which the middle and lower classes have lost significant income in relation to the upper classes. In a second report *Divided We Stand* published in 2011, the OECD make a similar kind of observation. In 2015, the OECD report on *The Broken Elevator* examine the collapse of social mobility, whilst a similar report called *Under Pressure* (2019) they show the

squeezed middle class face a shrinking in the capacity to consume. They note the income of the wealthiest 10% had increased by a third more than the income of the middle class. At the same time, the middle class is under significant pressure to consume, in large part because social welfare systems have increasingly become privatized and part of the market. Access to health, education, and housing is also increasingly expensive and depends on access to a well-paid job and credit. The middle class face new anxieties which drive their pursuit of credentials from elite institutions as a protection against significantly reduced opportunities – a consequence of the automation of middle-class jobs being off-shored and outsourced (Peck 2018).

Taken together it is these patterns of social inequality that Dorling (2016), and Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) argue has sown the seeds of resentment in the UK, and the rise of the populist vote. Barely months after the 2008 financial crisis, Sir Michael Marmot was appointed to head a Commission of enquiry into health inequalities in England (Marmot 2010). The 2010 Marmot Report made for a sobering read. The lower one's social status, the worse his or her health, wellbeing and life expectancy. Those living in the poorest neighbourhoods, on average, died seven years earlier than those living in the richest. Importantly, similar patterns could be seen in terms of level of education, occupation and housing conditions (Marmot 2010, 12). Yet if the identity of the different social classes is not relationally experienced and lived but is now tied to competitive individualism and consumption, a different set of self-justifications emerge whose deeply depoliticizing effects have shaped the lack of engagement around the politics of distribution. Instead, what we see is heightened anxiety, insecurity and resentment expressed via the ballot box.

(3). Transforming meritocracy: when individual effort justifies social inequalities

The ethics of competitive individualism in the new market society has also transformed the idea of meritocracy, such that those who land at the top come to believe not only do they deserve their success, but it is their efforts that are being rewarded (Mijs 2019). In this view of the world, if opportunities are truly equal, it means those who are left behind deserve their fate as well. This transformation in meritocracy represents an important shift in how social inequalities tied to education are now legitimated as a failure of both aspiration and effort (Wintour 2012).

Whilst social recognition has historically been tied to the idea of striving to be rewarded in the labour market, as we argued in the previous section, there is growing evidence of very little upward mobility, whilst those at the top have consolidated their advantages (Piketty 2014). As Sandel (2020, 23) argues, the faith that with hard work and talent anyone can rise no longer fits what is seen to be the case on the ground. It also explains why the rhetoric of opportunity has failed to inspire as it once did, as mobility can no longer compensate for inequality. That said, is also no accident that the rhetoric of 'rising' was at its most fulsome at a time when inequality was approaching daunting proportions, with the richest 1%, taking more than the combined earnings of the entire bottom half the population (Piketty 2014). Not only are medium incomes not just stagnating, the squeezed middle now finds itself seriously left behind on the broken elevator of social mobility (OECD 2015).

This produces two kinds of potential discontent. One is frustration that the system falls short of its meritocratic promise, especially if those who have worked hard and played by the rules (and invest a lot) are unable to advance. The other is the despair that arises when people believe the meritocratic promise has already been fulfilled, and they have lost out in the process. This is a demoralising discontent because it implies that for those who have been left behind, their failure is their fault.

## *Authoritarian populism, neoliberalism and market societies*

We agree with Sandel (2020, 17) who argues it is a mistake to see the populist vote and protest as bigotry (this is implied in the cleavage theorist's nationalist and nativist explanations). The triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016 are better understood

as the angry verdict by those who have been the losers from decades of rising inequality, and a version of globalisation that has benefitted those at the very top (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019). If, too, Kuppens et al. (2018) are also correct, then they all feel looked down upon for their low-education status. Antonucci et al (2017: 224) however argue that 'leave' voters in the UK 2016 Referendum also include 'the squeezed middle'; those with intermediate levels of education, such as A-levels. Rather than anger they identify a link between worsening financial circumstances and a distinct sense life had become more complicated, and that one's life was not worthwhile.

We have also argued the education cleavage theorists offer an explanation that dichotomizes the populist vote around an uneducated, low-income 'nationalist' and an educated well-off cosmopolitan. However, Bovens and Wille (2018) fail to account for the transformations that have taken place in countries like the UK and specifically England, and the attitudes that have emerged that justify social inequalities (Kuppens et al. 2018; Mijs 2019). Higher education has been transformed along two related vectors; as an institution of social and cultural production to constitute market societies, and to create globally competitive knowledge economies. Both dynamics are deeply implicated in producing the culture of the new capitalism (Sennett 2006). This is a culture shot through with competitive individualism and entrepreneurialism, whilst legitimating its unequal outcomes through the recalibration of class (as consumption), the reworking of meritocracy, and who is to be valued as both worthwhile and worthy, and who is not.

As we have shown, in a neoliberal meritocratic order (Littler 2013, 2017; Martini and Robertson 2021) the winners consider their success their own, whilst the losers feel that those on top look down with distain (Kuppens et al. 2018). It can be argued this helps explain why those left behind by globalization would become angry, resentful and feel left behind with worsening financial circumstances, and why they would be drawn to authoritarian populists who rail against elites and promise to assert national borders with a vengeance (Dorling and Tomlinson 2019; Antonucci et al. 2017; Cohen 2019). Those in the squeezed middle and at the bottom feel looked down on by those above, and disempowered, yet objectively their fortunes and futures have been shaped by a predatory merchant class who have benefitted hugely in terms of amassed wealth and privilege (Piketty 2014, 2018, 2020). Those who have lost out in the education competition end up facing a system that has failed them. The combination of the loss of social identities through high degrees of individualism and the dismantling of organised labour, emotional resentment towards successful elites, and financial and economic insecurity have fed into the anxieties valorised by populist leaders (Fraser 2017; Cohen 2019).

Yet this winner takes all sorting of higher education is undesirable for several reasons. First it reinforces inequality as the universities who fare best in the selectivity stakes are generally the ones with the highest proportion of wealthy students. Second, it takes a toll on the winners who must engage in constant striving (Sandel 2020: 177). The rise of anxiety and mental ill-health in universities is striking. Of the 2.3 million students studying in UK universities, Universities UK (n.d.) report – *Minding Our Future* – shows a rise in the decline in students mental health over the past ten years, including a steady increase in student suicides.

Furthermore, those who celebrate the meritocratic ideal and make it the centre of their political project overlook an important moral question; they ignore the morally unattractive attitudes the meritocratic ethic promotes among the winners and also amongst the losers. Amongst the winners it generates hubris; amongst the losers it creates humiliation, resentment and a sense of being left behind. Former US President, Donald Trump, like Nigel Farage and hardline Brexiteers in the UK, have exploited this resentment.

## Conclusions

We began this paper stimulated by Steger and James (2020) challenge; of how best to understand the current conjuncture; the historical creation of a market society, its transformation of higher education, the paradoxes that accompany this transformation, and the rise of authoritarian populism.

Recent theorists, such as Bovens and Wille (2018), as well as Thomas Piketty (2018, 2020) have pointed to a distinct education cleavage that has emerged in those societies witnessing the rise of authoritarian populism. A key argument is that an education cleavage between the well-educated and the less-well-educated (Bovens and Wille 2018; Wille and Bovens 2019) – evidenced in distinct attitudes and cultural competences has emerged out of the major transformations taking place in modern Western societies linked to the rise of knowledge economies. We have argued in this paper that these accounts tend to black-box higher education whilst promoting a highly dichotomized view of a high-income/well-educated tolerant cosmopolitan and a low-income/not well-educated nationalist who is xenophobic and drawn to authoritarianism.

We have instead put forward a different explanation; one that centres upon growing social inequalities over the past two or more decades, how this is linked to major changes in the organization of education more generally, and higher education in particular, and in the creation of new kinds of identities. Through a close analysis of the making of a market society in England, we have shown that a globally competitive market-driven higher education sector is implicated in the rise of authoritarian populism. We focus particularly on the ways in which understandings and experiences of class, social mobility, meritocracy, economic and social inequalities, and social justice have all been transformed to create a new commonsense; one that justifies social inequalities whilst also legitimating biases toward those less-well-off and less-well educated. We argued that the individualizing of the self and neoliberal ethics, the erasures of collective class politics, and the hubris of the winners in a neoliberal meritocratic social order have created fertile ground for authoritarian populists whose binarized politics of us (nation) and them (elites, migrants, stranger, enemy) feed divisions, a politics of resentment (Cohen 2019) and a sense of being left behind financially (Antonucci et al. 2017). When participation in a market society is viewed through the capacity to consume, not having adequate financial resources creates a deep sense of malaise amongst those whose investments in education have not paid off.

According to David Runciman (2018, 1–2), the rise of authoritarian populists is symptomatic of: 'an overheated political climate that appears unstable, risen with mutual mistrust and mutual intolerance, wild accusations and online bullying, a dialogue of the deaf drowning each other out with noise'. In our view, the globalizing of neoliberalism has led to a failure of democracy and our capacity to build more equitable societies and just institutions. The technocratic way of conceiving of the public good as bound up with faith in markets, unfettered laissez faire capitalism and market mechanisms, has instead created deepening social inequalities between social groups. In a market society where the only outcome of competition can be creating winners and losers, the rise of competitive individualism undermines the idea of a community of citizens and notions of collective common good. If we are to build more socially-equitable and just societies through education so as to avoid the divisiveness of authoritarian populism, then education more generally, and higher education, in particular, needs to be transformed so as to create very different kinds of social structures, identities, life worlds and relations.

## Notes

1. It should be noted that Wales and Scotland have different HE policies and fee structures as compared to England.
2. The justification for the increased burden on students was that having a degree generated a significant increase in salary (graduate premium), of well over £100,000 over a lifetime. However, reporting an average in this way removes from view the fact that some professions (such as medicine, law, dentistry and business studies), generate significant returns which distorts the average. Students enrolled in areas such as the arts tend to earn significantly less than this over a lifetime.
3. There were 51,930 undergraduate students on designated courses at alternative providers (APs) in 2016/17. Of these, 25,785 were in their first year of study (HESA 2019).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

*Susan L. Robertson* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6757-8718
*Matias Nestore* http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7736-2857

## References

Andreotti, A., D. Benassi, and Y. Kazepov. 2018. *Western Capitalism in Transition: Global Processes, Local Challenges*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Angebauer, N. 2019. "Property and Capital in the Person: Lockean and Neoliberal Self-Ownership." *Constellations (Oxford, England)* 27: 50–62.
Antonucci, L., L. Horvath, Y. Kutiyski, and A. Krouwel. 2017. "The Malaise of the Squeezed Middle: Challenging the Narrative of the 'Left Behind' Brexiter." *Competition and Change* 21 (3): 211–229.
Boltanski, L., and E. Chiapello. 2005. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso.
Bornschier, S. 2009. "Cleavage Politics in Old and New Democracies". *Living Reviews in Democracy* 1 (1).
Bornschier, S. 2010. "The new Cultural Divide and the two Dimensional Political Space in Western Europe." *West European Politics* 33 (3): 419–444.
Bovens, M., and A. Wille. 2018. *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Britton, J., L. Dearden, N. Shephard, and A. Vignoles. 2016. *How Domiciled Graduate Earnings Vary with Gender, Institution Attended, Subject and Socio-Economic Background IFS Working Paper W16/06*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies.
Brown, P. 2000. "The Globalization of Positional Competition." *Sociology* 34 (4): 633–653.
Brown, W. 2015. *Undoing the Demos*. New York: Zone Books.
Browne, J. 2010. *Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education: An Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance*. London: BIS.
Brubaker, R. 2017. "Why Populism?" *Theoretical Sociology* 46: 357–385.
Cerny, P. 1997. "Paradoxes of the Competition State: The Dynamics of Political Competition." *Government and Opposition* 32 (2): 251–274.
Chacko, P. 2018. "The Right Turn in India: Authoritarianism, Populism and Neoliberalisation." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48 (4): 541–565.
Cohen, Jean L. 2019. "Populism and the Politics of Resentment." *Jus Cogens* 1 (1): 5–39.
Davies, W. 2017. *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, Sovereignty and the Logic of Competition*. Los Angeles: Sage.
Deegan-Krause, K. 2006. "New Dimensions of Political Cleavage." *Oxford Handbook of Political Science*, edited by R. Dalton and H.-D. Klingemann. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Dearing, R. 1997. *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. London: HMSO.
de la Torre, C., and O. Mazzoleni. 2019. "Do we Need a Minimum Definition of Populism? An Appraisal of Mudde's Conceptualization." *Populism* 2 (2): 79–95.
Department of Business, Innovation and Skills. 2009. *Higher Ambitions*. London: HMSO.
Dorling, D. 2016. "Brexit: The Decision of a Divided Country." *BMJ* 354: i3697. 1–2.
Dorling, D., and S. Tomlinson. 2019. *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the End of Empire*. Oxford: Biteback Publishing.
Fielden, J., and R. Middlehurst. 2017. *Alternative Providers of Higher Education: Issues for Policymakers*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.
Florida, R. 2002. *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it is Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. New York: Perseus Book Group.
Foray, D. 2004. *The Economics of Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Fraser, N. 2009. "Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History." *New Left Review* 56: 97–117.
Fraser, N. 2017. "From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump—and Beyond." *American Affairs* 1 (4): 46–64.
Friedman, T. 2005. *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Allen Lane.
Geiselberger, H. 2017. *The Great Regression*. Cambridge: Polity.
Hall, S. 1979. "The Great Moving Right Show". *Marxism Today*, January, pp. 14–20.
Harvey, D. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Harvey, D. 2005. *Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
HESA. 2019. *Higher Education Student Statistics: Alternative Providers, 2017/18*. Cheltenham: Higher Education Statistics Agency. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/14-02-2019/sb254-higher-education-student-statistics-APs
Hobsbawm, E. 1994. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*. London: Michael Joseph.

Holloway, S., and P. Kirby. 2019. "Neoliberalising Education: New Geographies of Private Tuition, Class Privilege and Minority Ethnic Advancement." *Antipode* 52 (1): 164–184.
Kalmijn, M., and G. Kraaykamp. 2007. "Social Stratification and Attitudes: A Comparative Analysis of the Effects of Class and Education in Europe." *The British Journal of Sociology* 58 (4): 547–576.
Kuppens, T., R. Spears, A. Manstead, B. Spruyt, and M. Easterbrook. 2018. "Educationism and the Irony of Meritocracy: Negative Attitudes of Higher Educated People Toward the Less Educated." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 76: 429–447.
Lazzarato, M. 2012. *The Making of the Indebted Man: An Essay on the Neoliberal Condition*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Leys, C. 2003. *Market-driven Politics: Neoliberal Democracy and the Public Good*. London: Verso.
Lipset, S. M., and S. Rokkan. 1967. "Cleavage Structures, Party Systems and Voter Alignments: An Introduction." In *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross National Perspectives*, edited by S. M. Lipset and S. Rokkan, 113–185. New York: Free Press.
Littler, J. 2013. "Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of 'Equality' Under Neoliberalism." *New Formations* 80: 52–72.
Littler, J. 2017. *"Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility"*. London: Taylor & Francis.
Magalhaes, A., and S. Stoer. 2003. "Performance, Citizenship and the Knowledge Society: A new Mandate for European Education Policy." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 1 (1): 41–66.
Malešvic, S. 2019. *Grounded Nationalisms: A Sociological Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Marmot, M. 2010. *Fair Society: Healthy Lives (The Marmot Review)*. London: HMSO.
Martini, M., and S. L. Robertson. 2021. "Meritocracy and the Culture of the New Capitalism: A Corpus Linguistics Analysis of UK Higher Education Policies." *Journal of Education Policy*.
Mijs, Jonathan JB. 2019. "The Paradox of Inequality: Income Inequality and Belief in Meritocracy go Hand in Hand." *Socio-Economic Review*. doi:10.1093/ser/mwy051.
Milburn, A. 2017. *State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain*. London: HMSO.
Montacute, R., and C. Cullinane. 2018. *Access to Advantage*. London: Sutton Trust.
Mudde, C. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition* 39 (3): 541–563.
OECD. 1996. *The Knowledge-Based Economy*. Paris: OECD.
OECD. 2015. *Broken Elevator*. Paris: OECD.
Peck, J. 2013. *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Peck, J. 2018. *Offshore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Piketty, Thomas. 2014. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Piketty, T. 2018. *Brahmin Left Versus Merchant Right: Rising Inequality and the Changing Structure of Political Conflict, Working Paper Series No. 2018/17*. Paris: World Inequality Database.
Piketty, T. 2020. *Ideology and Capital*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Regt, S., T. Smits, and D. Mortelmans. 2012. "The Relevance of Class in Shaping Authoritarian Attitudes: A Cross National Perspective." *Research on Social Stratification and Mobility* 30: 280–295.
Reich, R. 1991. *The Work of Nations: Preparing Ourselves for the 21st Century*. New York: Vintage Books.
Robertson, S. L. 2009. "Producing the Global Knowledge Economy: The World Bank, the Knowledge Assessment Methodology and Education"." In *Re-Reading Education Policies*, edited by M. Simons, M. Olssen, and M. Peters, 235–256. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
Robertson, S. L. 2020. "Powershift: Universities and the Seismic Winds of Change." In *Universities as Political Institutions*, edited by L. Weimer and T. Nokkala, 11–32. London: Brill.
Robertson, S. L., and J. Komjlenovic. 2016. "Non-state Actors, and the Advance of Frontier Higher Education Markets in the Global South." *Oxford Review of Education* 42 (5): 594–611.
Runciman, D. 2018. *How Democracy Ends*. London: Profile Books.
Sainsbury, David. 2007. *The Race to the Top, Review of Government's Science and Innovation Policies*. London: HMSO.
Sandel, M. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit*. New York: Allen Lane.
Sennett, R. 2006. *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Slater, D., and F. Tonkiss. 2001. *Market Society: Markets and Modern Social Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Smith, N. 2000. "What Happened to Class?" *Environment and Planning A* 32: 1011–1032.
Sorensen, T., and S. L. Robertson. 2020. "Ordinalization and the OECD's Governance of Teachers." *Comparative Education Review* 64 (1): 21–45.
Steger, M. 2019. "Mapping Antiglobalist Populism." *Populism* 2 (2): 110–136.
Steger, M., and P. James. 2020. "Disjunctive Globalization in the era of the Great Unsettling." *Theory, Culture and Society* 37 (7-8): 187–203.
Streeck, Wolfgang. 2014. *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*. New York: Verso.

Streeck, W. 2017. "The Return of the Repressed as the Beginning of the end of Neoliberalism." In *The Great Regression*, edited by H. Geiselberger, 157–172. Cambridge: Polity.
Therborn, G. 2020. "Dreams and Nightmares of the World's Middle Classes." *New Left Review* 124: 63–87.
Wille, A., and M. Bovens. 2019. *Education as a Cleavage. Electronic Copy*. https://ssm.com.abstract=3370399.
Wintour, Patrick. 2012. "David Cameron Presents Himself as Leader of an 'Aspiration Nation'". *The Guardian*. October 10. Accessed November 25 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/ 2012/oct/10/david-cameron-leader-aspiration-nation.