

Equal opportunities and social mobility

The city of Florence has detailed records of the income of families living there in the mid-15th century. Thanks to these we know that the Bernardi family was placed at the 90th percentile of earnings distribution; much higher than the Grasso family at the 10th percentile. A study by the Bank of Italy economists estimates that, six centuries and 20 generations later, the difference in earnings between the descendents of these two families, although much smaller, is still statistically significant.

Florence's experience may not be representative; in fact, Italy is one of the OECD countries with the least social mobility. However, it does illustrate the ability of successive generations to pass on their level of wealth.

This persistence is essentially the result of the different opportunities enjoyed by descendents of families with a different socioeconomic status. Certain abilities can be passed down from parents to children, through the genes, for instance. Those families with more resources may also tend to invest more in human capital of their children. Parents with values and attitudes such as the importance of hard work and sacrifice, which have helped them to improve their financial position, make an effort to instil these same principles in their offspring. Some societies may also have customs or institutions that protect certain privileges over several generations. Who knows, perhaps the Bernardi family had a profession protected from competition that could be passed down from parents to children.

Open liberal societies, however, value social mobility and tend to promote this by balancing up opportunities to some extent (I say balancing up because equal opportunity is a pipedream). There are good reasons for doing so. «Inherited disadvantages» are inherently unjust and reducing them reinforces our notion of social justice. Greater social mobility encourages ambition and hard work and fosters social cohesion, whereas a lack of mobility can result in castes that are jealous of each other. Moreover, society makes better use of its talent, much of which can be found among young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. It is therefore a question of justice but also efficiency.

There can be little doubt that the best way to balance up opportunities is to ensure access to good quality education and training. And this comes down to everyone. It is obviously the responsibility of the public sector but also of civil society and educational communities. Local examples of efforts to promote the equality of opportunities and social mobility are provided by three wonderful initiatives. Firstly, Caixa Proinfancia, one of "la Caixa" Foundation's key programmes which covers the whole of Spain and promotes the development of skills in young children and teenagers from families suffering from poverty and social exclusion. Secondly, ProFuturo, an alliance also by "la Caixa" Foundation together with the Telefónica Foundation which provides children from vulnerable backgrounds in Africa, Asia and Latin America with a digital education. And, thirdly, the Joaquim Ruyra school in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat which, with more than 90% of its pupils of immigrant origin, manages to achieve academic results comparable with those of an elite school. The school's headmistress sums up such initiatives when talking about her students: «We do not want life to choose for them».

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