The Role of Education in Elite Formation

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Oliver Quick

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read The Role of Education in Elite Formation by Oliver Quick, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

________________________
Macey Salzberger, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

________________________
Jeremy Reid, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
Abstract

Education if often viewed as a pathway to elite positions within society, which has the capacity to offer equality of opportunity, regardless of social background. However, traditionally selective four-year colleges, which have a gatekeeper role to many elite positions, appear to be socially selective and can be accused of generating elites which are unresponsive to the needs of broader society. This thesis considers the extent to which we can expect education to play a role in improving elite formation, with a particular emphasis on Elizabeth Anderson’s 2007 suggestions on reforming elite college selection procedures. The thesis considers several challenges to these suggestions and concludes that although education is a flawed tool in the targeting of fair equality of opportunity, it is nonetheless an important one. Elite college selection procedures can be reformed, and there is evidence about how this can be achieved. Furthermore, there are other approaches to widening the routes to the elites which can be adopted.
## Table of Contents

Introduction................................................................................................................................................... 1  
Section 1: The Anderson proposal ................................................................................................................ 6  
Section 2: Challenges to the Anderson/Morton project .............................................................................. 13  
  2.A The challenge from principles of justice .......................................................................................... 13  
  2.B Challenges from the implementation of FEO ................................................................................... 15  
  2.C Challenges arising from FEO and social mobility ........................................................................... 18  
  2.D Structural challenges ........................................................................................................................ 21  
Section 3: Responses to the challenges ....................................................................................................... 23  
  Difficulties with FEO in education ......................................................................................................... 24  
  The empirical evidence from social mobility .......................................................................................... 28  
  The nature of elites .................................................................................................................................. 29  
Section 4: Expanding the routes to the elites. ............................................................................................. 32  
Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 38  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................... 41
Introduction

This paper arises from a mix of theoretical and practical concerns about how we should understand the role of education in the formation of elites. Within the academic literature I draw in particular on the work of Elizabeth Anderson (2007) and Jennifer Morton (2021), who discuss how education can make elites more or less representative of, and responsive to, the broader population whose interests we expect them to serve. The main question for the paper is, given that these elites exist, to what extent is it possible and proper to look to our education systems as a means of influencing and legitimizing their composition.

On the practical side I draw on the work I have done with The Sutton Trust (a UK non-profit organization) which has been dedicated to the improvement of social mobility through education. Social mobility, as pursued in this context, is primarily concerned with access to certain institutions of higher education and professional careers for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and, in this paper, will be clearly linked to the idea of a fair equality of opportunity to join those elites, irrespective of family background. As Morton puts it in her 2019 book:

The thought that your life opportunities will be determined by the accident of your birth is diametrically opposed to the ideal of equal opportunity at the heart of the American Dream. As a society we have viewed our educational institutions as the way of equalizing the prospects of those born into disadvantage. Morton (2019) p.2

This sort of ideal of equal opportunity will require some unpacking and analysis, but it stands in broad opposition to visions of society in which advancement is gained through family status or patronage. It draws on broadly ‘meritocratic’ thinking, and, although often seen as integral to the ‘American Dream’, it seems to be a stable idea in a large number of modern societies.
There are clear and forceful arguments against an exclusively meritocratic concept of fair equality of opportunity (“FEO”) as the only principle by which we assign goods in our society (i.e., the motivation behind the Rawlsian requirement for the difference principle). Certainly, most would argue that a meritocratic concept of FEO cannot be the only principle guiding an education system. But we might still think that a broadly meritocratic concept of education is appropriate insofar as education is a societal tool for the selection of elites. In heavily structured societies, which are typical of contemporary experience, there is an inevitable hierarchy of decision making and responsibilities which mean that elites exist and are not going away in the foreseeable future, despite the reservations of more structural egalitarians such as Joshua Kissel (Kissel, 2021). If these elites are functional rather than social in nature, we presumably want to ensure that our educational system works to fill these elite positions with the best qualified candidates in a functional sense. In this context, a meritocratic concept of education would seem a good route to ensuring that we channel the most able people, irrespective of economic and social background, into positions of authority and responsibility.

Alongside this classically meritocratic concept of education as a means of picking out talent, we can also see education as a way of guiding elite formation in a way which might meet the demands of Anderson and others who argue that elites have duties of representation and responsiveness towards society: this supplementary view of elite formation suggests that there are political principles of democratic accountability, grounded in the ideals of liberal democracy, which elite formation should follow, if the relative power and responsibility of these elites is to be justified. Anderson sees these principles of democratic accountability in elite formation as realizable through education, and, in particular, through the reform of admissions policy at elite colleges.
In this paper I will present Anderson’s main thesis in what I consider to be its most promising form, and then consider some key objections to her approach. Consequently, I will be emphasizing the instrumental role of education, rather than considering the intrinsic benefits which it brings to the individual. My main concern, following Anderson, is with the use of education as part of a social toolkit through which we might hope to justify the formation of elites both with reference to fair equality of opportunity and to requirements for representation. As such I am focusing on one of the instrumental roles which we tend to assign to education, which I take to co-exist both with other instrumental roles and more intrinsic benefits. I do not imagine there is a simple overarching purpose or aim of education under which we can subsume all these roles, and, like Allen (2016), I do not think that paying attention to the instrumental roles negates the importance of the intrinsic benefits. I will consider both theoretical concerns with the Anderson project and some practical issues where, I believe, real progress can be made towards addressing the challenges that have been raised. My position will sometimes be quite closely in line with the that of Morton (2021), and I will support her move to redefine the notion of elite colleges, but I also want to expand on her arguments in relation to possible practical interventions in the labor market, and in relation to the more theoretical concerns of writers such as Kissel.

This is also a timely moment to re-examine Anderson’s original argument, given the large amount of comment generated by this year’s Supreme Court ruling barring affirmative action in college admissions. Following both Anderson and Morton I will not directly address race as a separate issue in admissions, but concur with them that their line of argument forms part of the philosophical justification for affirmative action. This can be seen within the Supreme Court ruling which directly challenges, for instance, the value of diversity, which Anderson and
Morton champion. More directly relevant to this paper is the volume of new information and analysis on the way in which Ivy League colleges still act as powerful gatekeepers to subsequent elite roles in the labor market, as well as the distortions and inequalities of their own admissions processes. This follows not long after the college admissions scandal of 2019, which also demonstrated the extremes to which families will go to secure admission to certain types of college. It is exactly these two processes, that of the transition from high school to college, and that of transition from college to the labor market, that both Anderson and Morton focus on in their thoughts about elite formation.

At various points in the paper the paper I will be linking the idea of fair equality of opportunity to that of relative social mobility, which, I will argue is a logical consequence of FEO when realized in typical modern societies. Therefore, the recorded falls in social mobility in both the UK and the US are of broad concern because they suggest that FEO is not being realized (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022). Academic work in social mobility can help motivate the arguments raised by Anderson and Morton, but also ask questions about their practical implementation. Falling social mobility and widening inequality, which are inter-related, raise questions about the potential ossification of social structures and an increasing tendency for wealth and power to be concentrated and passed down between generations rather than open to any realization of the ideal of fair equality of opportunity. One reaction to this situation, which I want to dispute, is to abandon elite formation as a political topic because it only relates to the ‘lucky few’, whereas what should properly concern us is the prospects of the vast majority who do not make it into the elite (Jeremy Corbin, 2019). These two concerns are not mutually exclusive, and, I will argue, it is very important for all members of society, especially those outside the elite, that those who lead and take decisions on their part are properly and
legitimately selected. Fair elite formation may not be a policy panacea, but it is necessary condition of a fair society in which elites exist.

The structure of the paper will be to start, in section 1, with a reconstruction of the argument that Anderson makes in her original paper, with a particular focus on her views about the necessary structural elements of elite education, and also an account of how I think Morton (2021) can add to the strength of the underlying project. In section 2 I will outline four sets of challenges to the project which emerge from the surrounding literature: the challenge from the broader requirements of justice; the challenge from the narrower requirements for FEO; the challenge from the empirical evidence of social mobility, and, finally, the challenge from the inherent psychological nature of elites. In section 3 I will consider some responses to these challenges, and discuss whether they allow for education to be used in the sort of way that Anderson suggests. I will argue that the challenge which emerges from the practical demands of allocating elite college places in line with FEO is particularly hard to counter. In section 4 I will restate why I consider the aims of the Anderson project to be important, and consider the practical direction in which it might be taken, given the reservations which emerge from the challenges. In conclusion I will argue that we are entitled to see education as a tool in a process of elite formation which aims to protect both fair equality of opportunity and democratic accountability. But the obstacles to social mobility and fair equality of opportunity cannot be overcome by education alone, and significant changes in the labor market and elsewhere are also needed.
Section 1: The Anderson proposal

The philosophical setting of Anderson’s paper is to suggest a shift in the conversation about educational provision away from the benefits that education provides to the individual, and towards the benefits that those most educated should be providing to their society. Her contention is, that for this elite group, education should be a means of developing or qualifying them for the responsibilities which they will have later in life. Her focus is on the pipeline from K-12 education to the specific forms of college education that will generate elites, and she argues that the way in which these elites are currently selected is not in line with democratic standards and therefore needs to be reformed if these elites are to be properly qualified to make decisions on behalf of other members of society. Her resultant demand upon the public education system is that it should be able to supply every pupil, regardless of their socio-economic or racial background, with an education that will allow them a fair opportunity to participate in the college courses that will generate elites.

I would summarize her theses as follows:

1. Elites are required to make decisions for the community as a whole.
2. In a democracy, elites must therefore be democratically accountable, which requires them to be effective and responsive to all sectors of society (Anderson, 2007, p.596).
3. Current elites are characterized by cognitive defects which deprive them of these qualities.
4. The remedy is to ensure that elites are drawn from all sectors of society and are educated together, and also to ensure that every citizen has the opportunity to qualify for the elite.
Points 1 and 2 are argued for from general principles of democratic accountability, and can be seen to be based in classical theory of liberal democracy, in which leaders have a duty to represent those on behalf of whom they are making decisions. But her main concern is to expand point 3. She argues that current elites, largely drawn from multiply advantaged sectors of the population, are not formed in a way that allows them to fulfill their democratic requirements and instead are formed in ways that tend to transmit or maintain structures of disadvantage because of cognitive deficits arising amongst the privileged.

These deficits are caused through pre-existing social segregation – economic, racial, and cultural – as well as through the process of stereotyping. Both social segregation and stereotyping lead to cognitive biases, which make elites unresponsive to the diversified population for whom they are accountable. Anderson refers to the sociological data about how segregation and stereotyping are causally implicated in the reproduction of disadvantage for certain sectors of the population, often through depriving them of the sorts of knowledge they need to empower themselves. But she wants to look at the other side of this coin, namely the way in which the same processes are responsible for cognitive deficits amongst the multiply advantaged, and which make them ‘ignorant and incompetent’ since they are unable to properly understand the situation of people in other social groups to themselves (Anderson, 2007, p.598). So, in her view, existing elites which are drawn too heavily from the advantaged are unqualified. This effectively subsumes the representative requirement of elites under the umbrella of cognitive qualifications for admission to elite programs, as she argues that lack of representative capacity should be viewed a cognitive deficit.

She proposes that the correct remedy for these defects is to modify elite education so that it no longer cultivates academic knowledge alone, but also incorporates awareness and
acquisition of other sorts of knowledge, including the viewpoints of the non-privileged. This requires, amongst other things, constant social contact across social and economic backgrounds and thus the education of prospective elites together in a group setting, whilst being drawn from all representative sectors of society (p.612). In this context she approves of the traditional four-year college degree at selective colleges, where students from different backgrounds live together and away from home, as she sees this as an opportunity for potential members of the elite to learn from each other and gather non-academic knowledge about the viewpoints of others (p.614). But naturally, this will only work if the admissions process to such colleges properly reflects her aim of bringing together students from all representative parts of society. She recognizes that this requires a commitment from such colleges to change their procedures: “The marginal value to a college admissions committee of additional academic qualifications among the better-off should fall off steeply in head-to-head competition with sufficiently academically prepared students from disadvantaged social backgrounds”. (p. 616). This is part of what Anderson sees as a necessarily comprehensive commitment to integration across social divides at educational institutions and she recognizes that any token representation of the less advantaged will not achieve the impact that she wants. (p. 617).

She argues that, as long as elite college admissions committees are ‘doing their job,’ then they will not just allocate places to those who, through virtue of social position and privilege, are better prepared academically. In this way she believes that she can answer the criticism that elites generated in traditionally selective four-year colleges are merely reflecting pre-existing social structures and the ability and desire to invest in the educational outcomes that traditionally secure those places. At the same time, she is not asking college admissions committees to forgo academic standards, as all of those admitted must be “sufficiently
academically prepared” (see above quotation). She argues that, as long as the K-12 public education system is able to deliver this sufficiency standard, then the admissions policies which she is advocating will not lead to any reduction of standards or ‘dumbing down’ in elite education. The sufficiency standard she has in mind is therefore quite demanding, and, in her view, cannot be implemented without substantial changes to the K-12 system, which would allow for every student with potential to be educated to a standard which would qualify the academically for a four-year college course. But this sufficiency standard does not demand strict equality of educational provision in the K-12 system, which she would consider an interference with the right of individuals (and/or their families) to pursue education for its own sake.

One way of developing Anderson’s underlying views has been suggested by Jennifer Morton. She also argues that existing college selection procedures distort elite formation, but is sceptical about the formation of elites in traditional selective four-year colleges. She argues that the selective college education experience itself undermines the abilities of those who have attended to continue to be representative of the communities from which they have come. To some extent this is as a result of the actual physical distancing from those communities and to some extent from the inability to resist normalizing social standards at traditional elite colleges (Morton labels the problems as ‘Distancing, Cultural Mismatch and Silencing’). The enrollment at Harvard, for instance, of a student from a disadvantaged community might transport them across the country and into a ‘different world’, which might radically alter their own life journey, but also subjects them to the social hierarchies and norms of the dominant culture. If they are either drawn into this ‘different world’, or effectively silenced by it, then they will lose their representative capacity. Morton sees a fundamental tension here between the transformative nature of education and the representative requirement of elites (Morton, 2022, p.15). Morton
therefore champions the idea of drawing elites from less selective colleges. By diversifying the colleges from which the elite are chosen in the next step of their formation, we automatically tap into the pre-existing diversification of the student body of these alternative colleges, which, Morton argues, are much better equipped to attract and retain students from less advantaged backgrounds, without compromising on the still necessary functional or academic side of knowledge (Morton, 2021, p.18).

Morton suggests some criteria for defining the sorts of colleges she has in mind, using social science studies linked to social mobility and identifying colleges which do best at raising the economic prospects of students from least advantaged backgrounds. These colleges, she suggests, offer excellence in academic standards but are less likely to be captured by the wealthy, as they are also accessible to those from marginalized populations (Morton, 2021, p19). We might lose the advantage that Anderson sees in the education of the elite together in one place, as there will be less concentration in any individual college and many students will stay local to their homes; but this is part of Anderson’s model that Morton rejects because of the risks of eroding the continued representativeness and responsiveness of those from less advantaged backgrounds. I think Anderson might well respond that at least some of the problems identified by Morton would be solved if there was a genuine selection revolution at elite colleges: if different communities were properly represented in the student population then it could be argued that some of Morton’s concerns about cultural mismatch and silencing could be addressed, although not without addressing the sorts of institutionalized values which exist in the bones of elite colleges and which might take more than a change of student population to alter. The concern about distancing, however, cannot really be addressed by a change in student population and there does seem to be some irreducible tension between enrollment at an elite
college and remaining embedded in a local community. This remains true, albeit to a lesser extent, for Morton’s wider list of colleges. But I consider the idea of moving elite formation onto a broader base of college educated students to be a valuable contribution to the general project of expanding access to elite positions. If we view Anderson as trying to diversify elite formation only through the selection procedure at traditionally selective four-year colleges, then we can view Morton as trying to achieve the same aim by diversifying elites at the point that they leave college and enter the labor market.

In practice we might hope, if we believe in the project advanced here, that some combination of the Anderson and Morton models will happen. Traditionally elite colleges might be persuaded to diversify their intake across all strata of society and elite employers might diversify their recruitment away from the handful of colleges on which they have often relied. In the UK, where private schools used to have a close grip on admissions to the elite colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, the percentage of admissions from state funded schools has shown a steadily increasing trend, and between 2017 and 2022, increased from 62.7 to 72.5 per cent at Cambridge and from 58.2 to more than 68 per cent at Oxford, (The Sunday Times, 10/30/22). At the same time there has been a move amongst elite employers to move their recruitment process away from the traditional emphasis on these two colleges, and some have taken the step of conducting interviews where recruiters do not know which school or college the candidate attended (Financial Times, 10/2/2015). That is not to say that these sorts of steps represent a full embrace of widely diversified elites, but they are moves in the right direction, and they are accompanied, at least in the UK by rhetoric from both the public and private sectors that are generally supportive.
In the US, it remains the case that the children of the wealthiest 1% of families are 77 times as likely to attend an elite university than the children of the poorest 20% (The Economist (Lexington) 7/12/ 2023) and, as the recent Supreme Court Case shows, there is perhaps less support for any changes. The Supreme Court decision directly challenges the value of ‘acquiring new knowledge based on diverse viewpoints’ or at least demotes it to a ‘worthy’ aim rather than one which is allowed to be directly reflected in an admissions policy which takes race into account (https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf, p.6). The ruling also attacks any approach which assumes that minority students express any characteristic minority viewpoint (https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/22pdf/20-1199_hgdj.pdf, p.7). Both of these aspects of the ruling can be seen to undermine the sort of approach taken by Anderson, although Morton’s approach naturally avoids the specific domain of the ruling by bypassing the issue of college admissions policy. Nonetheless the cultural support for fair equality of opportunity appears strong, and the sentiments expressed in the Morton quote on page 1 of this paper remain reflective of popular opinion. The incentives to promote the aims of Anderson and Morton’s approaches have not weakened.
Section 2: Challenges to the Anderson/Morton project

The Anderson/Morton project as I have described it pursues an agenda of reforming elite formation and critiques the way that elites are currently formed in the educational system. It does this with a clear reference both to ideas of elites needing to be representative of different sectors of society and with reference to ideas of a fair equality of opportunity to join these elites. In this section I want to outline four sources of challenge to the project which emerge from the academic literature on fair equality of opportunity in education, as well as the representative capacity of elites. The first two areas deal with the idea of FEO, the third with the empirical link between FEO and social mobility, and the fourth with the underlying nature of elites. In section 3 I will then discuss responses to these challenges.

2.A The challenge from principles of justice

Fair equality of opportunity as presented in the Anderson project is concerned with the problems that arise in a democratic society in the face of social inequality (Anderson, 2007, p.598). We can see the project as seeking to correct for social disadvantage while allowing natural differences from ability and ambition to be reflected in access to elite positions. One area of challenge for Anderson is the idea that this concept of FEO is essentially unjust in failing to address the problems of the naturally disadvantaged, and arbitrary in that it is difficult, in practice, to tell the difference between different causes of inequality.

This is the line taken by Jencks (1988) and more recently Schouten (2012). Jencks is a more general sceptic of the notion of fair equality of opportunity, especially as applied to education. He argues that there are a number of different ‘principled reasons’ which can be applied to thinking about equality of opportunity and that it ends up being an ill-defined concept;
in his view it can be used to refer to distributing resources either equally or unequally and, if unequally, to either favor the advantaged or the disadvantaged (Jencks, 1988, pp. 532-3), all depending on which sort of idea of equality we pick. Focusing on correction for social disadvantage (which he terms as ‘weak humane justice’) is, he argues, morally and empirically unjustified since we cannot justify treating a child who reads poorly because of genetic circumstances in a different way to a child who reads poorly because of their social environment; nor can we, in many circumstances, reliably know the cause of the poor reading. Weak humane justice therefore collapses into ‘strong humane justice’ (which allows for all forms of disadvantage) but this also encounters problems because we have no coherent idea of how far we should go in correcting for all these disadvantages, and no ground for deciding how far we should hold the individual responsible for the social positions they attain, as opposed to their broad environment.

Schouten (2012) draws on Jencks’s criticism of weak humane justice but argues that the principles of strong humane justice can indeed be a unifying guide to educators. She constructs a framework which draws on Rawlsian concepts at the broader political level to suggest that equality of life chances in education is both an appropriate goal, and one that must distribute education based on attempting to correct both natural and societal disadvantage. Rawls suggests that in addition to FEO, which aims to ensure fair access - regardless of social circumstances - to positions of social and economic advantage, society must also follow his ‘difference principle’ which demands that any inequalities can only be justified by improving the condition of the least well off. This aims to protect those who are less able to exploit opportunities due to disadvantage of any sort, including the natural disadvantage of being less intelligent or less talented, as opposed to disadvantage due solely to social circumstances. In parallel, Schouten argues that a
Rawlsian type FEO in education can correct for social disadvantage, but she believes that educational justice demands that we should give priority to improving the life chances of those who for any reasons (including natural endowment and temperament) fall to the bottom of the pile. Raising academic achievement, she suggests, may well not be the intervention that actually improves the life prospects of certain populations. Rather she wants to ensure that, irrespective of achievement, every pupil is getting educational goods which contribute to their overall well-being, and that, in the distribution of these goods, the least well off are prioritized. She does not mean to preclude academic performance based on ability, but would challenge the Anderson project because she believes systemic resources need to be clearly focused on the least well off to meet standards of justice, rather than on meeting Anderson’s ambitious sufficiency bar for that proportion of the population which might in theory have the potential to gain access to selective colleges. For her the principles of justice in education demand that we prioritize the intrinsic benefits that education can bring to the quality of life of the least well off. Anderson claims that her proposals will give the less advantaged no “cause for complaint” (Anderson, 2007, p 598), but this is clearly a very weak requirement compared to Schouten’s.

2.B Challenges from the implementation of FEO

Other educational ‘egalitarians’ such as Brighouse and Swift have a less demanding requirement than Schouten in that they advance a plurality of goals, and, although they would agree with Schouten’s demand that the lest well off are benefited in the distribution of educational resource (as well as social resource), they still want to allow for a stronger role for a meritocratic concept of fair equality of opportunity (as a competing standard) which allows for fair competition regardless of social background (weak humane justice in Jencks’s terminology). Like Schouten they explicitly appeal to a Rawlsian framework, but they hold that there is a
plurality of educational goals, and it is probably not helpful to subsume them all under a single principle, which will be action guiding in all contexts. We should instead use a combination of goals in driving both educational policy and justice in the classroom, and there is an important role to be played by the meritocratic concept of FEO.

But they have a problem with Anderson’s project in that they do not believe that a meritocratic FEO can be realized in her framework. A central objection is that Anderson is happy to see unlimited private investment in education above her sufficiency standard, which, they believe, is in inconsistent with fair competition for positions of perceived value where education plays a gatekeeper role: ‘the competitively positional aspect of education means that getting “enough” will not give one a fair chance in competitions to which education is relevant, if others are getting more than enough ‘(Brighouse and Swift, 2008 p.462) . They could agree that a fair equality of opportunity which corrects only for social disadvantage would be an appropriate principle for elite college admissions, but they worry that the distortion of differential private investment in education undermines this equality of opportunity, and, more generally, that Anderson’s sufficiency standard strikes us as intuitively unfair when viewed in the context of fair competition.

The challenge to Anderson from the role of private investment is important because it questions the possibility of there being a sufficiently high standards of adequacy to ensure fair equality of opportunity. In an ideal world of educational FEO we might imagine that there is a centralized allocation system for the distribution of education, and every student gets the educational input that will give them a fair and equal opportunity to gain a place in the elite, compensating as necessary for different social circumstances, but accepting that differences in ability and temperament should give different outcomes, thus creating a fair pathway to the elite.
But, because education is not allocated by an impartial central authority and because good educational outcomes lead to societal rewards such as elite positions of power and affluence, education will often attract investment to secure an advantage in this ranking system. Anderson defends the ability to invest differentially in education, as we do not want to restrict an individual’s right to self-development, and, for instance, study for a Ph.D. for the love of the subject. But, in practice, it is impossible to distinguish between investment in education as an intrinsic good and investment to secure advantage in the selection process for elite universities or the labor market.

This typically plays out in the USA or the UK in the purchasing of private education by parents for their children in order to better their competitive position. It is explicitly understood in broad swathes of society that investment of time and money in a child’s education will improve their probability of going to highly selective colleges and (often as a consequence) obtaining an elite position in the labor market. Private schools and private tutors make a difference to educational achievement rankings. Unpaid internships and work experience which polish the college applications of students from wealthy backgrounds are not available to all. Obtaining higher degrees requires financing as well as aptitude and talent. All of these factors can be seen to undermine FEO to those whose parents will not, or cannot, make that investment. Nor is it possible for the state to intervene and provide enough additional education to level the playing field again, because the required investment is essentially unlimited, if the rewards offered by society are high enough.

A similar argument is used by Halliday (2015), who refers to the phenomenon of education serving as a positional good as creating an ‘educational arms race’. Halliday emphasizes the importance of the positional goods argument but also draws attention to the way
in which the resultant competitive parental investment in education undermines the developmental and intrinsic goods of education (Halliday, 2015, p.151). This is because it changes the goals of education from self-development to securing a place in a ranking, and, since investment of this nature is so large, it misallocates resources that would otherwise go to benefit the system as a whole. This sort of critique parallels some of the ideas of Schouten in that it raises the importance that education should have to the quality of everyone’s life experiences, rather than its role as an access point to positions of privilege.

2.C Challenges arising from FEO and social mobility.

There is both a challenge and a potential justification for the Anderson project in considering the connection between a Rawlsian concept of FEO and empirical observations of social mobility and its connections with education. Baum and Macpherson (2022) extend some of Morton’s practical thoughts about the need to look beyond college access if we are to pursue a fairer society, and discuss the conceptual role that education ideally plays in the promotion of social mobility. They discuss the linkage of social mobility to measures of inequality and emphasize that, even though there is broad acceptance of a certain degree of inequality in the distribution of resources in society, we believe that the opportunity to change one’s relative position in society is an important value (p.33). We accept that the rewards for individuals may be unequal because of differences in their efforts and abilities, and because of the different roles they play in society, but a key part of the folk belief in democratic structures is that we are independent agents that can effect a change in our relative position in a hierarchically ordered society by dint of our own efforts and talents. This requires mobility between the rungs on the ladder not only of financial success but more generalized social opportunity.
A fuller sociological consideration of the role of education in social mobility can be found in Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2022), which provides a summary of empirical findings as well as a theoretical framework, and challenges the ‘liberal’ theory of social mobility which links back to the ideology of the American Dream. Their research indicates that, even if there was indeed an increase in social mobility/social fluidity in the decades following WWII, this appears to have stagnated or gone into reverse since then. But this period of time, starting in the 1970’s or 1980’s has, certainly in the UK and the USA, seen a very substantially increased participation in higher education, and enormous investment in the provision of universal free education. If education is an effective tool for societal FEO, why have social mobility rates reversed? Bukodi and Goldthorpe explain some of the persistent lack of social mobility by the ability of parents to prevent downward social mobility for their children by investing in their education. If comparative educational benefits can be purchased in this way, then less able but wealthier candidates fill spots amongst the elites, and break down the conveyor of social mobility. Other theorists refer to this sort of phenomenon as ‘social congestion’ because places at the top of the ladder remain inaccessible because no space is available. Upward social mobility cannot happen without downward social mobility – the two are logically connected (assuming a fixed percentage of ‘elite’ spots), so if wealthier families do not move out of the way, then social mobility gets stopped. And it can be educational qualifications, effectively purchased through disproportionate family investment, that lead to this congestion. In this way it could be argued that education can be turned into the enemy of broad FEO, because it relates achievement to wealth and not to ability and effort.

I think these sorts of sociological findings are directly relevant to the argument that I want to make because they draw on the same philosophical background. I would support the
position that a generalized fair equality of opportunity is fundamental to liberal democracies because it allows for the recognition of individuals as inherently equal to one another, and that, as regards elites, access to these ‘unequal’ positions should be managed without regard to inequality of social position and class, although it can allow, in the first instance, for inequality based on natural endowments. But if our society follows this meritocratic principle in elite formation, and if ability is spread across different sectors of society, then it follows that elites should be composed from all sectors of society, and this can be measured, at least approximately, by studies of social mobility. This is independent of the Anderson argument about the qualification of elites through their social diversity, and simply reflects how elite formation should operate if fair equality of opportunity in fact exists. Whether we take social mobility in its restricted economic sense, or in the broader sense of the permeability of social structures, it is a corollary of fair equality of opportunity. We can see it as fair equality of opportunity, manifested in actual social structures, and, like a canary in a coalmine, if there is no social mobility, we should be able to conclude there is no fair equality of opportunity. It’s opposite, social stasis and ossification, is rightly regarded as a social pathology.

This is both a justification for the Anderson project and a challenge to its implementation, in that we have to consider the suggestion from Bukodi and Goldthorpe that educational qualifications will impede social mobility if they become a route to the maintenance of privilege within wealthy families. If this has become a structural part of education, then the attempt to make elite formation either fairer or more representative through education is going to be very hard to implement.
2.D Structural challenges

There are also more fundamental critics of the sort of approach that Anderson takes in respect to the structure and psychology of elites. Joshua Kissel argues that the sort of meritocratic ideals incorporated in her approach and partially accommodated by ‘egalitarians’ such as Brighouse and Swift fail on two principal grounds: one is the way in which education (particularly elite education) acts as a positional good, much as described above. The second contains a different and arguably stronger challenge to the project. Kissel argues that it would be pointless to try and ensure universal access to elite positions, as Anderson suggests, since our social structures and class systems will automatically convert any entrants into the elite to the standards of power and oppression already at play there. He sees the possibility of benevolent elites as negligibly remote, not only because it is probably not in the personal interest of members of the elite to care for the common good, but also because elites that are in fact benevolent would, over time, lose their elite status to those who are not constrained by the need to be benevolent (Kissel, 2021, p.293). We could view this as a more neo-Marxist and structuralist critique in that it assumes the primacy of social and structural forces over the power of education, and the inevitably corrupting nature that elite status will have on the psychology of the individuals concerned.

Linked to this form of critique is Wendy Salkin’s more generalized view that we should be very cautious in assigning roles of representation to individuals from minority communities that are informal – rather than the result of a formal process such as an election. In the Anderson model the socially diverse members of the elites automatically bring with them a representative function that allows others to understand the viewpoints of the communities from which they are drawn. But this may not be a reasonable expectation and, Salkin argues, we need to allow for the
fact that this representation might fail, either through epistemic failure (not reflecting the actual views of their community), or through the distorting effect of the power they gain, or through the relational imbalance with their communities (which in some ways they have to leave behind) (Salkin, 2021. p.947). We have to consider whether we are justified in assigning representative roles to members of often disadvantaged communities just through virtue of them belonging to that community – when even that label of ‘belonging’ might be questionable. We might ask whether that state of ‘belonging’ could change over time as a result of gaining power or different social status, and whether the representativeness of an individual is really accepted by their whole group, as opposed to being effectively assigned to them by people external to the group.
Section 3: Responses to the challenges

As we have seen in the previous section there are a few different angles from which the Anderson project needs to be defended. In this section I am going to focus on the challenge that the project cannot offer fair equality of opportunity (in a meritocratic form) to reach the elites; and also on the challenge emanating from the characterization of elites as inherently self-serving and structurally impossible to reform. The challenge from social mobility scholarship will be treated as a quasi-empirical constituent of the fair equality of opportunity critique, in that it suggests that educational qualifications can, in practice, be used to block social mobility and hence obstruct FEO.

I will largely put to one side the critique from the broader requirements of justice - covered in 2A above – which suggests that education should not be used to pursue a meritocratic concept of FEO for elite formation, as this fails to prioritize the life chances of the least well-off, who, through no fault of their own, are not in a position to be candidates for four year college education. Although I take it as a serious critique of education policy in general, I think that we can defend a project based around elite formation against its arguments, precisely because it is about elites; that is to say we are restricting our concerns to a subset of the population that enjoys (or so we hope) a high degree of natural endowment. Therefore, within a limited domain of ensuring fair equality of opportunity to join this group, we can deal with the issue of broader justice at a secondary level, in that, if our elites are correctly qualified in the ways that Anderson suggests and are responsive to the requirements of the disadvantaged, we can reasonably expect that they will make correct decisions about broader justice. This only works if there is a real chance of having benevolent elites, which I discuss in the second half of this section. However, if we do believe in that as a possibility, I think we can defend a narrow definition of Rawlsian
FEO, which seeks to address social disadvantage only, in the selection process for elites. This is not dissimilar to the approach taken by Brighouse and Swift in that it allows for multiple goals within the education system, rather than a universally applicable principle. This is not to deny that there will be unresolved issues about resource distribution in an education system, which might pit the demands of the least well off in general against the demands of Anderson’s sufficiency standard for those of higher academic potential. But this does not diminish the importance of Anderson’s aims or the coherence of the project in its own terms.

**Difficulties with FEO in education**

However, as we have seen, even within a narrow definition of FEO there is a substantive problem about how to allow for the differential private investment that may go into an individual’s education. Given the ‘gatekeeper’ role that elite college education still has in ensuring access to elite jobs – and resultant power and wealth – there is a huge incentive for families to invest in their children’s education so as to maximize their access to these positions of privilege. If education is distorted by its gateway role, then educational markers of achievement become a reflection of the resources that students and their families are prepared to invest in acquiring these markers, rather than picking out the ‘natural ability’ which would be an independent qualifier for these elite roles.

At first glance there might seem to be two alternative ways around this issue:

1. Brighouse and Swift approach: Seek to limit or abolish private investment.
2. Anderson’s approach: depend on college admissions departments to institute remedies for this by making some sort of calculation about the value of diversity.

Brighouse and Swift have argued that, even if we cannot fully abolish private schooling, we need to legislate to impose strict controls on how it works, and to put it on an equal footing with state
provided education. They also argue for effective limits on parental input into the education of children both at school and in the home environment. We might tie this sort of concern to more generalized critiques of neoliberal trends in education, that is the tendency to treat it as a competitive market with the rewards going to the better resourced families. But it is unclear to me how we could ever implement the sort of requirements that Brighouse and Swift suggest and roll back what has become a global phenomenon of private educational investment. There is very little we can do to prevent parents from attempting to tip the playing field to the advantage of their children, and there also strong philosophical arguments for limiting the extent to which we should try (which Brighouse and Swift acknowledge through their model of competing values). This is a case where the principles relating to independence and freedom of choice in educational matters butt up against the principle of meritocratic FEO. It is not just a question of private education, as even in countries where the public educational system is almost completely dominant (such as China and South Korea) there are often social expectations that parents will invest in supplemental private tutoring and other measures to obtain positional advantage.

The other sort of response to the positional goods argument, as advanced by Anderson, is to allow for people to invest differentially, but to introduce some sort of additional metrics, to be used by those who drive the process of elite formation, which would supplement metrics based on academic performance. This could be seen to be addressing both the problems with unfair advantage in functional testing for elites, and the resultant tendency to be non-representative. If we make it an overriding rule of elite formation that elites are chosen from different sub-groups, then, Anderson argues, we can ensure democratic accountability as well as functional competence, as long as the core academic education is ‘adequate’. So, to the extent that additional educational investment is ‘weaponized’ for competitive advantage in entering the elite
by the wealthier classes, we must use other metrics in elite formation which attempt to allow for
the unfair advantage which accrues in this way:

Since an elite overwhelmingly drawn from the already class-privileged is less qualified
than an elite drawn from all socioeconomic classes, colleges that are doing their jobs
must sharply discount the positional advantages that the prosperous can accrue by
endowing their children with more academic knowledge. (Anderson, 2007, p.616)

In practice this would involve the admissions committees at elite colleges making very large
adjustments to current admissions practice to allow both for social disadvantage and social
diversity, and therefore not allowing strictly “academic” qualifications to drive the process.
Anderson still wants to allow a role for the positional value of academic rankings, but seeks to
restrict this to ‘within group’ competition, and demands that, in parallel, social integration also
be given a large role. Anderson writes:

Nor should these positional advantages be wholly eliminated. Academic qualifications
are genuine. But considerations of social integration sharply limit the positional
advantages that accrue to higher academic achievement in competitions between the
multiply advantaged and the disadvantaged for access to elite positions. (Anderson, p
617)

This form of response could be seen as a critique of a traditionally meritocratic FEO, measured
only by academic means, in that it flags the weakness of such a principle in promoting the
representational role of elites; that is to say the ability, as Anderson would demand, to be both
representative of, and responsive to, the different social groups which constitute society. This
highlights the tension we have seen between a traditional notion of functional (or purely
academically constructed skill sets) and representative demands. Anderson argues for a clear
selection of elites to include members from all classes of society – regardless of strictly academic
FEO criteria. She presents her demands for diversity as a function of the ‘cognitive deficits’ of
existing elites, which arise from segregation and a lack of understanding of larger group
dynamics. In this way she stitches back together the functional and representational role, by
describing representational failure as a cognitive issue. So, for her the revised selection process at elite universities will still be meritocratic, because those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds deserve their place by virtue of the non-academic knowledge that they bring to the group.

Anderson believes that her approach successfully deals with the positional goods argument, but there is a huge gap here between theory and practice. In the first place it demands a revolution in elite college admissions procedures which seems implausible. To avoid tokenism there would need to be a huge change in the socio-economic profile of elite college admissions, and there seems to be relatively little appetite for this in the US. The colleges themselves are tied into a competitive ranking system in which they perceive the need to maintain status, and that demands keeping their admissions policy linked to sources of wealth and power. As President Biden has noted, there is a ‘river of power’ which runs through America, and which starts at these elite colleges (The Economist 7/12/23 Lexington). But the river does not only flow in one direction. It is through close ties to existing power and wealth that the colleges preserve their elite status, and to open up their admissions procedure as Anderson suggests would provide risks to their own status which they are unlikely to take. It is ironic that although the top colleges alone have the financial resources to educate a genuinely diverse class at affordable rates, they are probably unwilling to take the financial and, to them, reputational risk of doing that.

In any case, as Kissel notes, Anderson does not just ask that the elite colleges change their admissions procedures, but she also suggests that her project, in the medium terms, requires the removal of residential and educational segregation along pre-existing lines of race and class. This seems to her to be necessary condition for a genuinely sufficient K-12 education, so that the process of understanding diverse viewpoints can be properly embedded an early age.
(Anderson, 2007, p. 619). These are great aims, but it is questionable as to whether they are more achievable than the Brighouse/Swift suggestion of eliminating or controlling private investment in education.

**The empirical evidence from social mobility**

This is something of an empirical analogue to the main positional goods argument discussed above. As we have seen, there are concerning observations in social mobility which question the efficacy of education in constructing fair elites. Bukodi and Goldthorpe suggest a breakdown of the liberal theory of social mobility, which traditionally posited that ‘industrialization led through functional imperatives to an education-based meritocracy’ (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2022, p. 276). Education in this model should break the link between social origin and destination, but they believe there is no longer the evidence to support this. If they are correct then education as a motor of social mobility has broken, and educational attainment instead becomes a break on downward mobility for the wealthy, as they are able to invest in obtaining degrees and other credentials for their children which maintain their unfair advantage in entering the elites. If we conclude on the basis of the evidence that education does not work as a tool for improving social mobility, then we might draw the conclusion that it will not help in delivering FEO.

In defending Anderson, we could suggest that if the educational system was reformed in the way she suggested, then education could indeed work as a motor for social mobility, but the evidence here certainly reinforces the extent of reforms which would be necessary to achieve this. It also highlights the risk of parental investment in education undermining the sorts of reform suggested. If the acquisition of certain educational qualifications has become an established route to putting a brake on social mobility and FEO, then there is a risk that
opening up undergraduate courses at elite universities to genuine FEO will simply push the gateway credential to a different level. Thus the MBA or similar replaces the undergraduate degree from a four-year college as the passport to the elite, just because it demands extra resource to get it. If this sort of pattern in education is established, the attempt to reform can become something of an infinite regress, as the goal disappears over the horizon. This does nothing to undermine the rationale for the Anderson project but might make us question the implementation through the education system.

**The nature of elites**

Returning to Kissel’s critique we also need to consider his second line of attack, which is driven by the social and psychological nature of elites and the way in which we might ask them to be representative. Both Kissel and Morton argue that the social interaction inherent in the formation of elites undermines the ability of elites to represent the groups from which they have come. This is a very separate argument from the idea that they cannot compete fairly in some sort of race to be the most qualified on functional grounds for an elite job, even if, as Anderson suggests, social background forms part of that qualification. It argues rather that certain aspects of the social construction of elites in a selective university will alienate them from the groups which they should be representing, regardless of any pre-existing qualification. Kissel questions whether *any* construction of elites will make a difference to their behavior and suggests that the whole idea of being ‘qualified’ for the job cannot be determined independently of the social power structures that are already in existence. A further part of Kissel’s critique is that IF we are to make the huge social adjustments to accommodate a plan such as Anderson’s, which, at best, will marginally improve the nature of elites, we might as well directly address and reform the hierarchical injustices of our current social structures. Anderson’s plan is to somehow mitigate
these through her proposals, but Kissel suggests that any attempt to make elites genuinely benevolent will fail.

This line of attack is quite compelling, and it is true that we do not have a lot of clear examples of completely disinterested and benevolent elites wielding power. But the problem with drawing Kissel’s conclusion is that, for me at least, it is unclear how we could take any steps to incrementally improve social structures short of a substantial revolution. He identifies the underlying problem in the hierarchical nature of our society, and seems to believe that it could be re-ordered so as not to require elites. He certainly explicitly believes that elites and class hierarchy are incompatible with his egalitarian intuitions (Kissel, 2021, p. 296). But how does he imagine a society in any way similar to the one which we inhabit is going to be structured? Elites emerge in societies not just because of class based considerations but because of organizational necessity, and the fact that one can sometimes overlay the other is contingent not necessary. Basic structures of our society such as power supplies and running water seem to me to demand a certain hierarchy of roles and the expression of authority. Kissel uses ‘empirical’ observation to question the possibility of benevolent elites, but does not suggest any empirical examples of societies which are free of elites and hierarchies. From this perspective I think the Anderson project of reforming elites is the only real game in town, unless we imagine that the correct direction of social travel is towards some (to me implausible) Gauguinesque vision of an atomized and technology free tribal life.

But I think we can accept parts of Kissel’s critique of Anderson by adopting elements of Morton’s approach. We can see Morton as accepting the outline of Anderson’s project but also accommodating the concern that the act of elite formation will undermine the ability of the elite to act as good representatives. Hence her proposal to try and force social change by selecting
elites from a broad range of colleges - as opposed to a limited and self-perpetuating sub-group which risks divorcing representatives of minorities from the backgrounds which we want them to represent. Whereas Kissel draws a pessimistic conclusion and questions any ability of the elites to act in the communal interest, Morton has a more constructive approach: she accepts that the process within elite colleges may indeed alienate potential elites from their original communities and undermine their representative function, but she suggests a solution which addresses both groups of objections which I have covered in this section. If we expand the notion of elite colleges to include those that offer rigorous academic excellence, but which do not embody ‘elite’ social norms and expectation, then we might be able to avoid the alienation of future elites, and, at the same time circumvent the need to route them all through the admissions departments of hard-to-reform college admissions committees.

The consequent difficulty of course would be to change the selection procedures for elite jobs so that employers no longer relied on such a small group of colleges for their recruitment, but opened up their process to a much broader base of college graduates. But, given the huge practical difficulties of the other approaches we have considered, this might be the easiest option to implement, especially if it is line with other developing social trends. Morton is also aware of the risk that all the problems which she identifies as undermining elite formation at traditional colleges, could be replicated in the workplace. Here she seems to rely on the idea that working age populations might be more psychologically stable and less prone to social pressures than college students (Morton, 2021, p.21). College students are still at a very formative stage of their lives and, for many, taking their first steps towards adult independence and identity formation outside their immediate social environment. Therefore, they are more vulnerable to the forces of alienation than the working age population.
Section 4: Expanding the routes to the elites.

I consider that the defining aspect of the Anderson project which I have outlined is to create a pathway to elite positions which properly accounts for both ability and social diversity, and ensures that those in elite positions in society can be representative and responsive to those on behalf of whom they are making decisions. The project is important because it stresses the need for elites to be open to all sectors of society and provides a justification that draws on both functional and representative demands. The demand for representation is important because it adds to the more straightforwardly meritocratic argument for opening up elite formation, and emphasizes that the process of elite formation affects society as a whole. I don’t think we can accept a situation in which we abandon the hope of influencing elite formation and allow elites to become even more insular and self-perpetuating, because the reach of elites into all aspects of our society is so large. That is why we cannot accept the political argument that access to the elites is unimportant because we are only talking about small numbers of people. Elite formation is inherently political because of the power of their decision making.

I also suggest that even if, or especially if, we accept some aspects of Kissel’s argument about the inevitably self-serving nature of elites, the role of social mobility in elites is of great importance. The process of alienation from birth circumstances (as described by Morton) is potentially a multi-generational process, and social mobility in elites will lead to less alienation for the elite group as a whole, even if we cannot stop a certain amount of alienation creeping in through the very act of elite formation. A society without social mobility also becomes ‘ossified’ and unable to adapt to change, because those in elite positions have become part of a self-perpetuating and closed group, which also tends towards functional incompetence. Thus, even if we assume that elites cannot be fully benevolent, it remains of great importance that we keep
them open to all members of society, and the project described in this paper is a key part of that effort.

But if we are committed to opening up elite formation, is education a help or a hindrance in this process? As we have seen, there is an argument to be addressed that education provides an opportunity for existing elite groups to maintain a stranglehold on their position through investing family resource in education and dominating the channels of future elite formation. This and the other problems discussed provide real difficulties for the role of education in having a positive impact on elite formation. But even if it cannot be the reliable force we might have hoped for, this does not mean it is not a key part of the process, or one that cannot be improved. We might think that Anderson’s proposal requires too radical a reform of elite college admission to escape the positional goods argument, but there are elements in her suggested solution that are still appealing, and more achievable than a full-scale resistance to market forces that the Brighouse and Swift approach requires.

I referred earlier in the paper to the moves by UK elite colleges to change the social composition of the intake, and, more generally there has been considerable traction in the UK for ‘contextual’ admissions. These are defined as admissions policies which consider the social and schooling context when making admissions decisions, rather than bald ‘academic’ scores, and can be seen as in line with some of Anderson’s recommendations. As discussed in a 2017 paper from the Sutton Trust, these policies have been traditionally used by some US elite colleges to bolster recruitment from underrepresented communities – although in too limited a way to counteract the countervailing forces of legacy and other regressive admissions policies. But in the UK which does not have these countervailing policies the impact of contextual admissions at elite colleges has been significant and continues to gain traction. Other related policies have for
instance introduced ‘foundation’ year courses to allow students from less privileged backgrounds an extra year of university teaching in order to catch up with more privileged peers. Overall, these policies have the potential to make a significant impact on rates of recruitment from lower socio-economic tiers, and have not resulted in drop in standards (Bolivar et al 2017 p.36). Similar policies have, and continue to be used in the US: the UC system for instance (and Berkeley in particular) introduced various policies in the wake of the 1995 California ruling against positive discrimination, including “Eligibility in the Local Context”, ‘Comprehensive review’ and ‘Holistic review’, all of which have helped diversify admissions “By de-emphasizing quantitative academic measures relative to applicants’ special talents and disadvantages” (Douglass 2020 p.10). Again very little impact on standards has been noted (ibid). I think it is fair to conjecture that if the countervailing forces of legacy admissions and similar were not present, US colleges could use these sorts of strategies to decisively shift the socio-economic make-up of their intake.

The other area of considerable promise for the Anderson project more widely construed is Morton’s aim of redefining the notion of elite colleges. The key idea of Morton’s is to replace Anderson’s idea of equal opportunity to an ‘elite’ college education, with the idea that elites should be chosen from a much broader range of educational institutions. The proposal is important in two ways: first because it offers another route to diversifying the elite and secondly because it tackles the objections to Anderson’s project stemming from the risk of that elite colleges inherently undermining representative capacity through their social norms.

Morton considers some objections to her proposals, including a); the idea that by recruiting from a broader range of colleges we risk ‘dumbing down’ the elite and failing on the sort of functional demands that Anderson might make; and b); the idea that a strategy of this sort
pushes the underlying problem we are discussing from the level of college recruitment to the level of the labor market. I think we can agree with Morton that the first objection is weak as the idea that academic excellence is confined or even concentrated in a small number of socially elite institutions makes little sense, especially since the reputation of those institutions is more often driven by research (and the ability to fund it) rather than by teaching excellence. The idea seems something of a relic from the very early days of universities when ‘knowledge’ was actually physically attached to certain types of institution both through individual scholars and physical resources.

However, the second objection merits some further consideration: since we have no centralized control over the labor market, there is no available mechanism to implement Morton’s approach, whereas in the case of Anderson’s strategy, at least a certain amount of pressure could be brought to bear on the college selection procedure. This might seem a difficult problem, and it is certainly not easy to control. But I think we can point to a fair amount of practical evidence that would support the sort of approach taken by Morton. My experience in working in advocacy for social mobility in the UK has shown a surprisingly high level of interest from industry and professional bodies in adopting policies to increase diversity and variation in their recruitment practices, including opening up recruitment to consider graduates from a broader range of universities. This seems to come from a mixture of social trends/pressure and self-interest in the sense of hoping to attract candidates who are both more talented than those from traditional social elites and better able to connect with likely future clients. The double aim is neatly captured in this quote from the Goldman Sachs website: “We value diversity as an important asset that enhances our culture, helps us serve clients well and maximizes return for shareholders” (https://www.goldmansachs.com/careers/statements/diversity-global.html).
However cynical we might be about the rhetoric, the fact remains that a firm like Goldman, which used to run recruitment events at elite colleges only, now makes the effort to seek college graduates from a much broader range of colleges.

We can see the broader trend, at least in the area where I have experience, in concrete actions such as group industry pledges from the UK legal industry (https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/prime-year-1-full-report.pdf) and other more vocationally diverse groups (https://www.socialmobilitypledge.org/about). These initiatives encourage recruiters to eliminate barriers to social mobility and fair equality of opportunity in the micro world of their own recruitment; this typically involves spreading work experience opportunities and internships over a wide base, and paying properly for them so as to eliminate a bias in favor of the wealthy, as well as ensuring that final selections take due account of cultural and social capital biases. The result has been a marked change in the composition of new recruitment cohorts at many ‘elite’ employers.

Anecdotally there are similar trends in the US corporate world, and I think there at least three factors which are helping this:

1. The overall growth in the graduate working population dilutes the numbers of ‘Ivy League’ graduates, and forces employers to look elsewhere (https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics). This trend is sharpened by the fact that the traditionally elite colleges do not expand in line with overall student numbers as their priority is to maintain their exclusivity.

2. This drives more questioning as to the added value of traditionally elite college degrees which also encourages recruiters to widen their net and seek the same talent for less money. A 2020 study in the Harvard Business Review aimed at corporate
recruiters suggests that graduates from elite colleges have only marginally better performance, and that this difference is not derived from their college education. (https://hbr.org/2020/09/graduates-of-elite-universities-get-paid-more-do-they-perform-better)

3. Perceptions of fairness in recruiting and promotion have become very important to employees, and are ranked by Pew Research in a 2023 survey as by the far the most popular element of DEI initiatives in the workplace. (https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/05/17/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-the-workplace/).

Furthermore, because these are privately organized policy changes there is, despite some current right-wing rhetoric, less likely to be a successful political effort to reverse them, and there are also less likely to be the sort of legal challenges that attempts to alter college selection procedures have provoked.
Conclusion

I have argued for the importance of fair and representative elite formation. However, we cannot assume that education can be reliably used to ensure fair equality of opportunity and social mobility, because it seems, in practical terms, impossible to overcome the socially driven distortion of such a system. At the same time the ideals of FEO and social mobility are central to our idea of what our society should look like, and we need to use as many means as possible to ensure that they persist. These sorts of considerations should lead us to reject the position that access to the elites is unimportant because it affect only a ‘lucky few’. The way that elites are formed is important both for the effective functioning of society (because we want to make sure of their competence), and because the acceptance and buy-in from broader society of those elites (and their privileges) depends on their being viewed as potential representatives of us all.

Although I have considered the viewpoint that elites will always be self-serving, because of the fundamental psychological tendencies suggested by Joshua Kissel, I would suggest his approach of creating a less hierarchical structure in society has no route to implementation and does nothing to improve the situation in a non-ideal setting. Unless we radically reform the basic governance units of society to a much smaller size, then hierarchy will naturally flow from the complexity of current structures.

This leads us back to the question of how we try and promote FEO and diversity in elite formation. There is a limit to what can be achieved through education, mainly because of the weaponization of education by the wealthy in securing positional goods advantage for themselves and for their children. Nor is it easy to correct this through imposing limitations on family influence on education as this runs up against important and competing rights. For these reasons we need to look to more than education to bolster social mobility, and labor market
practices seem to be an important component of how we might achieve this. There are two points to note here: first that the tendency of elites to be self-perpetuating and socially defined will play out in the labor market, as well as in access to elite educational institutions. But, as we have seen there is an appetite to challenge this sort of ‘closed shop’, and because labor market institutions are numerous and not centrally controlled, there is space for different approaches to gain traction. If we are also able to directly target social mobility through measures other than education, then this will feed into societal FEO and, at least partially in consequence, better representative capacity.

The second point is that education is still intimately involved. Even if we can sometimes directly target elite formation independently of education, it remains the case that education has an extremely strong gateway function and must be part of a set of tools we use. In this case some of the arguments advanced by Anderson remain valid, and her idea that, within the educational world, we need to compensate for the social advantage conferred by excess investment seems more practical than attempts to ban this excess investment. Furthermore, it seems to be gaining traction on the ground in the use of schemes such as contextual admission, which, at least in the UK, have succeeded in substantially altering the social make up of incoming cohorts to the most elite universities.

But this is a partial solution and I think Morton is correct to insist that a move away from drawing elites from a small number of highly selective colleges is critical to better/fairer elite formation, especially given the valid concerns about the undermining of representative qualities in the process of elite educational institution. Education tends to funnel and direct its participants towards certain destinations and social functions, and elements of that process may be unfair. The argument of this paper is not that we can stop that process, but that we should try and
broaden the number of streams by which destinations are reached, and avoid funneling bottle
necks which tend to become controlled by power and privilege, rather than any notion of fair
equality of opportunity. This is naturally a gradual and non-ideal process, but one where progress
can be made if we rely on a broad coalition of policies and actors.

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