Peter Mandler has written a significant history of post-war education which raises several important questions about meritocracy and education. Mandler claims to provide an alternative narrative emphasizing the role of demographic and economic (supply/demand) explanation of educational expansion in the UK after 1945. In doing so he providers an accessible overview of (mostly) post-war education policy exploring major reforms including comprehensive school reform and charting the shift away from progressive education reforms and towards the market from the mid-1970s.

At a time when minimum entry requirements for higher education are being considered by government as a means to effectively cap the number of places (Department for Education, 2022), Mandler's discussion of questions of supply and demand in education policy has clear relevance. The potential unpopularity of reforms that might regressively limit access through requiring minimum GCSE standards for entry to university is an interesting question to view through the lens of Mandler's book.

The major issue that limits and sometimes undermines this text is Mandler's tendency to dismiss and mischaracterize many major texts in the sociology and history of education. Historians of education 'usually educationists, lodged in university departments of education', as if this location was a disqualifying factor, and sociologists of education have been 'in thrall' to party politics. This obsession with viewing inequality and social change in education through the lens of party political time frames is, for Mandler, a weakness in the existing literature leading historians and sociologists unable to situate education 'in the process of [wider] social change'. This rather dismissive approach also mischaracterizes the rich historical work on different aspects of social change by historians of education (Lowe, 1997; Müller, Ringer, & Simon, 1987; Woodin, McCulloch, & Cowan, 2012) and by those working at the boundaries of history, sociology, anthropology and other disciplines (Delamont, 1989; Gerrard, 2016). This approach feels unnecessary, but it is also odd as the text relies extensively on historians of education for much of its source material.

What is interesting here from a sociological perspective is whose accounts are taken seriously and whose are not. Halsey, Floud, Goldthorpe and Banks are all discussed here generously. The Nuffield/LSE quantitative accounts of access to secondary education or socio-historical accounts of educational and social class change are prominent here. Surprisingly, particularly for a book focused on meritocracy, Jackson and Marsden's (1962) account of social class and the grammar school receives much less attention. Their work is cited just once and dismissed as 'declinist' (a term that is used broadly to very varied critics of education in the UK) and 'politically charged'. Given the focus of the book on meritocracy, it is odd that Mandler does not draw on Jackson and Marsden's account of complicated experiences of social mobility for first generation working-class grammar school students. This dismissive approach continually re-appears when discussing critical, largely qualitative work in the sociology of education.

One of the outcomes of this attitude is that the complexities of educational inequality at the micro-level are less present here. The book acknowledges at the start that it 'says little about the nitty-gritty of educational experience, except where that has a bearing on

supply and demand.' In writing a broad narrative of educational and social change focusing on the latter half of the 20th century, we might expect micro-levels of change to be treated briefly but not ignored. Sociologists of education would expect the work of Basil Bernstein, Paul Willis and others to be given greater seriousness rather than simply described as out of sync with popular opinion and of little historical value. Bernstein and Willis are criticized for their focus on working-class experience of education and their use of ethnographic, as opposed to survey-based methods. Mandler laments the absence of Floud and Halsey style surveys of educational attitudes to provide historical evidence for the 1970s. From the 1980s onwards, Mandler claims that historians and sociologists of education 'miserable' attitudes towards the direction of education meant that they 'fixate[d]' on policy rather than 'the actual experiences, attitudes and behaviours of those who are allegedly suffering under it.' Again, the question is what 'experiences, attitudes and behaviours' does Mandler actually mean? The types of experience, feeling and opinion that matter in considering the expansion (or restriction) of educational opportunity are drawn quite narrowly here.

This refrain that sociologists of education 'fixate' on working-class experience of education is repeated for later decades. Those focused on access to HE in more recent decades 'remained fixated on the proportion of students… from working-class backgrounds'. The qualitative school choice literature of the 1990s and 2000s is critiqued for focusing on working-class children, 'a smaller and smaller proportion of the population'. This is odd given that much of the school choice literature examined middle-class experience. Mandler's definition of class appears to rest on the Nuffield analyses of the changing social structure (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2018). Class analysis in sociology is more heterogeneous, providing multiple perspectives on how class is formed and reproduced in education and how it intersects with inequalities of race, gender and disability.

There are other omissions that will seem notable to sociologists working on meritocracy, social mobility and education. Structures of feeling are mentioned briefly, but without referencing Williams, whose critique of meritocracy is also overlooked (Williams, 1960, pp. 350-351). Pierre Bourdieu is omitted completely. More recent qualitative work on meritocracy (Littler, 2017), the complex and unequal experience of social mobility in higher education (Bathmaker et al., 2016) and work on race, racism and access to education (Archer & Francis, 2006; Mirza, 2008) is almost entirely overlooked or is dismissed.

The influence of market-oriented, neoliberal policy reform from the 1980s onwards is also downplayed. This leads to a dramatic and misleading underestimation of the changes wrought by academization which are particularly concerning for 'democracy' – a concept which despite its prominence in the book's title is never really clearly defined. Mandler is right to highlight that the relationship between access, inequality and marketisation is complex, the introduction of higher fees has not led to falling participation for *young* working-class students but this is not true for mature and part-time students (Callender & Thomson, 2018). Debt (Clark, Hordósy, & Vickers, 2019), private profit-making (Whitfield, 2016) and weakened local democratic control (West &

Wolfe, 2019) are all major threats to democratic forms of participation and governance of education.

Despite the problems with Mandler's text, it is nonetheless a significant contribution that explains many of the key changes in post-war education policy. There are genuine questions about the power of demographic change to shape education policy which are explored well here. It would have been perfectly possible to do this without dismissing or overlooking substantial collections of sociological and historical work on education. For this reason sociologists of education seeking an introduction to the history of education could cast their net wider to explore other accessible overviews (Lowe, 2021; Martin, 2022). The history of education is a far richer and rewarding discipline than is sometimes implied here and one which sociologists of education should be exploring further. There are questions that Mandler raises for sociologists of education that are useful – how do we combine sometimes contradictory accounts of class and education? In seeking to answer this question we should adopt a fair, balanced and humble account that does not seek to dismiss large swathes of sociological or historical work on education.

References

Archer, L., & Francis, B. (2006). *Understanding minority ethnic achievement: Race, gender, class and'success'*: Routledge.

Bathmaker, A.-M., Ingram, N., Abrahams, J., Hoare, A., Waller, R., & Bradley, H. (2016). *Higher education, social class and social mobility: The degree generation*: Springer.

Bukodi, E., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (2018). Social inequality and social mobility: is there an inverse relation? *SocArXiv. October, 5*.

Callender, C., & Thomson, J. (2018). *The lost part-timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England*. Retrieved from London:

Clark, T., Hordósy, R., & Vickers, D. (2019). 'We will never escape these debts': Undergraduate experiences of indebtedness, income-contingent loans and the tuition fee rises. *Journal of Further and Higher Education, 43*(5), 708-721.

Delamont, S. (1989). *Knowledgeable women: Structuralism and the reproduction of elites*. London: Routledge.

Department for Education. (2022). *Higher education policy statement & reform consultation*. London

Gerrard, J. (2016). *Radical childhoods: Schooling and the struggle for social change*: Manchester University Press.

Jackson, B., & Marsden, D. (1962). *Education and the working class: some general themes raised by a study of 88 working-class children in a northern industrial city*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Littler, J. (2017). *Against meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. London: Routledge.

Lowe, R. (1997). *Schooling and social change: 1964-1990*. London: Routledge.

Lowe, R. (2021). *Schooling and Social Change Since 1760: Creating Inequalities Through Education*: Routledge.

Martin, J. (2022). *Gender and Education in England since 1770: A Social and Cultural History*: Springer Nature.

Mirza, H. S. (2008). *Race, gender and educational desire: Why black women succeed and fail*: Routledge.

Müller, D., Ringer, F., & Simon, B. (1987). *The rise of the modern educational system: structural change and social reproduction 1870-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

West, A., & Wolfe, D. (2019). Academies, Autonomy, Equality and Democratic Accountability: Reforming the Fragmented Publicly Funded School System in England. *London Review of Education, 17*(1), 70-86.

Whitfield, D. (2016). *The financial commodification of public infrastructure*. Retrieved from Adelaide:

Williams, R. (1960). *Culture and society 1780-1950*. New York: Doubleday and Company.

Woodin, T., McCulloch, G., & Cowan, S. (2012). Raising the participation age in historical perspective: policy learning from the past? *British Educational Research Journal*, 1-19. doi:10.1080/01411926.2012.668871