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2. Graduate Income Inequalities: A Qualified Desert Responsibility Analysis

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Abstract: This article proposes a ‘qualified desert responsibility’ framework to analyse social class-based differentials in graduate incomes in the UK. I posit that unequal outcomes can only be justified on desert grounds by virtue of actions or qualities for which individuals may reasonably be held responsible. I then review a range of sociological studies of graduate employment from which I conclude that disparities between middle-class and working-class graduates cannot be justified by reference to a desert principle because they are the product of an unequally structured labour market for which individuals cannot reasonably be held responsible. In the discussion, I develop this argument by drawing upon Fishkin’s theory of ‘opportunity pluralism’. I conclude with a brief account of sociological investigations of intra-class graduate employment experiences. Here, I suggest that unequal outcomes can be justified by reference to the desert principle where there is evidence that the responsibility condition has been met.

Keywords: graduate incomes, inequality, desert-based justice, opportunity pluralism

Introduction: Graduate Income Inequalities

This article draws from a desert-based justice framework to examine the question of income differentials both between different social classes of graduates

in the UK and within them. It begins by outlining evidence of income variances between middle-class and working-class graduates. The article then moves on to the question of whether such inter-class inequalities are simply a fair, if unfortunate, outcome of a competitive market economy. This is examined by reference to two facets of neoliberalism: the public discourses of human capital and ‘social efficiency’, and its more doctrinal aspect as represented by the work of Hayek. It is noted that, while inter-class income inequalities come into some conflict with the technocratic rationalism of the first of these, they are comfortably accommodated within Hayekian libertarianism. It is argued that both positions, in different ways, are incompatible with broad egalitarian principles. The article suggests that class-based graduate employment differentials are rightly matters of distributive justice and, further, that these may be understood through a form of desert-based justice framework. The proposed framework assumes a form of ‘qualified desert responsibility’ condition which stipulates that individuals and social groups can only be said to deserve more or less than other individuals or social groups in virtue of actions or characteristics for which they can reasonably be held responsible. This, in turn, requires that they have been accorded prior and equal opportunities to exercise such responsibility.

The article then considers what is known about the different labour market experiences of middle-class and working-class graduates by reviewing a wide range of sociological studies, much of which is informed by the work of Bourdieu. This research points to a graduate labour market which privileges middle-class financial, cultural and social capitals to the extent that the responsibility condition of a desert-based justice framework—fair and equal opportunity to deserve—cannot be met. In the discussion section, the article elaborates on this argument by drawing from a different philosophical perspective: Fishkin’s¹ theory of ‘opportunity pluralism’ and its ‘anti-bottleneck’ principle. Following this, some empirical studies of intra-class differences in labour market experiences and outcomes are reviewed. It is suggested that there is some evidence within this literature to indicate that the desert responsibility condition for differential outcomes has been met. This is an important point because it recovers a place for desert as a justificatory principle in relation to unequal labour market outcomes and avoids critique lapsing into more straightforward luck egalitarianism.

Viewing social class-based inequalities in graduate incomes through a qualified desert responsibility lens affords attention to structural conditions,

¹ Joseph Fishkin *Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

but also allows for recognition of individual agency. The review of sociological research then provides empirical evidence against which to apply the principles established within the normative framework set out. This article addresses a problem of relevance to all with an academic or policy interest in higher education and, although the discussion relates to the UK, the schema applied here may usefully be extended more internationally.

Social Class and Graduate Incomes

A range of studies offers consistent indications of social class-related disparities in graduate incomes. Graduates from higher income families earn on average twenty percent more than their peers from lower income families, while those from working-class backgrounds who make it into the professions may earn £6,800 less than their counterparts from professional backgrounds. Furthermore, even when educational credentials and human capital are controlled for, a class pay gap of £2,242 remains.² Other studies have identified a notable ‘private school effect’ independent of other variables whereby graduates who have attended fee-paying schools enjoy a marked earnings premium over their state-educated colleagues.³ Finally, social class emerges as a variable in categories that correlate strongly with but do not finely map onto class. Those who have attended high-ranking, selective institutions are most likely to become higher earners (although this will vary considerably across subjects) but are less likely to have come from working-class backgrounds; similarly, those who have studied highly competitive subjects, such as law or medicine, are most likely to be in the higher income brackets but are much more likely to be from middle-class backgrounds.⁴

² Britton Jack, Lorraine Dearden, Neil Shephard, and Anna Vignoles. “Is Improving Access to University Enough? Socio-Economic Gaps in the Earnings of English Graduates.” *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics* 81, no. 2 (2019): 328–368.

³ Chris Belfield, Jack Britton, Franz Buscha, Lorraine Dearden, Matt Dickson, Laura van der Erve, Luke Sibieta, Anna Vignoles, Ian Walker, and Yu Zhu. *The impact of undergraduate degrees on early-career earnings* (Department for Education/Institute for Fiscal Studies, November 2018).

Francis Green, Jake Anders, Morag Henderson, and Golo Henseke. “Private Benefits? External Benefits? Outcomes of Private Schooling in 21st Century Britain.” *Journal of Social Policy* 49, no. 4 (2019): 724–743.

⁴ Paul Wakeling, and Mike Savage. “Entry to Elite Positions and the Stratification of Higher Education in Britain.” *The Sociological Review* 63, no. 2 (2015): 290–320.
Britton Jack, Elaine Drayton, and Laura van der Erve. *Which University Degrees Are Best for Intergenerational Mobility?* (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021).

The question for this present article is whether such inequalities amount to matters of distributive justice. That is, are such income distributions fair? It is suggested that these questions need, firstly, to be considered through the lens of neoliberalism: the mode of political economy which, in its different variants, frames the education systems and labour markets of advanced capitalist nations. Two rather different answers to the questions emerge by comparing the public discursive face of neoliberalism with the ‘pure’ doctrine of Hayek, one of its most prominent intellectuals.

Neoliberalism and Graduate Income Inequalities

The first, perhaps surprising, answer to the questions posed above emerges if one of the tenets of the public discourse of neoliberalism—that of the ‘knowledge-based economy’ (KBE)—is to be taken at face value. It has been noted that the two key assumptions underpinning the knowledge-based economy are, firstly, that markets are now global and, secondly, that all nations must compete within them on the basis of knowledge and innovation.⁵ This belief, which has been propagated by supra-national organisations such as the OECD and the European Union, has had a profound effect upon many nations’ higher education systems. A nation’s global competitiveness is seen to be predicated upon its stock of human capital—the knowledge, skills, learning capacities and cultural openness of its workforce. This, in turn, has brought demands for a reconceptualising of the purposes of national higher education systems to align them more closely with the perceived needs of the global economy.

The result has been a powerful shift in higher education policies across the world towards a form of ‘market fundamentalism’ whereby what is valued is primarily that which can be articulated through the logic of the market.⁶ And, while this doctrine varies somewhat between national systems, the same basic principles of educational instrumentality are to be seen across both advanced economies and emerging ones.⁷ The pertinent point for this discussion, however, is that the discourses of the KBE and of human capital emphasise notions of technocratic equity in the running of both higher education systems and the labour markets they supply to.⁸ From this perspective, systemic levels

⁵ Fazal Rizvi and Bob Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010).

⁶ Rizvi and Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy*, 78.

⁷ Phillip Brown, Hugh Lauder, and David Ashton, *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Rizvi and Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy*, 78.

of social class-based graduate income inequalities could be seen to represent a failure of the human capital model and its promise of ‘social efficiency’.⁹ However, if this amounts to a critique of class-based income inequalities, it is one premised upon a narrow form of economic rationalism rather than upon principles of distributive justice. Moreover, neoliberalism has never been a monolithic construct, and its ‘pure’ ideological form may differ substantially from its public face. Here, I turn to the work of Hayek who offers quite a different answer to the questions above.

Hayek was a central figure in the ideological shift towards neoliberalism. His ideas, and those of fellow ideologues, influenced what became known as ‘Thatcherism’ in the UK and ‘Reaganomics’ in the United States. His writings ranged beyond economics into philosophy because his trenchant views on free market economics were based upon the logic of his ontological, epistemological and, ultimately, ethical positions in relation to society. His particular strain of libertarianism thus bears examination as an influential philosophical and political perspective on market inequalities, and as a rejection of ameliorative distributive justice measures.

Hayek’s ontology was a form of methodological individualism: what is commonly termed ‘society’ or ‘the market’ is simply an aggregation of individuals, each of whom acts to meet their own individual aims. And, as aggregations of individuals, such entities cannot meaningfully be said to have an overall purpose; instead, they are highly intricate ‘spontaneous orders’ with their own unpredictable, organically-driven dynamics¹⁰. The epistemological implication of this ontology is that society and the market become unknowably complex and this, in turn, takes us to Hayek’s key ethical position as a free market economist: that all attempts at ‘control’ to redress inequalities are both misguided and certain to fail because it is the market’s organic, spontaneous nature that gives it its flexibility and vitality.

Hayek made a distinction between ‘value’ and ‘merit’ to support his argument that economic inequalities were an inevitable feature of a healthy and dynamic market. ‘Merit’ denoted the ‘attributes of conduct’ and ‘moral character’ of an individual while ‘value’ referred to the monetary worth of an individual as an economic actor.¹¹ Consonant with his view that the market lacked an overall purpose, and thus was an essentially amoral entity, Hayek

⁹ Rizvi and Lingard, *Globalizing Education Policy*, 79.

¹⁰ Friedrich August von Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1982).

¹¹ Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*. (London, New York: Routledge Classics, 1960/2006).

maintained that it rewarded individuals only by virtue of their value, and not by their merit. In consequence, many individuals who might be considered deserving (in the sense of their hard work or the moral probity of their intentions) may not actually receive their just deserts. Similarly, many undeserving individuals (in the same sense above) may be rewarded by the workings of the market. Hayek was aware of the function of social class in mediating market inequalities. He recognised that individuals had access to very different levels of cultural, social and economic capital, although he did not actually employ such terminology. Nevertheless, Hayek's insistence upon the impersonal nature of market forces, and his distinction between value and merit, meant that he accepted a place for inherited privileges and for the inequalities they inevitably created. Inherited material and cultural advantages could simply be reduced to 'luck', a condition which no state (a term he rejected in itself) could or should aim to remedy.¹²

Hayek's unconcern with the effects of 'brute luck'—the lottery of both natural talents and social advantages—puts him directly at odds with those, such as this present writer, who are sympathetic to what is broadly termed 'luck egalitarianism'. This philosophy covers a range of different positions, but in essence it argues that an individual's life chances should not depend on brute luck but solely on the choices for which that person may reasonably be held responsible. The following section offers a normative framework for understanding graduate income differentials which addresses itself to such distributive justice principles: desert-based justice. At this point, I wish to clarify that this paper is not concerned with whether income inequalities per se may be justified by reference to free market principles such as an individual's productivity. That is, the article does not seek to examine what Olsaretti¹³ terms 'economic desert'—questions regarding individuals' desert of monetary benefits—as a principle of distributive justice. Rather, the focus is upon employing a desert-based justice framework to consider questions of fairness in relation to *differential opportunities* across the graduate population to earn high incomes. In particular, the article examines what counts as deserving in relation to job selection processes. Finally, this paper's focus on income inequalities should not be taken to mean that income in itself is of fundamental moral significance, or that it is the only or prime reason why an individual may choose to go to university. Nevertheless, graduate income inequalities matter because income is a fungible good that enables individuals to pursue their

¹² Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 79.

¹³ Serena Olsaretti. *Liberty, Desert and the Market: A Philosophical Study*. (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

conception of the good life and to secure conditions for their well-being. For that reason, it is an important subject as a question of distributive justice.

Desert-Based Justice

Formally speaking, desert consists of three distinct but inter-related properties: a subject (for example, a person), a thing or treatment (for example, a reward or punishment) and a fact about the subject (for example, something that the individual has done). Feinberg¹⁴ (1970, p. 224) takes these elements to offer a well-known triadic relation whereby “S deserves X in virtue of F,” where S is a person, X a mode of treatment, and F some fact about S¹⁵. This basic formulation has been widely accepted among desert theorists¹⁵. The inter-relationship between the three elements of this structure also means that desert-claims are normatively significant because if it is accepted that a person deserves a thing (a mode of treatment), then, in consequence, there is a reason why the individual should have the thing.

For reasons later discussed, desert has been eclipsed by more dominant philosophical defences of liberalism that emphasise needs-based or rights-based principles of distributive justice. Indeed, most desert theorists also adopt a pluralist view of justice and accept that other competing principles—such as basic needs or equal outcomes—may take priority over desert claims.¹⁶ However, I follow both Kristjansson and Wolff¹⁷ in noting that questions of desert are central to lay social actors’ everyday intuitions and beliefs about justice. It is important, therefore, that these instincts should find some expression within distributive justice thinking. It is necessary, though, that this is done with philosophical rigour since lay perceptions may not align with philosophical analysis. However, rather than trying to outline a general theory, the article focuses on offering certain principles which are pertinent to

¹⁴ Joel Feinberg “Justice and Personal Desert” in *Rights and Reason Essays in Honor of Carl Wellman*, ed. Marilyn Friedman, Larry May, Kate Parsons, and Jennifer Stiff (Dordrecht: Springer, 2000), 221–250

¹⁵ See Kristjan Kristjansson *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2006); Serena Olsaretti *Liberty, Desert and the Market: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004); Samuel Scheffler, “Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, and Liberalism in Philosophy and Politics,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 21, no. 4, (1992): 299–323; George Sher, *Desert* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ See Feinberg, *Justice and Personal Desert*; Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*; Sher, *Desert*; Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*.

¹⁷ Jonathan Wolff, “The Dilemma of Desert,” in *Desert and Justice*, ed. Serena Olsaretti (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 219–232.

understanding questions of fairness in job selection. This framework consists of three formal constraints and one substantive one.

The first formal constraint refers to the temporality of desert. It is generally agreed that desert-bases are retrospective, that is, they originate in an individual's past actions which are then rewarded or sanctioned at some later point.¹⁸ By contrast, job selection processes are normally thought to be different in that the basis of the desert claim is the most qualified candidate's promise of *future performance* rather than their past actions¹⁹. This would seem to present an obstacle to applying a desert-based approach to the question of employment hiring practices. However, Schmidt²⁰ has attempted to retain the concept of desert here through his notion of 'promissory desert' whereby, "*A person who receives opportunity X at t1 can be deserving at t1 in virtue of what she will do if given the chance*". This concept upends the traditional temporality of desert since the desert-base for being given the job is forward-looking, in the form of promised future productivity, rather than being grounded in past achievements.

For many writers, Schmidt's concept of promissory desert would not be considered a true form of desert. Kristjansson,²¹ for example, acknowledges that all desert claims are made, in some minimal sense, against a context of future expectations—that is, we reward or sanction with a view to the likely consequences of the reward or sanction. Nevertheless, to go beyond this to a substantive view of desert as based in future actions would be conceptually difficult, a notion somewhat like repaying a debt that has not yet been incurred. For this present author also, Schmidt's promissory desert unnecessarily complicates the concept of desert. In fact, if we consider what is known about the desert-bases from which employers in high competition, high-income sectors of the graduate labour market award jobs, they can be readily reconciled with a retrospective desert temporality.

As the article later discusses more fully, elite employers award jobs on the basis of a mixture of 'hard' and 'soft' credentials. Degrees and other forms of paper qualifications are hard credentials, while an applicant demonstrates their soft skills in the form of extra-curricular activities (ECAs), work experience

¹⁸ See Feinberg, *Justice and Personal Desert*; Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*; Sher, *Desert*.

¹⁹ See Serena Olsaretti, "Justice, Luck and Desert," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 439.

²⁰ David Schmidt, "How to Deserve," *Political Theory* 30, no.6 (2002): 774–799.

²¹ Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*.

and behavioural attributes such as drive, resilience and charisma. Of course, an employer evaluates these simply with an eye to what they may indicate about an applicant's future productivity. Nevertheless, they all originate in a candidate's past endeavours and therefore align with the retrospective temporality of a desert-based justice framework. This includes behavioural competencies such as resilience or determination which are, to some degree, the results of past socialisation.

At this point, it should be acknowledged that, in accepting employers' requirements as desert-bases, this discussion may be departing from more standard treatments of desert in which theorists will debate what should constitute a desert-base.²² It seems I may be open to Olsaretti's²³ criticism of following an 'ecumenical' notion of desert. Thus, by simply relying on the appraisers' (employers') responses to the appraised (graduate applicants) this article is employing an overly broad conception of desert that lacks moral force—it becomes more of a *descriptive* claim about how people react to other people rather than how they *should* and consequently loses force as a desert claim. The first point, that the treatment of desert in this paper is unorthodox in this respect, must be conceded. However, this aligns with the purposes of this article: I am a sociologist who is employing philosophical principles to interrogate the sociological realities of the labour market. Thus, the starting point here is what is known about what elite employers appear to want rather than what they should want. I believe too that my approach avoids lapsing into the ecumenicism that Olsaretti criticises. My reading of her position on this is that desert becomes overly capacious if the appraisers' views are *all* we have to go on. By introducing the three constraining principles below, we qualify desert and thus delimit its scope.

The second constraint is that desert must have independent, pre-institutional force. This argument follows on from my comments above. As Olsaretti²⁴ notes, desert claims that may be wholly reduced to the rules of an institution do not satisfy as true desert claims. All institutions have rule-based procedures for the allocation of rewards but if our *only* criterion for evaluating desert with regard to such rewards were those procedures, we could not properly speak of desert. We would, rather, be referring to *entitlement* claims: what individuals may justifiably claim strictly by appeal to institutional

²² See Kristjánsson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*; Sher, *Desert*; Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*; Feinberg, *Justice and Personal Desert*.

²³ Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*.

²⁴ Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*, 16.

rules and purposes.²⁵ Of course, employer selection procedures are, to a large extent, bound by rules-based procedures in the form of legislation and other regulatory frameworks. They may also recruit to an informal, but powerful, sense of institutional ‘social fit’. Nevertheless, as the article later discusses with particular reference to the concept of intra-group desert, in meeting employer requisites, candidates still have to display actions and qualities—resilience, active choice-making, hard work, and application—that are not merely institutional constructs. To say anything less would be to lose all sight of individual agency and, consequently, of desert as a justificatory principle for income inequalities.

The third constraint is that desert must be an independent, distinctive principle of justice that is not confused or conflated with other principles of distributive justice. That is what Olsaretti²⁶ means when she argues that desert must be ‘non-parasitic’ upon other, competing principles. How does this play out in concrete terms? This present article is concerned with questions of justice in relation to graduate income inequalities. Here, one could make a justice claim based around principles of equal opportunities or material equality. Both of these are sound principles of justice, but they would not amount to a desert claim because they are about different things. One may need a certain level of income, but not necessarily deserve it; equality of opportunity may allow that we are entitled to an income level, but we may not actually deserve it. Desert claims are distinct from these justice claims in that they must carry a moral force whereby there is a kind of ‘fittingness’ between one person’s actions or qualities and another’s ‘reactive attitudes’, that is, their treatment of that person.²⁷ What we may call desert here, though, is tied to my final constraint: the responsibility condition.

There is not space in this present article to discuss at any length the competing arguments over the place of luck and responsibility in desert claims. In short, though, to deserve something an individual must be appraised as *deserving* in virtue of a past achievement. This would imply a degree of agency and responsibility on the part of the individual in realising their achievement. Responsibility in this sense also seems to require control but luck, by definition, pertains to what lies beyond an individual’s control. Debates centre

²⁵ See also Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions* and Feinberg, *Justice and Personal Desert* on this distinction.

²⁶ Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*, 18.

²⁷ See Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions* and Feinberg, *Justice and Personal Desert* for further discussion.

particularly on ‘background luck’—an individual’s unchosen social circumstances and two main positions have emerged on this issue. As Olsaretti²⁸ notes, ‘luck egalitarian’ theorists tend to argue that it is unfair to allow some people to claim more than others on the basis of their performance or achievements because the unchosen advantages of background luck will have played a role. Consequently, they dismiss or at least downplay desert as a principle of distributive justice and tend to favour needs-based or rights-based principles. By contrast, the ‘conventional’ view of desert holds that rendering social actors responsible for their achievements would require neutralising all the social (dis)advantages of background luck; however, since this is not possible, we must accept that this form of luck does not undermine the principle of desert.

The two positions thus take opposing views of the role of responsibility and luck in formulating desert claims. Here, though, I follow both Kristjansson and Olsaretti²⁹ in suggesting that there is scope to reconcile the two if we accept two key premises: where desert is called upon as a justificatory principle in relation to unequal outcomes, desert claims are then necessarily comparative in nature; when comparing individuals or groups, desert claims are to be evaluated on the basis of the exercise of responsibility. To begin with the first point, following Feinberg’s³⁰ influential discussion, while distributive justice has typically been viewed in holistic or comparative terms—that is, the justice of allocating any good or burden to an individual depends upon the larger distribution of goods in society—desert has traditionally been seen as individualistic and non-comparative—that is, what each person may be due is determined in isolation from others. This is because the desert-base originates from the individual’s particular qualities or actions. Olsaretti³¹ accepts that some desert claims can be determined in this way. However, comparison is entailed in desert claims where we are attempting to justify unequal outcomes. Here, the justice of social and economic goods is contingent not only on the isolated desert claims of individuals, but upon the background conditions which affect the distribution of opportunities to deserve. Kristjansson³² argues something similar when he insists that all desert-claims are holistic because they all imply a comparison with another individual or groups of individuals.

²⁸ Olsaretti, “Justice, Luck and Desert.”

²⁹ Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*, Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*.

³⁰ Feinberg, *Justice and Personal Desert*.

³¹ Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*.

³² Kristjansson, *Justice and Desert-Based Emotions*, 60.

If we accept that desert claims are necessarily comparative, we move on to the question of the grounds on which we are comparing people's desert claims. For Kristjánsson, all desert claims are evaluated by reference to an individual's exercise of responsibility. The conception of responsibility that he offers is of an Aristotelian kind: from early socialisation, an individual develops a sense of practical reason that they take into adulthood and, in a sense, chooses their own character by reflecting upon and adding to the traits with which they were originally inculcated. Thus, people become 'desert-evaluable' through their rational capacity to form their character via the choices they have made. This is a clear statement of the function of individual moral agency in desert-making, and it offers a way through to placing responsibility as a key constituent of any desert base. However, while Kristjánsson's emphasis upon agential choice-making is welcome, his principle of responsibility is somewhat one-sided in that it appears to play down another of its key elements: the structural conditions under which individuals can exercise responsibility. For this, I turn to Olsaretti's conception of 'fair opportunity'.

For Olsaretti, as with Kristjánsson, desert claims are to be evaluated by reference to an individual's exercise of responsibility and their display of 'active desert': the choices they have made and the activities they have undertaken. This means that 'sheer possession' of unchosen and differentially distributed natural talents is *not* an appropriate desert basis. Where Olsaretti appears to depart from Kristjánsson however, is in her greater emphasis upon the role that 'fair background conditions' play in ensuring that people are enabled to acquire their deserts. Here, Olsaretti³³ proposes a 'fair opportunity view' of desert whereby "*...persons justifiably deserve more or less than others only if all had a fair opportunity to deserve more or less than others, or a fair opportunity to be unequally deserving*". Olsaretti insists that, by delimiting what we mean by desert through the application of the fair opportunity principle, we are thereby able to recover a place for desert as a principle of distributive justice. The fair opportunity view of desert is, then, more attentive to structural conditions than Kristjánsson's stronger emphasis upon choice-making. This, though, leaves the question of the impact of background conditions, that is, how we distinguish between what an individual may reasonably be held responsible for and what they may not. Here, Olsaretti limits herself to nothing that we may form judgements by dividing people up into 'groups' based upon their inheritance of shared unchosen circumstances, such as family background, and then measure how well they have achieved against others within

³³ Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*, 10.

their group, with variations then being ascribed to greater or lesser effort or choice on the part of the individual.

Intra-group comparisons—however, the group is defined and however the comparison may be made—thus keep open the principle of desert through individual choice-making and effort. The article returns to this question in the discussion section. At this point, however, the qualified desert responsibility thesis will be applied to the matter of inter-group comparisons: the question of income disparities between graduates of working-class and middle-class backgrounds in the UK. To examine this problematic as a question of desert, the article draws upon a broad range of sociological studies of graduate employment experiences. Many of these are informed by the work of the social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, and his ‘culturalist’ conception of social class.

Bourdieu and Social Class

Bourdieu has made a major impression on approaches to social class within sociological research in the UK through his ‘theory of practice’. This is a theory of culture which comprises three basic components: habitus, capital, and field. The theory of culture represents Bourdieu’s attempt to bridge the traditional subjective-objective divide in social thinking with a theory that links individual subjectivities with objective structure through a continual dialectic in which the individual is both a product and producer of social relations. The subjective side of the dialectical relationship is theorised through the concept of the habitus. Socialisation produces a set of deeply embedded dispositions produced by which individuals orient themselves to the social world on a more or less subconscious level. The habitus structures a sense of what to do or not to do, what may be possible or not. And, while the habitus is often applied at the micro-level of analysis, where groups of individuals share common or similar material and cultural conditions of existence, we may identify a class habitus and thus class social practices.³⁴ To resist any criticisms of determinism, though, Bourdieu insists the habitus is not pre-destiny. Rather, the habitus is an ‘open system of dispositions’³⁵ whose structured dispositions may be strengthened or altered through its exposure to another of Bourdieu’s key concepts: the field.

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: CUP, 1977).

³⁵ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

If habitus represents the subjective side of the dialectical relationship, field is the objective part. A field is a competitive social space, a ‘field of struggles’ between different classes, institutions or individuals over the possession of valued material and symbolic goods.³⁶ Higher education or the labour market are examples of fields in these terms and, given their size and heterogeneous natures, they are themselves comprised of multiple sub-fields. A field is structured because individuals, institutions and class groups all exist in social space in some form of social relation to one another. The habitus will encounter this structure and attempt to adjust itself to its particular demands through what Bourdieu terms a ‘feel for the game’, that is, through socialisation. The extent to which an individual is able to move successfully within the field—whether educational, occupational or other—depends upon their access to the third of Bourdieu’s concepts: capital.

For Bourdieu³⁷ there are three different but inter-related forms of capital: economic (financial resources); cultural (an expansive concept covering culturally-based knowledges, bodily comportment, educational credentials and cultural tastes); social (an individual’s network of contacts and, very importantly, its potential to benefit the individual within the relevant field). Here, then, capital is a form of social resource which an individual can draw upon in the competition of the field, and which places them in a relatively dominant or relatively subordinated social location within the structure of the field. This is because fields themselves are structured by the forms of cultural and social capital that they value, the dominant forms which are classed, raced and gendered among their other social aspects, and which set the ‘rules of the game’. The way that power is obscured through culture in this way—what Bourdieu³⁸ terms ‘misrecognition’—has consequences for an individual’s sense of what they believe they may achieve within the field. Put another way, the levels of capital which an individual has and which the field values may inform the structuring of the habitus. Bourdieu termed this link between capital, field and habitus the ‘field of the possibles’³⁹ and it demonstrates the inter-connected nature of the three key concepts of his theory of practice.

³⁶ Pierre Bourdieu *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital” in *Education, Culture, Economy and Society*, ed. Albert H. Halsey, Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown, and Amy Stuart Wells (Oxford, OUP, 1986), 46–58.

³⁸ Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

³⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 110.

Bourdieu's theoretical schema is indebted to, but represents a development of, the work of two other key influences on conceptions of class in sociology: Weber and Marx. From Weber, Bourdieu draws the conceptual resources for a theory of cultural and symbolic goods and practices. Where he develops from Weber is in constructing a general theory—the theory of practice—which systematically links cultural or symbolic resources to the material economy and vice versa. Bourdieu offers a way of seeing the modes of conversion (and subsequent reproduction) between what Weber terms class (an individual's economic position) and what Weber calls status (their social prestige). From Marx, Bourdieu has taken social class as his central unit of analysis and the notion that social location conditions subjectivities and social practices. Where he develops from Marx is in viewing the cultural and material realms as autonomous but intricately interlinked, a position that distances him from the more bifurcated base/superstructure Marxian model. Ultimately, what Bourdieu offers is a *flexible* conceptualisation of class whereby economic, cultural and social dimensions combine in complex ways. As the article shall now discuss with reference to a range of sociological studies, this approach offers real explanatory purchase on the problematic of social class-based graduate income inequalities in the UK.

Graduate High-Competition Jobs

In reviewing Bourdieusian-influenced literature on graduate employment, the appropriate place from which to start is the field. Here, there is evidence that the 'games of the field' have changed, and that this has had the paradoxical effect of both loosening and tightening the functional relationship between qualifications and some areas of the graduate labour market. On the one hand, a large expansion of higher education over recent decades has led to a qualifications boom. Faced with a larger pool of credentialled candidates, a degree has now become a minimum 'foot in the door' for a job application.⁴⁰ On the other hand, an increased number of graduates has led to a loosening of the link between a degree qualification and employment, and this is particularly evident in elite, highly competitive sectors of the graduate labour market.

⁴⁰ See Michael Tomlinson, "Forms of Graduate Capital and Their Relationship to Graduate Employability," *Education + Training* 59, no.4 (2017): 338–352; Gerbrand Tholen, *The Changing Nature of the Graduate Labour Market* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Research into elite-entry corporations has indicated that employers no longer simply invest faith in an applicant's paper credentials to signal their future productivity. In the face of relentless global competition, organisations face unremitting pressure to keep costs down. In consequence, there is now an emphasis upon what are termed 'social qualifications'.⁴¹ Employers favour applicants who they believe will be able to make a quick and unproblematic 'social fit' with the organisation and deliver immediate value to them: the 'plug and play' employee.⁴² Recruitment then becomes an intensely competitive process. In addition to an applicant's academic resources, their cultural, social and experiential assets also have to be actively bundled up into a performative 'narrative of employability'.⁴³ Initiatives such as extra-curricular activities (ECAs) and work experience are signifiers of an individual's qualities of leadership, resilience and personal dynamism, and thus of their productive potential.

The demands of the field, at least in the more competitive reaches of the graduate labour market, have shifted from an old-style bureaucratic meritocracy, where credentials are a relatively unproblematic signal of talent, to what Brown⁴⁴ terms a 'performocracy' in which candidates must actively demonstrate their productive potential in ways that go well beyond academic qualifications. In considering graduate employment opportunities, a key question then is the extent to which (under)graduates from working-class and middle-class backgrounds are aware of the changes to the rules of the field. It is important, of course, to avoid homogenising class group positioning in relation to the labour market. Nevertheless, a number of inter-class comparative studies, drawing upon the concept of habitus, have identified distinct orientations. It has been found that working-class undergraduates are less likely to be aware of the new rules than their middle-class peers and more likely to display a 'linear understanding' of the relationship between degrees and the labour market wherein credentials are assumed to lead directly to

⁴¹ See Nicola Ingram and Kim Allen, "'Talent-spotting' or 'Social Magic'? Inequality, Cultural Sorting and Constructions of the Ideal Graduate in Elite Professions," *The Sociological Review* 67, no. 3 (2019): 723–740; Phillip Brown, and Manuel Souto-Otero, "The End of the Credential Society? An Analysis of the Relationship between Education and the Labour Market Using Big Data," *Journal of Education Policy*, 35, no. 1 (2020): 95–118.

⁴² Brown and Souto-Otero, "The End of the Credential Society?," 109.

⁴³ Phillip Brown and Anthony Hesketh *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Phillip Brown "Education, Opportunity and the Prospects for Social Mobility," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34, nos. 5–6 (2013): 678–700.

jobs.⁴⁵ A consequence of this is that working-class subjects show a greater tendency than their middle-class counterparts to privilege the development of their scholastic capital over accruing experiential assets in the form of ECAs or internship work.⁴⁶

Burke, Scurry and Benkinsop⁴⁷ posit that the anachronistic view of the labour market held by some of their working-class undergraduates may be accounted for by the participants' location within the field: they lacked social networks and families attuned to recognise changes in the requirements of the field and who could pass on such knowledge. The consequence of this was that the working-class (under)graduates were more inclined to find refuge in educational capital as the only resource over which they had control. This interpretation is echoed in another comparative study by Abrahams.⁴⁸ It was found that middle-class students were more likely to admit to a willingness to use whatever social networks they had in order to gain advantage in competitive recruitment, while their working-class peers had a greater tendency to express adherence to a form of 'honourable mobility' which discounted using contacts in the belief that it was morally unacceptable. Abrahams suggests that this strong faith in the power of a credentialist meritocracy emerges from the structuring of their habitus within a dominated social position, where it is important to maintain 'respectability' as a means of developing a sense of self-worth and value.

It is the case, though, that, even when working-class (under)graduates recognise that the rules of the field have changed, a lack of suitable economic and social capitals may disadvantage them. Internships are an increasingly important way of gaining work experience within high-competition sectors of the graduate labour market such as the media, law, digital, and cultural and creative industries (CCIs).⁴⁹ Despite some attempts to reform them, they can often be opaque to working-class graduates, who may lack the dominant

⁴⁵ See Ciaran Burke, Tracy Scurry, and John Blenkinsopp "Navigating the Graduate Labour Market: The Impact of Social Class on Student Understandings of Graduate Careers and the Graduate Labour Market," *Studies in Higher Education* 45, no.8 (2020): 1711–1722.

⁴⁶ See Ann-Marie Bathmaker, Nicola Ingram, and Richard Waller. "Higher Education, Social Class and the Mobilisation of Capitals: Recognising and Playing the Game," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34, nos. 5–6 (2013): 723–743; Ciaran Burke, *Culture, Capitals and Graduate Futures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

⁴⁷ Burke, Scurry, and Blenkinsop, "Navigating the Graduate Labour Market."

⁴⁸ Jessie Abrahams, "Honourable Mobility or Shameless Entitlement? Habitus and Graduate Employment," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38, no. 5 (2017): 625–640.

⁴⁹ See Sabina Siebert and Fiona Wilson, "All Work and No Pay: Consequences of Unpaid Work in the Creative Industries," *Work, Employment and Society* 27, no.4 (2013):

forms of cultural knowledge and social contacts required to access positions.⁵⁰ An aggravating factor is that many internships are also unpaid, which clearly disadvantages graduates from less affluent backgrounds who are not able to sustain the costs of working for free.

Economic capital can also be a key factor in relation to graduates' ability to generate a narrative of employability through undertaking ECAs. As Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller⁵¹ found, their working-class participants were much less likely than their middle-class counterparts to partake in structured ECAs despite recognising their value and that this was often due to financial constraints. Finally, there remains the question of what elite-entry corporations mean by qualities of leadership or resilience which they demand in candidates. Some academic research studies have argued that such soft skills are no more than socially classed skills—a case of large corporations rewarding candidates with the appropriate forms of dominant embodied cultural capital, and thus the closest 'social fit' to the recruiters themselves.⁵² Such class biases are not usually of an overt nature. Rather, they are often naturalised through what Ingram and Allen⁵³ term 'social magic': the ways in which a highly subjective, classed 'cultural fit' can be passed off in recruiting processes as a set of 'objective' criteria.

Discussion

This article has considered the question of desert in relation to class-related disparities of graduate income. Desert is a question of what individuals or, in

711–721; Neil Percival and David Hesmondhalgh, "Unpaid Work in the Television and Film Industries: Resistance and Changing Attitudes," *European Journal of Communication* 29, no. 2 (2014): 188–203; Keith Randle, Cynthia Forson, and Moira Calveley, "Towards a Bourdieusian Analysis of the Social Composition of the UK Film and Television Workforce," *Work, Employment and Society* 29, no. 4 (2015): 590–606; Marios Samdanis and Soo Hee Lee, "Access Inequalities in the Artistic Labour Market in the UK: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Precariousness, Entrepreneurialism and Voluntarism," *European Management Review* 16 (2019): 887–907.

⁵⁰ See Cabinet Office *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* (London: HMSO, 2009); Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission *Elitist Britain 2019: The Educational Backgrounds of Britain's Leading People* (London: Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

⁵¹ Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller "Higher Education, Social Class and the Mobilisation of Capitals".

⁵² See Louise Ashley, Jo Duberley, Hilary Sommerlad, and Dora Scholarios, *A Qualitative Evaluation of Non-educational Barriers to the Elite Professions* (London: Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, June 2015); Brown and Hesketh, *The Mismanagement of Talent*, 225.

⁵³ Ingram and Allen, "'Talent-spotting' or 'Social Magic'?"

this case, social groups may deserve through their actions or attributes. The first part of this discussion section, though, shall focus a little more on the concept of the field and how, through its structures, it militates against inter-class just deserts in graduate incomes. This discussion will require a move from sociology back to political philosophy where I draw upon Fishkin's⁵⁴ notion of the 'opportunity structure'.

For Fishkin, a society's opportunity structure refers to the routes through which individuals attain their desired goal, role or job. The shape of the opportunity structure will vary between and within societies and Fishkin notes the function that structures of race, class, and gender play in opening up or delimiting opportunities. A compounding factor here is that some goals may only be attained through 'zero-sum' highly competitive routes or what Fishkin calls 'bottlenecks'. To counter these restraints on opportunity, Fishkin proposes what he terms 'opportunity pluralism': a plurality of socially valued goals and a plurality of routes to attain them. Fishkin's thesis is composed of four key principles. Principles three and four will be discussed here as I believe they permit us to place the structures of the graduate employment field on a normative footing.

Principle three is the 'anti-bottleneck principle'. Here, a bottleneck is "*...a narrow place through which one must pass in order to pursue any of the many paths that fan out on the other side and lead to a wide range of valued roles and goods*".⁵⁵ Most of Fishkin's discussion and illustrative examples of bottlenecks relate to education systems. A bottleneck is a high-stakes examination or other form of assessment that an education system employs with the purpose of selecting a small few. Competition in such assessments is acute because they are the principally recognised and legitimated paths to gaining future social roles or goods, and those who do not sufficiently succeed in them may find their access to those goods is limited or even blocked. The remedy for this is the anti-bottleneck principle whereby, "*As far as possible, there should be a plurality of paths leading to the valued roles and goods, without bottlenecks through which one must pass in order to reach them*".⁵⁶

It is suggested that Fishkin's anti-bottleneck principle may be applied to the 'social selection' procedures of elite or highly competitive graduate sectors. There has been a number of initiatives among elite graduate employers in the

⁵⁴ Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*.

⁵⁵ Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*, 144.

⁵⁶ Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*, 146.

UK to promote greater social diversity in their workforces⁵⁷. It seems clear that such initiatives, if successful, may do something to ease the *social* bottlenecks of high-competition graduate employment. They will not, though, alleviate the problem of bottlenecks *per se*. Given a finite number of well remunerated graduate jobs, competition will still be fierce because there will always be more applicants than positions. Thus, the field of high-competition graduate work fails Fishkin's anti-bottleneck principle. And, given the structured imbalances in social class financial, cultural and social capitals, it is likely that any improvements may only temper rather than fully address the problem of social representation in elite sectors.

The fourth principle is that there should be a plurality of sources of authority. Where an opportunity structure is controlled by a small number of institutions, whether by law or social consensus, that can act as a constraint on opportunity. Again, Fishkin draws from education for his argument, and discusses the dangers of educational institutions employing the same narrow entry criteria which can lead to bottlenecks at certain high-stakes squeeze points. To address this, Fishkin⁵⁸ proposes that "*There are multiple, competing sources of authority—which do not all agree—regarding the goods, roles, paths, and qualifications...*". Fishkin regards the fourth principle as the 'meta-condition' of his thesis as it ultimately governs who has control over the elements of the opportunity structure. Again, it is suggested that this principle may usefully be applied to the issue of elite/highly competitive graduate employment in the UK. As discussed, there is clear evidence from a range of sociological studies that graduate recruiters are characterised by a relatively high degree of social homogeneity. Put in Fishkin's terms, there are not multiple or competing gatekeepers or sources of authority in the field of elite graduate recruitment. A consequence of this, as discussed, there is a greater inclination for organisations to recruit within their own image. The narrow social base of elite employment graduate recruiters, therefore, offends Fishkin's fourth principle.

It may seem from the foregoing discussion that there is little place for desert in justifying graduate income inequalities. However, a consistent theory of desert-based justice must accept that often individuals *do* deserve

⁵⁷ One example of this is 'The Social Mobility Employer Index' whereby participating employers agree to record and publish data on their performance across a range of social mobility indicators. More recently, the major accountancy and consultancy corporation, Price Waterhouse Cooper, has removed its requirement for applicants to have an Upper-Second (2.1) degree as part of its commitment to recruit candidates from a wider range of socio-economic backgrounds.

⁵⁸ Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*, 152.

what they get. To deny this would be to deny human agency. It is suggested, therefore, that we can recover a place for desert in relation to the problematic of unequal graduate incomes through the application of Olsaretti's⁵⁹ proposal, as discussed earlier, for comparative intra-group desert. The article shall conclude with some possible evidence of desert from sociological studies of graduate employability that have taken an intra-class comparative approach.

In their study of the competition for 'tough-entry' graduate jobs, Brown and Hesketh⁶⁰ acknowledged that their participants were all drawn from comparable middle-class backgrounds and shared similar cultural resources. Nevertheless, they noted a broad dual-typology of ways in which the graduates managed their employability. The 'Players' understood employability as a positional game which required a level of performative management on their part: a strategic development of all their experiential and cultural resources. The 'Purists' tended to have more faith in the power of meritocracy to deliver: educational credentials and 'objective' employer assessments would pick out the worthy candidate. Another typology of graduate orientations comes from Tomlinson⁶¹. Of particular interest is his distinction between 'Careerist' and 'Retreatist' students. Where the former were broadly similar to Brown and Hesketh's⁶² 'Players', the 'Retreatists' (a small sub-group of the study) displayed signs of anxiety and alienation from the labour market with the consequence that they aimed to prolong their adolescence rather than engage with job-hunting. The pertinent fact for this present analysis is that both types were from middle-class backgrounds. Finally, Burke⁶³ offers a four-fold typology of graduate positionings with bifurcations of middle-class and working-class orientations. He distinguishes between the 'Strategic' middle-class who displayed a clear understanding of the rules of the labour market game, and an 'Entitled' middle-class who also understood them but rejected them in the hope of obtaining self-actualisation through creative employment. Working-class graduates were differentiated between the 'Strategic' group, who had begun to learn and apply the new rules of the labour market, and the 'Static' group who remained constrained by a relatively poor understanding of employment games.

⁵⁹ Olsaretti, *Liberty, Desert and the Market*.

⁶⁰ Brown and Hesketh, *The Mismanagement of Talent*.

⁶¹ Michael Tomlinson "Graduate Employability and Student Attitudes and Orientations to the Labour Market," *Journal of Education and Work* 20, no. 4 (2007): 285–304.

⁶² Brown and Hesketh, *The Mismanagement of Talent*.

⁶³ Burke, *Culture, Capitals and Graduate Futures*.

Making judgements of desert from these studies is not a straightforward matter. Certainly, none of these writers presents their typologies in such terms. As a discipline, sociology is given to providing descriptive accounts of social phenomena rather than offering normative principles. It is suggested, however, that we may infer questions of desert from the studies discussed above if desert is taken to mean the capacity of graduates from same or similar social backgrounds and cultural resources to navigate the labour market and to satisfy the requirements for high-competition employment. Of course, from a sociological viewpoint, what is meant by ‘same or similar social backgrounds’ can itself be problematic. The working-class and middle-class groups discussed by these studies will inevitably encompass gradations of economic, cultural and social capitals within the class group. Additionally, we should recall the socially constructed features of employer desert-bases: the tendency to recruit within a white upper-middle-class ‘social fit’. This inevitably complicates any evaluations of desert since it may be difficult to disentangle the ‘social magic’ from the ‘objective’ criteria.⁶⁴ Where all individuals swim in a sea of raced, classed and gendered biases, it may be tempting to retreat from any discussion of desert. This article argues, though, that if we are to retain an understanding of agency, we must recognise that individuals *can* display qualities of determination, active choice-making, and application that have a real and not simply performative dimension, and which therefore qualify as true desert bases. Where the responsibility condition has been met as far as possible and where individuals have displayed such choice-making, actions, and qualities, we may say that we have evidence of Olsaretti’s ‘active desert’ within a social class group. Consequently, any subsequent differences in graduate incomes may be justified through the principle of desert.

Conclusion

This article has applied a qualified desert responsibility analysis to argue that unequal inter-class graduate incomes cannot be justified by reference to the principle of desert as outlined within the paper. The field of high-competition, elite graduate employment rewards unearned middle-class financial, cultural, and social capitals over those of working-class graduates. Thus, the key responsibility condition of desert as a principle of justice—fair and equal opportunity to deserve (or not)—has not been met. The article has also drawn upon Fishkin’s⁶⁵ notion of the ‘opportunity structure’ to discuss how

⁶⁴ Ingram and Allen, “‘Talent-spotting’ or ‘Social Magic?’”

⁶⁵ Fishkin, *Bottlenecks*.

highly competitive graduate labour markets offend the normative principles that have been proposed. Finally, while most of this paper has been devoted to explaining an absence of desert, a theory of desert-based justice must acknowledge that, under appropriately fair and equal conditions, individuals can become deserving (or not) of certain treatments. Here the concept of comparative intra-group desert has been applied to studies of intra-class differences in graduate employment outcomes.

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