

MERITOCRACY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

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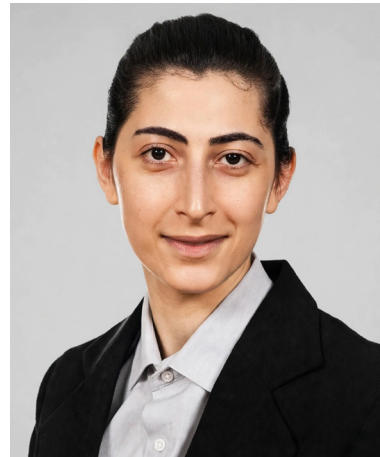
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ABSTRACT

In contemporary social and political discourse, meritocracy is regarded as the principle according to which an individual's social and economic standing ought to be determined by their knowledge, skills, effort, and achievements, rather than by social origin or inherited advantages. Although the meritocratic principle is frequently associated with fairness, the feasibility of its realization under conditions of structural and socioeconomic inequality is increasingly and actively examined in contemporary scholarly literature. The aim of the present article is to analyze the theoretical relationship among meritocracy, equality of opportunity, and social mobility. Particular attention is devoted to equality of opportunity as an essential precondition for the implementation of the meritocratic principle, and to social mobility as one of the significant dimensions for assessing the influence of social origin on individual life outcomes. The article further examines the role of education in fostering social mobility, as well as the socioeconomic and structural factors that constrain equal opportunity among individuals. The theoretical discussion demonstrates that a social order formally grounded in merit cannot, in itself, ensure equality of opportunity if individuals' formation of knowledge, skills, and capabilities is significantly shaped by their initial socioeconomic circumstances. Accordingly, the evaluation of meritocracy requires consideration not only of individual achievement and effort, but also of the social and institutional conditions within which such achievements are formed.

Keywords: meritocracy; social mobility; equality of opportunity; social inequality; education.



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მერიტოკრატია და სოციალური მობილობა: შესაძლებლობების თანასწორობის თეორიული პერსპექტივა

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აბსტრაქტი

მერიტოკრატია თანამედროვე სოციალურ და პოლიტიკურ დისკურსში განიხილება როგორც პრინციპი, რომლის მიხედვითაც ინდივიდის სოციალური და ეკონომიკური მდგომარეობა უნდა განისაზღვრებოდეს მისი ცოდნით, უნარებით, ძალისხმევითა და მიღწევებით და არა სოციალური წარმომავლობითა თუ მემკვიდრეობით მიღებული უპირატესობებით. მიუხედავად იმისა, რომ მერიტოკრატიული პრინციპი ხშირად ასოცირდება სამართლიანობასთან, თანამედროვე სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურაში სულ უფრო აქტიურად განიხილება მისი რეალიზების შესაძლებლობა სტრუქტურული და სოციალურ-ეკონომიკური უთანასწორობის პირობებში. წინამდებარე სტატიის მიზანია მერიტოკრატიას, შესაძლებლობების თანასწორობასა და სოციალურ მობილობას შორის თეორიული ურთიერთმიმართების გაანალიზება. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა შესაძლებლობების თანასწორობას, როგორც მერიტოკრატიული პრინციპის განხორციელების მნიშვნელოვან წინაპირობას, და სოციალურ მობილობას, როგორც ინდივიდის ცხოვრებისეულ შედეგებზე სოციალური წარმომავლობის გავლენის შეფასების ერთ-ერთ მნიშვნელოვან განზომილებას. სტატია, ასევე, განიხილავს განათლების როლს სოციალური მობილობის ხელშეწყობაში და იმ სოციალურ-ეკონომიკურ და სტრუქტურულ ფაქტორებს, რომლებიც ზღუდავს ინდივიდების თანაბარ შესაძლებლობებს. თეორიული განხილვა აჩვენებს, რომ ფორმალურად დამსახურებაზე დაფუძნებული სოციალური წესრიგი თავისთავად ვერ უზრუნველყოფს შესაძლებლობების თანასწორობას, თუ ინდივიდების ცოდნის, უნარებისა და შესაძლებლობების ჩამოყალიბებაზე მნიშვნელოვნად მოქმედებს მათი საწყისი სოციალურ-ეკონომიკური მდგომარეობა. შესაბამისად, მერიტოკრატიის შეფასება საჭიროებს არა მხოლოდ ინდივიდუალური მიღწევებისა და ძალისხმევის, არამედ იმ სოციალური და ინსტიტუციური პირობების გათვალისწინებასაც, რომლებშიც ეს მიღწევები ყალიბდება.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: მერიტოკრატია; სოციალური მობილობა; შესაძლებლობების თანასწორობა; სოციალური უთანასწორობა; განათლება.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary societies, the question of the just distribution of social and economic success is closely bound up with the principle of meritocracy. According to the meritocratic approach, an individual's position within the social hierarchy ought to be determined by their knowledge, skills, effort, and achievements, rather than by social origin, inherited privileges, or personal connections. In this sense, meritocracy rests upon the idea that individuals should have the opportunity to realize their own potential and to advance socially and economically in accordance with their merit.

The practical implementation of the meritocratic

principle, however, becomes problematic under conditions in which individuals begin life with substantially different social and economic resources. A family's socioeconomic status, access to quality education and healthcare, and other structural factors influence the formation of the very knowledge, skills, and capabilities that subsequently serve as the basis for the assessment of "merit" itself. Accordingly, formally equal competition does not always entail genuine equality of opportunity. Under such conditions, explaining an individual's achievements solely in terms of personal effort and ability risks disregarding the social environment within which these capacities were formed.



This problem links meritocracy to the questions of equality of opportunity and social mobility. Equality of opportunity implies that an individual's life prospects should not be predetermined by their social origin, while social mobility reflects individuals' capacity to alter their socioeconomic position and to overcome the influence of their initial social standing. Social mobility analysis therefore constitutes an important theoretical basis for assessing the extent to which a merit-based social order corresponds to the principle of equality of opportunity.

The aim of the present article is to analyze the theoretical relationship among meritocracy, equality of opportunity, and social mobility. The article focuses on the social and economic conditions that influence the formation of individuals' capabilities and their social mobility, and examines the role of education as one of the principal mechanisms of social mobility. Through the analysis of these questions, the article aims to demonstrate that the evaluation of meritocracy cannot be confined to individual achievement alone, but must also take into account the social and institutional environment within which such achievements are formed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a theoretical-conceptual approach and an analysis of the scholarly literature. Within the scope of the research, existing theoretical and empirical literature on meritocracy, equality of opportunity, and social mobility is analyzed, along with relevant studies and reports produced by international organizations. On the basis of this literature analysis, the theoretical relationship among these concepts is examined, together with the principal factors determining social mobility, with particular attention to education, socioeconomic status, and inequality of opportunity. The study does not involve the collection of primary empirical data and is instead based on the theoretical and comparative analysis of secondary sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In discussions of meritocracy, one of the key concepts is that of merit, which refers to an individual's possession of the knowledge, experience, and competence appropriate to the social role they occupy in society (Costa, 2026). According to meritocracy, it is precisely these factors that should determine an individual's social and economic success. A person

deserves a given outcome insofar as they possess the relevant skills and abilities, rather than because they benefit from inherited or other forms of privilege. In a society founded upon this concept, high-ranking positions are occupied by the most competent and experienced individuals, who, according to meritocratic logic, "deserve" their positions. At the same time, under this definition of merit, individuals occupying relatively lower positions likewise "deserve" their circumstances, since they lack the competencies and capabilities required to attain a higher standing (Sandel, *How Meritocracy Fuels Inequality - Part I The Tyranny of Merit: An Overview*, 2021). On the one hand, this concept appears just, since an individual's success or failure depends on their personal effort and abilities rather than on inherited advantages. Thus, labor and talent are directly reflected in socioeconomic outcomes, and the system presents itself as a fair order in which career advancement or decline is determined by individual merit.

However, critics have called into question the fairness of this principle, arguing that, owing to the structural and social inequalities present in contemporary societies, individuals have unequal access to education, healthcare, and other significant institutions and resources that substantially influence the formation of their abilities and skills. The term "meritocracy" itself first gained popular currency after its use in 1958 by the British sociologist Michael Young in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Jackson-Cole & Goldmeier, 2023). The author depicts a future society in which social status is no longer determined by origin or class, but by the formula: merit = intelligence + effort (Nash, 1961). Michael Young himself was a critic of this system. In his view, meritocracy creates a new elite that believes its success to be "deserved," which engenders arrogance and self-satisfaction, while those who lose out come to associate their failure directly with their own shortcomings (Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality*, 1958). The term subsequently acquired a positive, almost ideal-like meaning in political discourse, a development that troubled Young himself. In 2001, he published an article titled "Down with Meritocracy," in which he criticized Tony Blair's government for attributing a positive meaning to the word (Young, *Down With Meritocracy*, 2001). A similar line of argument to Michael Young's has been developed in depth by Harvard University professor Michael Sandel in his book



The Tyranny of Merit, and by Yale University professor Daniel Markovits in his book *The Meritocracy Trap*. Both authors call into question the widespread belief that an individual's success is solely the fruit of their talent and industriousness (Pelloni, 2022). According to Sandel, meritocracy often obscures the fact that most successful individuals achieve their outcomes thanks to factors beyond their control. Nevertheless, the system convinces them that their success is entirely their own doing, which ultimately fosters arrogance and, in certain cases, even negative attitudes toward the less successful. Consequently, those who fail to achieve success frequently blame only themselves for their failure (Sandel, *Tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?*, 2020). Daniel Markovits, for his part, explains how meritocracy has itself become an unjust system: affluent families are able to invest in their children's development resources that are inaccessible to lower-income families, with the result that "merit" itself becomes the product of unequally distributed experience (Markovits, 2020). Both authors ultimately arrive at the same conclusion: meritocracy, despite being founded on the principle of equal opportunity, in practice produces the opposite outcome - rather than eliminating existing inequality, it serves to entrench and deepen it (Pelloni, 2022).

Children born into families of a high social stratum are afforded greater opportunities from the outset than those born to middle- or lower-class families. Unequal access to quality education and economic resources produces a situation in which individuals born into affluent families enjoy considerably higher chances of achieving success, even in the absence of such privileges as nepotism¹ or cronyism² (Costa, 2026). A system in which socioeconomic outcomes are directly contingent upon social origin, nepotism, or cronyism is discriminatory; however, even in the absence of these factors, members of a higher social stratum, owing to superior resources and opportunities, more frequently develop the skills and competencies that increase

the likelihood of success. Meritocracy may thus be employed to justify or conceal existing structural inequality. As a result, individuals tend to perceive their failures as a matter of purely personal responsibility, just as they attribute their successes solely to their own effort, notwithstanding the fact that their outcomes are significantly shaped by their initial social and economic circumstances. In this way, under conditions of unequal starting opportunities, meritocracy may function not as a mechanism for reducing inequality but as one that deepens it (Dekkers, Erkelenz, Hoeben, Lenchard, & Kalaitzi, 2022). Furthermore, contemporary scholars such as Michael Sandel and Michael Young note that meritocracy's emphasis on "merit" is excessively narrow, since its assessment is frequently grounded solely in certain intellectual or academic capacities, the determination and evaluation of which are not always objective (Sandel, *Tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?*, 2020). For these reasons, a growing tendency can be observed in contemporary academic literature that calls into question the fairness of such a "merit-based" social order.

For the assessment of merit-based social justice within a society, the concept of social mobility proves to have more practical applicability. The academic literature treats social mobility as the capacity of individuals to move within the hierarchy of income or social status. Such movement may be upward or downward and may manifest itself in changes to either income or social position. Social mobility addresses the extent to which an individual's success or failure is independent of their social origin. According to this principle, a person's initial financial position ought not to determine their future opportunities and achievements (Tiwari, Cancho, & Meyer, 2018). It is precisely in this context that the idea of equality of opportunity arises, according to which circumstances such as a family's socioeconomic status, sex, ethnic origin, or place of residence should not influence an individual's subsequent outcomes - for instance, their income or academic achievement.

Social mobility is most often defined in terms of changes in income, occupation, education, or social status, occurring either over the course of an individual's own life (intragenerational mobility) or across different generations (intergenerational mobility). Social mobility encompasses not only the improvement of one's social status - that is, upward mobility - but also downward changes, namely downward mobility. Such changes may be absolute, in the sense that an individual

1 Nepotism - nepos (nepotis): the favoritism shown by officials toward their relatives and close associates in matters of appointment or preferment; (Dictionary of Foreign Words, 1989)

2 Cronyism - the practice whereby people in positions of power or authority grant privileges to their close associates on the basis of personal acquaintance rather than merit or competence. (The Transition to Democracy and Active Citizenship: Training Materials, comp. Malkhaz Begiashvili, David Bostoganashvili, Diana Lezhava, et al. - Tbilisi, 2007)



finds themselves in a better or worse socioeconomic position relative to their parents (Ciani & Balestra, 2022).

Social mobility is also regarded as a mechanism for reducing long-term inequality. In this respect, attention is directed to the extent to which social mobility diminishes persistent income inequality over time. The higher the level of social mobility, the lower the probability that economic advantages or disadvantages will be transmitted unchanged from one generation to the next (Tiwari, Cancho, & Meyer, 2018).

Accordingly, social mobility is frequently employed as an indicator of equality of opportunity, insofar as it reflects the degree to which an individual's life outcomes are determined by their abilities and effort rather than by family origin or inherited advantages. Within discussions of meritocracy, social mobility assumes particular significance, as it enables an assessment of the extent to which individuals are able to achieve social and economic advancement on the basis of their own merit. A society characterized by a high level of social mobility is generally considered more meritocratic, since under such conditions success depends less on inherited privilege and more on individual talent and effort. Conversely, a low level of social mobility may indicate the presence of structural barriers that significantly constrain individuals' opportunities for career advancement.

EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Equality of opportunity denotes a social and political arrangement in which individuals, irrespective of sex, ethnicity, social status, or other circumstances, enjoy equal access to the fundamental resources and opportunities necessary for the attainment of success. Among such resources, quality education and healthcare are of particular importance. Under conditions of equality of opportunity, an individual's life prospects are less dependent upon their family's financial standing.

In the study of social mobility, particular attention is devoted to its two principal forms: intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. Intragenerational mobility describes the change in an individual's socioeconomic position over the course of their own life, whereas intergenerational mobility reflects the extent to which children's socioeconomic position differs from that of their parents (Tiwari, Cancho, & Meyer, 2018).

Intergenerational social mobility is of particular importance, as it is closely linked to equality of opportunity and inclusive economic growth. In a society where an individual's life outcomes depend significantly on their parents' income, education, or social status, the level of mobility is low. The analysis of intragenerational mobility, in turn, allows one to distinguish sustained economic advancement from merely temporary improvement. For example, a statistical reduction in poverty may occur, yet if a significant portion of the population readily falls back into poverty as a result of economic shocks, this does not indicate a high and sustained level of mobility. Intragenerational mobility analysis therefore provides important information regarding the sustainability of a country's development (Tiwari, Cancho, & Meyer, 2018). At the same time, the analysis of social mobility enables policymakers to identify those groups that remain systematically disadvantaged. Such groups may be affected by geographic isolation, low levels of education, health problems, or other structural barriers. Accordingly, the study of social mobility constitutes an important instrument for the formulation of policies that promote inclusive economic growth and a more equitable distribution of opportunity.

In contemporary political philosophy, particular influence is exerted by the principle of Fair Equality of Opportunity, as formulated by John Rawls. According to Rawls, formal equality alone is not sufficient. It is necessary that individuals of equal talent and motivation should, irrespective of social origin, genuinely enjoy equal chances of attaining desirable positions and social status. This idea rests upon his well-known thought experiment, the "Veil of Ignorance," according to which individuals select the principles governing the social order without knowing what social position they themselves will occupy within it (Freeman, 2023). Rawls's veil-of-ignorance principle is closely connected to the idea of equality of opportunity. If individuals do not know in advance the social, economic, or cultural circumstances into which they will be born, it would be rational for them to choose a society in which life opportunities are equally distributed. Under such conditions, no individual would find their life prospects determined solely by the circumstances of their birth. Accordingly, individuals situated behind the veil of ignorance would, in all likelihood, favor institutions that ensure equal access to quality education, healthcare, and other essential resources (Mason, 2003). Equal-



ity of opportunity may thus be regarded as one of the principles that rational individuals would choose in order to establish a just society (Rawls, 1971).

It is precisely equality of opportunity that enables individuals to attain desired outcomes on the basis of their own abilities and effort, including the improvement of their social and economic standing - that is, social mobility. When opportunities are equally distributed within a society, individuals possess relatively equal chances of advancement, and their life outcomes are less dependent on family origin and inherited advantages. Accordingly, equal starting opportunities constitute one of the most important preconditions for high social mobility. Conversely, where access to quality education, healthcare, economic resources, and other significant opportunities is unequal, social origin exerts a considerable influence on individuals' life outcomes. Under such conditions, social mobility diminishes, since members of lower socioeconomic strata have fewer opportunities to improve their circumstances. As a result, the likelihood increases that social and economic status will be transmitted from one generation to the next within the society. For this reason, social mobility is frequently regarded as the practical expression of equality of opportunity and as one of the principal indicators of the effectiveness of meritocracy. The higher the level of social mobility within a society, the more likely it is that individuals' success is attributable to their talent, effort, and achievements rather than to inherited privilege. Equal opportunity and social mobility are therefore very closely linked.

Thus, a close theoretical relationship exists between equality of opportunity and social mobility. Equality of opportunity creates the conditions for social mobility, while the level of social mobility makes it possible to assess the extent to which social origin determines an individual's subsequent socioeconomic position. Within the context of meritocracy, this relationship is of particular significance, since the evaluation of a merit-based social order requires consideration not only of an individual's ultimate achievements, but also of the initial conditions and opportunities within which those achievements were formed.

EDUCATION AS A KEY MECHANISM OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

In contemporary academic literature, education is regarded as one of the most significant mechanisms of social mobility. Education provides individuals

with the means to acquire the qualifications necessary for securing better employment, higher income, and elevated social status. The literature frequently characterizes education as a so-called "social elevator," enabling individuals to move into higher social strata. OECD research indicates that higher levels of educational attainment are generally associated with higher income, better employment outcomes, and a greater likelihood that individuals will improve upon their parents' socioeconomic position (OECD, 2018). At the same time, contemporary literature emphasizes that the impact of education on social mobility depends not only on the attainment of education itself, but also on the quality of that education and the equality of access to it. Where access to quality education is concentrated primarily among higher socioeconomic strata, education may function not to reduce social inequality but rather to reinforce it. For this reason, education is considered a foundation for social mobility only when access to it is broadly and equitably ensured. Furthermore, with respect to intergenerational mobility, education is one of the principal factors through which social advantages or disadvantages are transmitted from one generation to the next. A higher level of education increases an individual's capacity to obtain better-paid employment and, ultimately, to create better opportunities for their own offspring. Education is therefore a significant determinant not only of individual but also of intergenerational social mobility. Countries that have historically invested more in public education tend to exhibit higher levels of educational mobility (see Diagram 1). It should be noted that what matters is not merely the overall volume of resources allocated to education, but also their effective use and a targeted approach toward disadvantaged groups. Accordingly, the effectiveness of such policy is not limited to increased expenditure alone but depends on the targeted allocation of effective programs (OECD, 2018).

Thus, education constitutes one of the fundamental foundations of social mobility, as it can mitigate the influence of social origin on individual life outcomes and create conditions in which social and economic success is more closely linked to knowledge, skills, and effort rather than inherited advantages. However, this function of education can be fully realized only when access to quality education is not substantially determined by an individual's initial socio-economic status. Consequently, the role of education in the process of

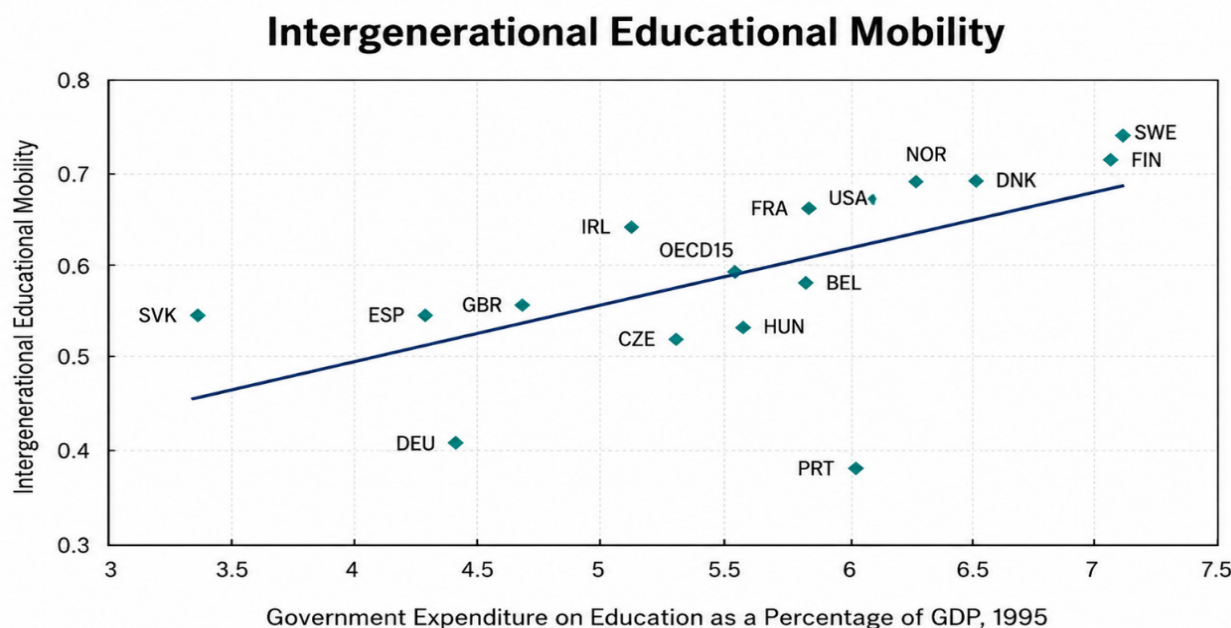


Diagram 1. Relationship between intergenerational educational mobility indicators in 2018 and government expenditures on education in 1995 (as a percentage of GDP).

Source: (OECD, 2018)

social mobility is directly connected to the principle of equality of opportunity.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO SOCIAL MOBILITY

Social mobility and equality of opportunity are significantly shaped by the social and economic environment in which individual capabilities are formed. Although the principle of meritocracy links social and economic success to knowledge, skills, and effort, the development of these attributes is itself contingent upon various social and economic factors. In this regard, particular importance attaches to the socio-economic status of the family, the distribution of income and wealth, access to education and healthcare, and other resources that influence the formation of human capital.

Family Socio-Economic Status and Inequality of Opportunity. Family socio-economic status represents one of the most significant initial determinants of individual development and exerts a substantial influence on future opportunities and life outcomes. Access to education, healthcare, and other essential resources varies across socio-economic strata, resulting in unequal distribution of capabilities among individuals.

High-income families, compared to low-income families, possess greater capacity to invest in their children's development. Such investments may include

quality education, healthcare, supplementary educational programs, and other resources that foster the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competencies. From an economic perspective, these investments enhance children's human capital, which in turn can shape their professional opportunities and future economic standing (OECD, 2018).

Conversely, families with lower socio-economic status often face more limited opportunities to invest in their children's education and development, particularly with respect to access to high-quality educational resources. As a result, family socio-economic conditions may directly affect children's academic performance and subsequent opportunities. This process is influenced both by the resources available within the family and by the scale and effectiveness of state investments in education and child development.

A similar relationship is observed in the sphere of health. Family socio-economic status affects living conditions, nutrition quality, access to medical services, and other aspects of daily life. Children raised in low socio-economic households may encounter less favorable environments, which can negatively impact their health. Health-related inequalities, in turn, may influence both academic achievement and future professional opportunities.

Thus, family socio-economic status plays a critical



role in shaping individual human capital, as it is closely tied to access to education, healthcare, and other essential resources. Accordingly, initial socio-economic inequality may be transformed into inequality of opportunity, ultimately constraining the prospects for social mobility.

Income and Wealth Inequality. Income inequality refers to the unequal distribution of earnings among individuals and social groups within society. While certain differences in income are characteristic of market economies - reflecting demand and supply, qualifications, professional skills, and other economic factors - significant disparities in income remain one of the major socio-economic challenges in contemporary societies. Research indicates that many countries exhibit high levels of income concentration and inequality, as reflected in various indicators, including the Gini coefficient (Ortiz-Ospina, Arriagada, Rohenkohl, Roser, & Hasell, 2023).

Multiple factors contribute to income inequality, notably changes in labor markets driven by globalization and technological development. The market value of different skills and qualifications is not uniform, leading to income disparities across professions and social groups (Polacko, 2021).

Income inequality is particularly consequential for equality of opportunity. Access to education and other essential resources is often linked to family financial circumstances. Under conditions of high income inequality, low-income families may have fewer opportunities to provide quality education, supplementary learning resources, and healthcare for their children. In contrast, high-income families are better positioned to invest in their children's human capital, thereby shaping future academic, professional, and economic opportunities (Polacko, 2021).

Alongside income inequality, wealth inequality is also a critical factor. Wealth inequality refers to the unequal distribution of assets and financial resources among individuals and families. Concentration of wealth provides certain groups with additional economic and social advantages. Moreover, wealth is not merely a source of current well-being; it enables the intergenerational transfer of economic resources and related advantages (Trudy, 2019).

Accordingly, income and wealth inequality can become significant structural barriers to social mobility. When family economic conditions determine access to quality education, healthcare, and other essential re-

sources, the influence of social origin on individual life opportunities intensifies. In such contexts, inequality manifests not only in divergent economic outcomes but also transforms into inequality of opportunity, creating conditions for the intergenerational transmission of advantages and disadvantages.

Social networks and informal practices also exert considerable influence on career opportunities, often shaping prospects for employment, promotion, and professional development. For example, according to a 2024 survey conducted by CRRC in Georgia, 27 percent of respondents (the largest share) believe that social connections are the primary determinant of securing a good job, while only 27 percent identify education as the main prerequisite (CRRC, 2024). Among informal practices, nepotism, cronyism, and patronage are particularly prevalent.

Thus, career advancement is not determined solely by knowledge, skills, and effort. Individuals with connections to influential networks often gain access to opportunities unavailable to those lacking such ties. As a result, social networks can become a significant advantage in the labor market.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the theoretical interrelation between meritocracy, equality of opportunity, and social mobility demonstrates that the evaluation of a merit-based social order cannot be confined solely to individual achievements, knowledge, skills, and effort. The realization of the meritocratic principle critically depends on the social and institutional conditions within which individual capabilities are formed. Accordingly, assessing the fairness of meritocracy requires not only examining the extent to which social and economic outcomes are based on individual merit, but also considering whether individuals had equal opportunities to acquire and realize such merit.

From this perspective, equality of opportunity constitutes a key prerequisite for a meritocratic social order. Formal equality alone cannot ensure fair competition if individuals' initial socio-economic conditions differ substantially. Unequal access to education, healthcare, and other essential resources affects the formation of human capital and, consequently, future social and economic opportunities. Under such circumstances, the influence of social origin may persist even when the distribution of social positions formally adheres to the principle of merit.



Social mobility provides an important dimension for evaluating this relationship. Intergenerational mobility, in particular, allows for an assessment of the extent to which an individual's socio-economic status depends on the initial conditions of their family. Low levels of mobility may indicate the presence of structural barriers and the intergenerational reproduction of economic and social advantages. At the same time, social mobility should not be equated with meritocracy; rather, it reflects broader social and institutional contexts that shape the influence of social origin on life outcomes.

Education emerges as one of the primary mechanisms of social mobility, though its impact depends on both quality and equitable access. Under conditions of equal access, education can reduce the influence of social origin and provide individuals with opportunities for socio-economic advancement. Conversely, when

access to quality education is largely determined by family resources, education may function as a mechanism for reproducing existing social advantages and disadvantages.

Thus, meritocracy, equality of opportunity, and social mobility are closely interconnected yet conceptually distinct. The existence of a meritocratic order cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of whether social and economic success formally derives from individual achievement. It is essential to account for the structural conditions that shape individuals' ability to acquire and develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies that are subsequently valued as "merit." Without genuine equality of opportunity, the meritocratic principle may fail to ensure fair social mobility and, under certain conditions, may even contribute to the reproduction of inequality. Therefore, the theoretical assessment of meritocracy