Young people’s education to work transitions and inter-generational social mobility in post-soviet central Asia

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Abstract
This paper is based on evidence gathered in 20 firms, matched by size and business sector, in each of three Central Asia cities — Almaty in Kazakhstan, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and Samarkand in Uzbekistan. In each firm the owner(s) and/or senior managers supplied information about the business, focusing on methods of recruitment, training, and employee career development. Parallel questionnaire surveys gathered information about the family and educational backgrounds, and labour market and employment biographies, of all the young (up to age 30) employees in each of the 20 companies. A total of 1,402 young employees completed questionnaires, and from these, eight per city, with equal numbers of males and females, with and without higher education, were subsequently interviewed in depth. The evidence is used to identify how families that were advantaged under the old (communist) system were continuing to reproduce their advantages inter-generationally. It is shown that this was mainly, though not entirely, via their children’s superior chances of progressing through higher education. The evidence
is also used to argue that cultural capital was playing a stronger role than social capital in the inter-generational transmission of advantages, that the critical events in the potentially life-long status attainment process were concentrated within a relatively short time frame, and that the multiple strategies to which families with economic and cultural assets could resort were liable to neutralise all efforts to diminish their ability to pass their advantages down the generations.

**Keywords**
bioigraphy, Post-Soviet Central Asia, social mobility, transition, young people
THE CONSTANT FLUX IN THE TRANSITION COUNTRIES

In most of the countries the transition from communism is being accomplished without any evident perturbation in hitherto normal rates of social mobility and fluidity. It is still far too early to reach final, definitive conclusions about post-1989/91 mobility processes and rates, but in those countries where the evidence to date has been assembled and analysed systematically — by Szonja Szelenyi and colleagues (1999) for Hungary, and Henryk Domanski (2001) for Poland — the indications are that any changes have been minimal. East Germany is the sole country where close connections with the communist state have subsequently proved a distinct disadvantage (see Diewald et al., 2002). Elsewhere, former communist politicians have been reborn as democrats and nationalists, and many former party cadres and state plant directors have become successful capitalists (see Bystrova, 1998; Clark, 2000; Stoica, 2004). In the Czech Republic, individuals experiencing this recent transformation have often been from the very same families whose members made an earlier transition from business into communist officialdom (Andrle, 2001). Needless, to say, since 1989/91, political elites in all the countries have been refreshed with some new blood (see Lane and Ross, 1997), and some new ‘oligarchs’, as well as proprietors of more modest businesses have sprung ‘from nowhere’ (see Hoffman, 2002). However, in the case of the Croatia, Dusha Sekulic and Zeljika Sporer (2002) have shown that the rate of circulation into and out of the political elite has remained more or less the same as prior to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Thus the transitions of former communist countries have provided more examples of the ‘constant flux’ (see Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). Children from families that were advantaged under the old system have continued to be hugely over-represented in higher education (see Roberts et al., 2000), just as they were under communism (see Gerber and Hout, 1995).

Given that the general constancy of the flux — the rate of social fluidity in the class structures of modern societies — was already well-established, its discovery throughout transitions into post-communism may be regarded as unsurprising, requiring no further comment. However, it is always a task of sociology to see problems in the apparently unexceptional. One might have expected the end of communism to trigger upheavals, even if only temporarily, in social mobility rates and processes. One might have expected some diminution in the ability of families that were advantaged under the old system to continue to advantage their children. Most such families entered the new era with modest if any economic capital. Their social and cultural capital must also have suffered some devaluation. New private sector employers have not been required to follow any of the old rules when recruiting personnel. There are no longer nomenklatura positions or persons. Membership of any political party no longer has to be treated as a commendation by higher education institutions or employers. Higher education graduates are no longer ‘directed’ into employment. Nor is there any longer an official expectation that recruitment to firms will be from any particular schools or higher education institutions.
Contemporary sociology has a mature body of theory, grounded in empirical evidence, about how social strata are reproduced from generation to generation, and how and why there is a powerful tendency for individuals to remain close to their social origins. Sociology's preferred explanations (rarely challenged within the discipline) are in terms of the inter-generational transmission of economic, social, and cultural capital, and the ability of advantaged social strata to have their own cultural capital defined as meritorious for purposes of assessment in education and in the labour market. Our research has used this body of theory as a starting point, which leaves open the relative contributions of economic, social, and cultural assets, and the particular cultural assets that prove efficacious in particular places and at particular historical moments. The original (now regarded as classic) accounts of socio-cultural reproduction in western countries stressed the efficaciousness of cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977), with British and American authors tending to stress how self-perpetuating working class cultures led to working class young people 'celebrating their own damnation' (see especially Willis, 1977), whereas in Pierre Bourdieu's work, based on evidence from France, there was far more stress on the ability of advantaged strata to distinguish themselves from others (see especially Bourdieu, 1984). More recently there has been more stress on the role of social capital (see especially Putnam, 2000), and economic capital also (see Devine, 2004).

There have also (allegedly) been sweeping cultural changes since the now classic theories of socio-cultural reproduction were formulated: specifically, it is claimed that the higher social strata have been transformed from cultural snobs (with highbrow tastes) into omnivores (see Erikson, 1996; Peterson and Kern, 1996). The explanations of the constant flux sought in the following paragraphs will be specific to the particular countries (and maybe even the particular cities) at a particular historical moment, but by adding our new material to the existing body of theory and evidence, it may be possible to detect whether a known uniform outcome (the constant flux) is a product of uniform processes. The constancy of the outcome suggests that there will be some constants in the processes that are responsible. So what are these constants?

How to succeed in the new era in Eastern Europe and the ex-USSR has been unclear to all concerned. Under communism, the 'rules' were well known. The prime route towards the top for ambitious young people and their families was via higher education and activity in the Komsomol, leading to full communist party membership. Since 1989/91, how success is earned has been a matter for heated debate in all the transition countries. Those who have succeeded have been likely to attribute their success to their own hard work and talents, to insist that everything now depends on the individual, and to attribute the failure of others to the legacy and passivity of a post-communist mind (see Melich, 1997). Most losers in the new market economies have tended to see things differently. They have been likely to condemn the new wider inequalities as unfair, and to argue that success has depended on being part of some insider network (see Roberts et al., 2000). How has it been possible under these conditions for
advantaged families to continue to advantage their children with very similar outcomes to those that prevailed under communism? By addressing these questions we intend to use the case of post-communism to identify processes that normally keep the flux constant throughout modern societies.

EVIDENCE

Our new evidence is from surveys in 2006 of businesses that were at least nominally in private ownership, and their young employees in three Central Asia cities — Almaty in Kazakhstan, Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan, and Samarkand in Uzbekistan. In each of these cities, matched samples of 20 businesses were investigated. The businesses were a purposive sample. They were all structured as private companies (with share capital, and so on), though in Samarkand most shares in some of the firms were still held by a state bank or some other state agency. In each city, the businesses were selected so that they were equally distributed across five business sectors: construction, food and drink processing, engineering and other light manufacturing, financial services, and ICT. Two of the four firms per sector and city had between 10 and 99 employees while the other two were larger. In each firm, a local research team contacted the owner(s) or a senior manager, and, if they were willing to take part, visited (typically on several occasions) and gathered information about trends in the business and employment in the company, and especially about the firm’s recruitment, training, and career development practices. A parallel strand in the research comprised a questionnaire survey of all the young (up to age 30) employees in these same companies (r = 1402). These questionnaires gathered information about the respondents’ family and educational backgrounds, and their subsequent labour market and employment biographies. In each city, eight of the young employees, always four males and four females, and four with and four without higher education, participated in in-depth follow-up interviews. For purposes of analysis the family backgrounds of the young employees are graded with up to four points awarded according to whether their mothers and fathers had been to university, and whether their normal occupations had been professional or management. Those who scored zero points are described as ‘lower’ class in the following analysis, those who scored 1 or 2 are described as ‘intermediate’ and those who scored 3 or 4 are described as ‘higher’ class in social origins.

The firms that we studied were not meant to be representative of all businesses in the three cities. They included no shops or other retailers, taxi firms, bars, restaurants, hotels, or nightclubs. They were all properly (legally) established businesses, and in most cases had been doing business on a continuous basis for several years (and much longer if the pre-privatisation histories of some companies are taken into account). The young employees who we surveyed cannot be regarded as representative of their entire age group in the cities. They were...
all individuals who had obtained proper jobs (full-time, permanent, and with contracts) in proper businesses in what may be regarded as ‘old’ (construction, food and drink, engineering and other manufacturing) and ‘new’ (financial services and ICT) sectors of the local economies. We know from other sources that in 2006 there was a great deal of youth unemployment in all three cities and also, as appears to be the case in all ex-communist countries, that many young people were under-employed in part-time, irregular, and casual jobs.

We need to be clear about the kinds of conclusions that can be justified given the character of the businesses and the samples of young people who we investigated. Our evidence is about those young people who had achieved different kinds of employment (in different grades of occupations and with different salary levels) in the particular kinds of businesses that we surveyed. We can thereby identify how some of these young people appeared to have been advantaged by their family backgrounds, but we cannot generalize about the experiences of all young people from any particular kind of background because our respondents were not representative of any such groups. Also, strictly speaking, the young employees are not a sample. They are the entire populations of employees aged up to 30 in the firms that were investigated, which renders normal tests of statistical significance inappropriate. We are therefore not using our evidence to measure the strength of the effects of different social origins on life chances, but to identify processes that appear highly likely, and others that appear unlikely, to have contributed to the maintenance of the constant flux during the transitions to post-communism in the relevant cities and countries. We can thereby use this historical scenario, during which there are prima facie grounds (outlined above) to expect the constancy of the flux to have been subjected to exceptional tests, to reveal processes that may help to explain the flux’s wider geographical and historical constancy.

FINDINGS

Table 1 is a straightforward social mobility table. The evidence from each of the three cities is presented separately, as is the case throughout most of the following analysis. As this analysis proceeds, we will explain that there were substantial differences between the cities (and their countries) in the political, economic, and labour market contexts. Sometimes these differences are interesting on account of their apparent implications for social mobility processes. In rather more instances the differences are interesting because of the apparent absence of mobility consequences. In Table 1, the young employees are split along the horizontal axis according to whether they were from low, intermediate or higher social class family backgrounds. How each class group was distributed between the different occupational grades at the time of the surveys is laid out on the vertical axis (respondents to the questionnaire self-classified their current jobs into the grades listed in Table 1).
Table 1 Intergenerational mobility (in percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present job</th>
<th>Almaty Class 0</th>
<th>Almaty Class 1,2</th>
<th>Almaty Class 3,4</th>
<th>Bishkek Class 0</th>
<th>Bishkek Class 1,2</th>
<th>Bishkek Class 3,4</th>
<th>Samark'd Class 0</th>
<th>Samark'd Class 1,2</th>
<th>Samark'd Class 3,4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manual</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N* = 79 158 128 194 166 75 170 137 79

Source: Authors’ calculations.
* N = Number of cases.
It is immediately apparent in Table 1 that in each city the young people with lower class origins were more likely to be doing manual or farm jobs (some of the businesses were in food and drink processing) than respondents from the intermediate group, who in turn were more likely to be in such occupations than those from higher class backgrounds. In each city, the higher their social class backgrounds, the greater was the likelihood that the young people would have obtained non-manual jobs. These findings are unsurprising. The issue addressed in what follows is exactly how the ‘normal’ relationship between social class origins and occupational attainments had been maintained throughout the transition from communism.

SOCIAL CLASS AND EDUCATION

What had higher-class families done to enhance their children’s life chances? Since 1991 they had been acting in circumstances where the new ‘rules’ of attainment were unclear. Our evidence shows that higher class families had been doing some combination of everything that was possible — using tactics that had worked under the old system such as paying for private coaching and ensuring that their children progressed into then through higher education, and some new options such as using private schools and universities. However, it would be unwise to assume that all the things that higher-class families had done had, in practice, actually advantaged their children. We need to be cautious when imputing causality.

In Almaty, 12 per cent of the young people from higher class families had been educated in private schools. This had been rarer in Bishkek where the population was poorer — incomes in Almaty had been flushed by Kazakhstan’s oil and gas revenues — and the option of private schooling had not existed in Samarkand, where the creation of such schools had not been permitted. Private schools in Almaty were believed to confer advantages in two ways: by virtue of their superior resources vis-à-vis under-funded state schools, and also by their broader curricula, especially the offer of foreign (western) language teaching (see Fierman, nd; Toursunof, 2006).

Other higher-class families had sent their children to academically selective state secondary schools (21 per cent of such families in Almaty and 13 per cent in Bishkek). These were sometimes the same schools that had offered specialized education in either maths and sciences or foreign languages under the old system. Sometimes they were former general secondary schools that had been rebranded as lycées or gymnasiums. In Samarkand, the option of such schools had not become available until the very end of the 20th century when upper secondary education was reorganized and academic lycées were created. Only 1 per cent of the Samarkand sample (necessarily from the younger end of our age range) had been to such schools.
In Samarkand, the majority of children from all social class backgrounds had attended non-selective general state secondary schools, as had majorities (albeit somewhat smaller majorities) in Bishkek and Almaty. In all three cities, rather than using different types of schools, a more common way in which higher-class families had tried to give their children an edge was by paying for private coaching or classes to complement school education. This had been common under communism, the aims being success in the examinations to enter ‘good’ secondary schools, and then higher education. These remained objectives even post-communism, and between 59 per cent and 63 per cent of the higher class young people in all three cities, against between 23 per cent and 40 per cent of those from lower class backgrounds, had received private coaching or attended extra private classes. The same higher class young people were more likely than their lower class peers to have received private coaching or classes while at university. Here the most likely aim had been to give the students additional skills, maybe in information technology or, even more likely, in foreign languages. In Almaty, 55 per cent, in Bishkek 57 per cent, and in Samarkand 34 per cent of the young people from higher class families described their English language as good or better. The proportions were always lower among young people from other class backgrounds. French and German languages were much rarer, and most of the young people who claimed proficiency in these languages were from specialized language courses in higher education, whereas English language had become more widely dispersed.

Finally, whether the young people had been through higher education was strongly related to their social class backgrounds. The overall proportions of the young employees who had been through higher education varied considerably between the three cities — 28 per cent in Samarkand, 54 per cent in Bishkek and 93 per cent in Almaty. In Kazakhstan by 2002, as many as 89 per cent of the age group were sitting the state administered university entrance examination that had been introduced in 1999 (Zhakenov, nd). It appeared to have become very difficult for young people in Almaty without higher education to obtain any job in the kind of firms that we investigated. However, in Almaty, as in the other two cities, the likelihood of young people attending university was related to their social class backgrounds. The proportions of young people with higher education were 86 per cent in the lower class and 99 per cent in the higher class in Almaty, 35 per cent and 91 per cent in Bishkek, and 20 per cent and 54 per cent in Samarkand. In Samarkand, entrance to universities had been rationed by entrance examinations, following which the top performers were offered free places plus stipends, while the next band were offered paid-for places, but still with stipends. A similar regime operated in Bishkek and Almaty for entry to state universities, but with less state control over the number of paid-for (and no stipend) places that the universities could offer, and in these two cities there was the option of a private university. This meant that Almaty and Bishkek had ‘open’ higher education systems — entry was possible for any secondary school
graduate whose family was able and willing to pay, and in this context higher education appeared to have become virtually universal for young people from higher class families. It should be remarked here that in all three cities, as in some other parts of the ex-USSR, the universities were riddled with rumours of corruption (gift giving/bribery to gain entry then to succeed in examinations) (see Lillis, 2007; Rumyanyseva, 2004).

It is self-evident that the advantages conferred by university attendance must diminish as the proportion of young people attending rises, and in this connection it is noteworthy that it was in the cities where attendance had been most common (Almaty then Bishkek) that higher class families had been most likely to use additional tactics to assist their children — private schools, academically specialized schools, English language coaching, and private universities also.

By 2006, Kazakhstan had 50 state and 114 private universities, and among the higher-class young people in Almaty who had been to university, 24 per cent had attended private institutions. This was the case with 10 per cent of the higher-class university graduates in Bishkek but none in Samarkand, where there was no private university. There was much tighter state control over education (and the economy) in Uzbekistan than in either Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan. Private universities in ex-communist countries are a heterogenous bunch. Some charge lower fees and have lower entry standards than state universities. A few have higher entry standards and charge higher fees than public institutions. The latter private universities are likely to have links with (sometimes franchises from) western universities. However, irrespective of the particular university, teaching quality is most likely to be fairly uniform since most teachers at private universities are moonlighters from the public sector.

A further way in which the higher education of young people from higher class families had tended to be different was that they were more likely to have studied business subjects: 37 per cent to 60 per cent in the different cities had done so, whereas fewer lower class students had opted or been accepted for business specialties (16 per cent to 32 per cent). Technical subjects had been in decline in higher education throughout Central Asia (and in the rest of the ex-USSR) (see, for example, Kassymbekova, 2005). In our research, in Almaty and Samarkand, engineering had clearly become a lower class specialty; in fact, no university student from higher-class families in Samarkand had taken an engineering subject. Voldemar Tomusk (2000) has argued that in Eastern Europe, new elites are being created and then reproduced through business and law programmes in the new elite private universities. However, as already indicated, not all new private universities in the relevant countries are prestigious institutions. In some places, the elite universities are still the top-ranked state institutions.

At this point it is worth asking how exactly the tactics of higher-class families might have been advantaging their children, or if advantages were indeed ensuing. Enrolment in private schools and universities could not, in most cases, have indicated exceptional ability. Nor could extra coaching. The superior resources of private secondary schools may (or may not) have led to pupils acquiring
more knowledge and skills that would be assets in their future employment. The teaching quality in private universities was unlikely to be superior, given that the teachers were usually the same people who taught at the state universities. English language was not required (though it could still be an asset — see the next paragraph) in most of the occupations in which the young people were engaged. In the early 1990s, there were shortages of graduates in finance, marketing and other business subjects, but by the end of the decade the labour markets were saturated with young people with these qualifications.

The 24 young people who participated in follow-up interviews were asked for their views on the value of English language. All those who were proficient in English felt that their careers (and often their lives outside employment as well) were benefiting:

Knowledge of English is extremely important nowadays. My English language has been more important than my specialty in my career (male engineering graduate, Samarkand).

English is an inseparable part of my life and career. I have contact with foreigners at work and correspond with them regularly (male graduate, employed by data processing firm, Almaty).

English language is a very important skill to have today. In my career it has played an important role. I started here as a secretary but then we began to have foreign clients. My English language began to help me then. At present I participate in all negotiations with these clients. In other words, English has got me a promotion (female graduate, Almaty).

English is the language of international communication. So of course it’s useful to me. I can speak with people from Europe, America, all over the world. Also, I need to be able to read specialist technical literature (male graduate, employed in telecommunications, Bishkek).

Some of the young people who could not communicate in English did not regard this as a handicap:

Knowledge is never useless but it is useless in my work (construction). With whom would I speak English? (male construction worker, Bishkek).

I don’t need English so not knowing it does not disturb me (male security guard, Almaty).

However, there were more young people who felt disadvantaged by their lack of English.

Not knowing English does not affect my job, but it’s useful whenever you apply for a job (female graduate, Samarkand).

I am attending private classes in English language, and I have saved some money to attend a course in England. After I return home many gates will open for me (female non-graduate, employed by confectionery firm, Samarkand).

Nowadays English is in demand everywhere. Computer literacy requires English (male engineering graduate, Almaty).
I used to work in a sanatorium. There were always foreign guests. I found it difficult to communicate with them. I felt ashamed, uneasy and uneducated (female non-graduate, Almaty).

At present I have to pass documents to a translator. It’s a waste of time, a drawback. Also, the translator’s job status is lower than mine but he gets paid as much as me (female graduate, bank employee, Bishkek).

We conclude that the children of the mainly higher class parents who had acquired English felt that their careers were benefiting but, as noted earlier, we need to be cautious before attributing causality. Everyday knowledge is often right, but it is sometimes wrong.

In the follow-up interviews the young adults who had been through higher education were also asked whether it was better to study at some universities, and to take some subjects, rather than others. It was only in Bishkek that anyone mentioned a private university or universities as being superior, and in Bishkek this was always the American university. One male graduate from a state university in Bishkek said, ‘Graduates of the American university have better prospects but not everyone can study there. It is necessary to be able to afford to go and to speak English.’ However, there was some dissent about the value of attending the American university; said a female graduate from a state university in Bishkek, ‘Those who study at the American university have rich parents and some English but they are such goofs. No matter how much you invest in them — no sense.’ The sole Samarkand respondent who felt that it was possible to distinguish between universities argued that it was the location — capital city — that made the real difference. All the other respondents in Samarkand, and every single respondent in Almaty, either said that which university was best depended on the subject that was studied, or that which university one attended made no difference whatsoever:

I chose my university because it was the best place to study telecommunications. Overall some universities are probably better. It depends on the personnel and the university’s financial base (male graduate, Samarkand).

If you have brains the name of the university doesn’t matter much (female graduate, Bishkek).

I think that if you have a head on your shoulders and a goal, then anyone can get the education he or she wants at any university (female graduate, Almaty).

As regards disciplines, in Almaty, none of the respondents made any distinction, whereas in Bishkek and Samarkand there was a broad consensus as the following quotations make clear:

Some faculties at Samarkand State University — foreign languages and economics — are considered the most prestigious (male graduate, Samarkand).

Which university is best depends on the specialisations that they offer. Economics, law, foreign languages and banking are considered better than other specialties (male graduate, Bishkek).
It is noteworthy that several of the young people qualified these assessments with the phrase ‘are considered’. We conclude that, unlike in the case of English language, it is not clear from the young people’s own experiences and views (which, again, may or may not have been correct) that parents who had paid for private higher education and/or who had influenced their children to take the new prestige subjects, were actually conferring advantages. The quantitative evidence that we present below tends to confirm this.

**EUDCATION, SOCIAL CLASS, AND TRANSITIONS INTO EMPLOYMENT**

Which, if any, among the higher class families’ practices were improving their children’s labour market prospects? Here our evidence is unequivocal. In all three cities, whether or not the young people had progressed through higher education (which, as we have seen, was strongly associated with social class origins) was by far the best predictor of the kinds of employment that they would enter. In terms of first and present jobs, the higher education graduates in all three cities were far less likely than non-graduates to have entered manual or farm occupations, and were more likely to have entered some combination of office, professional, and management jobs. Higher education graduates also tended to have higher earnings than non-graduates. Higher education was the best single predictor of the types of occupations that young people entered under communism (see Titma et al., 2003), and according to our evidence this remained the case, at least in our three Central Asia cities, under post-communism. However, social class origins were affecting labour market outcomes independently of educational attainments. Among higher education graduates, there were differences in the young people’s chances of being in farm or manual occupations at the time of our surveys which dipped from 26 per cent among those with lower class origins to 11 per cent of those with higher class origins in Almaty, from 38 per cent to 9 per cent in Bishkek, and from 18 per cent to zero in Samarkand. Among non-graduates in Bishkek, 94 per cent of those from lower class families were in manual or farm occupations when surveyed against 85 per cent of those from intermediate families. In Samarkand, social class origins were discriminating powerfully among non-graduates. The proportions in manual or farm jobs dipped from 62 per cent among those from lower class families to 19 per cent among those from the higher class who were better represented in management and professional positions (17 per cent versus 10 per cent), and even more so in the office grades (64 per cent versus 29 per cent).

Higher education was improving the young people’s labour market prospects, but the subjects that they had studied and whether their universities had been state or private appeared to be making no overall difference. The young adults’ collectively equivocal views on these matters (presented above) appear to have been grounded in reality. Salaries were slightly higher among the young people from private as opposed to state universities, but there was no difference in their distribution between different occupational grades. The most likely explanation
of the difference in salary levels is that all the private universities were in Almaty and Bishkek where salaries were generally higher than in Samarkand. If we discount the arts graduates (there were only 21 in total), very similar percentages of graduates in different subjects were found in all grades of employment and within all salary bands.

Perhaps surprisingly, our quantitative evidence does not fully confirm the young adults' confident and near-universal view of the value of English language. Among the respondents with higher education, those with good or better English were thereby improving their chances of obtaining office jobs rather than manual or farm work, but English language was not boosting their chances of being in management or professional occupations. English language was boosting earnings in Almaty: 55 per cent of the graduates with good or better English were earning over $350 a month compared with 35 per cent of other graduates. However, in Bishkek and Samarkand there appeared to be no salary benefit from proficiency in English.

LABOUR MARKET CAREERS

In Samarkand, at the time of our surveys, 61 per cent of the non-graduates were still in their first jobs. Elsewhere, as among the graduates in Samarkand, majorities of graduates and non-graduates had changed employers. Some had made several job changes. What had been the outcomes of this job mobility? Had there been an overall drift up the occupational structure and, if so, what predicted the drift — family origins, education, or starting points in the workforce?

In all three cities, the spread of respondents between different grades of employment at the time of the surveys was much the same as when the respondents first started in employment. The proportions in manual and farm occupations had fallen minutely in Almaty from 21 per cent to 20 per cent, and from 60 per cent to 59 per cent in Bishkek, and had risen from 35 per cent to 39 per cent in Samarkand. The proportions in management and professional occupations had risen from 21 per cent to 26 per cent in Almaty but had fallen from 8 per cent to 7 per cent in Bishkek and from 23 per cent to 21 per cent in Samarkand.

This overall picture of stability could have been due to compensating movements with some young workers rising and others descending, and there had indeed been such compensating movements. Stability had been greatest among those who had started out in office and manual jobs: in each case 81 per cent were still doing such jobs when surveyed. Those who had exited manual jobs had mostly moved into non-manual occupations. Those who had exited office jobs were almost equally split between those moving up into the management or professional grades, and those moving downwards into manual jobs. Only 53 per cent of the young people who had started in farm occupations were still doing such jobs currently. Most of those who had moved had entered manual jobs but others had obtained non-manual employment. Young people who began their working lives in management and professional positions had been more likely
to exit these grades than those who started in office and manual jobs. At the time of the research, only 62 per cent and 63 per cent respectively were still in the same kinds of occupations in which they had commenced their working lives. From both management and professional starting points, the main flow over time had been downwards into office jobs. Why would young employees downgrade? Some of these movements may have been forced by firm closures or downsizing, and straightforward dismissals, but the chances are that most of the (apparent) descents had been voluntary, in search of higher earnings. Many of the university graduates had started their working lives in the public sector where they were most likely to have been employed according to their specialties (as teachers, for example) and in what, at that time, were their preferred occupations (see Roberts, 2006). In Almaty 28 per cent, in Bishkek 31 per cent and in Samarkand 78 per cent of the university graduates (in each city higher proportions than among the non-graduates) had initially been employed in the public sector. These young people were likely to have discovered early on that they could achieve significantly higher earnings in the private sector even if this meant a loss of occupational status.

There were two examples of downward career moves among the 24 young adults who were interviewed. One young graduate in Almaty had started her working life as a journalist but was doing embroidery when interviewed, ‘I like the work here but the main reason why I came is the salary. At the newspaper it was a small salary. At that time we were building a house and I had a small baby. Here the salary is good and it is paid in cash without delays.’

The other downward movement was by a female economics graduate, also in Almaty, who had started work managing a complex which housed several businesses, a car park and a playground, ‘I was uncertain of what to do. I was only 22. I could not meet the employer’s expectations.’ The young woman had quit this job by mutual agreement, ‘I went to an office job with a construction company.’ By the time of our interview, this young woman’s career had recovered: following maternity leave she had become an office manager with a new employer.

There were no overall consistent relationships between the likelihood of young employees moving up and down the occupational structure and their education and social class origins. In the places where our research was based, and over the period covered by our respondents’ working lives, the effects on occupational attainments of both social class origins and education appear to have been ‘spent’ and exhausted immediately the samples entered the labour markets in their cities. This is a point to which we will return below.

**Social capital, cultural capital, and pure luck**

A possible explanatory factor, so far ignored in our analysis, is ‘connections’. These could explain some of the so far unaccounted variance in the levels at which our respondents were employed, and also the ‘normal’ relationship, the
starting point for our analysis, between social class origins and labour market outcomes. Connections, ‘social capital’ in contemporary sociology, refers to valued, trusted social relationships.

It has been argued elsewhere that connections have become particularly important (more important than elsewhere) in post-communist labour markets (see Clarke, 2000; Yakubovich and Kozina, 2000). However, we do not believe that connections had played a major role in most respondents’ careers, or that connections explained who got ahead and whose careers stagnated. This is despite some of our evidence suggesting otherwise. In the survey of firms, all the employers were asked which methods were important when recruiting to vacancies at different levels in the companies. At least 50 per cent of the employers said that ‘personal recommendation’ was important when filling posts at all levels. However, most of the employers said that other methods were also important. Most of the firms had personnel/human resource managers who routinely used multiple methods when publicizing vacancies — state labour offices, private employment agencies, advertisements, contacts with schools and universities — especially those whose qualifications were trusted — and word of mouth. A recommendation from someone regarded as trustworthy was typically regarded as extremely useful given the difficulties that employers faced when trying to interpret the qualifications awarded by different schools and universities, but this is not say that connections would be allowed to over-ride other indicators of suitability.

Families and friends had been the main sources of information that had led to our young adults’ appointment to their first jobs. This was how approximately a half of the Almaty respondents had initially heard about their first jobs, slightly more than a half in Bishkek, and nearly two-thirds in Samarkand. Informal channels appear to be job-seekers’ main source of information in all market economies. Indeed, most successful job searching by young people in Soviet times appears to have been via informal rather than official channels (see Reiter, 2006). Among our respondents, informal sources had been equally important as sources of information leading to first jobs among young people from all social class backgrounds.

There is a difference between a social contact who supplies information and one who ‘pulls strings’ that lead to an appointment. Along with how they initially heard about their first jobs, our respondents were also asked why they believed they had been appointed. Some believed, and probably knew, that their ‘connections’ had been decisive: roughly a quarter of the respondents in Almaty and a sixth in Bishkek and Samarkand said that this had been the case. Once again, as with families and friends acting as main sources of job information, there was no relationship with social class. The evidence supplied by our young respondents suggests that connections had been decisive in a minority of hiring events, and equally so for young people from all social backgrounds.

Had informal sources of job information and the use of connections assisted the beneficiaries into particularly good jobs? Our evidence suggests otherwise.
Families and friends had been the initial sources of information leading to similar proportions of all types of jobs. Connections had been used most frequently in obtaining farm and manual employment. The most common explanation of their appointments given by entrants to management and professional occupations was their qualifications.

Throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia, ‘connections’ have become a popular folk explanation among people who feel left outside (and there are many such people). They need to know why their careers are not progressing: their psychic well-being demands a plausible explanation, consistent with the preservation of self-esteem, of why they are marginalized, unemployed, or under-employed while others who are no more suitable or industrious occupy decent jobs, and similarly with young people whose careers are stagnating while others are forging ahead, maybe earning twice as much or more when they are no better qualified or otherwise worthy. To people who are being left behind it can be plausible, and of some comfort, to believe and to argue that it is ‘who you know’ that really counts. However, as indicated above, the explanation is not consistent with most of our evidence. Maybe these young people are right and our contrary evidence is misleading, but we suspect otherwise.

In our research, among higher education graduates from higher class families, just 28 per cent in Almaty, 16 per cent in Bishkek, and 33 per cent in Samarkand were in professional or management occupations when interviewed. This means that in all three cities, the majority of the young university graduates whose families might have been expected to have useful connections had not entered such higher-level occupations. A fact of this matter is that in the Central Asian cities that we investigated, as in most ex-communist territories (and indeed, throughout much of the rest of the world), there are massively excess numbers of young people who would be suitable recruits to professional and management posts, or, to use an alternative terminology, to service class positions. From the point of view of any employer, exactly who is recruited is unlikely to make much difference to the organization. Under these conditions, ‘who gets on’ easily becomes a matter of genuine chance, depending on who is in the right place at the right time, or whose connections turn out to be useful. At both individual and collective levels, all outcomes become explicable in principle (even if we temporarily lack an explanation) after the events, but the hallmark of a risk society is surely that many events are not predictable in advance either by the actors themselves or by sociologists (see Roberts et al., 2002). Even when people know or believe that they were appointed to their jobs on account of their connections, they may not have been able to predict or to rely on these outcomes prior to the events.

**DISCUSSION**

Let us now overview our evidence on status attainment among young people in the Central Asia cities. The main way in which the young people’s education...
differed by social class backgrounds was whether or not they had been to university. Thereafter the best predictor of labour market attainments was whether the young people had been to university. These are the strongest, the clearest relationships in all our evidence.

Higher class families (some of them) were doing additional things that might have been giving their children an additional edge — paying for private coaching or classes, enabling their children to learn English, and (in smaller numbers) using private schools or having their children admitted to academically selective state schools, and using private universities. If the tactics worked (and we have seen that our evidence suggests that some tactics, such as using private universities, had not conferred any career benefits), what processes were responsible? In each case the tactics could have led to the acquisition of useful social capital (contacts, connections), but if so a lot of young people were becoming well connected. Additionally, and in our view more plausibly, the young people were acquiring cultural capital which signalled to potential employers that they were worthy and deserving applicants. Cultural capital (of the type described here, mainly higher education qualifications) will not explain exactly which person is offered a particular job. Connections and chance will play a role at this level. However, cultural capital provides our most plausible explanation of the strong tendency under post-communism for advantaged families (with advantages built under the old system) to continue to advantage their children thus maintaining normal rates of social mobility and fluidity throughout the countries’ historical transitions. Cultural assets will probably always prove more useful than social capital in the inter-generational transmission of advantages in market economies, where hiring decisions are made in numerous independent organisations. The right signals (having been to a particular school or university, knowing English, having studied a prestige subject) can be transmitted culturally far beyond the bounds of any individual’s or family’s social network.

Thus our evidence endorses the classical western accounts which stressed the efficacy of cultural capital in the inter-generational transmission of advantages and disadvantages. Social capital — the bridging variety (see Putnam, 2000) — and economic capital can still be important, but mainly by creating access to crucial cultural capital. Even if working/lower class young people are not ‘restrained’ by working class cultures and the associated identities (which have now been undermined by economic restructuring in both east and west Europe), they will still fail to ascend if they are unable to acquire crucial cultural assets, which meant primarily higher education, preferably topped-up with English language proficiency, in the particular cities and at the particular time of our investigation.

There are additional conclusions to be drawn from our evidence. What keeps the flux constant with so few exceptions in all modern societies? There are some pointers in our data. In so far as we can tell from our evidence and for the cohort that we investigated, the critical stages within what could be a lifelong status attainment process appeared concentrated within a short time-span. In the cities that we investigated the critical stages involved entry to then success
in higher education followed immediately by entry to a good job because thereafter individuals were very likely to become locked by normal labour market processes within the workforce segments that they had entered (see Roberts, 2006). In other countries and at other historical times, the crucial life stages and events may be different, but if critical life stages exist elsewhere, this will explain how it is possible for apparently successful interventions intended to improve the life chances of the disadvantaged (pre-school programmes, and initiatives aimed at the young unemployed, for example) to leave the constant flux undisturbed.

Finally, families with the necessary economic and cultural resources can use multiple tactics to give their children every possible chance. Many such families’ total efforts will amount to overkill, but the sheer variety of tactics available and used is likely to circumvent all attempts to diminish the families’ ability to transmit advantages down the generations. Advantaged families can be inventive and they can resort to new tactics if old ways are frustrated. If access to academic secondary education is widened, advantaged families can gather their children in private schools or provide additional teaching thereby giving their children access to a broader curriculum. If access to higher education is widened, elite (maybe private) universities and subjects can be brought into existence. These developments have occurred within a short time-span in former communist countries, during which old ways of transmitting advantages have been subjected to exceptional tests. Elsewhere the ways and means may be different, but throughout the modern world it is probably the case that families with advantages to conserve and transmit inter-generationally will find ways — the most efficacious of which rely on cultural capital — to outwit all efforts to frustrate them.

Notes
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References


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