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What would a society look like where children's life chances were *really* fair?

Abstract

A widely used term in recent decades, the central place 'life chances' in UK policy has been confirmed by the recent retrospective renaming of the Life Chances Act 2010 (formerly the Child Poverty Act 2010). Alongside this, the notion that we should promote fairer life chances is gained purchase across the political spectrum. Yet this notion is loose and ill-defined. This article unpacks the term from the point of view of children. It highlights problems involved with defining and measuring fair life chances for children in suitably broad and non-partial ways, and argues for a plural measure. It outlines two separate dimensions where questions of fairness might apply, in terms of the life course, showing how a suitably supple conception of fair life chances would need to apply across both dimensions. And in light of this account, it suggests three policy approaches – to poverty, childcare, and the configuration of opportunities – which would help establish a society where life chances were really fair – not sufficient, but vital contributions. Overall, the article suggests that a commitment to making life chances fairer requires considerably more radical steps than the term's recent handling in political discourse would imply.

Key words

life chances; fairness; children; poverty; childcare; social justice

Introduction

Like 'social exclusion' in the 1990s, the term 'life chances' has in recent years emerged from the background to take up a central place in the UK policy landscape. In a general way, this term refers to available opportunities – what Max Weber (1978: 302) called, in establishing the concept, the 'probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction'. Such opportunities will clearly vary according to social structure, and between individuals – and so 'life chances' are typically invoked in a comparative sense: in terms of whose are better or worse. But they are attributes not of individuals themselves, but rather of their relationship to the circumstances in which they live: 'Individuals have life chances in society;... their lives are a response to these chances' (Dahrendorf 1979: 29). As the usage of the term has grown, the idea that in a good society, life chances should be *fair* has gained wide take-up. In its usual handling, 'fairness' in this context requires that life chances should not be determined by a person's unchosen, unmerited starting points: the neighbourhood in which she grows up, or the wealth or status of her parents. Just as promoting life chances seems an uncontroversial, 'common sense' agenda, fairness itself may seem self-evidently desirable, as a matter of 'good sense' (Hall and O'Shea 2013; Bunyan and Diamond 2016). And so making life chances fairer is that rare kind of aspiration – along with equality of opportunity (Calder 2016, ch, 4) – which is invoked with apparently equal readiness across the political spectrum. It has been especially salient in recent Conservative discourse. A 'Life Chances Strategy' was to have been a cornerstone of David Cameron's second term as UK Prime Minister, before history took its diversionary course (Cameron 2016). We hear it in Theresa May's oft-quoted speech on assuming the role of UK Prime Minister in 2016, identifying 'burning injustices' in the fact that in the poor still die younger, working class boys remain less likely to go to university, and high-status professions are dominated by the privately educated (May 2016). We find its political pre-eminence rubber-stamped in the renaming, in 2016, of the Child Poverty Act 2010 as the Life Chances Act 2010 (UK

Government 2016). And we find it in the substance of policy in a range of domains, over recent decades.

The nature of that range is key. However defined, life chances are clearly not the province of a single government department, or policy direction. They will be significantly shaped by local contexts, alongside matters of national policy and global trends. Those shaping factors are themselves complex: from the macro to the micro, the structural to the individual. They reflect the distribution of resources, alongside attitudinal and cultural determinants. Across the governments of the UK, various initiatives since the 1990s have been aimed directly at ‘levelling the playing field’ between those from different backgrounds – whether via education policy, or parent-centred, early childhood-focused services such as Sure Start (Eisenstadt 2011), or initiatives aimed primarily at localities of high deprivation, such as Wales’s seventeen-year Communities First programme (Welsh Government 2017). Such programmes have achieved results, though have also been depleted under austerity (Torjesen 2016; Smith et al 2018). The ongoing political traction of ‘fairer life chances’ rhetoric is itself an indicator of the scale of persisting inequalities. Life chances remain unfair, by any plausible measure.

But what would a society look like where life chances were indeed distributed fairly? This article considers this question in conceptual and policy terms, specifically from the point of view of children. It will argue that taken seriously, a genuine ‘fair life chances’ agenda will be far more radical than might be suggested by its ‘vanilla’ overtones, loose definition in policy and easy cross-party appeal. It will also argue for a pluralistic understanding of the conditions under which fairness would be attainable – but one which allocates due weight to the economic. Rather than – as Cameron (2016) intended – switching focus from economic to social factors as contributing to the unevenness of life chances, we should reinforce a case for reducing income inequality in the foreground of any realistic fair life chances agenda. The article has three main sections. The first outlines how we might approach and interpret the term ‘fair life chances’, as applied to children. The second considers two dimensions in which we might consider whether children’s life chances are fair: respectively childhood itself, and destinations reached in future adulthood. And the third proposes three (necessary, but not sufficient) elements of a realistic fair life chances policy strategy: the eradication of child poverty, investment in childcare, and a commitment to what has been called ‘opportunity pluralism’ – a reassessment and opening up of what counts as ‘successful’ taking of the life chances on offer. These paint only part of a picture of a good society for children. But that part, as will be argued, is vital.

Defining and measuring ‘fair life chances’

As with social mobility, we may compare children’s life chances along two axes (Breen 2010; Calder 2016, ch. 3). One is inter-generational: how do members of a given generation fare in relation to that of their parents? The other is intra-generational: how do children within a cohort but from different backgrounds fare in relation to each other? There are protracted debates about how life chances compare between generations, partly reflecting competing metrics by which the welfare of different cohorts might be compared (e.g. via income/earnings, or class – see Willetts 2011; Blanden et al 2013; Goldthorpe 2013; Payne 2017; cf Jackson 2016). What counts as ‘fair’ may vary, according to the axis we adopt; certainly, separate questions will emerge. Our focus here is on the intra-generational comparison, and on the specific implications for fairness which it might carry. Report upon report in the UK, from the Social Mobility Commission (2017) to the Child Poverty Action Group (2016) and the new Life Chances Inquiry launched in May 2018 (Education Committee 2018) will confirm an unsurprising truth: children’s life chances remain drastically unevenly distributed. The background a child is born into remains a strong indicator of how their life will go.

Defining 'fair life chances', the political philosopher Joseph Fishkin offers this way of extending the initial idea that one's chances in life should not depend on the circumstances of one's birth. Imagine a hospital ward full of newborn babies. We know their races, genders, parents' income, neighbourhoods – but not their talents or traits. 'If life chances are fair, we should not be able to predict with any degree of accuracy which of them will succeed in life and which will fail' (Fishkin 2016: 27). Two aspects of this definition are worth highlighting for our purposes. One is that it looks across the whole life course. So whether one's life chances have been fair is crucially to do with the relationship between where or how one ends up – what we might call the *destination* of one's life – and where one started. What's crucial for fairness' sake is that there is no determinate connection between those two points. So if there is shock that – as a headline-grabbing 2016 UK study found – 74% of the judiciary, 61% of doctors, half of top actors and one in five top pop stars were educated at fee-paying independent schools, attended by only 7% of the overall population, the objection is to the strength of that connection between background and destination (Kirby 2016). The wealth of a child's parents is demonstrably, firmly linked to the likelihood of her becoming a high court judge, or getting nominated for a Brit award – and it is in the link that the unfairness lies.

The second aspect concerns what counts as a 'good' destination – or in Fishkin's terms 'succeeding' or 'failing' in life. Media scares about unfair life chances follow a clear pattern. A given measure of success – such as results in school qualifications gained at 16 or 18, admission to university, or access to elite professions – is shown to be achieved much more readily by people from privileged backgrounds than by others. This pattern is typified by the reception of the Social Mobility Commission's annual State of the Nation Report (see most recently, Social Mobility Commission 2017), which each time sparks a round of concern about the lack of progress – and in 2017, indeed, was followed by the resignation of the commission, its chair citing as a reason a lack of hope in the government's commitment to 'bring about a fairer Britain' (Austin 2017). Yet while each such report is illuminating, the dominance of certain recurring measures of success needs itself to be handled with critical care. While life chances need to be tracked and compared, any one yardstick for so doing will be limited and partial and needs to be set alongside other relevant indicators (Calder 2018a: 53-4). Educational attainment offers only one parameter by which to gauge children's progress – and the status of one's job is only one among a range of ways in which the value of different life achievements might be weighed.

On the one hand, doing justice to the variety of factors in play here requires the deployment of a pluralist measure – avoiding reducing the gauging of success to one parameter. We need to acknowledge that contributions and rewards are achieved, through a lifetime, in rich and diverse ways sitting well outside of what is tracked by academic qualifications, salary levels or professional influence – significant though those may also be. Indeed, as we would expect, the fullest, most developed frameworks through which to track life chances encompass a series of distinct components. A comprehensive analysis by the Fabian Society (2006) highlights health, education, income, security, physical environment and social networks as focal points, with recommendations cutting across them. Considering measurements for children's life chances specifically, Jonathan Bradshaw (2016, pp.113-5) proposes some 67 indicators under 10 headings: material, health, subjective well-being and mental health; family; early years; education; housing; child maltreatment; children in care; and transition to adulthood. Even with that degree of granularity, any such framework needs suppleness built in. Bradshaw acknowledges 'a hierarchy of what is more or less important', among these, and points out that there are 'good grounds for preferring measures that can be disaggregated by income, class, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality and other characteristics' in order to appreciate how different dimensions play out among different groups (2016, p.104; cf Child Poverty Action Group 2016). But the many-sidedness entailed by any serious such attempt at a means by which life chances might be measured makes clear the inadequacy of applying a small range of yardsticks, let alone a single one. While they may reinforce each other in

practice, for better or worse, in principle different categories of progress through the life course are importantly *different*. Educational qualifications are not themselves a measure of mental well-being, however mutually implicated they may be.

On the other hand, the dominance of any single, non-comprehensive measure itself may positively impede achievement across the full range, precisely by installing an officially sanctioned bias towards certain kinds of progress through life. This may wield inhibiting effects, for those who flourish in other areas. A low achiever in their school exams at 16 will not benefit from being categorized as one who has not succeeded, or holds less potential to. And to the extent that he is deemed this way, this may discount or obstruct the view of his successes elsewhere: as a carer for example, or as an apprentice. Staking life chances academic or professional achievements will not only distract from other plausible markers of fulfilment, but may lead to a kind of presumption against those who contribute in those other ways that they are somehow achieving less, or indeed less worthy of esteem. Education systems are a clear case in point: even with them, pathways and rewards can be configured either hierarchically (as epitomized by the grammar school system under the 1944 Education Act, with its diverting at age 11 of those deemed academically most robust into grammar schools) or in a more even-handed way, as in Germany's promotion of vocational education via a 'dual system' route, integrating workplace practice and classroom learning, widely recognized as avoiding the inherent bias towards the academic (Winch 2006). While education systems will not, by themselves, compensate for wider inequalities in life chances, they may certainly help sediment them, for example by reinforcing the senses in which – for example – working class children are regarded as having further to travel to 'success', and thus reinforcing middle class advantage (Brown 2016).

We have focused predominantly in this section on the need, in the promotion of fairer life chances, for a suitably plural conception of 'successful' destinations in life, of the means by which they are reached, and of the gauges by which progress towards them are measured. We noted along the way that most discourse about fair life chances – including Fishkin's conceptualization – is destination-focused. This matters. The next section helps unpack this further, in the context of childhood.

Unfair life chances for children: two dimensions

Approaching life chances there are, of course, good reasons to gauge a person's life later in the life course – from which perspective, we have a fuller sense of its overall trajectory and defining stages. But there are problems inherent with looking exclusively backwards through the life course, in this context. One is that it carries with it a built-in bias towards destinations arrived at later in life, and highest achievements – both of loom largest through (as it were) a rear-view mirror. From this angle, considering the adult that a child becomes will seem to afford a more complete assessment of life chances available and taken, than considering their childhood in itself. Yet there are strong reasons to do just that, as many have pointed out from different disciplinary directions (Lister 2016; Bradshaw 2016; Layard and Dunn 2009; Gheaus 2015). For in the rearview mirror, what happens in childhood matters principally in terms of its ultimate effects on adulthood – so that childhood may appear to have value only as an intermediary state, to the extent that it issues in a good adulthood.

But there are strong grounds for treating childhood as a stage with intrinsic value. Some reflect the claim that fulfillment for children may in some respects take different forms than it does for adults. So what it is for a child of 13 to have beneficial life chances is different from, rather than just an incomplete version of, what counts as fulfillment for adults. There are various ways in which such a claim might be substantiated. One is qualitative: to stress that children may possess capacities that adults have lost – for example, for open-mindedness, experimentation and fast learning – and which are distinctly employable in childhood, rather

than just of instrumental value in developmental terms (Gopnik et al 2008; Gheaus 2015). So to judge children's flourishing according to adult standards may simply miss those elements of fulfillment which are attainable better – or indeed exclusively – in childhood. Another is chronological: to emphasise the extent to which chances taken in childhood and experiences gained in childhood are valuable *at the time*, during childhood, irrespective of whether they are also valuable later – and would hold that intrinsic value even if (for example) the lifespan were cut short. Seeing childhood in terms of 'waiting' for adulthood (Qvortup 2004) may simply miss those senses in which it is a time when opportunities are *already* taken, flourishing is already achieved. And a third, distinctly moral consideration is that viewing children only as 'becomings' rather than as 'beings' in their own right devalues childhood as a stage in the life course, relative to others. Giving human beings equal moral consideration requires that fairness should apply across the life course, rather than only, or predominantly, to certain designated sections.

None of this should be taken as denying that children are both beings and becomings, nor that experiences in childhood have implications for fulfillment in adulthood (as if they were ontologically disconnected), nor that childhood should weigh more heavily in our consideration of the fair distribution of life chances. But it does amount to a clear case, in those considerations, for weighing childhood 'as a stage of life, with its own value' (Child Poverty Action Group 2016, p.2). Writing at the time of Cameron's then-nascent but ultimately thwarted 'Life Chances Strategy', Ruth Lister noted the absence of any appreciation of 'the importance of a fulfilling and flourishing childhood' in ministerial speeches on the matter (2016: 4). That absence persists. For example, while the Life Chances Act 2010 (as renamed and amended in mid-2016) addresses measures of childhood deprivation alongside obligations (on the part of the Social Mobility Commission) to promote social mobility, it does not explicitly relate the two – and neither does it address whether the conception of life chances (which itself goes undefined, as a term) applies to children themselves, *as* children. Without speaking to this absence, we lack the analytic scope either to tackle questions of fairness attaching to the achievement of life chances in childhood, or to assess the extent to which, at least in some cases, the pursuit of fulfilment in current childhood and future adulthood may be at odds with each other.

That last point is significant, just because so much of the assessment of children's well-being will typically be conducted on the basis of their future adulthood. Examples may help reinforce why there are strong reasons, from the point of view of 'fair life chances', to hold those in a more balanced perspective. One kind of case would be where short-term sacrifices are made for longer-term gain, and where the nature of those gains is itself presumed to justify those sacrifices. For example, an educational regime based entirely on achieving maximally high scores at certain stages may be vindicated in terms of any life chance indicator focusing on levels of educational attainment. The end would justify the means, even if at the expense of neglecting pedagogical goals measured otherwise than in test scores – for example the nurturing of creativity, individuality and diversity in students. (This picture has familiarly been applied to the educational régime in South Korea, with its globally excellent outcomes but apparent human costs. See Park (2014) for a critical discussion of this view.) It is one thing to debate whether those expenses are worth it, for the graduating students – whether they gain more, in life chances terms, from their high scores than they lose in diminished creativity or other educational roads not taken. But viewed from the point of view of flourishing in childhood, that dilemma barely figures. For if it is the fulfilment of children *as children* which is in focus, the 'life chances' costs will clearly outweigh the gains, simply insofar as such gains as do accrue are, however great, deferred until adulthood – and the costs in terms of lost individuality are both heavy and immediate (even if also longer-lasting). This is not to say that there is never a good 'fair life chances' case for promoting, among children, deferred or longer-term benefits over those accessible during childhood itself. But it is one way of making sense of a case which would say that any educational régime which is punitive

in terms of its burden on children's well-being or fulfilment cannot simply be justified in terms of deferred benefits even from the point of view of a life-chances agenda.

Another example, this time related to work: imagine a multi-talented child encouraged to specialize, on the basis of future employment prospects. He has a rare suite of talents across the domains of a liberal education, with an aptitude for sport just as much as academic work, and for art alongside mechanics. He is strongly motivated to maintain these many 'strings to his bow', rather than channeling his time and emotional investment into a single avenue. He maintains this motivation in spite of advice that he will lose earnings and status in later life, by not strategically specializing his interests, and so letting some go. His stance is reflexive and informed. From his own point of view, he would rather earn the median wage, in a job of relatively low status, than take a narrow route to high status and high income. In the end, he gets his way: teachers and parents relent, and support him in maintaining his broad range of interests and aptitudes, even though this means sacrificing academic grades for sake of saving time for pursuits beyond school. This he does – and indeed, settles contentedly into the low-status, medium-waged career he anticipated. How has he fared, in terms of fulfilment of life chances? Obviously, picking up a single yardstick (say, school grades or professional status) does him few favours given his juggling of different domains of achievement – so his story backs up the desirability of a pluralistic measure. But there is a deeper point here, from the point of view of being and becoming. His choices in childhood may have compromised his life chances in some respects, but they have just as clearly enhanced them in others. He has maintained interests he found fulfilling in childhood, and found fulfilment in carrying forward this range of aptitudes, despite the likelihood that they will diminish his future status and wealth, and is fully accepting of this. To make full sense of his situation in life chances terms means weighing his childhood self alongside his adult self. His childhood decisions and flourishing are not incidental to, nor instrumental to, how his adulthood takes shape – but are part of our understanding of the value he places on how his life chances have been used. Again, the point here is not that we should automatically privilege either childhood or adulthood, but rather that we should weigh both as the distinctive stages they are, when considering how fairness.

So a society where children's life chances were really fair, would address children as 'beings' as well as 'becomings', consider the role of life chances from each perspective, and would apply plural measures of 'life chances'. This tells us something of the conceptual background to that society: painting in key aspects of how a fleshed-out account of children's life chances would work. But what policy directions might we find? The next section proposes three such directions.

Real fairness: three key priorities

The eradication of child poverty

A realistic strategy for fair life chances for children would prioritise the eradication of child poverty. This is for two main reasons, among many possible others. One is that poverty experienced in childhood has as big an impact as any other phenomenon on children's life chances. An extensive review of evidence across a range of outcomes, children from low-income households fare worse in part *because* of low income (Cooper and Stewart 2013). Those impacts apply across the domains subject to any plausible plural measure. They also reverberate across both of the two dimensions addressed in the previous section. Succinctly: 'poor children are more likely to be behind their peers in education, have poorer health and risk chronic illnesses in later life, have a shorter lifespan and may even be more likely to die on the roads' (Garnham 2016: xii). Because countries with the highest levels of child poverty have the lowest levels of social mobility, the life chances chances of those born poor start lower, and remain so (Blanden 2009; Layard 2009). The other reason is that child poverty is definitively unfair to children. This question is quite separate from long-running political

debates about whether the causes of poverty in general should be located at the level of socio-economic structure or individual character and volition, or somewhere in between. Poverty is visited upon children: it does not flow from their life choices, and they cannot be held responsible for it. Because of its effects on life chances through childhood and adulthood, it is exemplary of why unfairness in childhood is particularly urgent: poverty wields potentially deep negative influence on children's well-being and well-becoming, in ways entirely unrelated to any considerations of merit or desert (Schweiger and Graf 2015; Calder 2016; Armstrong 2017).

Yet politically, the framing of life chances talk has distracted from this. Replacing 'Child Poverty' with 'Life Chances' in the naming of relevant UK legislation was not just an innocent change in terminology, but part of an explicit shift in focus from economic and structural factors to individual, cultural and relationship-based aspects of the generation of what Cameron called the 'opportunity gap' between poorer and richer children (Cameron 2016). The revised act removed the commitment to eliminate child poverty by 2020, and shifted the official measures of child poverty from a set based on income and material deprivation to one tracking a more heterogeneous set of 'life chances' indicators, including educational attainment and long-term worklessness. The argument from Iain Duncan Smith, architect of the change, was that income measures are crude, and that it would be more representative to focus on the 'barriers people face when trying to improve their own situation – whether that be problems of debt, relationship breakdown, poor education, addiction or something else' (as quoted in Stone 2016). While this may sound conducive to the adoption of a plural measure, from the evidence of Cooper and Stewart it mistakes symptoms for causes, and so will neither track unequal life chances accurately nor facilitate their evening up. A claim that life chances are manifested in a variety of ways does not entail a claim that about the conditions conducive to their realization. Because there is overwhelming evidence that inequalities in income are foundational to the uneven distribution of children's life chances, a realistic strategy for making that distribution fairer would start with eradicating child poverty.

The revaluation of childcare

Childcare – in the broad sense of the care of children – also straddles the dimensions of current childhood and future adulthood, in relation to children's life chances. While all human beings need and benefit from care relationships, the needs and benefits are especially acute among children. Partly, those needs reflect children's distinct vulnerability, in physical, mental and social terms – and so the extent to which children are particularly dependent on their relations with others. The implications of those care relations for life chances are so multifarious and extensive as to be beyond listing. If life chances subsist in the relationship between individuals and the social structures they inhabit, then childcare is fundamental to the playing-out of that relationship. Access to it is a fairness issue. This will be obvious in connection with the life chances of parents, because the costs of childcare will fall most heavily on the worst off, and the balance between work and domestic roles carries such clear implications for the dynamics of parents' relations with each other (Calder 2018; Butler and Rutter 2016; Hartas 2014). Yet the availability and quality of childcare holds consequential impacts for children themselves, foundational to their life chances both in chronological terms (because they matter so early in the life course) and qualitatively. Parent-child relations are of course difficult to standardize, and may be presumed to be a matter of discretion, with families as provinces of parental autonomy as regards to how childrearing unfolds, except in cases where there is risk of clear harm to the child. This assumption seems in direct tension with any principle of fair life chances for children, simply insofar as families' different decisions, circumstances and priorities will lead to widely varying patterns of upbringing for children living in them (Fishkin 1983; Calder 2016, ch. 1). This is not itself a reason to prioritise life chances over family autonomy. But to the extent that we support fair life chances, it gives compelling grounds on which to balance out inequalities arising from family autonomy with a robust framework for levelling the playing field in terms of childcare.

Specific provisions such as universal, regulated nursery provision will be a clear plank, because of their capacity to compensate for families' different levels of resources. But a wider cultural shift, in which the rearing of children is seen not as a privatized, individualized matter but as a commitment by society as a whole, with the costs to be borne cooperatively rather than by individual families, would be vital in furnishing the conditions under which uneven access to childcare did not systematically disadvantage some children in early and enduring ways (Engster 2015; Sevenhuijsen 1998) .

Opportunity pluralism

We have found accumulating reasons for the importance of a plural measure of life chances. The corollary of this is the importance of real opportunities, which people can actually use to achieve the goods reflected in those measures. One way to look at what that kind of opportunity pluralism would look like has been offered by Fishkin. He bills it as a way of mitigating unearned advantage, lowering the stakes of those merit-based competitions where some win and others lose (like those for access to high-ranking professions) and opening up space for people to pursue more paths throughout life (Fishkin 2014: 131). Crucial to it is the removal of what he calls 'bottlenecks', where opportunities are restricted by the congestion caused by narrow points of entry to situations which then bestow the opportunity to pursue a wide range of valued goods (Fishkin 2014: 13). Such a society would look like this. There would be a wide range of diverse goals and conceptions of flourishing; avoiding as far as possible these goods and roles being positional and competitive (so that one person's access to them entails as little as possible another person's lack of access), and a plurality of paths leading to them. As we saw in our earlier discussion of his definition of 'fair life chances', Fishkin takes a 'whole life course' perspective. It is not specifically directed at fairness for children. But there are clear reasons why it would have benefits there.

Chief among them perhaps is that the widening of opportunities for flourishing helps maintain a balance between the two dimensions of life chances discussed above. A society in which the most diverse array of destinations are recognized as valid and valuable is one where childhood is proportionately less likely to be regarded as a period of sacrifice for later gain, a means to the end of a successful adulthood, or a kind of laboratory for the achievement of the kinds of credentials which equip a child for a narrower range. Sociological studies have shown how prioritization of later success can lead to micro-managed, intensive modes of parenting specifically geared towards the cultivation of capital to be redeemed at the point of application for university, and thereafter for higher-status jobs (Lareau 2011). They have shown too that (again) simply being better off carries its own educational advantages (Hartas 2011). Opportunity pluralism – particularly, the diversification of routes to flourishing – would help make such variations more innocuous, and less detrimental to destination-based life chances. But they would also have the effect of allowing for a reassessment of the value of childhood itself – and make scope, for example, for the creative enjoyment of childhood as a time in its own right for which, as we saw earlier, children have been shown to have a particular cognitive aptitude, and which may have opportunities attached to it which are valuable in themselves even if perhaps running counter to the realization of other longer-term outcomes (see Bonotti and Calder, forthcoming). Flourishing in childhood is not best or simply served by regarding it as a period of limitation and sacrifice, for the sake of later gains.

Conclusion

A fair life chances agenda has a clear and pressing point to it in a society such as the contemporary UK, where life chances for children are unevenly distributed in ways without moral or political justification. Yet the term needs to be carefully and critically elaborated, to hold genuine critical bite and to contribute to a coherent policy agenda. Our discussion here has not, of course, provided a full picture of a society where children's life chances were genuinely fair. Instead it has aimed to provide some tools with which we might paint a fuller

picture – and, by way of policy directions, provide examples of some necessary features of the landscape. There is of course much more to be done, in terms of developing such tools, and fleshing out a wider policy landscape. But I hope to have shown, in this discussion, is the mistakenness of any assumption that ‘fairer life chances’ is a light commitment in political terms, or might be done without confronting major structural factors such as economic inequalities, or might be an easy step from our current conjuncture. It is a project which justifies being taken seriously only in so far as it is treated in far more radical terms than that.

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