Challenging International Social Mobility Narratives: The Emergence of the "Digipolitan"

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Abstract

Traditionally, social mobility has been cultivated through elite educational institutions such as boarding schools and private academies. These physical spaces are embedded within national and class-based hierarchies all around the world. However, the rapid expansion of online schooling in a post-COVID-19 world has begun to disrupt these established pathways. This paper theorizes the emergence of a new form of transnational subjectivity. This is termed as *digipolitanism*, enabled by the digitization of education. As access to physical migration through education becomes increasingly restricted due to rising financial barriers (e.g., heightened VAT in the UK's private education sector), families and students are turning to digital alternatives. British online schools now act as virtual conduits of cultural capital, allowing students to accrue the social and academic credentials associated with British education without territorial relocation. Attached capital rather than pure knowledge gained becomes more of a currency for the new socially mobile class looking abroad. Rather than mere substitutes, these online platforms may be constructing an emergent globally mobile class whose identity and aspirations are forged in digital rather than purely geographic space.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, social mobility, education, online schooling, digipolitanism

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Introduction

Social mobility has long been defined as being a structural proposition. Individuals are kept in or out of a specific hierarchy of social classes dependant on various factors.[1] Cosmopolitanism has been developed hand in hand with elitist, socially mobile classes. This study proposes the introduction to the theory behind the conception of *digipolitanism,* intent on highlighting a new path[2] of mobility that is now emergent via online modes of private schooling which have sprung up within the past decade in the United Kingdom. These schools, catering predominantly to an international demographic, facilitate upward social mobility and transmission of British cultural milieu without the need for a student to be physically mobile. The advent of the digital opens up an entirely new route of mobility, with digipolitanism becoming a new milieu to be socially constructed and transmitted, and the digipolitan the newly socially mobile class of young people.

The study of social mobility in the United Kingdom has a long history of looking at quite traditional variables in assessing the extent to which social mobility is possible, as well as what individuals can do to propel themselves forward (Savage & Egerton, 1997) in the rat race up the social ladder. Education has long served as the main transportation system for individuals from one social class to another, with private education for decades holding the biggest sway on factors of upwards mobility, even controlling for other factors (Neelsen, 1975; Savage & Egerton, 1997). Similar to the historical continuation of social mobility, cosmopolitanism too has a historical "traditional" connotation steeped in upper class customs and an out-of-touch feel that makes it unrelatable to many individuals. Cosmopolitanism is something which we must seek to define; *Cosmopolitanism is an ideology which seeks to build a universal political and social community based on values of internationalism, humanism and universality to create a common global society which celebrates local and international attachments/differences.*

This definition of cosmopolitanism assists in grounding the "type" of cosmopolitanism that this proceeding is referring to out of the multitude of cosmopolitanisms that have been identified in scholarly literature and theorised in the plural (Pollock et al., 2000). Cosmopolitanism by nature is Janus-faced. Digipolitanism, therefore, is one of many faces. This proceeding is specified to serve as an introduction to the interrelationships between social mobility and cosmopolitanism, and how this interrelationship is the precipice for the emergence of a new, disruptive theory in the form of digipolitanism.

Literature Review

Social mobility and cosmopolitanism have spent significant amounts of time building well fortified traditional routes. The largest debate relevant to this discussion is the longstanding sociological split between whether one's social status is *ascribed* or if it is *achieved*. In the study of social mobility in the UK, the general consensus has been that structural factors determine if a person is able to climb the social ladder or stay stagnant (Savage & Egerton,

[1] Factors dependent on specific study, from Blau and Duncan (1967); Goldthorpe et al. (1980); Savage and Egerton (1997); Neelsen (1975) etc. factors are dependent on the scope of the study, whether they are intergenerational or not, etc.

[2] Digipolitanism and the proposition of this proceeding are to not convince that online schooling or the concepts presented are not based in sociology of the elite, but that there is a new route available with online education and digital options which lower barriers to entry for private education, simultaneously making it a more accessible option.

1997). In comparison, scholarship in the United States has leaned much further into the consensus that it is individualised factors that determine a person's ability or circumstance to overcome their social status (Neelsen, 1975). With the turn of the 21st century, UK scholarship has begun to also swing towards individualist analysis, and therefore landing most of western sociological scholarship firmly in the status is *achieved* school of thought. This is not to say that they ignore structural factors, but moreso that individuals have a certain degree of agency and ability based on individual characteristics (ibid.). This championing of meritocracy has resulted in decades of UK social policies being based on trying to boost the factors of certain social classes to allow them to better climb this "ladder". However, this system is stagnating. There is a continuous strain between expectations of social climbers and the reality of the economic opportunities available in reality after summiting the next peak of the social climb. This disillusions social climbers, resulting in a "social congestion" where the skills individuals obtain, through education or other means, are not enough to fulfil their aspirational expectations (Brown, 2017). The structural bond between lower social classes' social status increasing due to achieving placement in university is now breaking down (ibid.). The ladder can no longer handle the weight on its own, as global society enters a "war for talent" (ibid.) determined to keep the traditional mobility system afloat while simultaneously stretching beyond social class capacities.

The social ladder exists in a myriad of different dimensions. Social mobility can also be analysed through the lens of cosmopolitanism, where the individual is not necessarily territorially bound (Beck, 2017). Mobility becomes more of a fluid notion, opening up the possibility to analyse mobility through different temporal realities, such as the digital. Cosmopolitanism is no stranger to the advent of the internet. Zuckerman (2013) first proposed the idea of *digital cosmopolitanism* and, with it, the drawbacks of how humanity is "failing" to utilise the global connectivity unlocked by digital means to its fullest potential. Online means of communication connect us with ease to those around us, with numerous people of diverse social backgrounds having basic access to a means to connect. This "everydayness" of digital cosmopolitanism results in a banality towards opportunity, as digital connectivity is seen as the new norm (Ponzanesi, 2020; Zuckerman, 2013). The creation of the new cosmopolitan is argued to be happening in the site of the digital. Traditionally, much like social mobility, cosmopolitanism has been transmitted through the same traditional structures as class mobility, i.e. elite education. It is through the passing directly of high levels of cultural and economic capital that elite social classes are able to remain elite (Neelsen, 1975). The concept of Kantian cosmopolitanism we can argue is a part of higher classes cultural milieu that is transmitted through the hallowed halls of British boarding schools and universities. Individuals absorb and "learn" how to be a "global citizen" through these sites of transmission, continuously reproducing the Kantian cosmopolitan as a locked, elite ideal, inaccessible to common man. Therefore, with the breaking down of the traditional social mobility system, there begins to be an opening in how cosmopolitanist ideals are situated, condensed, transformed, and transmitted. New cosmopolitanisms, in the plural, spring up internationally and in local contextualities (Appiah, 1997; Pollock et al., 2000). With new cosmopolitanisms comes new "rooted and routed" methods of being cosmopolitan (Ponzanesi, 2020) resulting in the cosmopolitan being able to be produced and transmitted outside of traditional elite institutions, breaking the nexus of education -> cultural and economic capital -> higher social class milieu and mobility.

The connecting factor between social mobility and cosmopolitanism is elite educational institutions as a site of transmission. Elite institutions, specifically in the UK context, can be further specified to the boarding school model of education. Students, domestic and

international, are in the prime context for socially mobile opportunities. Or, at least, they are supposed to be. The cultural milieu transmitted through boarding schools is that of the higher British social classes. Boarding schools have therefore been the pinnacle of social mobility in the UK for domestic and international students, with the meritocratic system promising a new *achieved* status upon graduation from their school, namely, to a globally ranked higher educational institution. Yet, this is the same traditional method which is argued to be breaking down. What is filling its place? *Digipolitanism.*

Social Mobility, Cosmopolitanism & Creating Digipolitanism

Given the definition of cosmopolitanism attributed in this study, it is possible to combine this theory with known concepts of social mobility in the context of the United Kingdom and in comparative contexts. Education breeds cosmopolitanism (Howard & Maxwell, 2020), which creates a reproduction of cultural and economic capital. Private education has served as the main mode of "creating" the cosmopolitan since the time of Kant (Howard & Maxwell, 2020) when this role was largely confined to an upper-class elite seeking to expand their knowledge to become more global, and continuing today as a more grounded and accessible phenomenon (Appiah, 1997; Hannerz, 2007; Holton, 2002; Ponzanesi, 2020). Schools within the elite context create a milieu specifically needed to succeed in higher echelons of British society (Neelsen, 1975; Savage & Egerton, 1997) which has occurred and reproduced in this cycle for decades. This cycle has also enabled and invited elites internationally to the United Kingdom through physical migration pathways, such as boarding schools, which take in international students and cycle them through this process of cosmopolitanizing elite education. Elite mobility in this way has been confined and refined to be a physical process, relocating oneself or entire family to a new, cosmopolitanist city with a constructed symbolic appeal. Schools cannot be physically picked up and relocated, forcing international participants to come to them, rather than going to them.[3]

However, there is a new factor emerging in today's society: the digital. Social mobility is no longer constricted to be bred and reproduced solely through the hallowed halls of elite educational institutions in a singular location. Since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been a new, disruptive educational player emerging: online schools. The digitisation of education enables international students globally to access a British education through entirely online private schools. British online schools now act as virtual conduits of cultural capital, allowing students to accrue the social and academic credentials associated with British education without territorial relocation. This creates a disruption to the elite mobility confined to physical boarding school-esque institution and leads to the emergence of an entirely new figure of cosmopolitan production: the *digipolitan.*

The figure of the digipolitan alludes to a new type of cosmopolitanism all together; *digipolitanism*. Cosmopolitanism is a plural concept (Appiah, 1997; Holton, 2002) and has many branches and therefore many figures which embody the definition of cosmopolitanism. Enabled through the globalization of the digital, the digipolitan is able to gain cultural capital through entirely online means. Online schools purposefully circumvent many of the barriers to entry that are seen in private British schools, with high tuition costs being the most glaringly socioeconomically bound factor. International families are now able to look at

[3] It's important to note that also within the last decade many elite institutions have been opening up "satellite" campuses in other countries for specifically the stated reason they have not done "going to them [internationals]" to create more opportunity for those unable to physically immigrate to the UK, i.e. Haileybury school in Kazakhstan.

alternative options to access elite education. This opens up a whole new world, and numerous new pathways of social mobility which skirt the traditionally held and guarded pathways of British elite schools. The digipolitan is new, *global*, and disruptive.

Digipolitan/ism

Digipolitanism is proposed as the newly emergent branch on the tree of social mobility. Digipolitanism is not argued to be a complete takeover of the traditional methods of social mobility, but a new option that is made possible by the advent and the development of the digital. The digipolitan is emerging, but it's also already here. Just as Zuckerman[4] proposed digital cosmopolitanism(s) all the way in 2013, over a decade ago, the concept of digipolitanism has been growing. To seek out a definition of digipolitanism, it can be tentatively defined as *a cosmopolitanism centred in the digital.* In seeking to place a definition without using cosmopolitanism as a defining word, we can tentatively define it as *a concept rooted in human connectivity, opportunity and social production through digital means.*

This places digipolitanism as a solidly sociologically based conception, yet suspended in a temporality, much like traditional cosmopolitanism. However, digipolitanism is specifically a disruption to the traditionalist definition of cosmopolitanism, as the digipolitan is arguably solidly anti-Kantian. The Kantian[5] definition of cosmopolitanism is centred around Kant's original conception presented in *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* and *Perpetual Peace*. Kant's cosmopolitan however is defined by the historical context of him and his cultural milieu, namely a heavily colonialist notion. This has tainted the definition and conversation around cosmopolitanism as a colonial project and the cosmopolitan as a colonial figure. Yes, Kant's cosmopolitan is the pinnacle of the colonial figure: white, male, wealthy, Kant's cosmopolitan was able to navigate the many vestiges of the British Empire with ease of affordability based on his race and his class. This is not to negate that Kant's definition has not bled into modern conversations and definitions of cosmopolitanism, but just the opposite. Today's society has multiplied and multicultural-ised beyond's Kant's deepest nightmares.[6] Digipolitanism is situated simultaneously as a disruption to cosmopolitan thought and traditional social mobility, but it is also a clear inheritor of the elite milieu that precedes it.

In introducing digipolitanism as a concept, we must also introduce who is the *digipolitan*. By definition, anyone can be a digipolitan, if they are actively taking part in socially mobile options and utilising the digital for means of migration and mobility, we could call them a digipolitan. Digipolitans look at the conceived banality of digital connectivity as a web of opportunity. Digipolitans can be simply defined as *individuals of an international demographic who are socially mobile through digital means and able to access private methods of mobility.* "Private methods of mobility" we can pinpoint to private education or training that might be found in the traditional collection of social mobility tools. Uniquely digital jobs have also become available which are a generational hallmark not found in preceding studies of intergenerational mobility. Digital jobs, such as the influencer, allow a

[4] Digipolitanism is not equivalent with Zuckerman's (2013) digital cosmopolitanism, but again a branch on the populous tree of cosmopolitanisms.
[5] Translation and edition of Kantian corpus is 1991's *Kant Political Writings*. Second Ed. Cambridge University Press.
[6] Ponzanesi 2020 offers a comprehensive "list" of the "types" of cosmopolitanisms which have emerged in recent social thought, including Zuckerman's 2013 digital cosmopolitanism.

specific kind of social mobility and construction of social class (Mamba & Beharry-Ramraj, 2022; Polson, 2019).

As a critique of this, the "digital nomad" may be conceived as a digipolitan. Arguably, the digital nomad is an extension more of the Kantian conception than anything just argued as the digipolitan. However, the conversation of cosmopolitanism is continuously suspended in its historical connection and complicity in colonialism (Ponzanesi, 2020). Digipolitanism is meant to be a disruptive revision to this, offering a more mediated, postmodern approach to the ongoing discussion of cosmopolitan thought. Cosmopolitanism in itself is not a dirty, colonial word. Digipolitans are not Kantian cosmopolitans, they are the inheritors here to change this outdated perception. Digipolitanism represents the extension of cosmopolitan thought into a more diverse future, where more individuals, who explicitly do not meet the Kantian ideal, are able to access formerly "elite" measures of mobility such as private education. It is through the digital that cosmopolitanism finds this grounding to be able to expand outwardly and more accessibly, rather than simply touting the traditionalist line.

Emergence of Online School as a Digitised Version of the Educational Factor of Social Mobility

In seeking to define digipolitanism and the digipolitan, we can also offer a site in which we might find this as a normative concept in action. Traditional methods are now starting to fail (or arguably, always were) to produce the next generation of cosmopolitanists. International students must seek alternative pathways to fulfil and overcome the global war for talent and simultaneous constraints placed on them by ethnonationalist policies and parties which are springing up across Europe and the United States (Brown, 2017; Ponzanesi, 2020). This has arguably led to the necessity of alternative pathways of mobility having to emerge as traditional routes are continuously constricted. This has led to the digitalisation of educational mobility pathways, with online schools cropping up via a multitude of national educational qualifications (US based, British based, etc.).

A site in which we can find digipolitanism in action is in online schooling. Online schooling has astonishingly little literature or scholarly attention, even as it is a phenomena emerging since the advent of the internet in some cases.[7] However, online schooling as a sector within the educational field is mostly attributed to solutions derived from necessity during the COVID19 pandemic in 2020. With traditional schools unable to operate, education took to the digital as a solution to continuity of learning without physical space. Families in the United Kingdom and abroad were able to access British education without having to deal with the demand of physically attending a school. Particularly for internationals, this opens the opportunity to receive and obtain a British qualification without having to physically relocate to the United Kingdom. Physical migration and mobility has also been further stifled by post-2020 economic constraints, from a shrinking global economy to financial constraints now placed on elite schools in the United Kingdom, with a 20% VAT levied on all private education schools. This cost, passed on to the consumer, limits a specific socioeconomic class which is now iced out financially from being able to access private education. Online schooling, in contrast, mitigates the majority of costs that are incurred through the traditional educational mobility route. This is where we are able to locate the notion of accessibility in online schooling and this new route of mobility. There is a cost reduction in tuition fees, and

[7] Certain charter and private schools, such as Connections Academy, in the United States have utilised online means of schooling since Skype in the early 2000s.

no costs associated with physical migration (visas, flights, accommodation, etc.). This primes online schooling as a viable and highly desirable alternative to traditional elite education for ambitious, socially mobile international students and their families.[8] These schools are able to manufacture a new type of attached capital to the UK schooling system, making it an attractive status symbol with international appeal. The context in which knowledge is gained becomes more of a currency for this newly socially mobile class, the digipolitan. Rather than simply being substitutes of elite, traditionalist education, online schools are constructing and forming an emergent globally mobile class whose identity and aspirations are forged through replicated forms of the traditional cultural milieu with a different route of transmission. Aspirations of mobility are able to be forged in the digital rather than purely geographic space, circumventing another long-standing notion of elite mobility attached to "cosmopolitan" cities[9] and physical location. The digipolitan has no geographic constraints, as they are able to access their mobile means anywhere in the world simply through an internet connection. The digipolitan is quite literally everywhere.

Implications and Conclusion

As the world continues to digitally globalise, the implication of the digipolitan and subsequent digipolitanism is to reevaluate what it means to be a social climber from a ground up perspective. International students are adapting to a crumbling system and creating something new through the routes that are afforded to them. There is a critique on where or not these digital methods are "better" or as substantial as the traditional routes.[10] Yet, the reality is the "traditional" pathway is becoming more and more of a phantom of social mobility. Unless there is radical change in policy in both social and educational forms, the digital is where flocks of social climbers will turn to.

Digipolitanism is not proclaiming to be anything "new", but does offer a new lens and dimension of understanding to what sociology can consider in the fields of cosmopolitanisms (Pollock et al., 2000; Zuckerman, 2013). Digipoiltanism is new in the normative sense, that there is a new, pinpointable route of mobility that is now able to be identified. Going forward, in the sociology of education urgent attention is needed in the analysis of online schooling. As an emergent sector, it is an amalgamous force reckoning with the educational routes and definitions that digipolitanism seeks to disrupt with its temporal modality. There are many things unable to be stretched, stress tested, and argued in the confines of this proceeding regarding digipolitanism, an acknowledged limitation. The theory of digipolitanism is now to be field tested and further defined, post its introduction to scholarship.

Digipolitanism is here to stay, and it is the future of the cosmopolitan tradition.

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[8] A Benton is currently researching a qualitative research paper on British online schools. Forthcoming.
[9] London is the central example in this case, but also can be applied to other "western" capitals that have a socially constructed status symbolism attached to them, such as Berlin, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, etc.
[10] There is social commentary and critique on if online school is a detriment or the future of the educational sector, yet little literature on the topic. Benton (forthcoming) on online schools and creating digipolitanism is creating a foray into study of this sector of online schools.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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