

When Hero-Making Fails, Social Mobility Pays the Price

Adam Tugwell | 8 August 2026



The intense scrutiny surrounding Jason Arday is no longer simply a story about one academic. It is a warning about what happens when Britain turns individuals into symbols of social mobility. When those symbols collapse, the damage extends far beyond the person at the centre of the story. It reaches thousands of people whose opportunities become collateral damage in the collapse of the narrative.

This moment is not only about reputational damage to one individual. It is about the harm that follows when a society mistakes an exceptional life story for proof that the system itself is working.

This is not a defence of Arday, nor a judgement of him. Investigations will reach their own conclusions. But the reaction to his case reveals something more troubling than any single biography: the fragility of a system that turns people into symbols, rewards narrative over capability, and then tears those symbols down with equal force.

To understand the wider impact, we must examine the machinery that created the narrative in the first place: why heroes are made, who benefits from them, why they become vulnerable, and who pays the price when they fall.

The Media's Cycle: Elevation, Performance, Collapse

The media has a familiar pattern: it elevates individuals whose stories of adversity and triumph are emotionally compelling, then scrutinises them with equal intensity when inconsistencies emerge.

This cycle is not unique to Arday. It is a structural feature of how public heroes are created, celebrated, consumed, and dismantled.

Hero-making is powerful because it offers institutions a visible way to demonstrate progress. A story of overcoming poverty, disability, or exclusion becomes proof that Britain is meritocratic, open, and fair.

But it can also be extractive. It turns a person into a narrative asset. Their life becomes a vessel for a story others want to tell.

When the story falters, the media does not merely report; it dismantles. The individual becomes a spectacle, and the public is invited to watch the fall.

The damage does not stop with the person at the centre of the story. It spreads to everyone whose life experience resembles theirs.

Trauma, Disadvantage, and the Pressure to Perform

Many people in Britain's deepest social-immobility pool carry trauma that is profound and lifelong. Poverty, instability, violence, and neglect shape how they see themselves and how they believe the world sees them. They learn early that survival requires adaptation, resilience, and sometimes storytelling too.

In that context, it is not difficult to understand how someone might come to believe that hardship is **currency**: that adversity is the only thing that makes them visible or valued.

When institutions reward narrative over capability, they unintentionally teach people that performance is expected, embellishment is strategy, and storytelling is survival.

Arday's background includes real adversity. Whatever the investigations ultimately conclude, it is clear that his life has been shaped by experiences many readers will never encounter. The tragedy is that those experiences - legitimate, complex, and

deeply human - may now be overshadowed by the collapse of the story built around them.

It is not an excuse. But it is context.

The Wider Impact: A Blow to Social Mobility Itself

The danger now is that Arday's story becomes a symbol - not of institutional failure, but of supposed flaws in disadvantaged people themselves.

The risk is that some observers will treat one case as evidence of a wider pattern. In symbolic public debates, individual failures are often used to question entire programmes, communities, or ideas. Trauma becomes recast as manipulation. Diversity is accused of undermining standards. Social mobility is dismissed as a façade.

That would be profoundly unfair. It would also be profoundly damaging, because there are real people - thousands of them - who have lived through trauma, who have extraordinary capability, and who deserve opportunity.

They will not be interviewed on television. They will not be profiled in newspapers. They will not be invited to speak at conferences. They will simply be harmed by the shadow cast by this moment.

The media will not see them. But the consequences will reach them.

This is the true cost of a collapsed hero narrative: it does not fall on the hero alone. It falls on everyone who shares the hero's background, even when they have done nothing to invite that burden.

The Educational Distortion Behind the Crisis

This moment also exposes a deeper flaw in Britain's educational model. The same system that creates social mobility heroes is also the system that misunderstands talent.

In a wealth-centric society, value is measured by financial productivity. Academic qualifications correlate with income, so they become the primary gateway to opportunity. Prestige concentrates into a narrow set of pathways. Those who succeed through them become symbols. Those who do not are often overlooked altogether.

The result is an educational system weighted almost entirely toward academic achievement, even though academic success is only one form of human capability.

The narrative that "everyone should get a degree" sounds egalitarian, but it rested upon a false assumption: that academic learning is the universal route to success.

It isn't.

Many people are experiential learners: practical, hands-on, intuitive. They often possess exceptional capability, but the system does not recognise it because it cannot be easily measured in academic terms.

A genuine vocational pathway, beginning at 14 and continuing to 21, would allow thousands of young people to thrive in ways no degree can replicate.

The tragedy is that the same system also fails traumatised young people who *could* be academic.

Growing up in survival-mode environments means adolescence is not always a time for learning; it can be a time for coping.

These young people may have academic potential, but they cannot always access it because their teenage years are spent navigating chaos rather than studying.

This is the educational bottleneck that makes social mobility far more complicated than the public debate often allows.

The Moral Question Institutions Must Ask

The question that should guide every institution, journalist, and policymaker involved in social mobility is simple, and it should be asked before any story is promoted, any platform offered, or any individual elevated:

Who am I helping - them, or me?

If the answer is “me,” the project is not social mobility. It is self-promotion.

If the answer is “me,” the hero is being used, not supported.

If the answer is “me,” the collapse of the narrative becomes more likely - and the consequences will fall hardest on those least able to bear them.

True **help** empowers individuals to recognise their own value, develop their capability, and rise on their own merit.

False elevation - the **hand-up** - places individuals into positions they may not be prepared for, then abandons them when the pressure becomes unbearable.

The media rarely distinguishes between the two. Institutions often don't either.

What Must Change

If social mobility is to survive this moment, institutions and media organisations must confront their own role in creating and extending the barriers that underpin it.

They must stop rewarding narrative over merit. They must stop treating trauma as currency. They must stop manufacturing heroes for their own benefit. They must stop confusing elevation with empowerment.

Social mobility was never meant to be about producing heroes. It was meant to be about widening opportunity. Heroes are exceptional by definition; opportunity should not be.

If institutions continue to reward stories more than capability, they will keep creating symbols and then destroying them. Each collapse will make the next person from a disadvantaged background harder to trust, harder to support, and harder to champion.

The question is not whether Britain needs more heroes. The question is whether it is finally prepared to build systems that make heroes unnecessary.

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