

MICHAEL J.
SANDEL

The Tyranny of Merit

*What's Become of
the Common Good?*



allen lane

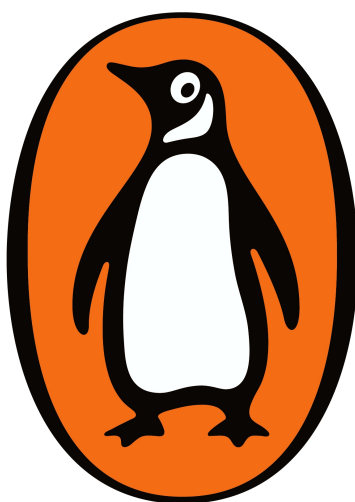
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About the Author

Michael J. Sandel teaches political philosophy at Harvard University. His books *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* , and *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* were international best sellers and have been translated into 27 languages. Sandel's legendary course 'Justice' was the first Harvard course to be made freely available online and on television and has been viewed by tens of millions of people. His BBC series 'The Global Philosopher' explores the philosophical ideas lying behind the headlines with participants from around the world.

Sandel has been a visiting professor at the Sorbonne, delivered the Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Oxford, the Reith Lectures for the BBC, and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. His lecture tours have taken him across five continents and packed such venues as St. Paul's Cathedral (London), the Sydney Opera House (Australia), and an outdoor stadium in Seoul (S. Korea), where 14,000 people came to hear him speak.

ALSO BY MICHAEL J. SANDEL

Liberalism and the Limits of Justice

Liberalism and Its Critics (editor)

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Justice: A Reader (editor)

Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?

What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets

*Encountering China:
Michael Sandel and Chinese Philosophy* (co-editor)

For Kiku, with love



Prologue

When the coronavirus pandemic hit in 2020, the United States, like many other countries, was unprepared. Despite warnings the previous year from public health experts about the risk of a global viral contagion, and even as China contended with its outbreak in January, the United States lacked the ability to conduct the widespread testing that might have contained the disease. As the contagion spread, the wealthiest country in the world found itself unable to provide even the medical masks and other protective gear that doctors and nurses needed to treat the flood of infected patients. Hospitals and state governments found themselves bidding against one another to acquire testing kits and life-saving ventilators.

This lack of preparedness had multiple sources. President Donald Trump, ignoring the warnings of public health advisors, downplayed the crisis for several crucial weeks, insisting in late February, “We have it very much under control ... We have done an incredible job ... It’s going to disappear.”

¹ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at first distributed flawed test kits and was slow to find a fix. And decades of outsourcing by American companies had left the United States almost entirely dependent on China and other foreign manufacturers for surgical masks and medical gear. ²

But beyond its lack of logistical preparedness, the country was not morally prepared for the pandemic. The years leading up to the crisis were a time of deep divisions—economic, cultural, political. Decades of rising

inequality and cultural resentment had brought an angry populist backlash in 2016, resulting in the election of Trump, who, shortly after having been impeached but not removed from office, found himself presiding over the gravest crisis the country had faced since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The partisan divide persisted as the crisis unfolded. Few Republicans (only 7 percent) trusted the news media to provide reliable information on coronavirus; few Democrats (4 percent) trusted the information Trump provided. ³

Amid the partisan rancor and mistrust came a plague that demanded the kind of solidarity few societies can summon except in times of war. People throughout the world were implored, and in many cases required, to observe social distancing, to abandon work and stay at home. Those unable to work remotely faced lost wages and disappearing jobs. The virus posed the greatest threat to those of advanced age, but could also infect the young, and even those who could ride it out had parents and grandparents to worry about.

Morally, the pandemic reminded us of our vulnerability, of our mutual dependence: “We are all in this together.” Public officials and advertisers reached instinctively for this slogan. But the solidarity it evoked was a solidarity of fear, a fear of contagion that demanded “social distancing.” The public health required that we express our solidarity, our shared vulnerability, by keeping our distance, by observing the strictures of self-isolation.

The coincidence of solidarity and separation made sense in the context of a pandemic. Apart from the heroic health care providers and first responders whose help for the afflicted required their physical presence, and the cashiers in grocery stores and the delivery workers who risked their health bringing food and supplies to those sheltering at home, most of us were told that the best way to protect others was by keeping our distance from them.

But the moral paradox of solidarity through separation highlighted a certain hollowness in the assurance that “We are all in this together.” It did not describe a sense of community embodied in an ongoing practice of mutual obligation and shared sacrifice. To the contrary, it appeared on the scene at a time of nearly unprecedented inequality and partisan rancor. The same market-driven globalization project that had left the United States without access to the domestic production of surgical masks and

medications had deprived a great many working people of well-paying jobs and social esteem.

Meanwhile, those who reaped the economic bounty of global markets, supply chains, and capital flows had come to rely less and less on their fellow citizens, as producers and as consumers. Their economic prospects and identities were no longer dependent on local or national communities. As the winners of globalization pulled away from the losers, they practiced their own kind of social distancing.

The political divide that mattered, the winners explained, was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. In an open world, success depends on education, on equipping yourself to compete and win in a global economy. This means that national governments must ensure that everyone has an equal chance to get the education on which success depends. But it also means that those who land on top come to believe that they deserve their success. And, if opportunities are truly equal, it means that those who are left behind deserve their fate as well.

This way of thinking about success makes it hard to believe that “we are all in this together.” It invites the winners to consider their success their own doing and the losers to feel that those on top look down with disdain. It helps explain why those left behind by globalization would become angry and resentful, and why they would be drawn to authoritarian populists who rail against elites and promise to reassert national borders with a vengeance.

Now, it is these political figures, wary though they are of scientific expertise and global cooperation, who must contend with the pandemic. It will not be easy. Mobilizing to confront the global public health crisis we face requires not only medical and scientific expertise, but also moral and political renewal.

The toxic mix of hubris and resentment that propelled Trump to power is not a likely source of the solidarity we need now. Any hope of renewing our moral and civic life depends on understanding how, over the past four decades, our social bonds and respect for one another came unraveled. This book seeks to explain how this happened, and to consider how we might find our way to a politics of the common good.

*April 2020
Brookline, Massachusetts*

INTRODUCTION

Getting In

In March 2019, as high school students awaited the results of their college applications, federal prosecutors made a stunning announcement. They charged thirty-three wealthy parents with engaging in an elaborate cheating scheme to get their children admitted to elite universities, including Yale, Stanford, Georgetown, and the University of Southern California. [¹](#)

At the heart of the scam was an unscrupulous college-counseling consultant named William Singer, who ran a business that catered to anxious, affluent parents. Singer's company specialized in gaming the intensely competitive college admissions system that had in recent decades become the primary gateway to prosperity and prestige. For students lacking the stellar academic credentials top colleges required, Singer devised corrupt workarounds—paying proctors of standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT to boost students' scores by correcting their answer sheets, and bribing coaches to designate applicants as recruited athletes, even if the students did not play the sport. He even provided fake athletic credentials, photoshopping applicants' faces onto action photos of real athletes.

Singer's illicit admissions service did not come cheap. The chairman of a prestigious law firm paid \$75,000 for his daughter to take a college entrance exam at a test center supervised by a proctor paid by Singer to ensure the student received the score she needed. One family paid Singer \$1.2 million to get their daughter admitted to Yale as a soccer recruit, despite the fact that she did not play soccer. Singer used \$400,000 of the payment to bribe the obliging Yale soccer coach, who was also indicted. A television actress and her husband, a fashion designer, paid Singer \$500,000 to get their two daughters admitted to USC as bogus recruits to the crew team. Another

celebrity, the actress Felicity Huffman, known for her role in the television series *Desperate Housewives*, somehow got a bargain rate; for only \$15,000, Singer put in the fix for her daughter's SAT. ²

In all, Singer took in \$25 million over eight years running his college admissions scam.

The admissions scandal provoked universal outrage. In a polarized time, when Americans could scarcely agree on anything, it drew massive coverage and condemnation across the political spectrum—on Fox News and MSNBC, in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. Everyone agreed that bribing and cheating to gain admission to elite colleges was reprehensible. But the outrage expressed something deeper than anger at privileged parents using illicit means to help their kids get into prestigious colleges. In ways that people struggled to articulate, it was an emblematic scandal, one that raised larger questions about who gets ahead, and why.

Inevitably, the expressions of outrage were politically inflected. Surrogates for President Trump took to Twitter and Fox News to taunt the Hollywood liberals ensnared in the scam. “Look at who these people are,” Lara Trump, the president's daughter-in-law, said on Fox. “The Hollywood elites, the liberal elites who were always talking about equality for all, and everyone should get a fair shot, when here is the biggest hypocrisy of all: That they're writing checks to cheat and get their kids into these schools—when the spots really should've gone to kids that were actually deserving of them.” ³

For their part, liberals agreed that the scam deprived qualified kids of the places they deserved. But they saw the scandal as a blatant instance of a more pervasive injustice: the role of wealth and privilege in college admission, even where no illegality was involved. In announcing the indictment, the U.S. Attorney declared what he took to be the principle at stake: “There can be no separate college admissions system for the wealthy.” ⁴ But editorial and opinion writers were quick to point out that money routinely plays a role in admissions, most explicitly in the special consideration many American universities accord children of alumni and generous donors.

Responding to Trump supporters' attempts to blame liberal elites for the admissions scandal, liberals cited published reports that Jared Kushner, the

president's son-in-law, had been admitted to Harvard despite a modest academic record after his father, a wealthy real estate developer, had donated \$2.5 million to the university. Trump himself reportedly gave \$1.5 million to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania around the time his children Donald Jr. and Ivanka attended the school. [5](#)

THE ETHICS OF ADMISSION

Singer, the mastermind of the admissions scam, acknowledged that a big gift sometimes gets marginally qualified applicants admitted through the “back door.” But he pitched his own technique, which he called the “side door,” as a cost-effective alternative. He told clients that the standard “back door” approach was “ten times as much money” as his cheating scheme, and less certain. A major gift to the college offered no guarantee of admission, while his “side door” of bribes and fake test scores did. “My families want a guarantee,” he explained. [6](#)

Although money buys access in both “back door” and “side door” admissions, these modes of entry are not morally identical. For one thing, the back door is legal, while the side door is not. The U.S. Attorney made this clear: “We are not talking about donating a building so that a school is more likely to take your son or daughter. We are talking about deception and fraud, fake test scores, fake athletic credentials, fake photographs, bribed college officials.” [7](#)

In prosecuting Singer, his clients, and the bribe-taking coaches, the feds were not telling colleges they could not sell seats in the freshman class; they were simply cracking down on a fraudulent scheme. Legality aside, the back door and the side door differ in this respect: When parents buy their child's admission through a big donation, the money goes to the college, which can use it to improve the education it offers all students. With Singer's scheme, the money goes to third parties, and so does little or nothing to help the college itself. (At least one of the coaches Singer bribed, the sailing coach at Stanford, apparently used the bribe to support the sailing program. Others pocketed the money.)

From the standpoint of fairness, however, it is hard to distinguish between the “back door” and the “side door.” Both give an edge to children of wealthy parents who are admitted instead of better-qualified applicants. Both allow money to override merit.

Admission based on merit defines entry through the “front door.” As Singer put it, the front door “means you get in on your own.” This mode of entry is what most people consider fair; applicants should be admitted based on their own merit, not their parents’ money.

In practice, of course, it is not that simple. Money hovers over the front door as well as the back. Measures of merit are hard to disentangle from economic advantage. Standardized tests such as the SAT purport to measure merit on its own, so that students from modest backgrounds can demonstrate intellectual promise. In practice, however, SAT scores closely track family income. The richer a student’s family, the higher the score he or she is likely to receive. ⁸

Not only do wealthy parents enroll their children in SAT prep courses; they hire private admissions counselors to burnish their college applications, enroll them in dance and music lessons, and train them in elite sports such as fencing, squash, golf, tennis, crew, lacrosse, and sailing, the better to qualify for recruitment to college teams. These are among the costly means by which affluent, striving parents equip their progeny to compete for admission.

And then there is tuition. At all but the handful of colleges wealthy enough to admit students without regard for their ability to pay, those who do not need financial aid are more likely than their needy counterparts to get in. ⁹

Given all this, it is not surprising that more than two-thirds of students at Ivy League schools come from the top 20 percent of the income scale; at Princeton and Yale, more students come from the top 1 percent than from the entire bottom 60 percent of the country. ¹⁰ This staggering inequality of access is due partly to legacy admissions and donor appreciation (the back door), but also to advantages that propel children from well-off families through the front door.

Critics point to this inequality as evidence that higher education is not the meritocracy it claims to be. From this point of view, the college admissions scandal is an egregious instance of the broader, pervasive unfairness that prevents higher education from living up to the meritocratic principle it professes.

Despite their disagreements, those who consider the cheating scandal a shocking departure from standard admissions practices and those who

consider it an extreme example of tendencies already prevalent in college admissions share a common premise: Students should be admitted to college based on their own abilities and talents, not based on factors beyond their control. They agree, in other words, that admission should be based on merit. They also agree, implicitly at least, that those who get in based on merit have earned their admission and therefore deserve the benefits that flow from it.

If this familiar view is right, then the problem with meritocracy is not with the principle but with our failure to live up to it. Political argument between conservatives and liberals bears this out. Our public debates are not about meritocracy itself but about how to achieve it. Conservatives argue, for example, that affirmative action policies that consider race and ethnicity as factors in admission amount to a betrayal of merit-based admission; liberals defend affirmative action as a way of remedying persisting unfairness and argue that a true meritocracy can be achieved only by leveling the playing field between the privileged and the disadvantaged.

But this debate overlooks the possibility that the problem with meritocracy runs deeper.

Consider again the admissions scandal. Most of the outrage focused on the cheating, and the unfairness of it. Equally troubling, however, are the attitudes that fueled the cheating. Lying in the background of the scandal was the assumption, now so familiar that it is scarcely noticed, that admission to an elite university is a highly sought prize. The scandal was attention-grabbing not only because it implicated celebrities and private equity moguls but also because the access they tried to buy was so widely desired, the object of fevered striving.

Why is this so? Why has admission to prestigious universities become so fiercely sought that privileged parents commit fraud to get their kids in? Or, short of fraud, spend tens of thousands of dollars on private admissions consultants and test prep courses to boost their children's chances, turning their high school years into a stress-strewn gauntlet of AP classes, résumé building, and pressure-packed striving? Why has admission to elite colleges come to loom so large in our society that the FBI would devote massive law enforcement resources to ferreting out the scam, and that news of the scandal would command headlines and public attention for months, from the indictment to the sentencing of the perpetrators?

The admissions obsession has its origins in the growing inequality of recent decades. It reflects the fact that more is at stake in who gets in where. As the wealthiest 10 percent pulled away from the rest, the stakes of attending a prestigious college increased. Fifty years ago, applying to college was less fraught. Fewer than one in five Americans went to a four-year college, and those who did tended to enroll in places close to home. College rankings mattered less than they do today. [11](#)

But as inequality increased, and as the earnings gap between those with and those without a college degree widened, college mattered more. So did college choice. Today, students commonly seek out the most selective college that will admit them. [12](#) Parenting styles have also changed, especially among the professional classes. As the income gap grows, so does the fear of falling. Seeking to avert this danger, parents became intensely involved with their children's lives—managing their time, monitoring their grades, directing their activities, curating their college qualifications. [13](#)

This epidemic of overbearing, helicopter parenting did not come from nowhere. It is an anxious but understandable response to rising inequality and the desire of affluent parents to spare their progeny the precarity of middle-class life. A degree from a name-brand university has come to be seen as the primary vehicle of upward mobility for those seeking to rise and the surest bulwark against downward mobility for those hoping to remain ensconced in the comfortable classes. This is the mentality that led panicky, privileged parents to sign up for the college admissions scam.

But economic anxiety is not the whole story. More than a hedge against downward mobility, Singer's clients were buying something else, something less tangible but more valuable. In securing a place for their kids in prestigious universities, they were buying the borrowed luster of merit.

BIDDING FOR MERIT

In an unequal society, those who land on top want to believe their success is morally justified. In a meritocratic society, this means the winners must believe they have earned their success through their own talent and hard work.

Paradoxically, this is the gift the cheating parents wanted to give their kids. If all they really cared about was enabling their children to live in

affluence, they could have given them trust funds. But they wanted something else—the meritocratic cachet that admission to elite colleges confers.

Singer understood this when he explained that the front door means “you get in on your own.” His cheating scheme was the next best thing. Of course, being admitted on the basis of a rigged SAT or phony athletic credentials is not making it on your own. This is why most of the parents hid their machinations from their kids. Admission through the side door carries the same meritocratic honor as admission through the front door only if the illicit mode of entry is concealed. No one takes pride in announcing, “I’ve been admitted to Stanford because my parents bribed the sailing coach.”

The contrast with admission based on merit seems obvious. Those admitted with sparkling, legitimate credentials take pride in their achievement, and consider that they got in on their own. But this is, in a way, misleading. While it is true that their admission reflects dedication and hard work, it cannot really be said that it is solely their own doing. What about the parents and teachers who helped them on their way? What about talents and gifts not wholly of their making? What about the good fortune to live in a society that cultivates and rewards the talents they happen to have?

Those who, by dint of effort and talent, prevail in a competitive meritocracy are indebted in ways the competition obscures. As the meritocracy intensifies, the striving so absorbs us that our indebtedness recedes from view. In this way, even a fair meritocracy, one without cheating or bribery or special privileges for the wealthy, induces a mistaken impression—that we have made it on our own. The years of strenuous effort demanded of applicants to elite universities almost forces them to believe that their success is their own doing, and that if they fall short, they have no one to blame but themselves.

This is a heavy burden for young people to bear. It is also corrosive of civic sensibilities. For the more we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility. And without these sentiments, it is hard to care for the common good.

College admission is not the only occasion for arguments about merit. Debates about who deserves what abound in contemporary politics. On the

surface, these debates are about fairness: Does everyone have a truly equal opportunity to compete for desirable goods and social positions?

But our disagreements about merit are not only about fairness. They are also about how we define success and failure, winning and losing—and about the attitudes the winners should hold toward those less successful than themselves. These are highly charged questions, and we try to avoid them until they force themselves upon us.

Finding our way beyond the polarized politics of our time requires a reckoning with merit. How has the meaning of merit been recast in recent decades, in ways that erode the dignity of work and leave many people feeling that elites look down on them? Are the winners of globalization justified in the belief that they have earned and therefore deserve their success, or is this a matter of meritocratic hubris?

At a time when anger against elites has brought democracy to the brink, the question of merit takes on a special urgency. We need to ask whether the solution to our fractious politics is to live more faithfully by the principle of merit, or to seek a common good beyond the sorting and the striving.



Winners and Losers

These are dangerous times for democracy. The danger can be seen in rising xenophobia and growing public support for autocratic figures who test the limits of democratic norms. These trends are troubling in themselves. Equally alarming is the fact that mainstream parties and politicians display little understanding of the discontent that is roiling politics around the world.

Some denounce the upsurge of populist nationalism as little more than a racist, xenophobic reaction against immigrants and multiculturalism. Others see it mainly in economic terms, as a protest against job losses brought about by global trade and new technologies.

But it is a mistake to see only the bigotry in populist protest, or to view it only as an economic complaint. Like the triumph of Brexit in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 was an angry verdict on decades of rising inequality and a version of globalization that benefits those at the top but leaves ordinary citizens feeling disempowered. It was also a rebuke for a technocratic approach to politics that is tone-deaf to the resentments of people who feel the economy and the culture have left them behind.

The hard reality is that Trump was elected by tapping a wellspring of anxieties, frustrations, and legitimate grievances to which the mainstream

parties had no compelling answer. A similar predicament afflicts European democracies. Before they can hope to win back public support, these parties must rethink their mission and purpose. To do so, they should learn from the populist protest that has displaced them—not by replicating its xenophobia and strident nationalism, but by taking seriously the legitimate grievances with which these ugly sentiments are entangled.

Such thinking should begin with the recognition that these grievances are not only economic but also moral and cultural; they are not only about wages and jobs but also about social esteem.

The mainstream parties and governing elites who find themselves the target of populist protest struggle to make sense of it. They typically diagnose the discontent in one of two ways: As animus against immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities or as anxiety in the face of globalization and technological change. Both diagnoses miss something important.

DIAGNOSING POPULIST DISCONTENT

The first diagnosis sees populist anger against elites mainly as a backlash against growing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. Accustomed to dominating the social hierarchy, the white male working-class voters who supported Trump feel threatened by the prospect of becoming a minority within “their” country, “strangers in their own land.” They feel that they, more than women or racial minorities, are the victims of discrimination; and they feel oppressed by the demands of “politically correct” public discourse. This diagnosis of injured social status highlights the ugly features of populist sentiment—the nativism, misogyny, and racism voiced by Trump and other nationalistic populists.

The second diagnosis attributes working-class resentment to bewilderment and dislocation wrought by the rapid pace of change in an age of globalization and technology. In the new economic order, the notion of work tied to a lifelong career is over; what matters now are innovation, flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and a constant willingness to learn new skills. But, according to this account, many workers bridle at the demand to reinvent themselves as the jobs they once held are outsourced to low-wage countries or assigned to robots. They hanker, as if nostalgically, for the stable communities and careers of the past. Feeling dislocated in the face of the inexorable forces of globalization and technology, such workers lash out against immigrants, free trade, and governing elites. But their fury is

misdirected, for they fail to realize that they are railing against forces as unalterable as the weather. Their anxieties are best addressed by job-training programs and other measures to help them adapt to the imperatives of global and technological change.

Each of these diagnoses contains an element of truth. But neither gives populism its due. Construing populist protest as either malevolent or misdirected absolves governing elites of responsibility for creating the conditions that have eroded the dignity of work and left many feeling disrespected and disempowered. The diminished economic and cultural status of working people in recent decades is not the result of inexorable forces; it is the result of the way mainstream political parties and elites have governed.

Those elites are now alarmed, and rightly so, at the threat to democratic norms posed by Trump and other populist-backed autocrats. But they fail to acknowledge their role in prompting the resentment that led to the populist backlash. They do not see that the upheavals we are witnessing are a political response to a political failure of historic proportions.

TECHNOCRACY AND MARKET-FRIENDLY GLOBALIZATION

At the heart of this failure is the way mainstream parties conceived and carried out the project of globalization over the past four decades. Two aspects of this project gave rise to the conditions that fuel populist protest. One is its technocratic way of conceiving the public good; the other is its meritocratic way of defining winners and losers.

The technocratic conception of politics is bound up with a faith in markets—not necessarily unfettered, laissez-faire capitalism, but the broader belief that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving the public good. This way of thinking about politics is technocratic in the sense that it drains public discourse of substantive moral argument and treats ideologically contestable questions as if they were matters of economic efficiency, the province of experts.

It is not difficult to see how the technocratic faith in markets set the stage for populist discontent. The market-driven version of globalization brought growing inequality. It also devalued national identities and allegiances. As goods and capital flowed freely across national borders, those who stood astride the global economy valorized cosmopolitan identities as a progressive, enlightened alternative to the narrow, parochial ways of

protectionism, tribalism, and conflict. The real political divide, they argued, was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. This implied that critics of outsourcing, free-trade agreements, and unrestricted capital flows were closed-minded rather than open-minded, tribal rather than global. ¹

Meanwhile, the technocratic approach to governance treated many public questions as matters of technical expertise beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. This narrowed the scope of democratic argument, hollowed out the terms of public discourse, and produced a growing sense of disempowerment.

The market-friendly, technocratic conception of globalization was embraced by mainstream parties of the left and the right. But it was the embrace of market thinking and market values by center-left parties that proved most consequential—for the globalization project itself and for the populist protest that followed. By the time of Trump's election, the Democratic Party had become a party of technocratic liberalism more congenial to the professional classes than to the blue-collar and middle-class voters who once constituted its base. The same was true of Britain's Labour Party at the time of Brexit, and the social democratic parties of Europe.

This transformation had its origins in the 1980s. ² Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher had argued that government was the problem and that markets were the solution. When they passed from the political scene, the center-left politicians who succeeded them—Bill Clinton in the U.S., Tony Blair in Britain, Gerhard Schröder in Germany—moderated but consolidated the market faith. They softened the harsh edges of unfettered markets but did not challenge the central premise of the Reagan-Thatcher era—that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving the public good. In line with this faith, they embraced a market-friendly version of globalization and welcomed the growing financialization of the economy.

In the 1990s, the Clinton administration joined with Republicans in promoting global trade agreements and deregulating the financial industry. The benefits of these policies flowed mostly to those at the top, but Democrats did little to address the deepening inequality and the growing power of money in politics. Having strayed from its traditional mission of taming capitalism and holding economic power to democratic account, liberalism lost its capacity to inspire.

All that seemed to change when Barack Obama appeared on the political scene. In his 2008 presidential campaign, he offered a stirring alternative to the managerial, technocratic language that had come to characterize liberal public discourse. He showed that progressive politics could speak a language of moral and spiritual purpose.

But the moral energy and civic idealism he inspired as a candidate did not carry over into his presidency. Assuming office in the midst of the financial crisis, he appointed economic advisors who had promoted financial deregulation during the Clinton years. With their encouragement, he bailed out the banks on terms that did not hold them to account for the behavior that led to the crisis and offered little help for those who had lost their homes.

His moral voice muted, Obama placated rather than articulated the seething public anger toward Wall Street. Lingering anger over the bailout cast a shadow over the Obama presidency and ultimately fueled a mood of populist protest that reached across the political spectrum—on the left, the Occupy movement and the candidacy of Bernie Sanders; on the right, the Tea Party movement and the election of Trump.

The populist uprising in the United States, Great Britain, and Europe is a backlash directed generally against elites, but its most conspicuous casualties have been liberal and center-left political parties—the Democratic Party in the U.S., the Labour Party in Britain, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Germany (whose share of the vote reached a historic low in the 2017 federal election), Italy's Democratic Party (whose vote share dropped to less than 20 percent), and the Socialist Party in France (whose presidential nominee won only 6 percent of the vote in the first round of the 2017 election).

Before they can hope to win back public support, these parties need to reconsider their market-oriented, technocratic approach to governing. They need also to rethink something subtler but no less consequential—the attitudes toward success and failure that have accompanied the growing inequality of recent decades. They need to ask why those who have not flourished in the new economy feel that the winners look down with disdain.

THE RHETORIC OF RISING

What, then, has incited the resentment against elites felt by many working-class and middle-class voters? The answer begins with the rising inequality of recent decades but does not end there. It has ultimately to do with the changing terms of social recognition and esteem.

The age of globalization has bestowed its rewards unevenly, to say the least. In the United States, most of the nation's income gains since the late 1970s have gone to the top 10 percent, while the bottom half received virtually none. In real terms, the median income for working-age men, about \$36,000, is less than it was four decades ago. Today, the richest 1 percent of Americans make more than the bottom half combined. ³

But even this explosion of inequality is not the primary source of populist anger. Americans have long tolerated inequalities of income and wealth, believing that, whatever one's starting point in life, it is possible to rise from rags to riches. This faith in the possibility of upward mobility is at the heart of the American dream.

In line with this faith, mainstream parties and politicians have responded to growing inequality by calling for greater equality of opportunity — retraining workers whose jobs have disappeared due to globalization and technology; improving access to higher education; and removing barriers of race, ethnicity, and gender. This rhetoric of opportunity is summed up in the slogan that those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to rise “as far as their talents will take them.”

In recent years, politicians of both parties have reiterated this slogan to the point of incantation. Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Marco Rubio among Republicans, and Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton among Democrats, all invoked it. Obama was fond of a variation of this theme, drawn from a pop song: “You can make it if you try.” During his presidency, he used this line in speeches and public statements more than 140 times. ⁴

But the rhetoric of rising now rings hollow. In today's economy, it is not easy to rise. Americans born to poor parents tend to stay poor as adults. Of those born in the bottom fifth of the income scale, only about one in twenty will make it to the top fifth; most will not even rise to the middle class. ⁵ It is easier to rise from poverty in Canada or Germany, Denmark, and other European countries than it is in the United States. ⁶

This is at odds with the long-standing faith that mobility is America's answer to inequality. The United States, we tell ourselves, can afford to worry less about inequality than the class-bound societies of Europe because here, it is possible to rise. Seventy percent of Americans believe the poor can make it out of poverty on their own, while only 35 percent of Europeans think so. This faith in mobility may explain why the U.S. has a less-generous welfare state than most major European countries. ⁷

But today, the countries with the highest mobility tend to be those with the greatest equality. The ability to rise, it seems, depends less on the spur of poverty than on access to education, health care, and other resources that equip people to succeed in the world of work.

The explosion of inequality in recent decades has not quickened upward mobility but, to the contrary, has enabled those on top to consolidate their advantages and pass them on to their children. Over the past half century, elite colleges and universities dismantled barriers of race, religion, gender, and ethnicity that once restricted admission to the sons of the privileged. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was born of the promise to admit students based on academic merit rather than class and family pedigree. But today's meritocracy has hardened into a hereditary aristocracy.

Two-thirds of the students at Harvard and Stanford come from the top fifth of the income scale. Despite generous financial aid policies, fewer than 4 percent of Ivy League students come from the bottom fifth. At Harvard and other Ivy League colleges, there are more students from families in the top *1 percent* (income of more than \$630,000 per year) than there are students from all the families in the bottom half of the income distribution combined. ⁸

The American faith that, with hard work and talent, anyone can rise no longer fits the facts on the ground. This may explain why the rhetoric of opportunity fails to inspire as it once did. Mobility can no longer compensate for inequality. Any serious response to the gap between rich and poor must reckon directly with inequalities of power and wealth, rather than rest content with the project of helping people scramble up a ladder whose rungs grow farther and farther apart.

THE MERITOCRATIC ETHIC

The problem with meritocracy is not only that the practice falls short of the ideal. If that were the problem, the solution would consist in perfecting equality of opportunity, in seeking a society in which people could, whatever their starting point in life, truly rise as far as their efforts and talents would take them. But it is doubtful that even a perfect meritocracy would be satisfying, either morally or politically.

Morally, it is unclear why the talented deserve the outsized rewards that market-driven societies lavish on the successful. Central to the case for the meritocratic ethic is the idea that we do not deserve to be rewarded, or held back, based on factors beyond our control. But is having (or lacking) certain talents really our own doing? If not, it is hard to see why those who rise thanks to their talents deserve greater rewards than those who may be equally hardworking but less endowed with the gifts a market society happens to prize.

Those who celebrate the meritocratic ideal and make it the center of their political project overlook this moral question. They also ignore something more politically potent: the morally unattractive attitudes the meritocratic ethic promotes, among the winners and also among the losers. Among the winners, it generates hubris; among the losers, humiliation and resentment. These moral sentiments are at the heart of the populist uprising against elites. More than a protest against immigrants and outsourcing, the populist complaint is about the tyranny of merit. And the complaint is justified.

The relentless emphasis on creating a fair meritocracy, in which social positions reflect effort and talent, has a corrosive effect on the way we interpret our success (or the lack of it). The notion that the system rewards talent and hard work encourages the winners to consider their success their own doing, a measure of their virtue—and to look down upon those less fortunate than themselves.

Meritocratic hubris reflects the tendency of winners to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way. It is the smug conviction of those who land on top that they deserve their fate, and that those on the bottom deserve theirs, too. This attitude is the moral companion of technocratic politics.

A lively sense of the contingency of our lot conduces to a certain humility: “There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of fortune, go I.” But a perfect meritocracy banishes all sense of gift or grace. It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room

for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule.

THE POLITICS OF HUMILIATION

Seen from below, the hubris of elites is galling. No one likes to be looked down upon. But the meritocratic faith adds insult to injury. The notion that your fate is in your hands, that “you can make it if you try,” is a double-edged sword, inspiring in one way but invidious in another. It congratulates the winners but denigrates the losers, even in their own eyes. For those who can’t find work or make ends meet, it is hard to escape the demoralizing thought that their failure is their own doing, that they simply lack the talent and drive to succeed.

The politics of humiliation differs in this respect from the politics of injustice. Protest against injustice looks outward; it complains that the system is rigged, that the winners have cheated or manipulated their way to the top. Protest against humiliation is psychologically more freighted. It combines resentment of the winners with nagging self-doubt: perhaps the rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor; maybe the losers are complicit in their misfortune after all.

This feature of the politics of humiliation makes it more combustible than other political sentiments. It is a potent ingredient in the volatile brew of anger and resentment that fuels populist protest. Though himself a billionaire, Donald Trump understood and exploited this resentment. Unlike Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, who spoke constantly of “opportunity,” Trump scarcely mentioned the word. Instead, he offered blunt talk of winners and losers. (Interestingly, Bernie Sanders, a social democratic populist, also rarely speaks of opportunity and mobility, focusing instead on inequalities of power and wealth.)

Elites have so valorized a college degree—both as an avenue for advancement and as the basis for social esteem—that they have difficulty understanding the hubris a meritocracy can generate, and the harsh judgment it imposes on those who have not gone to college. Such attitudes are at the heart of the populist backlash and Trump’s victory.

One of the deepest political divides in American politics today is between those with and those without a college degree. In the 2016 election, Trump won two-thirds of white voters without a college degree, while Hillary

Clinton won decisively among voters with advanced degrees. A similar divide appeared in Britain's Brexit referendum. Voters with no college education voted overwhelming for Brexit, while the vast majority of those with a postgraduate degree voted to remain. [9](#)

Reflecting on her presidential campaign a year and a half later, Hillary Clinton displayed the meritocratic hubris that contributed to her defeat. "I won the places that represent two-thirds of America's gross domestic product," she told a conference in Mumbai, India, in 2018. "So I won the places that are optimistic, diverse, dynamic, moving forward." By contrast, Trump drew his support from those who "didn't like black people getting rights" and "didn't like women ... getting jobs." She had won the votes of the winners of globalization, while Trump had won among the losers. [10](#)

The Democratic Party had once stood for farmers and working people against the privileged. Now, in a meritocratic age, its defeated standard bearer boasted that the prosperous, enlightened parts of the country had voted for her.

Donald Trump was keenly alive to the politics of humiliation. From the standpoint of economic fairness, his populism was fake, a kind of plutocratic populism. He proposed a health plan that would have cut health care for many of his working-class supporters and enacted a tax bill that heaped tax cuts on the wealthy. But to focus solely on the hypocrisy misses the point.

When he withdrew the United States from the Paris climate change agreement, Trump argued, implausibly, that he was doing so to protect American jobs. But the real point of his decision, its political rationale, was contained in this seemingly stray remark: "At what point does America get demeaned? At what point do they start laughing at us as a country? ... We don't want other leaders and other countries laughing at us anymore." [11](#)

Liberating the United States from the supposed burdens of the climate change agreement was not really about jobs or about global warming. It was, in Trump's political imagination, about averting humiliation. This resonated with Trump voters, even those who cared about climate change.

TECHNOCRATIC MERIT AND MORAL JUDGMENT

Taken by itself, the notion that the meritorious should govern is not distinctive to our time. In ancient China, Confucius taught that those who

excelled in virtue and ability should govern. In ancient Greece, Plato imagined a society led by a philosopher-king supported by a public-spirited class of guardians. Aristotle rejected Plato's philosopher-king, but he, too, argued that the meritorious should have the greatest influence in public affairs. For him the merit relevant to governing was not wealth or noble birth, but excellence in civic virtue and *phronesis*, the practical wisdom to reason well about the common good. [12](#)

The founders of the American republic called themselves "Men of Merit," and hoped virtuous, knowledgeable people like themselves would be elected to office. They opposed hereditary aristocracy, but were not keen on direct democracy, which they feared could bring demagogues to power. They sought to design institutions, such as the indirect election of the U.S. Senate and the president, that would enable the meritorious to govern. Thomas Jefferson favored a "natural aristocracy" based on "virtue and talents" rather than an "artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth." "That form of government is the best," he wrote, which provides "for a pure selection of these natural aristoi into the offices of government." [13](#)

Despite their differences, these traditional versions of political meritocracy—from the Confucian to the Platonic to the republican—share the notion that the merits relevant to governing include moral and civic virtue. This is because all agree that the common good consists, at least in part, in the moral education of citizens.

Our technocratic version of meritocracy severs the link between merit and moral judgment. In the domain of the economy, it simply assumes that the common good is defined by GDP, and that the value of people's contributions consists in the market value of the goods or services they sell. In the domain of government, it assumes that merit means technocratic expertise.

This can be seen in the growing role of economists as policy advisors, the increasing reliance on market mechanisms to define and achieve the public good, and the failure of public discourse to address the large moral and civic questions that should be at the center of political debate: What should we do about rising inequality? What is the moral significance of national borders? What makes for the dignity of work? What do we owe one another as citizens?

This morally blinkered way of conceiving merit and the public good has weakened democratic societies in several ways. The first is the most

obvious: Over the past four decades, meritocratic elites have not governed very well. The elites who governed the United States from 1940 to 1980 were far more successful. They won World War II, helped rebuild Europe and Japan, strengthened the welfare state, dismantled segregation, and presided over four decades of economic growth that flowed to rich and poor alike. By contrast, the elites who have governed since have brought us four decades of stagnant wages for most workers, inequalities of income and wealth not seen since the 1920s, the Iraq War, a nineteen-year, inconclusive war in Afghanistan, financial deregulation, the financial crisis of 2008, a decaying infrastructure, the highest incarceration rate in the world, and a system of campaign finance and gerrymandered congressional districts that makes a mockery of democracy.

Not only has technocratic merit failed as a mode of governance; it has also narrowed the civic project. Today, the common good is understood mainly in economic terms. It is less about cultivating solidarity or deepening the bonds of citizenship than about satisfying consumer preferences as measured by the gross domestic product. This makes for an impoverished public discourse.

What passes for political argument these days consists either of narrow, managerial, technocratic talk, which inspires no one; or else shouting matches, in which partisans talk past one another, without really listening. Citizens across the political spectrum find this empty public discourse frustrating and disempowering. They rightly sense that the absence of robust public debate does not mean that no policies are being decided. It simply means they are being decided elsewhere, out of public view—by administrative agencies (often captured by the industries they regulate), by central banks and bond markets, by corporate lobbyists whose campaign contributions buy influence with public officials.

But that's not all. Beyond hollowing out public discourse, the reign of technocratic merit has reconfigured the terms of social recognition in ways that elevate the prestige of the credentialed, professional classes and depreciate the contributions of most workers, eroding their social standing and esteem. It is this aspect of technocratic merit that contributes most directly to the angry, polarized politics of our time.

THE POPULIST UPRISING

Six decades ago, a British sociologist named Michael Young anticipated the hubris and resentment to which meritocracy gives rise. In fact, it was he who coined the term. In a book called *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), he asked what would happen if, one day, class barriers were overcome, so that everyone had a truly equal opportunity to rise based solely on his or her own merit. [14](#)

In one respect, this would be something to celebrate; the children of the working class would at last compete fairly, side by side with the children of the privileged. But it would not, Young thought, be an unmitigated triumph; for it was bound to foster hubris in the winners and humiliation among the losers. The winners would consider their success a “just reward for their own capacity, for their own efforts, for their own undeniable achievement,” and would therefore look down on those less successful than themselves. Those who failed to rise would feel they had no one to blame but themselves. [15](#)

For Young, meritocracy was not an ideal to aim at but a recipe for social discord. He glimpsed, decades ago, the harsh meritocratic logic that now poisons our politics and animates populist anger. For those who feel aggrieved by the tyranny of merit, the problem is not only stagnant wages but also the loss of social esteem.

The loss of jobs to technology and outsourcing has coincided with a sense that society accords less respect to the kind of work the working class does. As economic activity has shifted from making things to managing money, as society has lavished outsize rewards on hedge fund managers, Wall Street bankers, and the professional classes, the esteem accorded work in the traditional sense has become fragile and uncertain.

Mainstream parties and elites miss this dimension of politics. They think the problem with market-driven globalization is simply a matter of distributive justice; those who have gained from global trade, new technologies, and the financialization of the economy have not adequately compensated those who have lost out.

But this misunderstands the populist complaint. It also reflects a defect in the technocratic approach to governing. Conducting our public discourse as if it were possible to outsource moral and political judgment to markets, or to experts and technocrats, has emptied democratic argument of meaning and purpose. Such vacuums of public meaning are invariably filled by

harsh, authoritarian forms of identity and belonging—whether in the form of religious fundamentalism or strident nationalism.

That is what we are witnessing today. Four decades of market-driven globalization have hollowed out public discourse, disempowered ordinary citizens, and prompted a populist backlash that seeks to clothe the naked public square with an intolerant, vengeful nationalism.

To reinvigorate democratic politics, we need to find our way to a morally more robust public discourse, one that takes seriously the corrosive effect of meritocratic striving on the social bonds that constitute our common life.



“Great Because Good”:

A BRIEF MORAL HISTORY OF MERIT

There is nothing wrong with hiring people based on merit. In fact, it is generally the right thing to do. If I need a plumber to fix my toilet or a dentist to repair my tooth, I try to find the best person for the job. Well, maybe not the best; I do not conduct a global search. But I certainly want someone well qualified.

In filling jobs, merit matters, for at least two reasons. One is efficiency. I will be better off if my plumber or dentist is capable rather than incompetent. The other is fairness. It would be wrong to discriminate against the most qualified applicant out of racial or religious or sexist prejudice and hire a less-qualified person instead. Even if, for the sake of indulging my prejudice, I were willing to accept a shoddy plumbing repair or root canal, the discrimination would still be unfair. The more qualified candidates could rightly complain that they were victims of injustice.

If hiring based on merit is a good and sensible practice, what possibly could be wrong with a meritocracy? How can so benign a principle as merit fuel a torrent of resentment so potent as to transform the politics of democratic societies around the world? When exactly did merit turn toxic, and how?

WHY MERIT MATTERS

The idea that society should allocate economic rewards and positions of responsibility according to merit is appealing for several reasons. Two of these reasons are generalized versions of the case for merit in hiring—efficiency and fairness. An economic system that rewards effort, initiative, and talent is likely to be more productive than one that pays everyone the same, regardless of contribution, or that hands out desirable social positions based on favoritism. Rewarding people strictly on their merits also has the virtue of fairness; it does not discriminate on any basis other than achievement.

A society that rewards merit is also attractive on aspirational grounds. Not only does it promote efficiency and renounce discrimination; it also affirms a certain idea of freedom. This is the idea that our destiny is in our hands, that our success does not depend on forces beyond our control, that it's up to us. We are not victims of circumstance but masters of our fate, free to rise as far as our effort and talents and dreams will take us.

This is an exhilarating vision of human agency, and it goes hand in hand with a morally comforting conclusion: We get what we deserve. If my success is my own doing, something I've earned through talent and hard work, I can take pride in it, confident that I deserve the rewards my achievements bring. A meritocratic society, then, is doubly inspiring: it affirms a powerful notion of freedom, and it gives people what they have earned for themselves and therefore deserve.

Inspiring though it is, the principle of merit can take a tyrannical turn, not only when societies fail to live up to it, but also—indeed especially—when they do. The dark side of the meritocratic ideal is embedded in its most alluring promise, the promise of mastery and self-making. This promise comes with a burden that is difficult to bear. The meritocratic ideal places great weight on the notion of personal responsibility. Holding people responsible for what they do is a good thing, up to a point. It respects their capacity to think and act for themselves, as moral agents and as citizens. But it is one thing to hold people responsible for acting morally; it is something else to assume that we are, each of us, wholly responsible for our lot in life.

Even the phrase “our lot in life” draws on a moral vocabulary that suggests certain limits to unbridled responsibility. To speak of one's “lot” suggests the drawing of lots, a result determined by fate, fortune, or divine providence, not our own effort. ¹ It points beyond merit and choice to the

realm of luck and chance, or on some accounts, grace. This reminds us that the most consequential early debates about merit were not about income and jobs but about God's favor: Is it something we earn or receive as a gift?

A COSMIC MERITOCRACY

The notion that our fate reflects our merit runs deep in the moral intuitions of Western culture. Biblical theology teaches that natural events happen for a reason. Favorable weather and a bountiful harvest are divine rewards for good behavior; drought and pestilence are punishments for sin. When a ship encounters stormy seas, people ask who on the crew has angered God. ²

From the distance of our scientific age, this way of thinking may seem innocent, even childlike. But it is not as distant as it first appears. In fact, this outlook is the origin of meritocratic thinking. It reflects the belief that the moral universe is arranged in a way that aligns prosperity with merit and suffering with wrongdoing. This is not far from the familiar contemporary view that wealth signifies talent and hard work and that poverty signifies indolence.

Two features of the biblical outlook offer an intimation of contemporary meritocracy. One is its emphasis on human agency; the other is its harshness toward those who suffer misfortune. It might seem that contemporary meritocracy emphasizes human agency and will, while the biblical version attributes all power to God. It is he, after all, who doles out the punishments and rewards—the floods, the droughts, the crop-saving rains.

But in fact, this is a highly anthropocentric picture, in which God spends most of his time responding to the promptings of human beings—rewarding their goodness, punishing their sins. God becomes, paradoxically, beholden to us, compelled, insofar as he is just, to give us the treatment we have earned. Although God is the one who bestows the rewards and punishments, he does so according to people's merits, not arbitrarily. So even in the presence of God, humans are seen to earn and therefore to deserve their fate.

Second, this meritocratic way of thinking gives rise to harsh attitudes toward those who suffer misfortune. The more acute the suffering, the greater the suspicion that the victim has brought it on himself. Recall the book of Job. A just and righteous man, Job is subjected to unspeakable pain

and suffering, including the death of his sons and daughters in a storm. Ever faithful to God, Job cannot fathom why such suffering has been visited upon him. (He does not realize that he is the victim of a cosmic wager, in which God seeks to prove to Satan that Job's faith will not waver, whatever hardship he encounters.)

As Job mourns the loss of his family, his friends (if one can call them friends) insist that he must have committed some egregious sin, and they press Job to imagine what that sin might be. ³ This is an early example of the tyranny of merit. Armed with the assumption that suffering signifies sin, Job's friends cruelly compound his pain by claiming that, in virtue of some transgression or other, Job must be to blame for the death of his sons and daughters. Although he knows he is innocent, Job shares his companions' theology of merit, and so cries out to God asking why he, a righteous man, is being made to suffer.

When God finally speaks to Job, he rejects the cruel logic of blaming the victim. He does so by renouncing the meritocratic assumption that Job and his companions share. Not everything that happens is a reward or a punishment for human behavior, God proclaims from the whirlwind. All rain is not for the sake of watering the crops of the righteous, nor is every drought for the sake of punishing the wicked. It rains, after all, in places where no one lives—in the wilderness, which is empty of human life. Creation is not only for the sake of human beings. The cosmos is bigger and God's ways more mysterious than the anthropomorphic picture suggests. ⁴

God confirms Job's righteousness but chastises him for presuming to grasp the moral logic of God's rule. This represents a radical departure from the theology of merit that informs Genesis and Exodus. ⁵ In renouncing the idea that he presides over a cosmic meritocracy, God asserts his unbounded power and teaches Job a lesson in humility. Faith in God means accepting the grandeur and mystery of creation, not expecting God to dispense rewards and punishments based on what each person merits or deserves.

SALVATION AND SELF-HELP

The question of merit reappears in Christian debates about salvation: Can the faithful earn salvation through religious observance and good works, or is God entirely free to decide whom to save, regardless of how people live their lives? ⁶ The first option seems more just, as it rewards goodness and

punishes sin. But theologically, it poses a problem, for it calls into question God's omnipotence. If salvation is something we can earn and therefore deserve, then God is bound, so to speak, to recognize our merit. Salvation becomes at least partly a matter of self-help, and this implies a limit to God's infinite power.

The second option, viewing salvation as an unearned gift, affirms God's omnipotence but in doing so raises a different problem: If God is responsible for everything in the world, then he must be responsible for the existence of evil. But if God is just, how can he allow suffering and evil he has the power to prevent? If God is all-powerful, the existence of evil seems to imply that he is unjust. Theologically, it is difficult if not impossible to hold the following three views simultaneously—that God is just, that God is omnipotent, and that evil exists. ⁷

One way of resolving this difficulty is to attribute free will to human beings. This shifts the responsibility for evil from God to us. If, in addition to laying down the law, God gave each of us the freedom to decide whether to obey or disobey it, then we are responsible if we choose to do wrong rather than right. Those who act badly will deserve whatever punishment God metes out, in this world or the next. Their suffering will not constitute an evil, but rather just punishment for their transgression. ⁸

An early proponent of this solution was a fifth-century British monk named Pelagius. Although he is not well-known, some recent commentators have argued that, as a champion of free will and individual responsibility in early Christian theology, Pelagius was a forerunner of liberalism. ⁹

In his day, however, Pelagius's solution generated fierce opposition, not least from Augustine, the most formidable Christian philosopher of the age. For Augustine, attributing free will to humans denies the omnipotence of God and undermines the significance of his ultimate gift, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. If human beings are so self-sufficient that they can earn salvation on their own, through good works and performing sacraments, then the Incarnation becomes unnecessary. Humility in the face of God's grace gives way to pride in one's own efforts. ¹⁰

Despite Augustine's insistence on salvation by grace alone, the practices of the Church brought merit back in. Rites and rituals—baptism, prayer, attending Mass, performing the sacraments—cannot persist for long without prompting a sense of efficacy among the participants. It is not easy to

sustain the belief that faithful religious observance and good works do not win God's favor or generate merit in his eyes. When faith is embodied in outward observance, mediated and reinforced by a complex array of Church practices, a theology of gratitude and grace slides, almost inevitably, toward a theology of pride and self-help. This at least is how Martin Luther viewed the Roman Church of his time, eleven centuries after Augustine had inveighed against salvation by merit.

The Protestant Reformation was born as an argument against merit. Martin Luther's case against the Catholic Church of his day was only partly about the sale of indulgences, the corrupt practice by which rich people tried to buy their way to salvation. (Strictly speaking, the payment was thought to expedite penance and shorten one's stay in purgatory.) His broader point, following Augustine, was that salvation is wholly a matter of God's grace and cannot be influenced by any effort to win God's favor, whether through good works or the performance of rites. We can no more pray our way to heaven than buy our way in. For Luther, election is a gift that is entirely unearned. Seeking to improve our chances by taking communion or attending Mass or otherwise trying to persuade God of our merit is presumptuous to the point of blasphemy. [11](#)

Luther's stringent doctrine of grace was resolutely anti-meritocratic. It rejected salvation by good works and left no room for human freedom or self-making. And yet, paradoxically, the Protestant Reformation he launched led to the fiercely meritocratic work ethic the Puritans and their successors would bring to America. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber explains how this happened. [12](#)

Like Luther, John Calvin, whose theology inspired the Puritans, held that salvation was a matter of God's grace, not determined by human merit or deservingness. Who will be saved and who damned is predestined, not subject to change based on how people live their lives. Even the sacraments cannot help. Although they must be observed to increase the glory of God, "they are not a means to the attainment of grace." [13](#)

The Calvinist doctrine of predestination created unbearable suspense. It is not hard to see why. If you believe that your place in the afterlife is more important than anything you care about in this world, you desperately want to know whether you are among the elect or the damned. But God does not announce this in advance. We cannot tell by observing people's conduct

who is chosen and who is damned. The elect are “God’s invisible Church.”
[14](#)

As Weber writes, “The question, Am I one of the elect? must sooner or later have arisen for every believer and have forced all other interests into the background. And how can I be sure of this state of grace?” The persistence and urgency of this question led Calvinists to a certain version of the work ethic. Since every person is called by God to work in a vocation, working intensely in that calling is a sign of salvation. [15](#)

The point of such work is not to enjoy the wealth it produces but to glorify God. Working for the sake of lavish consumption would be a distraction from this end, a kind of corruption. Calvinism combined strenuous work with asceticism. Weber points out that this disciplined approach to work—working hard but consuming little—yields the accumulation of wealth that fuels capitalism. Even when the original religious motivations fall away, the Protestant ethic of work and asceticism provides the cultural basis for capitalist accumulation.

But for our purposes, the significance of this drama consists in the tension that develops between merit and grace. A lifetime of disciplined work in one’s calling is not, to be sure, a route to salvation, but rather a way of knowing whether one is (already) among the elect. It is a *sign* of salvation, not its source.

But it proved difficult if not impossible to resist the slide from viewing such worldly activity as a sign of election to viewing it as a source. Psychologically, it is hard to bear the notion that God will take no notice of faithful work that increases his glory. Once I am encouraged to infer from my good works that I am among the elect, it is hard to resist the thought that my good works have somehow contributed to my election. Theologically, the notion of salvation by works, a meritocratic idea, was already present in the background—both in the Catholic emphasis on rites and sacraments and in the Jewish notion of winning God’s favor by observing the law and upholding the ethical precepts of the Sinai covenant.

As the Calvinist notion of work in a calling evolved into the Puritan work ethic, it was hard to resist its meritocratic implication—that salvation is earned, and that work is a source, not merely a sign, of salvation. “In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves,” Weber observes. “Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it.” Some

Lutherans protested that such a view amounts to a “reversion to the doctrine of salvation by works,” precisely the doctrine Luther considered an affront to God’s grace. [16](#)

The Calvinist doctrine of predestination, combined with the idea that the elect must prove their election through work in a calling, leads to the notion that worldly success is a good indication of who is destined for salvation. “For everyone without exception God’s Providence has prepared a calling, which he should profess and in which he should labour,” Weber explains. This confers divine sanction on the division of labor and supports a “providential interpretation of the economic order.” [17](#)

Proving one’s state of grace through worldly activity brings meritocracy back in. The monks of the Middle Ages constituted a kind of “spiritual aristocracy,” pursuing their ascetic calling far removed from worldly pursuits. But with Calvinism, Christian asceticism “strode into the marketplace of life” and “slammed the door of the monastery behind it.” All Christians were called to work and to prove their faith in worldly activity. “By founding its ethic in the doctrine of predestination,” Calvinism substituted for “the spiritual aristocracy of monks outside of and above the world the spiritual aristocracy of the predestined saints of God within the world.” [18](#)

Confident of their election, this spiritual aristocracy of the elect looked down with disdain on those apparently destined for damnation. Here Weber glimpses what I would call an early version of meritocratic hubris. “The consciousness of divine grace of the elect and holy was accompanied by an attitude toward the sin of one’s neighbor, not of sympathetic understanding based on consciousness of one’s own weakness, but of hatred and contempt for him as an enemy of God bearing the signs of eternal damnation.” [19](#)

The Protestant work ethic, then, not only gives rise to the spirit of capitalism. It also promotes an ethic of self-help and of responsibility for one’s fate congenial to meritocratic ways of thinking. This ethic unleashes a torrent of anxious, energetic striving that generates great wealth but at the same time reveals the dark side of responsibility and self-making. The humility prompted by helplessness in the face of grace gives way to the hubris prompted by belief in one’s own merit.

For Luther, Calvin, and the Puritans, debates about merit were about salvation—do the chosen earn and therefore deserve their election, or is salvation a gift of grace beyond our control? For us, debates about merit are about worldly success—do the successful earn and therefore deserve their success, or is prosperity due to factors beyond our control?

At first glance, these two debates seem to have little in common. One is religious, the other secular. But on closer inspection, the meritocracy of our day bears the mark of the theological contest from which it emerged. The Protestant work ethic began as a tense dialectic of grace and merit, helplessness and self-help. In the end, merit drove out grace. The ethic of mastery and self-making overwhelmed the ethic of gratitude and humility. Working and striving became imperatives of their own, detached from Calvinist notions of predestination and the anxious search for a sign of salvation.

It is tempting to attribute the triumph of mastery and merit to the secular bent of our time. As faith in God recedes, confidence in human agency gathers force; the more we conceive ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the less reason we have to feel indebted or grateful for our success.

But even today, our attitudes toward success are not as independent of providential faith as we sometimes think. The notion that we are free human agents, capable of rising and succeeding by our own effort, is only one aspect of meritocracy. Equally important is the conviction that those who succeed deserve their success. This triumphalist aspect of meritocracy generates hubris among the winners and humiliation among the losers. It reflects a residual providential faith that persists in the moral vocabulary of otherwise secular societies.

“The fortunate [person] is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate,” Max Weber observed. “Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a *right* to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he ‘deserves’ it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate also merely experience [their] due.” [20](#)

The tyranny of merit arises, at least in part, from this impulse. Today’s secular meritocratic order moralizes success in ways that echo an earlier providential faith: Although the successful do not owe their power and wealth to divine intervention—they rise thanks to their own effort and hard

work—their success reflects their superior virtue. The rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor.

This triumphalist aspect of meritocracy is a kind of providentialism without God, at least without a God who intervenes in human affairs. The successful make it on their own, but their success attests to their virtue. This way of thinking heightens the moral stakes of economic competition. It sanctifies the winners and denigrates the losers.

The cultural historian Jackson Lears explains how providentialist thinking persisted even as Calvinist notions of predestination and innate human sinfulness fell away. For Calvin and the Puritans, “everyone was equally base in the sight of God.” Since no one was deserving, salvation had to depend on God’s grace. [21](#)

But when liberalizing theologians began to emphasize human beings’ ability to save themselves, success began to signify a convergence of personal merit and providential plan. Gradually and haltingly but unmistakably, the Protestant belief in Providence ... became a way of providing spiritual sanctions for the economic status quo ... Providence implicitly underwrote inequalities of wealth. [22](#)

Lears sees in American public culture an uneven contest between an ethic of fortune and a more muscular ethic of mastery. The ethic of fortune appreciates the dimensions of life that exceed human understanding and control. It sees that the cosmos does not necessarily match merit with reward. It leaves room for mystery, tragedy, and humility. It is the sensibility of Ecclesiastes: “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.” [23](#)

The ethic of mastery, by contrast, puts “human choice at the center of the spiritual order.” [24](#) This does not imply a renunciation of God but a recasting of his providential role. Lears shows that the ethic of mastery and control emerges from within evangelical Protestantism, and eventually predominates. It brings a shift from “a covenant of grace to what Luther had reviled, a covenant of works.” By the mid-eighteenth century, “the works in

question were not sacred rituals (as in traditional Catholicism), but secular moral strivings.” ²⁵ But those secular strivings still derived their virtue from a providential plan.

Providence still governed all, according to Protestant belief ... But human beings could freely choose to participate in the unfolding of God’s plan, could somehow align themselves with God’s purpose. Evangelical rationality balanced belief in an overarching providence with an unprecedented celebration of human effort. ²⁶

Combining human striving with providential sanction creates rocket fuel for meritocracy. It banishes the ethic of fortune and promises to align worldly success with moral deservingness. Lears sees this as a moral loss. “A culture less intent on the individual’s responsibility to master destiny might be more capacious, more generous, more gracious.” A keener awareness of the unpredictable character of fortune and fate “might encourage fortunate people to imagine their own misfortune and transcend the arrogance of the meritocratic myth—to acknowledge how fitfully and unpredictably people get what they deserve.” ²⁷

Lears assesses the moral and civic damage in stark terms:

The culture of control continues to sustain the smug, secular version of Christian providentialism that has framed American morality for two centuries, though the favored idiom is now technocratic rather than religious. The hubris of the providential view lies in its tendency to sanctify the secular; in its glib assurance not merely that we are all part of a divine—or “evolutionary”—plan, but also that we can actually see that plan at work in prevailing social and economic arrangements, even in the outcome of global power struggles. ²⁸

The providentialist notion that people get what they deserve reverberates in contemporary public discourse. It comes in two versions—one hubristic, the other punitive. Both versions assert a demanding notion of responsibility for our fate, be it prosperous or calamitous. The financial crisis of 2008 produced a notable example of providential hubris. Risky and greedy behavior by Wall Street banks had brought the global economy to the brink

of meltdown, requiring a massive taxpayer bailout. Even as homeowners and Main Street businesses struggled to recover, leading Wall Street bankers were soon paying themselves tens of billions of dollars in bonuses. Asked how he could defend such lavish pay in the face of public outrage, Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, replied that he and his fellow bankers were “doing God’s work.” [29](#)

The punitive version of providentialism has recently been voiced by some Christian conservatives in the aftermath of deadly hurricanes and other disasters. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans in 2005, Reverend Franklin Graham declared that the storm was divine retribution for a “wicked city” known for Mardi Gras, “sex perversion,” orgies, and other sinful activities. [30](#) When an earthquake claimed more than 200,000 lives in Haiti in 2009, the televangelist Pat Robertson attributed the disaster to a pact with the devil that Haitian slaves allegedly made when they rebelled against France in 1804. [31](#)

Days after the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City, Reverend Jerry Falwell, appearing on Robertson’s Christian television program, interpreted the attack as divine retribution for America’s sins:

The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union] ... all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen.” [32](#)

Explaining epic disasters as divine punishment is not exclusive to Christian providentialism. When a devastating earthquake and tsunami struck Japan in 2011, triggering a meltdown at nuclear power plants, Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, an outspoken nationalist, described the event as divine retribution (*tenbatsu*) for Japan’s materialism. “We need a tsunami to wipe out egoism, which has rusted onto the mentality of Japanese over a long period of time,” he said. [33](#)

HEALTH AND WEALTH

In recent decades, American Christianity has produced a buoyant new variant of providentialist faith called the prosperity gospel. Led by televangelists and preachers in some of the country's biggest megachurches, it teaches that God rewards faith with wealth and health. Far from conceiving grace as a mysterious, unearned gift of God, the prosperity gospel emphasizes human agency and will. E. W. Kenyon, an early-twentieth-century evangelist who laid the groundwork for the movement, urged Christians to proclaim: "God's ability is mine. God's strength is mine. His success is mine. I am a winner. I am a conqueror." [34](#)

Kate Bowler, a historian of the prosperity gospel, writes that its teaching is summarized in the phrase "I am blessed," where the evidence of being blessed is being healthy and wealthy. [35](#) Joel Osteen, a celebrity prosperity evangelist whose Houston church is the largest in America, told Oprah Winfrey that "Jesus died that we might live an abundant life." [36](#) His bestselling book offers examples of the blessings that flow from faith, including the mansion in which he lives and the time he was upgraded to business class on a flight. [37](#)

It might seem that a gospel of blessedness would prompt humility in the face of good fortune, rather than the meritocratic conviction that health and wealth are signs of virtue. But as Bowler observes, "blessed" is a term that blurs the distinction between gift and reward.

It can be a term of pure gratitude. "Thank you, God. I could not have secured this for myself." But it can also imply that it was deserved. "Thank you, me. For being the kind of person who gets it right." It is a perfect word for an American society that says it believes the American dream is based on hard work, not luck. [38](#)

Although about one million Americans attend megachurches that preach the prosperity gospel, its resonance with the American faith in striving and self-help give it a broader influence. A *Time* magazine poll found that nearly a third of American Christians agree that "if you give your money to God, God will bless you with more money," and 61 percent believe that "God wants people to be prosperous." [39](#)

By the early twenty-first century, the prosperity gospel, with its appeal to hard work, upward mobility, and positive thinking, was hard to distinguish from the American dream itself. “The prosperity movement did not simply give Americans a gospel worthy of a nation of self-made men,” Bowler writes. “It affirmed the basic economic structures on which individual enterprise stood.” And it reinforced the belief that prosperity is a sign of virtue. Like earlier success gospels, it trusted the market “to mete out rewards and punishment in fortune or failure. The virtuous would be richly compensated while the wicked would eventually stumble.” [40](#)

Part of the appeal of the prosperity gospel is its emphasis “on the individual’s responsibility for his or her own fate.” [41](#) This is a heady, empowering notion. Theologically, it asserts that salvation is an achievement, something we earn. In worldly terms, it gives people confidence that, with sufficient effort and faith, they can achieve health and wealth. It is relentlessly meritocratic. As with all meritocratic ethics, its exalted conception of individual responsibility is gratifying when things go well but demoralizing, even punitive, when things go badly.

Consider health. What could be more empowering than the belief that our health is in our hands, that the sick can be healed through prayer, that illness can be averted by living well and loving God? But this hyper-agency has a dark side. Illness, when it comes, is not merely a misfortune but a verdict on our virtue. Even death adds insult to injury. “If a believer gets sick and dies,” Bowler writes, “shame compounds the grief. Those who are loved and lost are just that—those who have lost the test of faith.” [42](#)

The harsh face of prosperity gospel thinking can be seen in the debate about health care. [43](#) When Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress attempted to repeal and replace Obamacare, most argued that their market-friendly alternative would increase competition and reduce costs, while protecting people with pre-existing conditions. But Mo Brooks, a conservative Republican congressman from Alabama, made a different argument. He acknowledged that the Republican plan would require those with greater health needs to pay more. But this was a virtue, not a vice, because it would reward those who led good lives. Allowing insurance companies to charge higher premiums to those with higher health care costs was not only cost-effective but morally justified. Higher premiums for the sick would reduce the cost “to those people who lead good lives, they’re

healthy, they've done the things to keep their bodies healthy. And right now, those are the people—who've done things the right way—that are seeing their costs skyrocketing.” [44](#)

The congressman's case against Obamacare reiterates the harsh meritocratic logic that runs from the Puritans to the prosperity gospel: If prosperity is a sign of salvation, suffering is a sign of sin. This logic is not necessarily tied to religious assumptions. It is a feature of any ethic that conceives human freedom as the unfettered exercise of will and attributes to human beings a thoroughgoing responsibility for their fate.

In 2009, as Obamacare was first being debated, John Mackey, the founder of Whole Foods, wrote an op-ed in *The Wall Street Journal* arguing against a right to health care. His argument relied on libertarian not religious assumptions. And yet, like preachers of the prosperity gospel, he asserted a strenuous notion of individual responsibility, arguing that good health is mainly our own doing.

Many of our health-care problems are self-inflicted: two-thirds of Americans are now overweight and one-third are obese. Most of the diseases that kill us and account for about 70% of all health-care spending—heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and obesity—are mostly preventable through proper diet, exercise, not smoking, minimal alcohol consumption and other healthy lifestyle choices. [45](#)

Many of those who fall prey to ill health, he argued, have no one to blame but themselves. This is due not to their lack of faith in God but to their lack of attention to scientific and medical evidence showing that a plant-based, low-fat diet “will help prevent and often reverse most degenerative diseases that kill us and are expensive to treat. We should be able to live largely disease-free lives until we are well into our 90s and even past 100 years of age.” Although he did not explicitly claim that those who fall ill deserve their disease, he insisted that such people should expect no help from their fellow citizens. “We are all responsible for our own lives and our own health.” [46](#)

For Mackey, as for the prosperity gospel evangelists, good health is a sign of virtue—whether pursued in the pews of a megachurch or in the organic-produce aisles of Whole Foods.

LIBERAL PROVIDENTIALISM

Viewing health and wealth as matters of praise and blame is a meritocratic way of looking at life. It concedes nothing to luck or grace and holds us wholly responsible for our fate; everything that happens is a reward or punishment for the choices we make and for the way we live. This way of thinking celebrates a thoroughgoing ethic of mastery and control and gives rise to meritocratic hubris. It prompts the successful to believe they are “doing God’s work” and to look down on victims of misfortune—hurricanes, tsunamis, ill health—as blameworthy for their condition.

Such hubris is not only found among prosperity gospel conservatives and libertarian critics of the welfare state. It is also a prominent feature of liberal and progressive politics. One example is the rhetorical trope of explaining America’s power and prosperity in providential terms, as a consequence of its divinely ordained or righteous status. In her speech accepting the Democratic nomination for president in 2016, Hillary Clinton proclaimed, “In the end, it comes down to what Donald Trump doesn’t get: America is great because America is good.” ⁴⁷ She used this language often during her campaign, as she sought to persuade voters that Trump’s promise to “make America great again” was inconsistent with his malevolence and venality.

But there is no necessary connection between being good and being great. For nations as for persons, justice is one thing, power and wealth another. A glance at history shows that great powers are not necessarily righteous, and morally admirable countries are not necessarily powerful.

The phrase “America is great because America is good” is by now so familiar that we forget its providential presuppositions. It echoes the long-standing conviction that America has a divinely inspired mission in the world, a manifest destiny to conquer a continent or to make the world safe for democracy. But even as the sense of divine mandate recedes, politicians reiterate the claim that our greatness derives from our goodness.

The slogan itself is relatively recent. The first president to use it was Dwight D. Eisenhower, who attributed it, mistakenly, to Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the classic work *Democracy in America*. Speaking in 1953, Eisenhower cited “a wise French visitor who came to America” seeking the source of America’s success. Eisenhower quoted the visitor as follows: “Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius

and power. America is great because America is good—and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.” [48](#)

Although these sentences do not appear in Tocqueville’s work, [49](#) they proved popular with subsequent presidents, especially Republicans. Presidents Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush all used them on inspirational occasions, often when speaking to religious audiences. [50](#) In a 1984 address to a convention of Christian evangelicals, Ronald Reagan drew explicitly on the providential basis of the slogan:

All our material wealth and all our influence have been built on our faith in God and the bedrock values that follow from that faith. The great French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, 150 years ago, is said to have observed that America is great because America is good. And if she ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great.
[51](#)

In the 1990s, Democrats, seeking to infuse their rhetoric with spiritual resonance, began citing the slogan. As president, Bill Clinton used it nine times; John Kerry and Hillary Clinton both invoked it during their presidential campaigns. [52](#)

THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

The claim that America is great because it is good is the bright, uplifting side of the idea that hurricanes are punishment for sin. It is the meritocratic faith applied to a nation. According to a long providential tradition, worldly success is a sign of salvation, or in secular terms, of goodness. But this way of interpreting America’s role in history poses a challenge for liberals: If wealthy and powerful countries owe their might to their virtue, can’t the same be said of wealthy and powerful citizens?

Many liberals and progressives, especially those with egalitarian commitments, resist the claim that the rich are rich because they are more deserving than the poor. They see this as an ungenerous, moralizing argument used by those who oppose taxing the rich to help the disadvantaged. Against the claim that affluence signifies superior virtue, egalitarian liberals emphasize the contingency of fortune. They point out that success or failure in market societies has as much to do with luck and

circumstance as with character and virtue. Many of the factors that separate winners from losers are arbitrary from a moral point of view.

But it is not easy to embrace the moralizing, providential notion that powerful nations owe their greatness to their goodness and at the same time reject the moralizing, meritocratic notion that wealthy individuals owe their fortunes to their virtue. If might signifies right for countries, the same could be said of the “1 percent.” Morally and theologically, providentialism abroad and meritocracy at home stand or fall together.

Although politicians of recent decades did not acknowledge this tension explicitly, they gradually resolved it by accepting meritocratic ways of thinking, abroad and at home. The meritocratic outlook implicit in “great-because-good” providentialism found parallel expression in domestic debates about solidarity, responsibility, and the welfare state. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, liberals increasingly accepted elements of conservative critiques of the welfare state, including their demanding notion of personal responsibility. Although they did not go so far as to attribute all health and wealth to virtuous behavior, politicians such as Bill Clinton in the U.S. and Tony Blair in Britain sought to tie welfare eligibility more closely to the personal responsibility and deservingness of the recipients. [53](#)

The providential aspect of contemporary liberalism can also be glimpsed in another rhetorical turn that touches both foreign and domestic policy. This is the habit of defending one’s policies or political allies as being on “the right side of history” and criticizing opponents for being on “the wrong side of history.” One might think that debates about “the right side” and “the wrong side” of history would have been at their high point during the Cold War, when Communist and anti-Communist superpowers faced off against each other and claimed that their systems would win the future. Surprisingly, however, no American president used these terms in the context of Cold War debates. [54](#)

It was not until the 1990s and 2000s that “the right side” and “the wrong side” of history became a staple of political rhetoric, and then mostly by Democrats. President George W. Bush used the phrase only once, telling an audience of U.S. Army soldiers in 2005 that Middle East terrorists were “losing the struggle because they are on the wrong side of history.” He added that, thanks to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, “the tide of freedom” was surging across the Middle East. A year later, his vice president, Richard Cheney, speaking on an aircraft carrier, defended the Iraq War, assuring

U.S. troops that “our cause is necessary; our cause is just; and we are on the right side of history.” [55](#)

But for the most part, this triumphalist rhetoric was the language of Democratic presidents. Bill Clinton used it twenty-five times during his presidency, Barack Obama thirty-two times. [56](#) Sometimes Obama used it as Bush and Cheney had done, in describing the struggle against radical Islamic terrorism: “Al Qaida and its affiliates are small men on the wrong side of history,” Obama declared in a speech at the U.S. Military Academy in West Point. Addressing the U.S. Air Force Academy, he said that ISIL terrorists would never be “strong enough to destroy Americans or our way of life,” in part “because we’re on the right side of history.” [57](#)

But Clinton and Obama also used this triumphalist rhetoric in other contexts. This reflected their confidence, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the breakup of the Soviet Union, that history was moving ineluctably toward the spread of liberal democracy and free markets. In 1994, Clinton expressed optimism for the prospects of Boris Yeltsin, Russia’s first democratically elected president, saying, “He believes in democracy. He’s on the right side of history.” Responding to democratic stirrings in the Muslim world, Obama, in his first inaugural address, issued a stern warning to tyrants and despots: “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history.” [58](#)

When, in 2009, Iranians engaged in street protests against their repressive regime, Obama praised them, saying, “Those who stand up for justice are always on the right side of history.” When the Arab Spring of 2011 prompted hope that democracy would displace autocracy in North Africa and the Middle East, Obama also invoked history’s verdict. He stated that the Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi was “on the wrong side of history” and supported his removal from power. Questioned about his administration’s muted support for pro-democracy protestors in Egypt’s Tahrir Square, Obama replied: “I think history will end up recording that at every juncture in the situation in Egypt, that we were on the right side of history.” [59](#)

There are two problems with arguing from history before it happens. First, predicting how things will turn out is notoriously tricky. Ousting Saddam Hussein did not bring freedom and democracy to the Middle East.

Even the hopes of the Arab Spring soon gave way to a winter of renewed autocracy and repression. From the vantage point of Vladimir Putin's Russia, Yeltsin's democratic moment now looks ephemeral.

Second, even if history's course could be predicted, it offers no basis for moral judgment. As things turned out, Putin not Yeltsin was on the right side of history, at least in the sense that his autocratic way of governing Russia has prevailed. In Syria, the tyrant Bashar al-Assad survived a brutal civil war, and in this sense was on the right side of history. But this does not mean that his regime is morally defensible.

THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE

Those who defend their cause as being on the right side of history might reply that they are thinking of the longer sweep of history. But this reply depends on a further assumption: given enough time, and notwithstanding the fitful pace of progress, history bends toward justice. This assumption brings out the providentialism implicit in arguments that appeal to the right side of history. Such arguments rest on the belief that history unfolds in a way that is directed by God, or by a secular bent toward moral progress and improvement.

Barack Obama held this view and spoke of it often. He frequently cited the saying of Martin Luther King, Jr., that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." So fond was Obama of this quotation that, as president, he cited it thirty-three times in speeches and proclamations and had it woven into a rug in the Oval Office. [60](#)

This providential faith provides the moral warrant for talk about "the right side" and "the wrong side" of history. It also supports the claim that America (or any country) is great because it is good. For only if a nation is doing God's work, or advancing history's march toward freedom and justice, can its greatness be a sign of its goodness.

Believing that one's projects and purposes are aligned with God's plan, or with a vision of freedom and justice unfolding in history, is a potent source of hope, especially for people struggling against injustice. King's teaching that the arc of the moral universe "bends toward justice" inspired civil rights marchers of the 1950s and 1960s to carry on, even in the face of violent opposition by segregationists. King drew this memorable phrase from a sermon by Theodore Parker, a nineteenth-century abolitionist

minister from Massachusetts. Parker's version, less succinct than King's, showed how providential theology can serve as a wellspring of hope for the oppressed:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice. Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble. [61](#)

In King's hands, as in Parker's, the faith that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice is a stirring, prophetic call to act against injustice. But the same providential faith that inspires hope among the powerless can prompt hubris among the powerful. This can be seen in the changing sensibility of liberalism in recent decades, as the moral urgency of the civil rights era gave way to a complacent triumphalism in the aftermath of the Cold War.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall led many in the West to assume that history had vindicated their model of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism. Empowered by this assumption, they promoted a neoliberal version of globalization that included free-trade agreements, the deregulation of finance, and other measures to ease the flow of goods, capital, and people across national boundaries. They confidently expected that the expansion of global markets would increase global interdependence, lessen the likelihood of war among nations, temper nationalist identities, and promote respect for human rights. The salubrious effects of global commerce and new information technologies might even loosen the grip of authoritarian regimes and coax them in the direction of liberal democracy.

Things did not turn out this way. The globalization project would bring on a financial crisis in 2008 and, eight years later, a fierce political backlash. Nationalism and authoritarianism would not fade away but gain momentum around the world and come to threaten liberal institutions and norms within democratic societies.

But in the 1980s and 1990s, as market-friendly globalization gathered force, the elites who promoted it had little doubt about where history was heading. From the early 1980s to 2008, the use of “the right side of history” increased more than eightfold in books tracked by Google. [62](#)

Proponents of globalization were confident that history was on their side. Urging Congress to pass NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) in 1993, Bill Clinton tried to assuage fears that the deal threatened the job prospects of American workers. But his greatest concern was that a defeat for NAFTA would be a blow to globalization: “The thing that I’m most worried about is that it will put America on the wrong side of history ... as we move toward the 21st century. That overwhelms every other concern.” Speaking in Berlin in 1998, Clinton praised Germany for “making a difficult transition to a global economy.” Though many German citizens “may not yet feel the benefits,” he said, Germany’s embrace of globalization placed it “clearly on the right side of history.” [63](#)

For liberals, being on the right side of history did not mean embracing unbridled free-market economics. It meant promoting global capitalism abroad while combatting discrimination and expanding equal opportunity at home. Health insurance reform, family and medical leave legislation, tax credits for college tuition, and an executive order preventing federal contractors from discriminating against LGBT employees were among the policies that Clinton and Obama, at various times, identified with “the right side of history.” In a speech endorsing Obama at the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Clinton recalled winning the presidency despite Republican charges that he was too young and inexperienced to be commander in chief. “It didn’t work in 1992, because we were on the right side of history. And it won’t work in 2008, because Barack Obama is on the right side of history.” [64](#)

Opposing discrimination and expanding opportunity are worthy causes. Hillary Clinton made them the central themes of her 2016 presidential campaign. But by then, when neoliberal globalization had produced vast inequalities of income and wealth, an economy dominated by finance, a political system in which money spoke louder than citizens, and a rising tide of angry nationalism, the project of improving equality of opportunity seemed inadequate to the moment, a pale expression of providential hope.

When Obama spoke of the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice, he added an assurance that King had not: “Eventually, America gets it right.” [65](#) But this changed the spirit of King’s message.

Over time, Obama’s providentialism became less a prophetic call for change than a kind of righteous repose, a comforting reassertion of American exceptionalism. Progress “doesn’t always go in a straight line,” he explained at a 2012 fundraising event in Beverly Hills, California, “it goes in zigs and zags. And there are times where the body politic takes a wrong turn, and there are times where there are folks who are left out. But what makes America exceptional is that, eventually, we get it right. What Dr. King called the arc of the moral universe, it bends towards justice. That’s what makes America different. That’s what makes America special.” [66](#)

In 1895, Katharine Lee Bates, a Wellesley College professor and social reformer, published a patriotic poem called “America the Beautiful.” Fifteen years later, a church organist set it to music. The song, an ode to American goodness, became one of America’s most popular patriotic songs; many wanted it to become the national anthem. [67](#)

Unlike “The Star-Spangled Banner,” America’s official anthem, “America the Beautiful” was a pacific hymn. It celebrated the country’s “purple mountained majesty,” not “the rockets’ red glare, the bombs bursting in air.” The song’s refrain was a prayer asking for God’s grace:

America! America!
God shed His grace on thee.
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea! [68](#)

But the line about God’s grace was open to two interpretations. It could be read as expressing a wish: “[May] God shed His grace on thee.” Or it could be read in the past tense, as a statement of fact: “God [has] shed His grace on thee.” [69](#)

It is clear from the rest of the lyrics that the poet intends the first meaning, a prayer for God’s grace. The next line makes this clear. It does

not say that God “crowned” thy good with brotherhood; it expresses the hope that he will do so.

Inevitably, many Americans interpret the line “God shed His grace on thee” in the second way, as a statement of fact. This reflects the assertive rather than the aspirational strand of American providentialism. God’s grace is not an unearned gift but something we deserve and have in fact achieved. “America is great because America is good.”

The balance between merit and grace is not easy to sustain. From the Puritans to the preachers of the prosperity gospel, the ethic of earning and achieving has exerted an almost irresistible allure, threatening always to override the humbler ethic of hoping and praying, of gratitude and gift. Merit drives out grace, or else recasts it in its own image, as something we deserve.

On October 28, 2001, just weeks after the 9/11 attacks, Ray Charles, the legendary African American soul singer and musician, blind since childhood, performed an electrifying rendition of “America the Beautiful” prior to game two of the World Series. Charles was renowned for performing the song as no one else could, evoking aching sorrow and redemptive joy. That night, as he always did, Charles added a riff that allowed his listeners to conclude that America’s grace was not a hope and a prayer but a fait accompli:

America! America!

God done shed His grace on thee. Oh yes he did.

*And crowned thy good—I doubt you remember—saving
brotherhood,*

From sea to shining sea. [70](#)

As the last chords echoed in the stadium, four F-16 fighter jets streaked overhead. The plaintive poignance of Charles’s song gave way to something harder, less forgiving. Here was the assertive face of providential faith. The arc of the moral universe may bend toward justice, but God helps those who help themselves.



The Rhetoric of Rising

These days, we view success the way the Puritans viewed salvation—not as a matter of luck or grace, but as something we earn through our own effort and striving. This is the heart of the meritocratic ethic. It celebrates freedom—the ability to control my destiny by dint of hard work—and deservingness. If I am responsible for having accrued a handsome share of worldly goods—income and wealth, power and prestige—I must deserve them. Success is a sign of virtue. My affluence is my due.

This way of thinking is empowering. It encourages people to think of themselves as responsible for their fate, not as victims of forces beyond their control. But it also has a dark side. The more we view ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the less likely we are to care for the fate of those less fortunate than ourselves. If my success is my own doing, their failure must be their fault. This logic makes meritocracy corrosive of commonality. Too strenuous a notion of personal responsibility for our fate makes it hard to imagine ourselves in other people's shoes.

Over the past four decades, meritocratic assumptions have deepened their hold on the public life of democratic societies. Even as inequality has widened to vast proportions, the public culture has reinforced the notion that we are responsible for our fate and deserve what we get. It is almost as if globalization's winners needed to persuade themselves, and everyone

else, that those perched on top and those at the bottom have landed where they belong. Or if not, that they would land where they belong if only we could remove unfair barriers to opportunity. Political argument between mainstream center-right and center-left parties in recent decades has consisted mainly of a debate about how to interpret and implement equality of opportunity, so that people will be able to rise as far as their efforts and talents will take them.

STRIVING AND DESERVING

I first noticed the rising tide of meritocratic sentiment by listening to my students. Having taught political philosophy at Harvard since 1980, I am sometimes asked how student opinions have changed over the years. I generally find this question difficult to answer. In classroom debates about the subjects I teach—justice, markets and morals, the ethics of new technologies—students have always voiced a wide range of moral and political views. I have not noticed any decisive trend, with one exception: Beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present, more and more of my students seem drawn to the conviction that their success is their own doing, a product of their effort, something they have earned. Among the students I teach, this meritocratic faith has intensified.

At first, I assumed this was because they came of age during the era of Ronald Reagan and had absorbed the individualistic philosophy of the time. But these were not, for the most part, politically conservative students. Meritocratic intuitions reach across the political spectrum. They emerge with special intensity in discussions of affirmative action in college admissions. Whether students are for or against affirmative action policies, most voice the conviction that they worked hard to qualify for admission to Harvard and therefore merited their place. The suggestion that they were admitted due to luck or other factors beyond their control provokes strong resistance.

It is not hard to understand the growing meritocratic sentiment among students in selective colleges. Over the past half century, admission to elite colleges has become increasingly daunting. As recently as the mid-1970s, Stanford accepted nearly a third of those who applied. In the early 1980s, Harvard and Stanford admitted about one applicant in five; in 2019, they accepted fewer than one in twenty. As competition for admission has intensified, the adolescent years of children who aspire to top colleges (or

whose parents aspire for them) have become a battleground of fevered striving—a highly scheduled, pressure-packed, stress-inducing regime of Advanced Placement courses, private college counselors, SAT tutors, athletic and other extracurricular activities, internships and good deeds in distant lands designed to impress college admissions committees—all supervised by anxious hyper-parents seeking the best for their kids.

It is difficult to emerge from this gauntlet of stress and striving without believing that you have earned, through effort and hard work, whatever success may come your way. This does not make students selfish or ungenerous. Many devote copious amounts of time to public service and other good works. But the experience does make them staunch meritocrats; like their Puritan forebears, they believe they deserve the success their hard work has won.

The meritocratic sensibility I've noticed among college students is not only an American phenomenon. In 2012, I gave a talk at Xiamen University, on the southeast coast of China. My subject was the moral limits of markets. Recent headlines had told of a Chinese teenager who sold one of his kidneys to buy an iPhone and iPad. ¹ I asked the students what they thought about this case. In the debate that ensued, many students took the libertarian view: If the teenager freely agreed, without pressure or coercion, to sell his kidney, he should have the right to do so. Others disagreed, arguing that it is unfair for the rich to be able to extend their lives by buying kidneys from the poor. A student toward the back of the hall offered a reply: Having earned their wealth, rich people are meritorious and so deserve to live longer.

I was taken aback by this brazen application of meritocratic thinking. In retrospect, I realize that it is morally akin to the prosperity gospel belief that health and wealth are signs of God's favor. Of course, the Chinese student who voiced it was probably not steeped in Puritan or providential traditions. But he and his classmates had come of age during China's turn to a market society.

The notion that those who prosper deserve the money they make runs deep in the moral intuitions of the students I have encountered during visits, over the past decade, to a number of Chinese universities. Notwithstanding the cultural differences, these Chinese students, like my Harvard students, are the winners of a hyper-competitive admissions process that unfolds against the background of a hyper-competitive market society. It is no

wonder that they resist the thought that we are indebted for our success and attracted to the idea that we earn, and therefore deserve, whatever rewards the system bestows on our efforts and talents.

MARKETS AND MERIT

As Deng Xiaoping was launching China's market reforms in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States were seeking to move their societies toward a greater reliance on markets. This period of market faith set the stage for the rise of meritocratic values and practices in the decades that followed.

To be sure, markets do not necessarily rest on meritocratic assumptions. The most familiar arguments for markets are about utility and freedom. The first argues that markets create incentives that boost GDP and maximize the general welfare; the second argues that markets leave people free to choose what value to place on the goods they exchange.

But the market triumphalism of the 1980s prompted the articulation of a third, meritocratic rationale: Provided they operate within a fair system of equal opportunity, markets give people what they deserve. As long as everyone has an equal chance to compete, market outcomes reward merit.

The meritocratic ethic was implicit, at times, in the free-market conservatism of Thatcher and Reagan. But it came to its fullest articulation in the politics of the center-left figures who succeeded them. This is due to a distinctive feature of center-left political argument in the 1990s and since: Rather than challenge the premise of Thatcher and Reagan's market faith, political figures such as Tony Blair and Bill Clinton accepted it and sought to soften its harshest features.

They accepted the Reagan-Thatcher notion that market mechanisms are the primary instruments for achieving the public good. But they wanted to ensure that markets operated under fair conditions. All citizens, whatever their race or class, religion or ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, should be able to compete on equal terms for the rewards that markets bestow. For the center-left liberals, equality of opportunity required more than the absence of discrimination; it also required access to education, health care, child care, and other services that enable people to compete effectively in the labor market.

Here then was the argument of center-left, market-friendly liberalism from the 1990s to 2016: Enabling everyone to compete on equal terms was

not only compatible with a market society but a way to fulfill its underlying principles. Two such principles were fairness and productivity. Eliminating discrimination and expanding opportunity would make markets more fair, and enlisting a wider pool of talent would make markets more productive. (Bill Clinton often advanced the fairness argument under cover of the productivity argument, as when he said, “We don’t have a person to waste.”) ²

But beyond fairness and productivity, the liberal argument also gestured toward a third, more potent ideal implicit in the case for markets: Enabling people to compete solely on the basis of effort and talent would bring market outcomes into alignment with merit. In a society where opportunities were truly equal, markets would give people their just deserts.

Over the past four decades, the language of merit and deservingness has become central to public discourse. One aspect of the meritocratic turn displays the hard side of meritocracy. This aspect finds expression in the demanding notions of personal responsibility that have accompanied attempts to rein in the welfare state and to shift risks from governments and companies to individuals. ³ A second aspect of the meritocratic turn is more aspirational. It finds expression in what might be called the rhetoric of rising, the promise that those who work hard and play by the rules deserve to rise as far as their talents and dreams will take them. The rhetoric of personal responsibility and the rhetoric of rising, having animated political argument in recent decades, eventually contributed to the populist backlash against meritocracy.

THE RHETORIC OF RESPONSIBILITY

In the 1980s and 1990s, the rhetoric of responsibility figured prominently in debates about the welfare state. Through much of the twentieth century, arguments over the welfare state were arguments about solidarity, about what we owe one another as citizens. Some held more demanding notions of solidarity, others more limited ones. Since the 1980s, debates about the welfare state have been less about solidarity than about the extent to which the disadvantaged are responsible for their misfortune. Some assert more demanding notions of personal responsibility, others more restrictive ones.

Expansive conceptions of personal responsibility are a clue that meritocratic assumptions are in play. The more thoroughgoing our

responsibility for our fate, the more we merit praise or blame for the way our lives turn out.

The Reagan-Thatcher critique of the welfare state argued that people should be held responsible for their own well-being, and that the community owed help only to those whose misfortune was not their own fault. “We will never abandon those who, through no fault of their own, must have our help,” Reagan declared in a State of the Union address. “But let us work to see how many can be freed from the dependency of welfare and made self-supporting.” ⁴ “Through no fault of their own” is a revealing phrase. It begins as a trope of generosity; those who are needy “through no fault of their own” have a claim on the community’s help. But, like all attributions of responsibility, it also has a harsh side. If those who are victims of circumstance deserve our help, those who had a hand in their own misfortune arguably do not.

In presidential rhetoric, the phrase “through no fault of their own” was first used by Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. It implies a stringent notion of personal responsibility; those whose poverty or ill health is due to bad choices they have made do not deserve government help and should be left to fend for themselves. Franklin D. Roosevelt employed the phrase from time to time, in the course of arguing that people thrown out of work by the Great Depression could hardly be blamed for being unemployed. ⁵

Ronald Reagan, seeking to reduce the role of government, used the phrase more frequently than any prior president. But each of his Democratic successors, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, employed it more than twice as often as Reagan did. ⁶ In doing so, they, like Reagan, implicitly distinguished between the deserving and the undeserving poor. Those who struggled due to forces beyond their control were deserving of government assistance; those who were responsible for their misfortune, possibly not.

In 1992, Clinton campaigned for the presidency promising to “end welfare as we know it.” As president, he connected the rhetoric of responsibility with the rhetoric of rising, evoking both the hard side and the aspirational face of meritocracy. “We must do what America does best,” he proclaimed in this first Inaugural Address. “Offer more opportunity to all and demand more responsibility from all. It is time to break the bad habit of expecting something for nothing from our Government or from each other.”

The rhetoric of responsibility and the rhetoric of rising had this in common: both gestured toward the ideal of self-reliance and self-making. In the 1980s and 1990s, responsibility meant getting off welfare and finding a job. Opportunity meant acquiring the education and skills to compete effectively in the labor market. If opportunities were equal, people would rise based on their efforts and talents, and their success would be the measure of their merit. “All Americans have not just a right but a solemn responsibility to rise as far as their God-given talents and determination can take them,” Clinton declared. “Opportunity and responsibility: They go hand in hand. We can’t have one without the other.” [8](#)

Clinton echoed Reagan’s argument that welfare should be restricted to those who were needy “through no fault of their own.” “Government’s role,” Clinton stated, is to “create economic opportunity and to help people who, through no fault of their own, have sustained economic burdens.” [9](#) In 1996, he signed into law a welfare reform measure, opposed by many of his fellow Democrats, that demanded “personal responsibility,” required welfare recipients to work, and limited the time they could stay on welfare. [10](#)

The new emphasis on responsibility, and its meritocratic implications, reached across the Atlantic. As Clinton was enacting welfare reform in the name of “personal responsibility,” Tony Blair, soon to become prime minister of Britain, was sounding a similar message: “We need a new settlement on welfare for a new age, where opportunity and responsibility go together.” Blair was explicit about the meritocratic inspiration of his politics. “New Labour is committed to meritocracy,” he wrote. “We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or the advantages of privilege.” [11](#)

A few years later, in Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder justified welfare reform in similar terms:

With these measures, we are weatherizing our welfare state against the storms of globalization. In doing this we will, in every respect, need to increase responsibility: More personal responsibility for ourselves and more common responsibility for the opportunities of our children ... In terms of social policy this means: Everybody has

the same opportunities. But it also means that everybody has the duty to seize their opportunities. [12](#)

The rhetoric of responsibility is by now so familiar that it is easy to miss its distinctive meaning in recent decades, and its connection to meritocratic understandings of success. Political leaders have long spoken of responsibility, typically referring to citizens' duties to their country and fellow citizens. But as Yascha Mounk points out, responsibility now refers to "our responsibility to take care of ourselves—and to suffer the consequences if we fail to do so." The welfare state has become less "responsibility buffering" and more "responsibility tracking." Limiting welfare eligibility to those who fall on hard times through bad luck rather than bad behavior is an example, an attempt to treat people according to their merits. [13](#)

AS FAR AS YOUR TALENTS WILL TAKE YOU

The rhetoric of rising is also novel in a way that can easily escape notice. Ideals of equal opportunity and upward mobility have long been a part of the American dream. They also inspire many other societies. The notion that people should be able to rise "as far as their talents and hard work will take them" is familiar to the point of cliché. It is hardly controversial. Mainstream politicians constantly invoke it. No one argues against it.

So it is surprising to discover that this slogan is relatively new. It only became prominent in American political discourse in the last four decades. Ronald Reagan was the first U.S. president to make it a mainstay of his political rhetoric. Speaking at a White House briefing for black members of his administration, he made explicit the connection between merit and the right to rise. "All Americans have the right to be judged on the sole basis of individual merit," he said, "and to go just as far as their dreams and hard work will take them." For Reagan, the rhetoric of rising was not only about overcoming discrimination. It had many uses, including arguing for tax cuts. Lower taxes would "knock down the barriers on the road to success so that all Americans can go as far as their hard work, skill, imagination, and creativity will take them." [14](#)

Bill Clinton adopted Reagan's slogan and used it frequently. "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one: If

you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you.” By the 2000s, the rhetoric of rising had become a bipartisan rhetorical reflex. Republicans George W. Bush, John McCain, and Marco Rubio all invoked it. But no American president was as attached to the slogan as Barack Obama, who used it more than all previous presidents combined. In fact, it was arguably the central theme of his presidency. [15](#)

“When it comes to higher education,” Obama told a gathering of educators at the White House, what ultimately matters “is making sure that bright, motivated young people ... have the chance to go as far as their talents and their work ethic and their dreams can take them.” He viewed a college education as the primary vehicle of upward mobility. “Now, as a nation, we don’t promise equal outcomes, but we were founded on the idea [that] everybody should have an equal opportunity to succeed. No matter who you are, what you look like, where you come from, you can make it. That’s an essential promise of America. Where you start should not determine where you end up. And so I’m glad that everybody wants to go to college.” [16](#)

On another occasion, Obama cited the example of his wife, Michelle, who had grown up in a working-class family but attended Princeton and Harvard Law School and was able to rise. “Michelle and her brother were able to get an unbelievable education and go as far as their dreams would take them.” This supported Obama’s belief that “what makes America so exceptional, what makes us so special, is this basic bargain, this basic idea that in this country, no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from, no matter what your last name is, no matter what setbacks you may experience, in this country, if you work hard, if you are willing to take responsibility, then you can make it. You can get ahead.” [17](#)

Echoing Reagan and Clinton, Obama’s rhetoric of rising pointed toward meritocracy. It emphasized non-discrimination (“no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from”), insisted on hard work, and admonished citizens to “take responsibility” for themselves. Here then was the link between the rhetoric of rising and the meritocratic ethic: If opportunities are truly equal, then not only will people rise as far as their talents and hard work will take them; their success will be their own doing, and they will deserve the rewards that come their way.

GETTING WHAT YOU DESERVE

As the rhetoric of rising became prominent, the language of merit and deservingness found growing expression throughout the public culture. Recall the ubiquitous McDonald's advertising slogan (and jingle) of the 1970s and 1980s: "You deserve a break today." Or consider books and newspapers. According to Google Ngram, which tracks the frequency of words and phrases in books, the use of the phrase "you deserve" more than tripled from 1970 to 2008. In *The New York Times*, "you deserve" appeared more than four times as often in 2018 as it did in the year Ronald Reagan took office. [18](#)

Some invocations of deservingness were explicitly related to meritocratic thinking. For example, a 1988 *New York Times* article described a growing market for motivational tapes with hypnotic, subliminal messages murmured under the sound of ocean waves. One such message: "I deserve to do better than Dad. I deserve to succeed. I deserve to reach my goals. I deserve to be rich." But as the language of deservingness infused popular culture, it became a soothing, all-purpose promise of success, as in the headline that accompanied a recent *New York Times* recipe: "You Deserve More Succulent Chicken." (The secret to achieving the tender chicken you deserve? "Don't overcook it.") [19](#)

As the language of merit and desert became prominent in everyday life, something similar was happening in academic philosophy. In the 1960s and 1970s, the leading Anglo-American philosophers rejected meritocracy on the grounds that what people earn in the market depends on contingencies beyond their control, such as demand for one's talents and whether one's talents are common or rare. But by the 1980s and 1990s, an influential group of philosophers, perhaps reflecting the "rhetoric of responsibility" prevalent in the politics of the day, revived the case for merit. Known as "luck egalitarians," they argued that society's obligation to help the disadvantaged depends on figuring out who among the needy are responsible for their misfortune and who are victims of bad luck. Only those who bear no responsibility for their plight, they maintained, deserve help from the government. [20](#)

Among politicians, the language of merit and deservingness accompanied the rhetoric of rising. In the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. presidents rarely sought to sway their audiences by telling them what they deserved. John F.

Kennedy never used the term “you deserve.” That changed with Reagan, who used “you deserve” more often than his five predecessors combined. [21](#) Speaking to a group of business leaders in 1983, for example, he said that those who succeed by their own efforts deserve to be rewarded.

This nation was not built on a foundation of envy and resentment. The dream I’ve always believed in is, no matter who you are, no matter where you come from, if you work hard, pull yourself up and succeed, then, by golly, you deserve life’s prize. And trying for that prize made America the greatest nation on Earth. [22](#)

After Reagan, “you deserve” became a non-partisan fixture of presidential discourse. Clinton used it twice as often as Reagan; Obama, three times as often, in contexts ranging from the quotidian to the consequential. Speaking in a city that had received a job-producing Defense Department administrative center, Clinton said, “You got it because you deserve it.” Addressing a group of warehouse workers, Obama declared, “If you put in a hard day’s work, you deserve decent pay for it.” Speaking at a community college in Ohio, he defended tax cuts for the middle class, saying, “You deserve a break; you deserve some help.” [23](#)

In the United Kingdom, the faith in meritocracy voiced by Tony Blair in the 1990s continued to inform British politics, even after the Brexit vote. In 2016, shortly after becoming prime minister, Theresa May set out her “vision for a truly meritocratic Britain.” Speaking of “ordinary, working-class people,” May declared, “They deserve a better deal.” The better deal she offered consisted in living up to meritocratic principles. [24](#)

I want Britain to be the world’s great meritocracy—a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow ... I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it’s your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like. [25](#)

Notwithstanding their talk of rising and deserving, most American politicians do not speak explicitly about meritocracy. Obama was an

exception. For example, in an interview with an ESPN sports commentator, he mused that what attracts people to sports is that “it’s one of the few places where it’s a true meritocracy. There’s not a lot of BS. Ultimately, who’s winning, who’s losing, who’s performing, who’s not—it’s all laid out there.” [26](#)

During her 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton drew frequently on the rhetoric of rising and deserving: “Our campaign is about the fundamental belief that, in America, every person, no matter what you look like, who you are, who you love, you should have the chance to go as far as your hard work and dreams will take you.” She vowed, if elected, to “make it possible for you to get the chances and the opportunities you deserve to have.” At one campaign rally, she declared, “I want this to be a true meritocracy. I’m tired of inequality. I want people to feel like they can get ahead if they work for it.” [27](#)

POPULIST BACKLASH

To Hillary Clinton’s misfortune, the rhetoric of rising had, by 2016, lost its capacity to inspire. Donald Trump, the candidate who defeated her, did not speak about upward mobility or the belief that Americans can rise as far as their talent and hard work will take them. As best I can determine, Trump never used this slogan during his campaign, nor has he used it during his presidency. Instead, he offered blunt talk of winners and losers, and promised to make America great again. But his vision of greatness had nothing to do with fulfilling the meritocratic project that had animated American public discourse for the previous four decades.

In fact, there is reason to think that populist antipathy toward meritocratic elites played a part in Trump’s election, and in the surprising vote in Britain, earlier that year, to leave the European Union. Elections are complicated events, and it is difficult to say conclusively what prompts voters to vote as they do. But many working-class supporters of Trump, Brexit, and populist parties in other countries seemed less interested in promises of upward mobility than in reassertions of national sovereignty, identity, and pride. They resented meritocratic elites, experts, and professional classes, who had celebrated market-driven globalization, reaped the benefits, consigned working people to the discipline of foreign

competition, and who seemed to identify more with global elites than with their fellow citizens.

Not all populist grievances against the established order were reactions against meritocratic hubris. Some were entangled with xenophobia, racism, and hostility to multiculturalism. But the populist backlash was provoked, at least in part, by the galling sense that those who stood astride the hierarchy of merit looked down with disdain on those they considered less accomplished than themselves. This populist complaint is not without warrant. For decades, meritocratic elites intoned the mantra that those who work hard and play by the rules can rise as far as their talents will take them. They did not notice that for those stuck at the bottom or struggling to stay afloat, the rhetoric of rising was less a promise than a taunt.

This is how Trump voters may have heard Hillary Clinton's meritocratic mantra. For them, the rhetoric of rising was more insulting than inspiring. This is not because they rejected meritocratic beliefs. To the contrary: They embraced meritocracy, but believed it described the way things already worked. They did not see it as an unfinished project requiring further government action to dismantle barriers to achievement. This is partly because they feared such intervention would favor ethnic and racial minorities, thus violating rather than vindicating meritocracy as they saw it. But it is also because, having worked hard to achieve a modicum of success, they had accepted the harsh verdict of the market in their own case, and were invested in it, morally and psychologically.

A survey conducted after the 2016 election asked Trump supporters and opponents to agree or disagree with several statements about how well the United States conformed to meritocratic principles, including the following: "Overall, U.S. society is equitable and fair." "Individuals are personally responsible for their position in society." "Opportunities for economic advancement are available to anyone who cares to look for them." "Society has reached a point where white Americans and racial/ethnic minority Americans have equal opportunities for achievement." ²⁸ Unsurprisingly, well-off respondents agreed with these statements more readily than those from lesser economic backgrounds. But independent of class status, Trump supporters agreed more strongly with each of these statements than did non-supporters. ²⁹ Trump supporters resented liberals' rhetoric of rising, not because they rejected meritocracy, but because they believed it described the prevailing social order. They had submitted to its discipline, had

accepted the hard judgment it pronounced on their own merits, and believed others should do the same.

The tyranny of merit arises from more than the rhetoric of rising. It consists in a cluster of attitudes and circumstances that, taken together, have made meritocracy toxic. First, under conditions of rampant inequality and stalled mobility, reiterating the message that we are responsible for our fate and deserve what we get erodes solidarity and demoralizes those left behind by globalization. Second, insisting that a college degree is the primary route to a respectable job and a decent life creates a credentialist prejudice that undermines the dignity of work and demeans those who have not been to college; and third, insisting that social and political problems are best solved by highly educated, value-neutral experts is a technocratic conceit that corrupts democracy and disempowers ordinary citizens.

CAN YOU MAKE IT IF YOU TRY?

When politicians reiterate a hallowed verity with mind-numbing frequency, there is reason to suspect that it is no longer true. This is the case with the rhetoric of rising. It is no accident that the rhetoric of rising was at its most fulsome at a time when inequality was approaching daunting proportions. When the richest 1 percent take in more than the combined earnings of the entire bottom half of the population, [30](#) when the median income stagnates for forty years, [31](#) the idea that effort and hard work will carry you far begins to ring hollow.

This hollowness produces two kinds of discontent. One is the frustration that arises when the system falls short of its meritocratic promise, when those who work hard and play by the rules are unable to advance. The other is the despair that arises when people believe the meritocratic promise has already been fulfilled, and they have lost out. This is a more demoralizing discontent, because it implies that, for those left behind, their failure is their fault.

Americans, more than most, adhere to the belief that hard work brings success, that our destiny is in our hands. According to global public opinion surveys, most Americans (77 percent) believe that people can succeed if they work hard; only half of Germans think so. In France and Japan, majorities say hard work is no guarantee of success. [32](#)

Asked what factors are “very important to getting ahead in life,” Americans overwhelmingly (73 percent) put hard work first, reflecting the enduring hold of the Protestant work ethic. In Germany, barely half consider hard work very important to getting ahead; in France, only one in four does. [33](#)

As with all such surveys, the attitudes people express depend on how the question is framed. When it comes to explaining why some people are rich and others poor, Americans are less certain about the role of effort than when asked generally about work and success. Asked whether the rich are rich because they work harder than others or because they had advantages in life, Americans are evenly divided. Asked why people are poor, a majority say it is due to circumstances beyond their control; only three in ten say poverty is due to a lack of effort. [34](#)

Belief in the efficacy of work as a route to success reflects the broader conviction that we are masters of our destiny, that our fate is in our hands. Americans profess greater faith in human mastery than do citizens of most other countries. The majority of Americans (57 percent) disagree with the statement “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control.” By contrast, majorities in most other countries, including most European countries, view success as determined mainly by forces outside our control. [35](#)

These views about work and self-help have implications for solidarity and the mutual obligations of citizens. If everyone who works hard can be expected to succeed, then those who fall short have no one to blame but themselves, and it is hard to make the case for helping them. This is the harsh side of meritocracy.

If those who land on top, and those who land on the bottom, are wholly responsible for their fate, then social positions reflect what people deserve. The rich are rich thanks to their own doing. If, however, the most fortunate members of society are indebted for their success—to good luck or God’s grace or the community’s support—then the moral case for sharing one another’s fate is stronger. It is easier to make the case that we are all in this together.

This may explain why the United States, with its robust faith that we are masters of our fate, has a less-generous welfare state than the social democracies of Europe, whose citizens are more inclined to attribute their

life circumstance to forces outside their control. If everyone can succeed through effort and hard work, then government need simply ensure that jobs and opportunities are truly open to all. American politicians of the center-left and center-right may disagree about what policies equality of opportunity actually requires. But they share the assumption that the aim is to provide everyone, whatever his or her starting point in life, a chance to rise. They agree, in other words, that mobility is the answer to inequality—and that those who rise will have earned their success.

But the American faith in the ability to rise through effort and grit no longer fits the facts on the ground. In the decades following World War II, Americans could expect that their children would do better, economically, than they had. Today, this is no longer the case. Of children born in the 1940s, almost all (90 percent) earned more than their parents. Of children born in the 1980s, only half surpassed their parents' earnings. [36](#)

It is also harder to climb from poverty to affluence than the popular belief in upward mobility would suggest. Of those born poor in America, few make it to the top. In fact, most do not even make it to the middle class. Studies of upward mobility typically divide the income ladder into five rungs. Of those born on the bottom rung, only around 4 to 7 percent rise to the top, and only about a third reach the middle rung or higher. Although the exact numbers vary from one study to the next, very few Americans live out the “rags to riches” story celebrated in the American dream. [37](#)

In fact, there is less economic mobility in the United States than in many other countries. Economic advantages and disadvantages carry over from one generation to the next more frequently than in Germany, Spain, Japan, Australia, Sweden, Canada, Finland, Norway, and Denmark. In the U.S. and the U.K., nearly half of the economic advantage of high-earning parents is passed on to their children. That is more than twice the earnings advantage that children inherit in Canada, Finland, Norway, and Denmark (where mobility is highest). [38](#)

Danish and Canadian children, it turns out, are far more likely to rise from poverty to affluence than U.S. children. [39](#) By these measures, the American dream is alive and well and living in Copenhagen.

The American dream is also flourishing in Beijing. An article in *The New York Times* recently posed the following scenario:

Imagine you have to make a bet. There are two 18-year-olds, one in China, the other in the United States, both poor and short on prospects. You have to pick the one with the better chance at upward mobility.

Which would you choose?

Not long ago, the answer might have seemed simple. The “American Dream,” after all, had long promised a pathway to a better life for anyone who worked hard.

But the answer today is startling: China has risen so quickly that your chances of improving your station in life there vastly exceed those in the United States. [40](#)

Given China’s unprecedented economic growth since 1980, this conclusion is less surprising than it seems. Rich and poor alike realized income gains in China, while in the U.S., the gains of growth have gone mainly to those at the top. Although the U.S. remains a much wealthier country per capita than China, today’s generation of Chinese young people is richer than their parents’ generation. [41](#)

More surprising is the fact that, according to the World Bank, levels of income inequality in China are about the same as in the U.S. Moreover, China now has greater intergenerational mobility than the U.S. This means that in the U.S., the land of opportunity, how much you make is more closely tied to where you started out than it is in China. [42](#)

When my students encounter these findings, they are disquieted. Most have an instinctive faith in American exceptionalism, in the idea that America is a place where those who work hard can get ahead. This belief in upward mobility is America’s traditional answer to inequality. Yes, America may have greater income inequality than other democracies, they reason. But here, unlike the more rigid, class-bound societies of Europe, inequality matters less, because no one is consigned to the class of his or her birth.

But once they learn that the U.S. has more inequality and less mobility than many other countries, they are troubled and perplexed. Some resist what the mobility data shows, pointing to their own experience of striving and succeeding. A conservative student of mine from Texas responded that, in his experience, all that really matters is how hard one works. “Everyone in my high school understood the rules,” he said. “If you work hard in

school and do well, you get into a good college and get a good job. If not, you work in the oil fields. And that's how things turned out." Others, while recalling their strenuous effort during high school years, acknowledge the sources of support that helped them succeed.

Some of my students argue that, even if the American dream is at odds with the facts, it is important not to spread the news; better to preserve the myth so that people will continue to believe it is possible to rise as far as their talents and hard work will take them. This would turn the American dream into what Plato described as a "noble lie," a belief that, though untrue, sustains civic harmony by inducing citizens to accept certain inequalities as legitimate. In Plato's case, it was the myth that God created people with different metals in their souls, giving divine sanction to an arrangement in which a guardian class led by a philosopher-king governs the city. ⁴³ In our case, it would be the myth that, in America, despite the sizable gap between rich and poor, even those on the bottom can make it if they try.

My students are not the only ones who are mistaken about the prospects of rising. When researchers asked members of the public in the U.S. and Europe how likely it is to rise from poverty to affluence in their countries, the American and European respondents generally got it wrong. Interestingly, however, they got it wrong in opposite ways: Americans overestimated the chance of rising, and Europeans underestimated it. ⁴⁴

SEEING AND BELIEVING

These results reveal something important about the way we understand social and political arrangements. We perceive the world in the light of our hopes and fears. At first glance, it might seem that people are simply ill-informed about the mobility that prevails in their societies. But what is interesting, what calls out for interpretation, is that the misperceptions have a certain shape. Europeans, whose societies are more equal and more mobile than the United States, are overly pessimistic about the possibility of rising, while Americans are overly optimistic. Why is this so?

In both cases, beliefs and convictions shape perceptions. Americans' strong attachment to individual initiative, together with their willingness to accept inequality, leads them to exaggerate the possibility of rising through hard work. Europeans' skepticism that individual effort conquers all,

together with their lesser tolerance of inequality, leads them to underestimate the possibility of rising.

This tendency to view the world through the lens of our ideals and expectations sheds light on how the meritocratic promise can be demoralizing, even humiliating, for working-class and middle-class voters. On the face of it, this is puzzling: Who could object to proposals to break down barriers, level the playing field, and improve educational opportunities so that everyone, not only those born to privilege, can have a chance at the American dream? Wouldn't the rhetoric of rising appeal to working-class and middle-class voters, who could benefit from the educational opportunities, job training, child care, family leave, and other policies that liberals and progressives were offering?

No, not necessarily. By 2016, as the baleful effects of globalization on ordinary workers became clear, the rhetoric of rising offered by liberal elites conveyed a harsh suggestion. Even in the face of rising inequality, it insisted that we are responsible for our fate, and that we therefore deserve the success or misfortune that comes our way.

This way of viewing inequality fueled meritocratic hubris. It reinforced the belief that those who had reaped the benefits of globalization deserved their bounty, and that those left behind deserved their meager lot. Larry Summers, an economic advisor to President Obama, put it bluntly: "One of the challenges in our society is that the truth is kind of a disequalizer. One of the reasons that inequality has probably gone up in our society is that people are being treated closer to the way that they're supposed to be treated." [45](#)

It might be argued, in defense of the rhetoric of rising, that it describes the opportunity to compete on equal terms as an ideal worth aiming at, not as a fact of the world in which we live. But merit has a way of overreaching. It begins as an ideal but slides into a claim about the way things are.

Although the rhetoric of rising is aspirational, pointing to a promise that has yet to be redeemed, its articulation invariably turns congratulatory: "Here in America, everyone who works hard can rise." Like most powerful rhetoric, it commingles the aspirational with the congratulatory; it asserts the hope as if it were a fact.

Obama's rhetoric is a case in point. In a 2012 radio address he said, "This is a country where no matter what you look like or where you come from, if

you're willing to study and work hard, you can go as far as your talents will take you. You can make it if you try." [46](#)

Obama's listeners would not be mistaken to think their president was describing the way things actually worked in America, not offering an ideal of a more equal, more mobile society that he hoped to bring about. He spoke in a congratulatory vein, praising America for having achieved a society in which hard work, not inherited privilege, was the key to success.

And yet, as he continued, he shifted from congratulation to aspiration: "I am only the President of the United States today because of the chance my education gave me, and I want every child in America to have that chance. That's what I'm fighting for. And as long as I have the privilege of being your President, that's what I'm going to keep fighting for." [47](#)

This tendency to move from fact to hope and back again is not a slip of the tongue or philosophical confusion but a characteristic feature of political rhetoric. It plays out with special poignance in the rhetoric of rising. Its commingling of hope and fact muddies the meaning of winning and losing. If meritocracy is an aspiration, those who fall short can always blame the system; but if meritocracy is a fact, those who fall short are invited to blame themselves.

In recent years, they have been invited, above all, to blame themselves for failing to acquire a college degree. One of the most galling features of meritocratic hubris is its credentialism.



Credentialism:

THE LAST ACCEPTABLE PREJUDICE

For years, Michael Cohen had served as Donald Trump's personal attorney and fixer. In February 2019, he testified before Congress. By then he had turned on his former boss and was revealing some of the unsavory activities he undertook on Trump's behalf, including paying hush money to a porn star to prevent her from disclosing an affair with Trump. During his testimony, Cohen also revealed another task he had performed at Trump's behest: threatening to sue the colleges Trump had attended, and the College Board, if they ever made public his college grades or SAT scores. ¹

Trump was presumably embarrassed by his academic record and apparently feared that making it public would damage his presidential candidacy, or at least his reputation. Cohen highlighted the hypocrisy in Trump's attempt to hide his academic records. Some years earlier, Trump had insisted that President Obama make his academic records public. "I heard he was a terrible student, terrible," Trump declared in 2011. "How does a bad student go to Columbia and then to Harvard? ... Let him show his records." ²

Cohen's disclosure of his attempt to keep Trump's grades and SAT scores from public view attracted less attention than his more salacious testimony about paying off the porn star. But as a sign of the times, it was more consequential. What it revealed was the public significance of credentialism. By the 2000s, how well one did in college, or even on

college entrance exams, loomed large enough to cast glory or disrepute on a president. Donald Trump certainly thought so. He first attempted to discredit Obama by demanding his birth certificate, casting doubt on his citizenship. When that failed, he leveled against Obama the next most potent insult he could imagine, casting doubt on his meritocratic credentials.

WEAPONIZING COLLEGE CREDENTIALS

Trump's line of attack reflected his own insecurity. Throughout his candidacy and his presidency, Trump boasted often about his intellectual credentials. A study of presidential word choice found that he spoke at a fourth-grade vocabulary level, the lowest of any president in the past century; his own secretary of state reportedly described him as a "moron," and his secretary of defense said his understanding of world affairs was that of a fifth or sixth grader. Stung by these and other disparaging remarks about his intellect, Trump was at pains to insist that he was a "smart person," in fact a "very stable genius." Asked during his 2016 presidential campaign to name the foreign-policy experts he was consulting, he replied, "I'm speaking with myself, number one, because I have a very good brain and I've said a lot of things ... My primary consultant is myself." He repeatedly asserted that he had a high IQ and that his critics had low ones, an insult he directed especially against African Americans. ³

Enamored with the genetics of IQ, Trump often pointed out that his uncle had been a professor at MIT ("an academic genius"), evidence that he, Trump, had "good genes, very good genes." Shortly after appointing his first cabinet, he proclaimed, "We have by far the highest IQ of any Cabinet ever assembled!" In a bizarre speech to employees of the Central Intelligence Agency on the day after his inauguration, Trump sought to allay what he imagined to be doubts about his intellect: "Trust me, I'm, like, a smart person." ⁴

He frequently felt the need to remind audiences of his college credentials, having spent two years at Fordham before transferring to the University of Pennsylvania, where he took undergraduate classes at the Wharton School of Finance. He boasted that he went to "the hardest school to get into, the best school in the world ... super genius stuff." ⁵ Campaigning in 2016, he

complained that his need constantly to recite and defend his intellectual credentials arose from media bias against conservatives.

If I ran as a liberal Democrat, they would say I'm one of the smartest people anywhere in the world. It's true! But when you're a conservative Republican they try—oh, do they do a number. That's why I always start off: "Went to Wharton, was a good student, went there, went there, did this, built a fortune." You know I have to give my, like, credentials all the time, because we're a little disadvantaged. [6](#)

Though animated by his own grievances and insecurities, Trump's repeated insistence that he was "a smart person," however plaintive and comic it seemed to his critics, proved to be a political asset. It resonated with the aggrieved working-class supporters who attended his rallies and who, like him, resented the meritocratic hubris of elites. Trump's protestations displayed the humiliation a meritocratic society can inflict. He both reviled elites and craved their respect. At a campaign-style rally in 2017, he lashed out against elites, then claimed to be one himself:

Now, you know, I was a good student. I always hear about the elite. You know, the elite—they're elite? I went to better schools than they did. I was a better student than they were. I live in a bigger, more beautiful apartment. And I live in the White House too, which is really great. I think—you know what? I think we're the elites. They're not the elites. [7](#)

Trump was not the only political figure to display defensiveness in the face of questions about his meritocratic credentials. In 1987, during his first presidential campaign, Joe Biden took umbrage when a voter pressed him to say what law school he attended and where he placed in the class:

I think I probably have a much higher IQ than you do, I suspect. I went to law school on a full academic scholarship—the only one in my class to have a full academic scholarship ... and in fact ended up in the top half of my class. I was the outstanding student in the political science department at the end of my year. I graduated with

three degrees from undergraduate school and 165 credits—only needed 123 credits—and I’d be delighted to sit down and compare my IQ to yours. [8](#)

Fact-checking found that Biden’s reply was replete with exaggeration. He had received a partial scholarship based on financial need, finished toward the bottom of his class, received one undergraduate degree not three (though he did have a double major), and so on. [9](#) What is striking, however, is not that politicians inflate their college credentials, but that they feel the need to do so.

Even those whose meritocratic credentials are not in doubt sometimes invoke them with defensive self-righteousness. Consider the 2018 Senate confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh, nominated by Trump (and eventually confirmed) for a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. Late in the proceedings, Kavanaugh’s confirmation was placed in doubt when a woman accused him of having sexually assaulted her at a party during their high school years.

When senators questioned him about the alleged drunken sexual assault, Kavanaugh not only denied the charge, but offered an oddly incongruous meritocratic defense, describing how hard he worked during high school, and how he won admission to Yale College and later, Yale Law School.

Asked about apparent references in his high school yearbook to drinking and sexual exploits, he replied, “I was at the top of my class academically, busted my butt in school. Captain of the varsity basketball team. Got in Yale College. When I got into Yale College, got into Yale Law School ... That’s the number one law school in the country. I had no connections there. I got there by busting my tail in college.” [10](#)

Kavanaugh’s meritocratic credentials had not been challenged. It is hard to fathom their relevance to the question of whether, when he was eighteen years old, he had become drunk and sexually assaulted a young woman at a party. But by 2018, credentialism had become so pervasive a basis of judgment that it served as a kind of all-purpose rhetoric of credibility, deployed in moral and political combat far beyond the campus gates.

The weaponization of college credentials shows how merit can become a kind of tyranny. It is worth reconstructing how it came about. The age of globalization brought vast inequalities and stagnant wages for the working

class. In the U.S., the richest 10 percent captured most of the gains, and the bottom half received virtually none. Liberal and progressive parties of the 1990s and 2000s did not address this inequality directly, by seeking structural reform of the economy. Instead, they embraced market-driven globalization and addressed the uneven benefits it bestowed by seeking a fuller equality of opportunity.

This was the point of the rhetoric of rising. If barriers to achievement could be dismantled, then everyone would have an equal chance to succeed; regardless of race or class or gender, people could rise as far as their talent and effort would take them. And if opportunities were truly equal, those who rose highest could be said to deserve their success and the rewards it brings. This was the meritocratic promise. It was not a promise of greater equality, but a promise of greater and fairer mobility. It accepted that the rungs on the income ladder were growing farther apart and offered simply to help people compete more fairly to clamber up the rungs.

It is easy to see why some would find this political project less than inspiring, especially for political parties once dedicated to more demanding visions of justice and the common good. But put aside, for the moment, the question of whether the meritocratic ideal is an adequate basis for a just society and consider the attitudes toward success and failure it promotes.

EDUCATION AS THE ANSWER TO INEQUALITY

Those who embraced the meritocratic project knew that true equality of opportunity required more than rooting out discrimination. It required leveling the playing field, so that people from all social and economic backgrounds could equip themselves to compete effectively in a knowledge-based, global economy. This led the mainstream parties of the 1990s and 2000s to make education the centerpiece of their response to inequality, stagnant wages, and the loss of manufacturing jobs. “Think about every problem, every challenge we face,” said George H. W. Bush in 1991. “The solution to each starts with education.” In Britain, Tony Blair, setting out his centrist, reform-minded agenda for the Labour Party in 1996, put it emphatically: “Ask me for my three main priorities for government and I tell you: education, education and education.” [11](#)

Bill Clinton expressed the importance of education, and its connection to jobs, with a rhyming couplet: “What you can earn depends on what you can

learn.” In the new era of global competition, he argued, workers without a college degree would struggle to find good jobs at decent wages. “We think everybody ought to be able to go to college, because what you can earn depends on what you can learn.” Clinton invoked this couplet in speeches and remarks more than thirty times during his presidency. It reflected the common sense of the time and had bipartisan appeal. Senator John McCain, a Republican, often used it during his 2008 presidential campaign. [12](#)

Barack Obama also saw higher education as the solution to the economic woes of American workers. “In the old days,” he told an audience at a technology college in Brooklyn, “if you were willing to work hard, you didn’t necessarily need a great education.” [13](#)

If you’d just gone to high school, you might get a job at a factory or in the garment district. Or you might be able to just get a job that allowed you to earn your wages, keep pace with people who had a chance to go to college. But those days are over, and those days are not coming back.

We live in a 21st-century global economy. And in a global economy, jobs can go anywhere. Companies, they’re looking for the best-educated people, wherever they live ... Now you’ve got billions of people from Beijing to Bangalore to Moscow, all of whom are competing with you directly ... If you don’t have a good education, then it is going to be hard for you to find a job that pays a living wage. [14](#)

After delivering this hard news about global competition, Obama assured his audience that more education was the solution and concluded with an upbeat rendition of the rhetoric of rising: He would keep fighting “to make sure that no matter who you are, where you come from, what you look like, this country will always be a place where you can make it if you try.” [15](#)

Here then was the basic argument of liberal and progressive politics in the decades leading up to Brexit, Trump, and the populist revolt: The global economy, as if a fact of nature, had somehow come upon us and was here to stay. The central political question was not how to reconfigure it but how to adapt to it, and how to alleviate its devastating effect on the wages and job prospects of workers outside the charmed circle of the elite professions.

The answer: Improve the educational credentials of workers so that they, too, could “compete and win in the global economy.” If equality of opportunity was the primary moral and political project, expanding access to higher education was the overriding policy imperative.

Toward the end of the Clinton-Obama era, some commentators generally sympathetic to the Democratic Party questioned the meritocratic liberalism that had come to define it—embracing globalization, valorizing a college degree, and believing that the talented and well-credentialed deserved to land on top. Christopher Hayes, an author and host of an MSNBC television program, observed that in recent years the left had had its greatest successes on issues that involved “making the meritocracy more meritocratic,” such as combating racial discrimination, including women in higher education, and advancing gay rights. But it had failed in areas “that fall outside the meritocracy’s purview,” such as “mitigating rising income inequality.” [16](#)

Within the framework of a system that seeks equal opportunity rather than any semblance of equality in outcomes, it is inevitable that the education system will be asked to do the heavy lifting ... And as inequality steadily increases, we ask more and more of the educational system, looking for it to expiate the society’s other sins. [17](#)

Thomas Frank, an author with populist sensibilities, criticized liberals’ focus on education as the remedy for inequality: “To the liberal class, every big economic problem is really an education problem, a failure by the losers to learn the right skills and get the credentials everyone knows you’ll need in the society of the future.” Frank found this response to inequality implausible and self-serving:

[It] isn’t really an answer at all; it’s a moral judgment, handed down by the successful from the vantage of their own success. The professional class is defined by its educational attainment, and every time they tell the country that what it needs is more schooling, they are saying: Inequality is not a failure of the system; it is a failure of you. [18](#)

Frank argued that all the education talk distracted Democrats from thinking clearly about the policies that had led to inequality. Noting that productivity rose during the 1980s and 1990s but that wages did not, he doubted that inequality was due mainly to a failure of education. “The real problem was one of inadequate worker power, not inadequate worker smarts. The people who produced were losing their ability to demand a share in what they made. The people who owned were taking more and more.” Failing to see this led Democrats “to ignore what was happening in the real economy — from monopoly power to financialization to labor-management relations — in favor of a moral fantasy that required them to confront no one.” [19](#)

Frank’s mention of a “moral judgment handed down by the successful” touched on something important. Encouraging more people to go to college is a good thing. Making college more accessible to those of modest means is even better. But as a solution to inequality and the plight of workers who lost out in the decades of globalization, the single-minded focus on education had a damaging side effect: eroding the social esteem accorded those who had not gone to college.

It did so in two ways, both having to do with attitudes corrosive of the dignity of work and of the working class. First, most Americans do not have a college degree. For those who go about their day in the company of the managerial-professional classes, this can come as a surprise. Although graduation rates have climbed in recent decades, only about one in three American adults has graduated from a four-year college. [20](#) When meritocratic elites tie success and failure so closely to one’s ability to earn a college degree, they implicitly blame those without one for the harsh conditions they encounter in the global economy. They also absolve themselves of responsibility for promoting economic policies that heighten the wage premium a college degree commands.

Second, by telling workers that their inadequate education is to blame for their troubles, meritocrats moralize success and failure and unwittingly promote credentialism — an insidious prejudice against those who have not been to college.

The credentialist prejudice is a symptom of meritocratic hubris. As meritocratic assumptions tightened their hold in recent decades, elites fell into the habit of looking down on those who do not rise. The constant call for working people to improve their condition by getting a college degree, however well intentioned, eventually valorizes credentialism and

undermines social recognition and esteem for those who lack the credentials the system rewards.

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST

Obama was emblematic of the meritocratic thinking that by the early 2000s had become the common sense of the professional classes. As Jonathan Alter writes, “At some level Obama bought into the idea that top-drawer professionals had gone through a fair sorting process, the same process that had propelled him and Michelle to the Ivy League, and were therefore in some way deserving of their elevated status.” [21](#)

In a book chronicling the first year of Obama’s presidency, Alter observed that a quarter of his appointees had some connection (as alumni or faculty) to Harvard, and more than 90 percent of early appointees had advanced degrees. “Obama’s faith lay in cream rising to the top. Because he himself was a product of the great American postwar meritocracy, he could never fully escape seeing the world from the status ladder he had ascended.” [22](#)

Obama’s fondness for the highly credentialed persisted throughout his presidency. By the middle of his second term, two-thirds of his cabinet-rank appointees had attended an Ivy League college, and thirteen of twenty-one had attended Harvard or Yale. All but three held advanced degrees. [23](#)

Having well-educated people run the government is generally desirable, provided they possess sound judgment and a sympathetic understanding of working people’s lives—what Aristotle called practical wisdom and civic virtue. But history shows little connection between prestigious academic credentials and either practical wisdom or an instinct for the common good in the here and now. One of the most ruinous examples of credentialism gone awry is described in David Halberstam’s classic book *The Best and the Brightest*. It shows how John F. Kennedy assembled a team with glittering credentials who, for all their technocratic brilliance, led the United States into the folly of the Vietnam War. [24](#)

Alter saw a similarity between Kennedy’s team and Obama’s, who “shared the Ivy League as well as a certain arrogance and a detachment from the everyday lives of most Americans.” [25](#) As things turned out, Obama’s economic advisors contributed to a folly of their own, less lethal

than Vietnam but consequential nonetheless for the shape of American politics. Insisting on a Wall Street–friendly response to the financial crisis, they bailed out the banks without holding them to account, discredited the Democratic Party in the eyes of many working people, and helped pave the way to Trump.

This failure of political judgment was not unrelated to meritocratic hubris. Frank describes a “widely shared view among Democrats that Wall Street is a place of enormous meritocratic prestige, on a level equivalent to a high-end graduate school.” [26](#)

Obama deferred to Wall Street in so many ways because investment banking signifies professional status like almost nothing else. For the kind of achievement-conscious people who filled the administration, investment bankers were more than friends—they were fellow professionals; people of subtle minds, sophisticated jargon, and extraordinary innovativeness. [27](#)

Frank argues that this reflexive respect for investment bankers “blinded the Democrats to the problems of megabanks, to the need for structural change, and to the epidemic of fraud that overswept the business.” He cites Neil Barofsky, a former federal prosecutor who served as the government watchdog for the bank bailout, and who wrote a scathing book about what he saw. The book’s title and subtitle convey his conclusion—*Bailout: An Inside Account of How Washington Abandoned Main Street While Rescuing Wall Street* . [28](#)

While it is true that Wall Street executives had been generous donors to Obama’s campaign, his administration’s gentle treatment of the financial industry was not only political payback. Barofsky suggests a further, meritocratic explanation—the belief among policy makers that well-credentialed, sophisticated investment bankers deserved the massive amounts they were paid.

The Wall Street fiction that certain financial executives were preternaturally gifted supermen who deserved every penny of their staggering paychecks and bonuses was firmly ingrained in Treasury’s psyche. No matter that the financial crisis had demonstrated just how unremarkable the work of those executives

had turned out to be, that belief system endured at Treasury across administrations. If a Wall Street executive was contracted to receive a \$6.4 million “retention” bonus, the assumption was that he must be worth it. [29](#)

Beyond the role it may have played in policy-making, credentialism seeped into Democrats’ mode of expression in the 1990s and 2000s, and subtly reshaped the terms of public discourse. In every age, politicians and opinion makers, publicists and advertisers, reach for a language of judgment and evaluation they hope will persuade. Such rhetoric typically draws upon evaluative contrasts: just versus unjust, free versus unfree, progressive versus reactionary, strong versus weak, open versus closed. In recent decades, as meritocratic modes of thinking have gained ascendancy, the reigning evaluative contrast has become smart versus dumb.

Until recently, the adjective “smart” mainly described persons. In American English, to call someone “smart” is to praise his or her intelligence. (In British English, “clever” conveys this meaning.) As the digital age dawned, “smart” came to describe things—high-tech devices and machines such as “smart cars,” “smart phones,” “smart bombs,” “smart thermostats,” “smart toasters,” and so on. But the digital age arrived in tandem with the age of meritocracy; it is therefore not surprising that “smart” also came to describe ways of governing.

THE SMART THING TO DO

Prior to the 1980s, U.S. presidents rarely used the word “smart,” and when they did, it was typically in the traditional sense. (“The American people are smart.”) George H. W. Bush began using the word in its new, digital-age sense. He spoke of “smart cars,” “smart freeways,” “smart weapons,” “smart schools.” The use of “smart” in presidential rhetoric exploded with Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, each of whom used it more than 450 times. Obama used it more than 900 times. [30](#)

The same trend can be seen in general parlance. In books, the use of “smart” climbed steadily from 1975 to 2008, increasing nearly threefold; the use of “stupid” doubled. In *The New York Times*, the appearance of “smart” increased fourfold from 1980 to 2000, and by 2018 had nearly doubled again. [31](#)

As a measure of meritocracy's hold on the public mind, the growing frequency of "smart" is less revealing than its changing meaning. Not only did "smart" refer to digital systems and devices; it increasingly became a general term of praise, and a way of arguing for one policy rather than another. As an evaluative contrast, "smart versus dumb" began to displace ethical or ideological contrasts, such as "just versus unjust" or "right versus wrong." Both Clinton and Obama frequently argued that their favored policy was "not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do." This rhetorical tick suggested that, in a meritocratic age, being smart carried more persuasive heft than being right.

"Fighting AIDS worldwide is not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing," Clinton assured the American public. "In our tightly connected world, infectious disease anywhere is a threat to public health everywhere." Adding a prescription drug benefit to Medicare was "not just the right thing to do; medically speaking, it's the smart thing to do." Raising the minimum wage was "not only the right thing to do for working families; it's the smart thing to do for our economy." [32](#)

Employing the same idiom, Obama declared that "empowering women isn't just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do. When women succeed, nations are more safe, more secure, and more prosperous." Speaking before the U.N. General Assembly, he said the same of development aid: "It's not just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do." Obama invoked this double-barreled appeal to ethics and smarts on issues ranging from immigration reform to extending unemployment insurance. [33](#)

The "smart thing to do" always pointed to a prudential or self-interested reason that did not depend on moral considerations. Clinton and Obama were of course not the first political leaders to buttress moral arguments with prudential ones; what is striking is that the prudential considerations were now a matter of being "smart."

Defending one's policies as smart rather than dumb is closely akin to credentialist ways of talking about people. When Hillary Clinton, newly appointed as secretary of state, announced several of her State Department deputies, she made this connection explicit: "In my testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, I spoke about the use of smart power.

At the heart of smart power are smart people, and these talented individuals are among the smartest I know.” [34](#)

At a time of intense partisanship, the language of smart and dumb has an understandable appeal; it seems to offer a refuge from ideological combat, a mode of political argument that steps back from moral controversy and seeks consensus on the basis of what’s smart, sensible, prudent. Obama was drawn to this seemingly non-partisan, meritocratic way of thinking and speaking. On issues related to racial, ethnic, and gender equality, Obama made eloquent, full-throated moral arguments. But when it came to foreign affairs or economic policy, he instinctively reached for the non-ideological language of smart versus dumb.

The most important speech of his early political career came in 2002, when, as a state senator in Illinois, he declared his opposition to the Iraq War. It was this stance that, six years later, would distinguish him from Hillary Clinton and help propel him to his party’s nomination for president. Even before ascending to the national political stage, Obama saw political choices in terms of smart versus dumb. “I don’t oppose all wars,” the young state senator told the anti-war rally in Chicago. “What I am opposed to is a dumb war.” [35](#)

When, during his second term as president, Obama was asked to articulate his foreign policy doctrine, he summed it up in a single, blunt sentence: “Don’t do stupid shit.” [36](#)

When Obama found himself at loggerheads with Republicans in 2013 over how to reduce the budget deficit while avoiding automatic, across-the-board spending cuts, he again resorted to the language of smart versus dumb. “There is a sensible way of doing things, and there is a dumb way of doing things,” he told shipbuilders in Virginia. At a press conference a few days later, he said, “We shouldn’t be making a series of dumb, arbitrary cuts.” Instead, he favored “smart spending cuts” and “smart entitlement reform.” [37](#)

Obama maintained that the smart spending cuts and smart revenue raising measures he favored were sensible, non-partisan measures that should be exempt from ideological wrangling. “I don’t think that is partisan. It’s the kind of approach that I’ve proposed for two years. It’s what I ran on last year.” [38](#) He did not explain how a policy that, by his own account, he ran on during his presidential campaign could be considered non-partisan.

ELITES LOOKING DOWN

Elites seemed oblivious not only to the partisan character of their “smart” policies, but also to the hubristic attitudes their persistent talk of “smart” and “dumb” expressed. By 2016, many working people chafed under the sense that well-schooled elites looked down on them with condescension. This complaint, which burst forth in the populist backlash against elites, was not without warrant. Survey research bears out what many working-class voters sensed; at a time when racism and sexism are out of favor (discredited though not eliminated), credentialism is the last acceptable prejudice. In the United States and Europe, disdain for the poorly educated is more pronounced, or at least more readily acknowledged, than prejudice against other disfavored groups.

In a series of surveys conducted in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Belgium, a team of social psychologists found that college-educated respondents have more bias against less-educated people than they do against other disfavored groups. The researchers surveyed the attitudes of well-educated Europeans toward a range of people who are typically victims of discrimination—Muslims, people of Turkish decent living in Western Europe, people who are poor, obese, blind, and less educated. They found that the poorly educated were disliked most of all. [39](#)

In a similar study conducted in the United States, the researchers offered a revised list of disfavored groups, including African Americans, the working class, and people who are poor, obese, and less-educated. The American respondents also ranked the less-educated at the bottom. [40](#)

Beyond showing the disparaging views that college-educated elites have of less-educated people, the authors of the study offer several intriguing conclusions. First, they challenge the familiar notion that educated elites are morally more enlightened than people with less education, and therefore more tolerant. The authors conclude that well-educated elites are no less biased than less-educated folk; “it is rather that [their] targets of prejudice are different.” Moreover, the elites are unembarrassed by their prejudice. They may denounce racism and sexism but are unapologetic about their negative attitudes toward the less-educated. [41](#)

Second, the reason for this lack of embarrassment relates to the meritocratic emphasis on individual responsibility. Elites dislike those with lesser educations more than they dislike poor people or members of the

working class, because they consider poverty and class status to be, at least in part, due to factors beyond one's control. By contrast, they consider low educational achievement to represent a failure of individual effort, and therefore the fault of those who do not make it to college. "Compared to the working class, the less-educated were perceived to be more responsible and more blameworthy, they elicited more anger, and they were liked less." [42](#)

Third, this adverse judgment of the less-educated is not unique to elites; it is shared by the less-educated respondents themselves. This shows how deeply the meritocratic view of achievement has penetrated social life and how demoralizing it can be for those who do not go to college. "There are no indications that less educated people resist the negative attributions made about them." To the contrary, they "even seem to internalize" these adverse judgments. The "less educated are seen as responsible and blameworthy for their situation, even by the less-educated themselves." [43](#)

Finally, the authors suggest that the relentless emphasis, in a meritocratic society, on the importance of going to college reinforces the social stigma against those who lack a college degree. "The suggestion that education is a universal social problem solver may increase the risk that groups with low levels of socioeconomic status will be especially negatively evaluated while strengthening the ideology of meritocracy." This makes people more willing to accept inequality and more likely to believe that success reflects merit. "If education is regarded as an individual's own responsibility, then people are likely to be less critical of social inequality that stems from differences in education ... If educational outcomes are seen as largely deserved, then their consequences are, too." [44](#)

GOVERNMENT BY DEGREE

By the 2000s, citizens without a college degree were not only looked down upon; in the United States and Western Europe, they were virtually absent from elective office. In the U.S. Congress, 95 percent of House members and 100 percent of senators are college graduates. This means that the credentialed few govern the uncredentialed many. Although about two-thirds of American adults do not have a college degree, only a tiny handful are members of Congress.

It has not always been this way. Although the well-educated have always been disproportionately represented in Congress, as recently as the early

1960s about one-fourth of senators and one-fourth of members of the House were elected despite lacking a college degree. Over the past half decade, Congress has become more diverse with regard to race, ethnicity, and gender, but less diverse with regard to educational credentials and class. [45](#)

One consequence of the diploma divide is that very few members of the working class ever make it to elective office. In the U.S., about half of the labor force is employed in working-class jobs, defined as manual labor, service industry, and clerical jobs. But fewer than 2 percent of the members of Congress worked in such jobs before their election. In state legislatures, only 3 percent come from working-class backgrounds. [46](#)

Credentialism is also changing the face of representative government in Britain and Europe. In Britain, as in the U.S., those with diplomas govern those without. In the United Kingdom as a whole, about 70 percent do not have a university degree; in Parliament, only 12 percent do not. Nearly nine of ten MPs have degrees; one-fourth of MPs went to Oxford or Cambridge. [47](#)

Over the past four decades, Britain's Labour Party has undergone an especially striking shift in the educational and class background of its MPs. In 1979, 41 percent of Labour MPs were elected to Parliament without having received a university degree; by 2017, only 16 percent managed to do so.

This rising tide of credentialism was accompanied by a precipitous decline in working-class MPs, who now constitute only 4 percent of the House of Commons. The class composition of the Labour Party, which traditionally represented the working class, underwent the most dramatic change. In 1979, 37 percent of Labour MPs came from a manual occupation background. By 2015, only 7 percent did. As Oliver Heath, a British political scientist, observes, "Such changes in MPs' occupational background have made parliament much less representative of the broader British population, and the Labour party much less representative of the working class whose interests it was traditionally supposed to represent." [48](#)

The less-educated members of society are also disappearing from parliaments throughout Western Europe, where the pattern is similar to the American and British experience. In Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, representative government has become almost exclusively the preserve of the highly credentialed. Even in rich countries such as these,

about 70 percent of the adult population do not have college degrees. But very few of them find their way into parliament. [49](#)

In Germany's Bundestag, 83 percent of MPs are university graduates; fewer than 2 percent have the high school vocational track (*Hauptschule*) as their highest degree. In France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, 82 to 94 percent of representatives in parliament have university degrees. Among cabinet members in these countries, the educational credentials are even higher. In Angela Merkel's 2013 cabinet, for example, nine of the fifteen ministers had PhDs, and all but one of the others had master's degrees. The cachet of a PhD is so considerable in German politics that scandals rage over plagiarism in doctoral dissertations, forcing cabinet ministers to resign. [50](#)

The virtual absence from government of non-college graduates is a development of the meritocratic age. But it is not unprecedented. It is more than a little troubling to notice that this is a reversion to the way things were before most working people had the right to vote. The highly credentialed profile of today's European parliaments resembles the one that prevailed in the late nineteenth century, when property qualifications limited suffrage. In Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium, most members of mid- to late-nineteenth-century parliaments had college degrees. [51](#)

This changed in the twentieth century, when universal suffrage and the rise of socialist and social democratic parties democratized the composition of parliaments. From the 1920s to the 1950s, MPs without college degrees served in substantial numbers, accounting for one-third to one-half of legislators. Beginning in the 1960s, the portion of degree holders began to climb, and by the 2000s, non-college graduates were as rare in national legislatures as they were in the days of aristocrats and landed gentry. [52](#)

Some might argue that government by well-educated university graduates is something to welcome not regret. Surely we want highly qualified engineers to build our bridges and well-trained doctors to perform our appendectomies. So why not seek elected representatives who attended the best universities? Aren't highly educated leaders more likely than those with less-distinguished credentials to give us sound public policies and reasoned political discourse?

No, not necessarily. Even a cursory glance at the parlous state of political discourse in Congress and in the parliaments of Europe should give us

pause. Governing well requires practical wisdom and civic virtue—an ability to deliberate about the common good and to pursue it effectively. But neither of these capacities is developed very well in most universities today, even those with the highest reputations. And recent historical experience suggests little correlation between the capacity for political judgment, which involves moral character as well as insight, and the ability to score well on standardized tests and win admission to elite universities. The notion that “the best and the brightest” are better at governing than their less-credentialed fellow citizens is a myth born of meritocratic hubris.

Two of the four iconic American presidents on Mount Rushmore (George Washington and Abraham Lincoln) lacked a college degree. The last U.S. president without a diploma, Harry S. Truman, is generally ranked among America’s best presidents. [53](#)

Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Harvard alumnus himself, conceived and enacted the New Deal with an eclectic team of advisors more capable but far less credentialed than those who served recent Democratic presidents. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that in the 1930s, the economics profession did not exert the hold on Washington policy-making it acquired in recent decades. [54](#) Thomas Frank describes the varied backgrounds of those who launched the New Deal:

Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt’s closest confidant, was a social worker from Iowa. Robert Jackson, the U.S. Attorney General whom Roosevelt appointed to the Supreme Court, was a lawyer who had no law degree. Jesse Jones, who ran Roosevelt’s bailout program, was a businessman from Texas with no qualms about putting the nation’s most prominent financial institutions into receivership. Marriner Eccles, the visionary whom Roosevelt appointed to run the Federal Reserve, was a small-town banker from Utah with no advanced degrees. Henry Wallace, who was probably the nation’s greatest agriculture secretary, studied at Iowa State. [55](#)

The rising credentialism of recent decades has also failed to improve governance in the United Kingdom. Today, only 7 percent of the British population attends private schools, and fewer than 1 percent attend Oxford or Cambridge universities. But the governing elites are drawn disproportionately from these places. Nearly two-thirds of Boris Johnson’s

2019 cabinet attended private schools, and almost half are Oxbridge graduates. Since World War II, most Conservative cabinet ministers, and about a third of ministers in Labour governments, have come from private school backgrounds. ⁵⁶ But one of the most successful British governments since the war was its least credentialed and most broadly representative in class terms.

In 1945, Clement Attlee's Labour Party defeated Winston Churchill's Conservatives. Attlee was an Oxford graduate, but only one in four of his cabinet ministers came from private schools, a lower proportion than in any British cabinet since. Seven of his ministers had worked as coal miners. ⁵⁷

Attlee's highly regarded foreign secretary, Ernest Bevin, who became one of the architects of the postwar world, had left school at the age of eleven and risen through the ranks as a union leader. Herbert Morrison, leader of the House of Commons and deputy prime minister, had left school at fourteen and risen to prominence through local government, helping create London's public transport system. The health minister, Aneurin Bevan, who had left school at thirteen and worked as a miner in Wales, led the creation of Britain's National Health Service. Attlee's government, considered "the most significant reforming administration of twentieth century Britain," empowered the working classes and, according to his biographer, "set the ethical terms on which Britain's new social contract was founded." ⁵⁸

Turning Congress and parliaments into the exclusive preserve of the credentialed classes has not made government more effective, but it has made it less representative. It has also alienated working people from mainstream parties, especially those of the center-left, and polarized politics along educational lines. One of the deepest divides in politics today is between those with and those without a college degree.

THE DIPLOMA DIVIDE

In 2016, two-thirds of whites without a college degree voted for Donald Trump. Hillary Clinton won more than 70 percent of voters with advanced degrees. Electoral studies found that education, not income, best predicted support for Trump. Among voters with similar incomes, those with more education voted for Clinton, while those with less voted for Trump. ⁵⁹

The diploma divide accounted for the most significant vote swings from the previous presidential election. In 48 of the 50 counties with the highest

proportion of college graduates, Hillary Clinton actually did better than Barack Obama four years earlier. In 47 of the 50 counties with the lowest proportion of college graduates, she did considerably worse. No wonder Trump proclaimed, celebrating one of his early primary victories, “I love the poorly educated!” [60](#)

Throughout much of the twentieth century, parties of the left attracted those with less education, while parties of the right attracted those with more. In the age of meritocracy, this pattern has been reversed. Today, people with more education vote for left-of-center parties, and those with less support parties of the right. The French economist Thomas Piketty has shown that this reversal has unfolded, in striking parallel, in the U.S., the U.K., and France. [61](#)

From the 1940s to the 1970s, those without a university degree voted reliably for the Democratic Party in the United States, the Labour Party in Britain, and the various left-of-center parties in France. During the 1980s and 1990s, the diploma gap narrowed considerably, and by the 2000s and 2010s, parties of the left had lost the support of voters without a college education. [62](#)

The reversal is complicated by the fact that wealthy voters still generally support parties of the right, even as the majority of highly educated voters favor the center-left. And in the United States, African American, Latino, and Asian American voters of all educational backgrounds continue to support the Democratic Party. But by the 2010s, education had become the most decisive political divide, and parties that once represented workers increasingly represented meritocratic elites. [63](#)

In the United States, as the Democratic Party came to be identified with the professional classes, white voters without a college education turned away from it. This trend continued after the election of Trump. In the 2018 congressional elections, 61 percent of non-college-educated white voters supported Republicans, and only 37 percent voted for Democrats. The deepening diploma divide can also be seen by looking at the thirty congressional districts with the highest proportion of college graduates. In 1992, when Bill Clinton was elected president, these districts divided evenly; half elected Democrats to Congress, and half elected Republicans. In 2018, Democrats won all but three of them. [64](#)

In the United Kingdom, the Labour Party's base of support has seen a similar shift. As recently as the early 1980s, about one-third of Labour Party MPs came from working-class backgrounds. By 2010, fewer than one in ten did. According to Oliver Heath, the decline of working-class MPs in the Labour ranks had a "substantial impact on the relative popularity of the party among working class voters," who increasingly viewed the party as "ruled by an out of touch metropolitan elite." [65](#)

The disaffection was first reflected in declining turnout among less-educated voters. Then, in 2016, it found expression in the vote to leave the European Union. Low-income voters were more likely than high-income voters to favor Brexit. But educational differences were more pronounced. Over 70 percent of voters with no college education voted for Brexit, while over 70 percent of those with a postgraduate degree voted to remain. [66](#)

The pattern can also be seen in regional voting disparities. Of the twenty local authorities with the lowest percentage of college graduates, fifteen voted to leave. Of the twenty most highly educated areas, all voted to remain. [67](#)

In France, despite its different party system, the same educational divide has developed over the past few decades. Since the 1980s, non-university graduates have moved away from the Socialists and other left parties, which have become the parties of educational elites. In the 1950s and 1960s, left parties were working-class parties; the share of non-graduates voting for the left was about 20 percentage points higher than among university graduates. By the 1980s, the gap had closed, and by the 2010s, it had reversed; now the share of university graduates voting for the left is 10 percentage points higher than the share of non-graduates doing so—a shift of 30 points. [68](#)

Piketty speculates that the transformation of left parties from worker parties into parties of intellectual and professional elites may explain why they have not responded to the rising inequality of recent decades. Meanwhile, those who lack high-powered educational credentials resent the globalization that elites promote, and turn to populist, nativist candidates, such as Trump in the United States, and Marine Le Pen, who leads a nationalist, anti-immigrant party in France. [69](#)

In 2017, Emmanuel Macron, a liberal centrist, defeated Le Pen for the presidency of France. Macron's election was hailed by some commentators as a sign that the populist revolt could be quelled by a young, attractive

candidate offering a market-friendly globalization program reminiscent of Clinton, Blair, and Obama. Like his meritocratic counterparts in the U.S. and the U.K., he drew his strongest support from voters with university educations and advanced degrees. [70](#)

But Macron's popularity soon faded, and his government was confronted with a series of street protests by citizens who donned the yellow safety vests (*gilets jaunes*) worn by stranded motorists. The protesters, mainly middle- and working-class residents of areas outside Paris, were angered by an increase in gas taxes, Macron's aloof manner, and economic policies that did little for those left behind by globalization. When, in the midst of the crisis, a senior politician from Macron's party was asked what mistakes by the government had provoked the protests, he replied, "We were probably too intelligent, too subtle." [71](#)

The relentless credentialism of our day has driven working-class voters toward populist and nationalist parties and deepened the divide between those with and those without a university degree. It has also led to increasingly partisan views of higher education, the institution most emblematic of the meritocratic project. As recently as 2015, Republicans and Democrats alike said that colleges and universities have a positive effect on the country. This is no longer the case. Today, 59 percent of Republicans believe that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country, and only 33 percent view higher education favorably. By contrast, Democrats overwhelmingly believe (67 percent to 18 percent) that colleges and universities have a positive effect. [72](#)

One of the casualties of meritocracy's triumph may be the loss of broad public support for higher education. Once widely seen as an engine of opportunity, the university has become, at least for some, a symbol of credentialist privilege and meritocratic hubris.

The rhetoric of rising, with its single-minded focus on education as the answer to inequality, is partly to blame. Building a politics around the idea that a college degree is a condition of dignified work and social esteem has a corrosive effect on democratic life. It devalues the contributions of those without a diploma, fuels prejudice against less-educated members of

society, effectively excludes most working people from representative government, and provokes political backlash.

TECHNOCRATIC TALK

Closely connected to these credentialist ills is the technocratic turn of public discourse. The more policy-making is described as a matter of “smart versus dumb,” the greater the case for having “smart” people (experts and elites) decide things, rather than allowing citizens to debate and decide what policies to enact. For meritocratic elites, the rhetoric of “smart” and “dumb” seems to offer a non-partisan alternative to moral and ideological disagreement. But such disagreement lies at the heart of democratic politics. Too determined an effort to rise above the messy terrain of partisan disagreement can lead to a technocratic public discourse that diverts politics from questions of justice and the common good.

Barack Obama is a case in point. When speaking about redeeming the promise of equal rights for all Americans, his rhetoric could soar to heights of eloquence unmatched by any political figure of his day. His “Amazing Grace” eulogy in Charleston, South Carolina, honoring the memory of parishioners murdered in church by a hate-filled gunman, was one of the most stirring speeches by an American president in modern times.

And yet, when it came to his view of democratic governance, Obama was at heart a technocrat. As this may seem a harsh claim about a popular president, let me explain. To govern a democratic society requires contending with disagreement. Governing in the face of disagreement presupposes a view about how disagreements arise, and how they might be overcome in this or that moment, for this or that public purpose. Obama believed that the primary source of democratic disagreement is that ordinary citizens lack sufficient information.

If lack of information is the problem, the solution is for those with a fuller grasp of the facts to make decisions on behalf of their fellow citizens, or at least to enlighten them, to tell them what they need to know to make sensible decisions of their own. Presidential leadership is less about moral persuasion than about gathering and promulgating facts.

Obama articulated this vision of governing with remarkable clarity in a 2007 speech to Google employees, early in his campaign for the presidency. One of the things he had learned while traveling the country, he told them, is that “the American people at their core are a decent people. There’s a

generosity of spirit there, and there's common sense there, but it's not tapped." The reason:

Mainly people—they're just misinformed, or they are too busy, they're trying to get their kids to school, they're working, they just don't have enough information, or they're not professionals at sorting out all the information that's out there, and so our political process gets skewed. But if you give them good information, their instincts are good and they will make good decisions. And the president has the bully pulpit to give them good information. [73](#)

Ever since Theodore Roosevelt coined the term a century earlier, the "bully pulpit" has referred to the presidency as a place of moral inspiration and exhortation. Now the bully pulpit would be a venue for facts and data, for good information. This is the essence of a technocratic conception of politics, and it carries more than a whiff of meritocratic hubris. If the ordinary people who populate the land, however "decent," are "not professionals" at sorting out information, then the true professionals must do the sorting for them and provide them the facts they need.

Obama saw this as the way to heal America's "skewed" political process. The challenge was not to break up the large concentrations of economic power that bore down on the political process, or to awaken in the public a keener sense of the common good. It was to provide better, more accurate information. "I'm really looking forward to doing that, because I am a big believer in reason and facts and evidence and science and feedback," he told his Google audience. "I want to restore that sense of decisions being based on facts to the White House." [74](#)

It might be thought that this statement of technocratic faith was intended mainly to win supporters in the tech industry. But throughout his presidency and since, Obama has been true to this vision of politics. Further examples of this way of thinking highlight the affinity between technocratic politics and neoliberalism. To a far greater extent than previous presidents, Obama drew upon jargon familiar among academic economists and corporate executives. In making his case for health care reform, for example, he spoke less about the moral argument for universal coverage than about the need "to bend the cost curve," by which he meant reducing the rising cost of health expenditures. Although "bending the cost curve" did not stir much

passion on the hustings, he used some version of this phrase more than sixty times in arguing the merits of his health care plan. [75](#)

In recent years, economists have argued for the use of market incentives to elicit desirable behavior. This emphasis on incentives has become so widespread that it has given rise to a new verb, “incentivize.” Like many social scientists, management consultants, and business executives of the early twenty-first century, Obama embraced “incentivize” as a way of describing how market mechanisms could achieve desired outcomes. He offered policies to “incentivize” technological development, small business hiring, clean energy development, improved water management, good cybersecurity practices, weatherization programs, healthier nutrition, efficient health care delivery, positive school climates, responsible business conduct, and a host of other goals.

Incentivizing was a technocratic concept that fit well with Obama’s instinct for avoiding partisan or ideological wrangling. It deployed a financial inducement to bring about a public purpose, and so seemed to strike a comfortable middle ground between a government mandate and an unfettered market choice. Where previous presidents had scarcely used the word, Obama spoke of “incentivizing” this or that behavior on more than one hundred occasions. [76](#)

More than any other aspect of his political rhetoric, Obama’s constant talk of “smart” policies highlighted the connection between technocracy and meritocracy. For Obama, “smart” was the ultimate term of praise: “smart diplomacy,” “smart foreign policy,” “smart regulations,” “smart growth,” “smart spending cuts,” “smart investments in education,” “smart immigration policy,” “smart infrastructure projects,” “smart law enforcement,” “smart government,” “smart trade policy,” “smart energy policy,” “smart climate policy,” “smart entitlement reform,” “smart market reforms,” “smart environmental regulations,” “smart counterterrorism policy,” “climate-smart agriculture,” “smart development,” “smart market-oriented innovation,” and above all, “smart grids.” During his presidency, Obama spoke in praise of “smart grids” or “smart grid technologies” on more than one hundred occasions. Overall, he used the adjective “smart” in connection with policies and programs more than nine hundred times. [77](#)

One of the defects of the technocratic approach to politics is that it places decision-making in the hands of elites, and so disempowers ordinary

citizens. Another is that it abandons the project of political persuasion. Incentivizing people to act responsibly—to conserve energy or to watch their weight or to observe ethical business practices—is not only an alternative to coercing them; it is also an alternative to persuading them.

TECHNOCRACY VERSUS DEMOCRACY

The ideologically evasive, economistic talk emanating from meritocratic elites has coincided with a time when public discourse is increasingly rude and shrill, with partisans shouting and tweeting past one another. What the technocratic discourse and the shouting matches have in common is a failure to engage in a substantive way with the moral convictions that animate democratic citizens; neither cultivates the habit of reasoning together about competing conceptions of justice and the common good.

The populist upheavals of 2016—the Brexit vote in Britain and the election of Trump in the United States—repudiated meritocratic elites and the neoliberal, technocratic approach to politics. Replying to economists’ predictions that leaving the European Union would bring economic hardship to the United Kingdom, a leading Brexit proponent replied, “The people in this country have had enough of experts.” [78](#)

For his part, Obama struggled to make sense of the political earthquake that occurred at the end of his presidency. In 2018, two years after Trump was elected to succeed him, Obama conceded that proponents of globalization “did not adapt quickly enough to the fact that there were people being left behind.” The Washington consensus “got a little too comfortable. Particularly after the Cold War, you had this period of great smugness on the part of America and American elites thinking we got this all figured out.” [79](#)

But Obama’s primary diagnosis of polarized politics in the age of Trump had to do with the public’s inability to agree on basic facts. The reason we are “seeing so much gridlock and venom and polarization in our politics,” he said, is partly because “we don’t have a common baseline of facts and information.” Those who watched Fox News and those who read *The New York Times* inhabited “entirely different realities,” with “not just different opinions but different facts ... It’s like, epistemological.” [80](#)

He offered a vivid illustration of what he saw as clashing realities:

The biggest challenge we're going to have over the next 10, 15, 20 years is to return to a civic conversation in which if I say this is a chair, we agree this is a chair. Now we can disagree on whether it's a nice chair, whether we should replace the chair, whether you want to move it over there. But you can't say it's an elephant. [81](#)

Of course, the factual disputes that figure in political debate are not as simple as describing a piece of furniture. But the "elephant" in the room was climate change. What Obama meant is that it is hard to have a reasoned debate about climate change with people who deny its existence, or the human role in bringing it about.

Obama surely had in mind that his successor, abetted by climate change deniers, had withdrawn the United States from the Paris climate accord that he, Obama, had signed. He attributed this not only to ideological disagreement but to a rejection of science by Trump and his Republican supporters.

In fact, the slogan "I believe in science" has become a rallying cry for Democrats. Hillary Clinton proclaimed it in her speech accepting the nomination in 2016, Obama used it as president, and a number of candidates seeking the 2020 presidential nomination made it a refrain on the campaign trail. That the slogan implicitly relegates science to the realm of faith seems not to have diminished its popularity. [82](#)

In support of his long-held belief in the primacy of facts, Obama was fond of quoting Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who once told an obdurate opponent, "You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts." In telling the story, Obama sometimes added that Moynihan "was very smart" and his opponent "wasn't as smart." [83](#)

But attributing political disagreement to a simple refusal to face facts or accept science misunderstands the interplay of facts and opinion in political persuasion. The idea that we should all agree on the facts, as a pre-political baseline, and then proceed to debate our opinions and convictions, is a technocratic conceit. Political debate is often about how to identify and characterize the facts relevant to the controversy in question. Whoever succeeds in framing the facts is already a long way to winning the argument. Moynihan to the contrary, our opinions direct our perceptions; they do not arrive on the scene only after the facts are cut and dried.

DEBATING CLIMATE CHANGE

If the primary source of opposition to action on climate change were a lack of information or a refusal to accept science, one would expect opposition to be stronger among those with less education and scientific knowledge. But this is not the case. Studies of public opinion show that the more people know about science, the more polarized are their views on climate change.

Republicans are more skeptical than Democrats about global warming, and the partisan divide increases with education. Among Republicans with a high school education or less, 57 percent believe global warming is generally exaggerated. Among Republicans who are college graduates, 74 percent think so. Among Democrats, more education leads to greater concern with climate change. Of Democrats with a high school education or less, 27 percent consider global warming exaggerated; of Democrats with college degrees, only 15 percent think so. [84](#)

The partisan gap in climate change concern is thus almost twice as large (59 percent) among those with college degrees as among those with a high school education (30 percent). The same pattern holds true of beliefs about the human role in bringing about climate change. Asked whether “global warming is caused by natural changes in the environment,” most Republicans say “yes,” and most Democrats say “no.” But the partisan gap among college graduates (53 percent) is much greater than among those with less education (19 percent). [85](#)

More detailed studies have found that political polarization on climate change tracks not only general levels of education but also scientific knowledge. People with greater scientific knowledge, as measured by science courses taken and tests of scientific literacy, are more likely than those who know less about science to adhere to their party’s views on climate change. [86](#)

These findings challenge the idea that those unwilling to support measures to alleviate climate change are simply ill-informed about science. The partisan divide on climate change is not mainly about facts and information but about politics. It is a mistake to assume that the more people know about science, the more likely they are to converge on measures to combat climate change. The technocrat’s belief that, if only we could agree on the facts, we could then have a reasoned debate about policy, misconceives the project of political persuasion.

Speaking in 2018 at MIT, Obama imagined the rational debate the country could have about climate change, if only everyone agreed on the basic facts:

You and I can have an argument about climate change in which you conclude, “we’re not going to stop the Chinese and the Indians from burning a bunch of coal, it’s gone on for a pretty long time, we’re just going to have to adapt, and maybe we’ll invent some new energy source in the nick of time, and that’s why I’m opposed to the Paris Accords.”

I’ll come back and say, “well no, it turns out if we just invest in some smart technology and we create a smart regulatory framework that incentivizes investment in clean energy, we can actually solve this problem now, and if we don’t it’s going to be catastrophic.” [87](#)

Obama wished we could have a wholesome debate such as this, and he lamented that the climate change deniers had made it impossible. [88](#)

But such a debate, even if possible, would be an impoverished mode of political argument. It assumes that our only choice is between resignation and imprudence on the one hand, and a value-neutral technocratic fix on the other. But this misses the deeper moral and political considerations that underlie the climate change controversy.

The appeal of the technocratic position, but also its weakness, is its seemingly frictionless value neutrality. Talk of “smart technology” and “smart regulatory frameworks” glides over the moral and political questions that make climate change a daunting and difficult issue: What would it take to counter the outsize influence of the fossil fuel industry on democratic politics? Should we reconsider the consumerist attitudes that lead us to treat nature instrumentally, as a dumping ground for what Pope Francis has called our “throwaway culture”? [89](#) And what about those who oppose government action to reduce carbon emissions, not because they reject science, but because they do not trust government to act in their interest, especially in a large-scale reconfiguration of the economy, and do not trust the technocratic elites who would design and implement this reconfiguration?

These are not scientific questions to be answered by experts. They are questions about power, morality, authority, and trust, which is to say they

are questions for democratic citizens.

One of the failures of the well-credentialed, meritocratic elites who have governed for the past four decades is that they have not done very well at putting questions such as these at the heart of political debate. Now, as we find ourselves wondering whether democratic norms will survive, complaints about the hubris of meritocratic elites and the narrowness of their technocratic vision may seem trifling. But theirs was the politics that led to this moment, that produced the discontent that populist authoritarians exploit. Facing up to the failures of meritocracy and technocracy is an indispensable step toward addressing that discontent and reimagining a politics of the common good.



Success Ethics

Consider two societies, both unequal, and to the same degree. Of every hundred dollars in national income, the richest 20 percent receive \$62, while the poorest 20 percent get only \$1.70. If you pooled the entire income of the bottom half of the society, you would have only \$12.50, far less than the amount taken in by the richest 1 percent alone (\$20.20). Disparities of wealth are even greater. ¹

If you are troubled by stark inequalities of income and wealth, you might well consider these two societies unjust. But before deciding, you might ask for some further information. You might want to know, for example, how these unequal distributions arose.

MERITOCRACY VERSUS ARISTOCRACY

Imagine, then, that the first society is an aristocracy, in which income and wealth are determined by the accident of birth and passed down from one generation to the next. Those born to noble families are wealthy, and those born to peasant families are poor. The same will be true of their children and their children's children. And imagine that the second society is a meritocracy. Its inequalities in income and wealth are not the result of hereditary privilege but the result of what people have earned through effort and talent.

Learning this would likely lead you to prefer the second society to the first. An aristocracy is unjust, because it consigns people to the class of their birth. It does not let them rise. A meritocracy, by contrast, enables people to improve their condition by exercising their talent and ingenuity. This is a powerful argument in its favor. To be sure, a meritocracy does not do away with inequality. Precisely because people differ in their talents and ambitions, some rise higher than others. But at least it can be said that these inequalities reflect people's merits rather than the circumstances of their birth.

Those who worry about inequality might still press for further information. They will suspect that, even in the meritocratic society, at least some of those at the top have benefited from a favorable starting point in life—loving, supportive, and possibly affluent families, good schools with dedicated teachers, and so on. Before declaring the meritocratic society just, these skeptics will want to know that policies are in place to ensure that all children, regardless of family background, have the educational and cultural opportunities to reach their full potential.

One way of thinking about what makes for a just society is to ask what kind of society you would choose if you did not know whether you would grow up in a rich family or a poor one. By this standard, most people would agree that a meritocracy with truly equal opportunity is more just than an aristocracy. But for the moment, put the question of justice aside and consider another feature of the two unequal societies we have imagined. Suppose you knew in advance whether you would land on top or on the bottom. Which of these two societies would you rather live in if you were rich, and which would you prefer if you were poor?

Remember, both societies are highly unequal. If you land in the top 1 percent, your average income will be (let's imagine) \$1.3 million per year; if you land in the bottom 20 percent, it will be only \$5,400 per year.² That is quite a difference. You might conclude that, since the gap between rich and poor is equally stark in both societies, knowing which position you will occupy does not help you decide which society to prefer.

But income and wealth would not be your only consideration. If you were rich, you might prefer the society that enabled you to bequeath your wealth and privilege to your children. This would argue for the aristocratic society. If you were poor, you might prefer the society that enabled you, or

your children, a chance to rise. This would argue for the meritocratic society.

Further reflection, however, suggests a countervailing consideration in each case. People care not only about how much money they have but also about what their wealth or poverty signifies for their social standing and self-esteem. If you were born into the upper reaches of an aristocracy, you would be aware that your privilege was your good fortune, not your own doing. Whereas if you ascended, through effort and talent, to the apex of a meritocracy, you could take pride in the fact that your success was earned rather than inherited. Unlike aristocratic privilege, meritocratic success brings a sense of achievement for having earned one's place. From this point of view, it is better to be rich in a meritocracy than in an aristocracy.

For similar reasons, being poor in a meritocracy is demoralizing. If, in a feudal society, you were born into serfdom, your life would be hard, but you would not be burdened by the thought that you were responsible for your subordinate position. Nor would you labor under the belief that the landlord for whom you toiled had achieved his position by being more capable and resourceful than you. You would know he was not more deserving than you, only luckier.

If, by contrast, you found yourself on the bottom rung of a meritocratic society, it would be difficult to resist the thought that your disadvantage was at least partly your own doing, a reflection of your failure to display sufficient talent and ambition to get ahead. A society that enables people to rise, and that celebrates rising, pronounces a harsh verdict on those who fail to do so.

MERITOCRACY'S DARK SIDE

The term "meritocracy" was invented under the shadow of this worry. Michael Young was a British sociologist affiliated with the Labour Party. In 1958, he wrote a book called *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.³ For Young, meritocracy described a dystopia, not an ideal. He wrote at a time when the British class system was breaking down, giving way to a system of educational and professional advancement based on merit. This was a good thing, because it enabled gifted children of the working class to develop their talents and escape a life consigned to manual labor.

But Young also glimpsed the dark side of meritocracy. Writing as if he were a historian looking back from the year 2033, he described with uncanny clarity the moral logic of the meritocratic society that was beginning to unfold in the postwar Britain of his day. Without defending the class-bound order that was passing, Young suggested that its moral arbitrariness and manifest unfairness at least had this desirable effect: It tempered the self-regard of the upper class and prevented the working class from viewing its subordinate status as personal failure.

Those who were “catapulted” to the top by their parents’ riches and influence “could not say to themselves with complete conviction ‘I am the best man for the job’ because they knew that they had not won their place in open competition and, if they were honest, had to recognize that a dozen of their subordinates would have been as good, or perhaps better.” ⁴

The upper-class man had to be insensitive indeed not to have noticed, at some time in his life, that a private in his regiment, a butler or “charlady” in his home, a driver of taxi or bus, or the humble workman with lined face and sharp eyes in the railway carriage or country pub—not to have noticed that amongst such people was intelligence, wit, and wisdom at least equal to his own. ⁵

Even if some “upper-class men” deceived themselves into believing they deserved their place at the top, their subordinates were under no such illusion. They knew “that many bosses were there not so much because of what they knew, as who they knew, and who their parents were.” Knowing the system was rigged empowered the working class to challenge it politically. (This was the point of having a Labour Party.) Equally important, the arbitrariness of the class system spared workers from judging themselves by the inferior status society had assigned them. ⁶

The worker said to himself: “Here I am, a workman. Why am I a workman? Am I fit for nothing else? Of course not. Had I had a proper chance I would have shown the world. A doctor? A brewer? A minister? I could have done anything. I never had the chance. And so I am a worker. But don’t think that at bottom I am any worse than anyone else.” ⁷

Young suggests that being clear-eyed about the moral arbitrariness of one's rank has a certain advantage; it prevents both the winners and the losers from believing they deserve their lot in life. This does not vindicate the class system. But it does shed light on a paradoxical feature of a meritocratic order. Allocating jobs and opportunities according to merit does not reduce inequality; it reconfigures inequality to align with ability. But this reconfiguration creates a presumption that people get what they deserve. And this presumption deepens the gap between rich and poor.

Now that people are classified by ability, the gap between the classes has inevitably become wider. The upper classes are ... no longer weakened by self-doubt and self-criticism. Today the eminent know that success is just reward for their own capacity, for their own efforts, and for their own undeniable achievement. They deserve to belong to a superior class. They know too, that not only are they of higher caliber to start with, but that a first-class education has been built upon their native gifts. ⁸

Not only did Young anticipate the meritocratic hubris of elites; he glimpsed their affinity for technocratic expertise, their tendency to look down on those who lacked their lustrous credentials, and the corrosive effect of these attitudes on public discourse. The rising elites “come as close as anyone to understanding the full and ever-growing complexity of our technical civilization. They are trained in science, and it is scientists who have inherited the earth.” Their superior intellect and education give them little reason or occasion to engage in serious discussion with those who lack a college degree.

How can they carry on a two-sided conversation with the lower classes when they [the elites] speak another, richer, and more exact language? Today, the elite know that ... their social inferiors are inferiors in other ways as well—that is, in the two vital qualities, of intelligence and education, which are given pride of place in the more consistent value system of the twenty-first century. ⁹

“One of our characteristic modern problems,” Young observed (and remember, he was “observing” as if living in 2033), is that “some members

of the meritocracy ... have become so impressed with their own importance as to lose sympathy with the people whom they govern.” He added sardonically that some meritocrats were “so tactless that even people of low caliber have been quite unnecessarily offended.” [10](#) (Hillary Clinton’s statement during the 2016 campaign that half of Donald Trump’s supporters were “a basket of deplorables” comes to mind.) [11](#)

Resentment against elites was compounded by the self-doubt that a meritocracy inflicts on those who fail to rise.

Today all persons, however humble, know they have had every chance ... Are they not bound to recognize that they have an inferior status—not as in the past because they were denied opportunity; but because they *are* inferior? For the first time in human history the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard. [12](#)

Young anticipated that this toxic brew of hubris and resentment would fuel a political backlash. He concluded his dystopian tale by predicting that, in 2034, the less-educated classes would rise up in a populist revolt against the meritocratic elites. In 2016, as Britain voted for Brexit and America for Trump, that revolt arrived eighteen years ahead of schedule.

MERITOCRACY RECONSIDERED

The two societies I described above are not purely hypothetical. The income inequalities that beset them are the ones that prevail in the United States today. [13](#) For the most part, these inequalities are defended, when they are defended at all, on something like meritocratic grounds. No one argues that the rich should be rich because they were born to wealthy parents. Critics of inequality may complain that those who would abolish inheritance taxes, say, are implicitly endorsing hereditary privilege. But no one defends hereditary privilege outright or disputes the principle that careers should be open to talents.

Most of our debates about access to jobs, education, and public office proceed from the premise of equal opportunity. Our disagreements are less about the principle itself than about what it requires. For example, critics of affirmative action in hiring and college admissions argue that such policies are inconsistent with equality of opportunity, because they judge applicants

on factors other than merit. Defenders of affirmative action reply that such policies are necessary to make equality of opportunity a reality for members of groups that have suffered discrimination or disadvantage.

At the level of principle at least, and political rhetoric, meritocracy has won the day. In democracies throughout the world, politicians of the center-left and center-right claim that their policies are the ones that will enable all citizens, whatever their race or ethnicity, gender or class, to compete on equal terms and to rise as far as their efforts and talents will take them. When people complain about meritocracy, the complaint is usually not about the ideal but about our failure to live up to it: The wealthy and powerful have rigged the system to perpetuate their privilege; the professional classes have figured out how to pass their advantages on to their children, converting the meritocracy into a hereditary aristocracy; colleges that claim to select students on merit give an edge to the sons and daughters of the wealthy and the well-connected. According to this complaint, meritocracy is a myth, a distant promise yet to be redeemed. ¹⁴

This complaint is certainly valid. But what if the problem runs deeper? What if the real problem with meritocracy is not that we have failed to achieve it but that the ideal is flawed? What if the rhetoric of rising no longer inspires, not simply because social mobility has stalled but, more fundamentally, because helping people scramble up the ladder of success in a competitive meritocracy is a hollow political project that reflects an impoverished conception of citizenship and freedom?

To explore this larger question, we need to examine two objections to meritocracy as a moral and political project. One is about justice; the other is about attitudes toward success and failure. The first objection doubts that even a fully realized meritocracy, in which jobs and pay perfectly reflected people's efforts and talents, would be a just society. The second objection worries that even if a meritocracy were fair, it would not be a good society. It would generate hubris and anxiety among the winners and humiliation and resentment among the losers — attitudes at odds with human flourishing and corrosive of the common good.

Philosophical critiques of meritocracy focus mainly on the first objection. For reasons we will explore, most contemporary philosophers reject the notion that society should allocate jobs and pay based on what people deserve. This puts philosophers at odds with the moral intuitions that

inform common opinion, and it is worth trying to figure out who is right—the philosophers or the public.

Although the first objection, about justice, is the more familiar one in philosophical circles, the second objection, about hubris and humiliation, may be more consequential for understanding our current political condition. The populist protest against meritocratic elites is not only about fairness but also about social esteem. To understand this protest is to identify and assess the grievances and resentments that animate it. Are they legitimate or misdirected? Insofar as they are legitimate, what might be done to address them?

WOULD A PERFECT MERITOCRACY BE JUST?

Imagine that, one day, we managed to remove all unfair obstacles to success, so that everyone, including those from humble backgrounds, could compete with the children of the privileged on a level playing field. Imagine that we achieved in fact what we proclaim in principle, that all citizens should have an equal chance to rise as far as their talents and hard work can take them.

Of course, such a society would be difficult to achieve. Overcoming discrimination would not be enough. The institution of the family complicates the project of giving everyone an equal chance. It is not easy to offset the advantages that affluent parents confer on their children. I am not thinking mainly of inherited wealth. A robust estate tax could deal with that. I am thinking of the everyday ways that conscientious, well-to-do parents help their kids. Even the best, most inclusive educational system would be hard pressed to equip students from poor backgrounds to compete on equal terms with children from families that bestow copious amounts of attention, resources, and connections.

But suppose this could be done. Suppose we could fulfill the promise of giving every child an equal chance to compete for success in school, in the workplace, and in life. Would this make for a just society?

It is tempting to say, “Yes, of course. Isn’t this what the American dream is all about—creating an open, mobile society in which the child of a farm worker or a penniless immigrant can rise to become a CEO?” And while this dream holds a special allure for Americans, it also resonates in democratic societies throughout the world.

A perfectly mobile society is an inspiring ideal for two reasons. First, it expresses a certain idea of freedom. Our fate should not be fixed by the circumstances of our birth but should be ours to decide. Second, it gestures to the hope that what we achieve reflects what we deserve. If we are free to rise based on our own choices and talents, it seems fair to say that those who succeed deserve their success.

Despite its powerful appeal, however, there is reason to doubt that even a perfectly realized meritocracy would be a just society. To begin, it is important to notice that the meritocratic ideal is about mobility, not equality. It does not say there is anything wrong with yawning gaps between rich and poor; it only insists that the children of the rich and the children of the poor should be able, over time, to swap places based on their merits—to rise or fall as a result of their effort and talent. No one should be stuck at the bottom, or ensconced at the top, due to prejudice or privilege.

What matters for a meritocracy is that everyone has an equal chance to climb the ladder of success; it has nothing to say about how far apart the rungs on the ladder should be. The meritocratic ideal is not a remedy for inequality; it is a justification of inequality.

This is not, in itself, an argument against it. But it raises a question: Is the inequality that results from meritocratic competition justified? Defenders of meritocracy say yes; provided everyone competes on a level playing field, the outcome is just. Even a fair competition has winners and losers. What matters is that everyone starts the race at the same starting point, having had equal access to training, coaching, nutrition, and so on. If so, the winner of the race deserves the prize. There is no injustice in the fact that some run faster than others.

DO WE DESERVE OUR TALENTS?

Whether this argument is convincing depends on the moral status of talents. Recall the rhetoric of rising that figures so prominently in public discourse these days. However humble our origins, the politicians proclaim, we should all be able to rise as far as our talent and hard work will take us. But why exactly that far? Why assume that our talents should determine our destiny, and that we merit or deserve the rewards that flow from them?

There are two reasons to question this assumption. First, my having this or that talent is not my doing but a matter of good luck, and I do not merit or deserve the benefits (or burdens) that derive from luck. Meritocrats

acknowledge that I do not deserve the benefits that arise from being born into a wealthy family. So why should other forms of luck—such as having a particular talent—be any different? If I won a million dollars in the state lottery, I would be delighted at my good fortune. But it would be folly to claim I had earned the windfall, or that my winning had anything to do with my merit. Similarly, if I bought a lottery ticket and failed to win, I might be disappointed, but I could not complain that I had been denied something I deserved.

Second, that I live in a society that prizes the talents I happen to have is also not something for which I can claim credit. This too is a matter of good fortune. LeBron James makes tens of millions of dollars playing basketball, a hugely popular game. Beyond being blessed with prodigious athletic gifts, LeBron is lucky to live in a society that values and rewards them. It is not his doing that he lives today, when people love the game at which he excels, rather than in Renaissance Florence, when fresco painters, not basketball players, were in high demand.

The same can be said of those who excel in pursuits our society values less highly. The world champion arm wrestler may be as good at arm wrestling as LeBron is at basketball. It is not his fault that, except for a few pub patrons, no one is willing to pay to watch him pin an opponent's arm to the table. [15](#)

Much of the appeal of the meritocratic faith consists in the idea that our success is our own doing, at least under the right conditions. Insofar as the economy is a field of fair competition, untainted by privilege or prejudice, we are responsible for our fate. We succeed or fail based on our merits. We get what we deserve.

This is a liberating picture, for it suggests we can be self-made human agents, the authors of our fate, the masters of our destiny. It is also morally satisfying, because it suggests the economy can answer to the ancient notion of justice as giving people their due.

But the recognition that our talents are not our own doing complicates this picture of self-making. It puts in doubt the meritocratic faith that overcoming prejudice and privilege is sufficient to bring about a just society. If our talents are gifts for which we are indebted—whether to the genetic lottery or to God—then it is a mistake and a conceit to assume we deserve the benefits that flow from them.

DOES EFFORT MAKE US WORTHY?

Defenders of meritocracy reply by invoking effort and hard work. They argue that those who rise by dint of hard work are responsible for the success their efforts bring, and worthy of praise for their industriousness. This is true, up to a point. Effort matters, and no one, however gifted, succeeds without working to cultivate his or her talents. Even the most gifted musician must devote long hours of practice to become good enough to play at Carnegie Hall. Even the most gifted athlete must spend strenuous years of training to make the Olympic team.

Notwithstanding the importance of effort, however, success rarely comes from hard work alone. What sets Olympic medal winners and NBA stars apart from lesser athletes is not only their strenuous training regimes. Many basketball players practice as hard as LeBron, but few can match his exploits on the court. I could train night and day but I will never swim faster than Michael Phelps. Usain Bolt, the gold medal sprinter considered the fastest runner in the world, acknowledged that his training partner Yohan Blake, also a gifted sprinter, works harder than he does. Effort isn't everything. [16](#)

The defenders of meritocracy know this, of course. They do not claim that the hardest-working athlete deserves the gold medal, or that the most industrious scientist deserves the Nobel Prize, or that the worker who expends the most effort deserves the highest pay, regardless of results.

They know that success is an amalgam of talent and effort that is not easy to disentangle. Success breeds success, and those who lack the talents society rewards may find it hard to summon the motivation to strive. But the meritocratic argument is not mainly a sociological claim about the efficacy of effort. It is above all a moral claim about human agency and freedom.

The meritocratic emphasis on effort and hard work seeks to vindicate the idea that, under the right conditions, we are responsible for our success and thus capable of freedom. It also seeks to vindicate the faith that, if the competition is truly fair, success will align with virtue; those who work hard and play by the rules will earn the rewards they deserve.

We want to believe that success, in sports and in life, is something we earn, not something we inherit. Natural gifts and the advantages they bring embarrass the meritocratic faith. They cast doubt on the conviction that praise and rewards flow from effort alone. In the face of this

embarrassment, we inflate the moral significance of effort and striving. This distortion can be seen, for example, in television coverage of the Olympics, which focuses less on the feats the athletes perform than on heart-rending stories of the hardships they have overcome, the obstacles they have surmounted, and the struggles they have waged to triumph over injury, or a difficult childhood, or political turmoil in their native land. ¹⁷

It can be seen in the overwhelming majority (77 percent) of Americans who, despite the difficulty of rising, believe that “most people can succeed if they are willing to work hard.” ¹⁸ I see a similarly exaggerated emphasis on striving in my Harvard students who, despite their impressive talents and often favorable life circumstances, invariably attribute their admission to effort and hard work.

If the meritocratic ideal is flawed because it ignores the moral arbitrariness of talent and inflates the moral significance of effort, it remains to ask what alternative conceptions of justice are available—and what notions of freedom and desert they offer instead.

TWO ALTERNATIVES TO MERITOCRACY

Over the past half century, two competing accounts of a just society have shaped political argument in most democratic societies. One might be called free-market liberalism, the other welfare state liberalism (or “egalitarian liberalism”). These two public philosophies stand in a complex relation to meritocracy. Both offer compelling arguments against the meritocratic idea that a just society distributes income and wealth based on what people deserve.

In practice, however, each generates attitudes toward success that are difficult to distinguish from meritocratic ones. Neither offers an account of the common good sufficiently robust to counter the hubris and humiliation to which meritocracies are prone. Despite rejecting the notion that the winners in a competitive market society morally deserve their winnings, these public philosophies offer no antidote to the tyranny of merit. It is instructive nonetheless to see why, despite their disagreements, they both reject merit as the basis of justice.

Free-Market Liberalism

Perhaps the most influential case for free-market liberalism in the twentieth century was advanced by Friedrich A. Hayek, an Austrian-born economist-philosopher. A source of inspiration for Margaret Thatcher and other proponents of laissez-faire capitalism, Hayek opposed government efforts to reduce economic inequality, argued against progressive taxation, and viewed the welfare state as antithetical to freedom.

In his book *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), Hayek argues that the only equality compatible with freedom is the purely formal equality of all citizens before the law. Careers should be open to everyone, but the state should not try to create a level playing field by providing equal or compensatory educational opportunities, a project he viewed as unrealistic and ultimately coercive. Unless the family were abolished, children would inevitably grow up in families that varied in the advantages they afforded, and any attempt to give all children an equal prospect for success would involve intolerable state coercion. Hayek rejects the notion “that all must be assured an equal start and the same prospects” for success. Such a principle would require the state to control “all conditions relevant to a particular individual’s prospects,” a far-reaching project that Hayek considers “the opposite of freedom.” [19](#)

Given his opposition to the redistribution of income, one might expect Hayek to insist that the free market gives people the economic rewards they deserve. But he does not. In fact, he argues that market outcomes have nothing to do with rewarding merit. They simply reflect the value consumers place on the goods and services sellers have to offer. Hayek draws a distinction between merit and value. Merit involves a moral judgment about what people deserve, whereas value is simply a measure of what consumers are willing to pay for this or that good. [20](#)

It is a mistake, Hayek argues, to over-moralize economic rewards by assuming they reflect the merit of those who receive them. One of the reasons Hayek wants to deflate this moralizing notion is to disarm a familiar objection to the inequalities of income and wealth produced by unfettered markets. The most compelling objection to inequality, he suggests, arises from the concern that “the differences in reward do not correspond to any recognizable differences in the merits of those who receive them.” [21](#)

Hayek’s reply to this objection is revealing. Rather than try to show that those who earn handsome rewards in the market morally deserve them, he

rejects the idea that economic rewards reflect people's merits, or moral desert. This is the force of his distinction between merit and value. In a free society, my income and wealth will reflect the value of the goods and services I have to offer, but this value is determined by contingencies of supply and demand. It has nothing to do with my merit or virtue, or the moral importance of the contribution I make.

To illustrate Hayek's point, consider an example. Some people argue that hedge fund managers do not deserve to make vastly more money than schoolteachers; managing money is far less admirable and important than teaching and inspiring young people. A defender of free markets might reply that hedge fund managers are responsible for investing the hard-earned pensions of teachers, firefighters, and college endowments, and so the moral importance of their work makes them worthy of the vast sums they earn. But Hayek does not offer this kind of reply. His argument is more radical. It rejects the very idea that the money people make should reflect what they deserve.

Hayek supports this argument by observing that my having the talents society happens to prize is not my doing, but morally contingent, a matter of good luck:

The inborn as well as the acquired gifts of a person clearly have a value to his fellows which does not depend on any credit due to him for possessing them. There is little a man can do to alter the fact that his special talents are very common or exceedingly rare. A good mind or a fine voice, a beautiful face or a skillful hand, and a ready wit or an attractive personality are in large measure as independent of a person's efforts as the opportunities or the experiences he has had. In all these instances the value which a person's capacities or services have for us and for which he is recompensed has little relation to anything that we can call moral merit or deserts. [22](#)

For Hayek, denying that economic rewards are a matter of merit is a way of fending off demands for redistribution by those who believe that hedge fund managers do not deserve to make more than teachers. Hayek is able to reply that, even if we consider the vocation of teaching to be more admirable than managing money, wages and salaries are not awards for good character or

worthy achievement but simply payments that reflect the economic value of the goods and services market participants have to offer.

Unlike Hayek, defenders of welfare state liberalism favor taxing the rich to help the poor. Surprisingly, however, they share Hayek's view that the distribution of income and wealth should not be based on what people merit or deserve.

Welfare State Liberalism

Welfare state liberalism (or "egalitarian liberalism") finds its fullest philosophical expression in the work of John Rawls, the noted twentieth-century American political philosopher. In his classic work *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls argues that even a system of fair equality of opportunity, one that fully compensated for the effects of class differences, would not make for a just society. The reason: If people competed on a truly level playing field, the winners would be those endowed with the greatest talent. But differences of talent are as morally arbitrary as differences of class. [23](#)

"Even if it works to perfection in eliminating the influence of social contingencies," Rawls argues, a fair meritocracy "still permits the distribution of wealth and income to be determined by the natural distribution of abilities and talents." [24](#) Income inequalities due to natural talents are no more just than inequalities that arise from class differences.

"From a moral standpoint the two seem equally arbitrary." [25](#) So even a society that achieved true equality of opportunity would not necessarily be a just society. It would have also to contend with the inequalities that arise due to differences in people's native abilities.

How to contend with them? Some defenders of meritocracy worry that the only alternative to equality of opportunity is equality of result, a kind of leveling equality that would handicap the gifted to prevent them from gaining a competitive edge. In a short story called "Harrison Bergeron," the author Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., imagines a dystopian future in which those with superior intelligence, physical strength, and good looks are required to wear elaborate encumbrances and disguises to offset their natural advantages. [26](#)

But Rawls shows that this is not the only way to compensate for unequal talents. "No one deserves his greater natural capacity nor merits a more favorable starting place in society. But it does not follow that one should

eliminate these distinctions. There is another way to deal with them.” [27](#)
Rather than handicap the talented, Rawls would have the winners share their winnings with those less fortunate than themselves. Don’t make the best runners wear lead shoes; let them run at full speed. But acknowledge in advance that the winnings do not belong to them alone. Encourage the gifted to cultivate and exercise their talents, but with the understanding that the rewards those talents reap in the market should be shared with the community as a whole.

Rawls calls this way of dealing with unequal talents “the difference principle.” It departs from meritocracy, not by preventing the gifted from exercising their talents but by denying that they merit or deserve the rewards those talents command in a market society.

“The difference principle represents,” Rawls writes, “an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a common asset and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever it turns out to be. Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out.” Society should be arranged “so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate.” [28](#)

The meritocrat might reply that, even if our natural talents are a matter of good luck, our effort is up to us. We therefore deserve what we earn by dint of effort and hard work. Rawls disagrees. “Even the willingness to make an effort, to try, and so to be deserving in the ordinary sense is itself dependent upon happy family and social circumstances.” Even effort cannot save the idea that market rewards should reflect moral desert.

The assertion that a man deserves the superior character that enables him to make the effort to cultivate his abilities is equally problematic; for his character depends in large part upon fortunate family and social circumstances for which he can claim no credit.

The notion of desert seems not to apply to these cases. [29](#)

Like Hayek, Rawls emphasizes the moral arbitrariness of talent and rejects the idea that market outcomes reflect merit or desert. But for Rawls, this argues for redistributive taxation, not against it. To those who would deny the state the right to tax a portion of their hard-earned income, claiming they deserve it, Rawls replies that the amount of money we make depends

on factors that are arbitrary from a moral point of view. It is not my doing that the market prizes the talents I have, or that I possess those talents in the first place. So I cannot rightly complain if the tax laws require me to turn over a portion of my income to pay for schools or roads or help for the poor.

It might be argued that, even if I do not morally deserve the benefits the market bestows on my talents, it is a further question how these benefits should be distributed. Should society distribute them to the community as a whole, or to the least fortunate members of society, or (as Hayek thinks) simply let them lie where they fall? Rawls's argument that market earnings reflect factors arbitrary from a moral point of view is a powerful negative argument; it undermines the meritocratic claim that the rich deserve the money they make. But it does not establish that the community has a legitimate moral claim to this money, or some portion of it.

This would depend on showing that we are indebted in various ways to the community that makes our success possible and therefore obligated to contribute to its common good. [30](#)

Politically as well as philosophically, welfare state liberals are better at articulating the negative argument—against the individual's sole claim to her success—than the affirmative argument—for the individual's debt to the community. Recall Barack Obama's attempt to evoke the mutual dependence and obligation of citizens during his 2012 re-election campaign:

[I]f you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own. You didn't get there on your own. I'm always struck by people who think, well, it must be because I was just so smart. There are a lot of smart people out there. It must be because I worked harder than everybody else. Let me tell you something—there are a whole bunch of hardworking people out there.

If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business—you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen. [31](#)

Republicans seized on the last two sentences to portray Obama as an apostle of big government who was hostile to entrepreneurs. Of course, he did not mean that my business or yours was actually built by “somebody else.” He was trying to say that the successful are not solely responsible for their success, but indebted to the community that makes it possible, not only by building roads and bridges but also by cultivating our talents and valuing our contributions. “You’re not on your own, we’re in this together,” he added a few sentences later. [32](#)

More than a slip of the tongue, Obama’s awkward attempt to describe the moral debt the successful owe their fellow citizens reflects a weakness in the philosophy of welfare state liberalism, which fails to provide a sense of community adequate to the solidarity it requires. This may account for the faltering legitimacy of the welfare state in recent decades, not only in the United States but also in Europe, where public services and safety nets have traditionally been more generous. It may also account for the inability of liberal democracies to resist the rampant inequality of recent decades and the rising tide of meritocratic sentiment, in political rhetoric and public attitudes, that has rationalized it.

REJECTING MERIT

Both Hayek and Rawls reject merit or desert as the basis of justice. For Hayek, denying that economic rewards are a matter of merit is a way of resisting demands for redistribution.

For Rawls, the renunciation of merit and desert serves the opposite political position. It is a way of countering objections to redistribution by wealthy people who claim, for example, that they deserve the money they have earned, and that it is therefore wrong to tax a portion of those earnings for redistributive purposes. Rawls can reply that making a lot of money is not a measure of a person’s merit or virtue; it simply reflects the happy coincidence of the skills a person has to offer with the abilities the market demands. Once just tax laws are in place, people are entitled to keep whatever portion of their earnings the tax code specifies. But they cannot rightly claim that the tax laws should be written in the first place to honor or reward their merits and achievements. [33](#)

Although Rawls and Hayek differ politically, their rejection of merit as the basis of justice highlights two philosophical commitments they share.

One is about the difficulty of coming to agreement, in pluralist societies, about which virtues and qualities of character are worthy of reward. The other is about freedom. “Reward according to merit must in practice mean reward according to assessable merit,” Hayek writes, “merit that other people can recognize and agree upon and not merit merely in the sight of some higher power.” The difficulty of identifying merit gives rise to a deeper problem. Given the inevitable disagreement about which activities are meritorious or worthy of praise, any attempt to base distributive justice on moral merit rather than economic value would lead to coercion. “A society in which the position of the individual was made to correspond to human ideas of moral merit would therefore be the exact opposition of a free society.” [34](#)

Rawls also points to widespread disagreement about merit and desert, and worries that basing justice on desert is at odds with freedom. Unlike Hayek, Rawls does not conceive freedom in market terms. For Rawls, freedom consists in pursuing our own conception of the good life while respecting the right of others to do the same. This means abiding by principles of justice that we and our fellow citizens would all agree to if each of us set aside our particular interests and advantages. Thinking about justice from this point of view—without knowing whether we would be rich or poor, strong or weak, healthy or unhealthy—would not lead us to affirm whatever distribution of income resulted from the market. To the contrary, Rawls argues, it would lead us to accept only those inequalities that help the least-advantaged members of society.

Although Rawls rejects the distribution of income that results from a free market, he does have this in common with Hayek: Rawls’s principles of justice do not seek to reward merit or virtue. In pluralist societies, people disagree about what counts as meritorious or virtuous, as these judgments depend on controversial conceptions of the best way to live. From Rawls’s point of view, to base principles of justice on one such conception would be to undermine freedom; it would impose on some the values of others, and so fail to respect each person’s right to choose and pursue his or her own conception of the good life.

And so, despite their differences, both Hayek and Rawls reject the idea that economic rewards should reflect what people deserve. In doing so, they acknowledge that they are challenging conventional wisdom. The notion that justice means giving people what they deserve seems deeply embedded

in untutored common opinion. Rawls notes the “tendency for common sense to suppose” that income and wealth should be distributed according to moral desert, and Hayek admits that his renunciation of merit “may appear at first so strange and even shocking” that he must “ask the reader to suspend judgment” until he can explain. [35](#)

But even as free-market liberalism and welfare state liberalism set the terms of public discourse over the past half century, they did not dislodge the widely held conviction that what people earn should reflect what they deserve. [36](#) To the contrary, during those decades, meritocratic attitudes toward success tightened their hold, even as mobility stalled and inequality deepened.

MARKETS AND MERIT

Here then is a puzzling feature of contemporary politics: Why, despite the rejection of meritocratic assumptions by the leading public philosophies of the day, do political rhetoric and public attitudes cleave to the notion that economic rewards either do align or should align with merit and desert? Is it simply that philosophy is too distant from the world to have any bearing on the way ordinary citizens think and act? Or do certain features of free-market liberalism and welfare state liberalism open the way to meritocratic understandings of success that they officially reject?

I believe the second is the case. A closer look at these two versions of liberalism reveals that their renunciation of merit and desert is not as thoroughgoing as may first appear. Both reject the meritocratic notion that, in a fair competition, the rich are more deserving than the poor. But the alternatives they offer can nonetheless give rise to attitudes characteristic of meritocratic societies—hubris among the successful and resentment among the disadvantaged.

This can be seen most clearly in Hayek’s distinction between merit and value. Hayek rightly observes that conceiving income inequalities as reflections of unequal merit adds insult to injury. “A society in which it was generally presumed that a high income was proof of merit and a low income of the lack of it, in which it was universally believed that position and remuneration corresponded to merit ... would probably be much more unbearable to the unsuccessful ones than one in which it was frankly recognized that there was no necessary connection between merit and

success.” ³⁷ Hayek cites the British Labour Party figure Anthony Crosland, whose influential book *The Future of Socialism* (1956) also emphasized the demoralizing effect that a meritocracy can have on those who do not rise:

When opportunities are known to be unequal, and the selection clearly biased towards wealth or lineage, people can comfort themselves for failure by saying that they never had a proper chance—the system was unfair, the scales too heavily weighted against them. But if the selection is obviously by merit, this source of comfort disappears, and failure induces a total sense of inferiority, with no excuse or consolation; and this, by a natural quirk of human nature, actually increases the envy and resentment at the success of others. ³⁸

Hayek argues that keeping in mind the difference between merit and value renders income inequalities less invidious. If everyone knew such inequalities had nothing to do with people’s merit, the rich would be less proud and the poor less resentful than they would otherwise be. But if, as Hayek claims, economic value is a legitimate basis for inequality, it is not so clear that invidious attitudes toward success are undercut.

For consider: How different, really, is the story the successful tell themselves if they believe their success measures the value of their contribution rather than their virtue or merit? And how different is the story the disadvantaged tell themselves if they believe their struggles do not reflect poorly on their character, only on the meager value of what they have to offer?

Morally and psychologically, the distinction between merit and value becomes vanishingly thin. This is especially true in market societies, where money is the measure of most things. In such societies, reminding the wealthy that their wealth reflects (only) the superior value of their contributions to society is an unlikely antidote to hubris and self-congratulation. And reminding the poor that their poverty reflects (only) the inferior value of their contributions is hardly a bracing tonic to their self-esteem.

The ease with which judgments of value can slide into judgments of merit reflects the familiar but questionable assumption that a person’s market value is a good measure of his or her contribution to society. Hayek

accepts this assumption uncritically. He simply points out that our market value is determined by factors beyond our control and so is not a measure of our merit. But he does not consider the possibility that the value of a person's contribution to society could be something other than his or her market value.

Once market value is taken as a proxy for social contribution, however, it is hard to resist the thought that people deserve, as a matter of justice, whatever income corresponds to their market value, or "marginal product" in the economist's jargon. According to standard economic analysis, perfectly competitive markets pay each worker the value of his or her "marginal product," the value of output attributable to that worker.

If, notwithstanding the complexity of the economy, it is possible to identify and individuate each person's market value in this way, and if market value is the true measure of social contribution, then it is a short step to concluding that people morally deserve to be paid according to their "marginal product," or market value.

A recent version of this argument has been advanced by Harvard economist N. Gregory Mankiw, who served as an economic advisor to President George W. Bush. Mankiw begins by stating a widely held and intuitively appealing moral principle: "People should get what they deserve. A person who contributes more to society deserves a higher income that reflects those greater contributions." He offers, as examples, Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, and J. K. Rowling, author of the wildly popular Harry Potter books. Most people agree that they deserve the millions they have made, Mankiw suggests, because their high earnings reflect the great value to society of iPhones and riveting adventure tales. [39](#)

Mankiw would extend this reasoning to all incomes in a competitive market economy: Morality should endorse the results that competitive markets generate, for care workers and hedge fund managers alike. Since "each person's income reflects the value of what he contributed to society's production of goods and services," Mankiw argues, "one might easily conclude that, under these idealized conditions, each person receives his just deserts." [40](#)

The assertion that people morally deserve whatever income a competitive free market assigns them goes back to the early days of neoclassical economics. Critics of this notion, including some economists generally friendly to free markets, have long pointed out its defects. As we have seen,

Hayek rejects this notion on the grounds that what people earn depends on native abilities that are no doing of the person endowed with them. It also depends on the vagaries of supply and demand. Whether the talents I have to offer are rare or plentiful is no doing of mine, and yet decisive for the income they command in the market. Mankiw's "just deserts" theory ignores these contingencies.

MARKET VALUE VERSUS MORAL VALUE

Perhaps the most devastating critique of the idea that market outcomes reflect moral desert was advanced in the 1920s by Frank Knight, one of the founders of neoclassical economics. Knight, a critic of the New Deal, taught at the University of Chicago, where his students included Milton Friedman and others who would become leading libertarian economists. And yet Knight took trenchant aim at the notion that markets reward merit. "It is a common assumption ... that productive contribution is an ethical measure of desert," he wrote. But "an examination of the question will readily show that productive contribution can have little or no ethical significance." [41](#)

Knight offers two arguments against attributing moral desert to market outcomes. One is the argument about talents taken up by Hayek and Rawls, both of whom cite him. [42](#) Having talents that enable me to cater to market demand is no more my own doing than inheriting valuable property. "It is hard to see that ... possession of the capacity to furnish services which are in demand ... constitutes an ethical claim to a superior share of the social dividend, except to the extent that the capacity is itself the product of conscientious effort." Moreover, the income my talents command depends on how many other people also possess them. Having talents that happen to be scarce and yet highly prized certainly boosts my income, but it is nothing for which I can claim credit. "It is hard to see how it is more meritorious merely to be different from other people than it is to be like them." [43](#)

Knight's second argument is more far reaching. It questions an assumption that Hayek takes for granted. This is the assumption that equates market value with social contribution. As Knight points out, meeting market demand is not necessarily the same thing as making a truly valuable contribution to society.

Serving market demand is simply a matter of satisfying whatever wants and desires people happen to have. But the ethical significance of satisfying such wants depends on their moral worth. Evaluating their worth involves moral judgments, admittedly contestable, that economic analysis cannot provide. So even setting aside the question of talents, it is a mistake to assume that the money people make by catering to consumer preferences reflects merit or moral desert. Its ethical significance depends on moral considerations that no economic model can supply.

We cannot accept want-satisfaction as a final criterion of value because we do not in fact regard our wants as final; instead of resting in the view that there is no disputing about tastes, we dispute about them more than anything else; our most difficult problem in valuation is the evaluation of our wants themselves and our most troublesome want is the desire for wants of the “right” kind. [44](#)

Knight’s insight drives a wedge between two concepts that Hayek conflates —the value of an economic contribution as measured by the market and its actual value. Consider the high school chemistry teacher in the television series *Breaking Bad*, who employs his expertise as a chemist to make the highly sought-after (though illegal) drug methamphetamine. The meth he cooks is so pure that it commands millions on the drug market, and the income he reaps far exceeds his modest pay as a teacher. Most would agree, however, that his contribution as a teacher has far greater value than his contribution as a drug dealer.

The reason has nothing to do with market imperfections or the fact that laws banning drugs limit the supply and so boost the profits of those who peddle them illegally. Even if meth were legal, a talented chemist might still make more money producing meth than teaching students. But this does not mean that a meth dealer’s contribution is more valuable than a teacher’s.

Or consider the billionaire casino mogul Sheldon Adelson. One of the richest men in the world, he makes thousands of times more than a nurse or a doctor. But even assuming the markets for casino moguls and health care providers are perfectly competitive, there is no reason to believe that their market value reflects the true value of their contributions to society. This is because the value of their contributions depends on the moral importance of the ends they serve, not on how effectively they satisfy consumer demand.

Caring for people's health is morally more important than catering to their desire to play slot machines.

Knight further argues that "the wants which an economic system operates to gratify are largely produced by the workings of the system itself." The economic order does not simply satisfy pre-existing demand; "its activity extends to the formation and radical transformation, if not to the outright creation, of the wants themselves." Any ethical assessment of an economic system must therefore consider "the kind of wants which it tends to generate or nourish," not only its efficiency in satisfying "wants as they exist at any given time." [45](#)

These considerations lead Knight to reject the notion Mankiw defends, that in a perfectly competitive market, people morally deserve the marginal product of their labor. Knight derides such claims as "the familiar ethical conclusions of apologetic economics." [46](#)

Although Knight, a skeptic of ambitious projects of social reform, is remembered as a leading proponent of laissez-faire economics, he inveighed against the idea that market prices are the measure of moral desert or ethical value.

The product or contribution is always measured in terms of price, which does not correspond closely with ethical value or human significance. The money value of a product is a matter of the "demand," which in turn reflects the tastes and purchasing power of the buying public and the availability of substitute commodities. All these factors are largely created and controlled by the workings of the economic system itself ... Hence their results can have in themselves no ethical significance as standards for judging the system. [47](#)

Although Knight does not claim to offer an ethical theory that could assess the moral importance of various wants and desires, he rejects the view, familiar among economists, that there is no judging tastes, that it is impossible to rank some wants as higher or worthier than others. An economic system should be judged less by its efficiency in satisfying consumer demand than "by the wants which it generates [and] the type of

character which it forms in its people ... Ethically, the creation of the right wants is more important than want-satisfaction.” [48](#)

By challenging the assumption that the market value of productive contributions has ethical significance, Knight offers a critique of meritocracy more thoroughgoing than Hayek’s, and one less susceptible to self-congratulation. Hayek tells the wealthy that although their wealth is no measure of their merit, it does reflect the superior value of their contribution to society. For Knight, this is overly flattering. Being good at making money measures neither our merit nor the value of our contribution. All the successful can honestly say is that they have managed—through some unfathomable mix of genius or guile, timing or talent, luck or pluck or grim determination—to cater effectively to the jumble of wants and desires, however weighty or frivolous, that constitute consumer demand at any given moment. Satisfying consumer demand is not valuable in itself; its value depends, case by case, on the moral status of the ends it serves.

DESERVING OR ENTITLED?

It remains to ask how egalitarian liberalism also fuels meritocratic hubris, despite rejecting the idea that people morally deserve the economic rewards that markets confer. To begin, it is important to clarify what Rawls means by rejecting desert as the basis of justice. He does not mean that no one has a legitimate claim to the income or position he or she acquires. In a just society, those who work hard and play by the rules are entitled to what they earn.

Here Rawls makes a subtle but important distinction—between moral desert and what he calls “entitlements to legitimate expectations.” The difference is this: Unlike a desert claim, an entitlement can arise only once certain rules of the game are in place. It can’t tell us how to set up the rules in the first place. Rawls’s point is that we cannot know who is entitled to what until we first identify the principles of justice that should govern those rules and, more broadly, the basic structure of society. [49](#)

Here is how this distinction bears on the debate over meritocracy: To base justice on moral desert would be to set up the rules for the sake of rewarding the virtuous and the meritorious. Rawls rejects this. He thinks it is a mistake to regard an economic system—or, for that matter, a

constitution—as a scheme for honoring virtue or cultivating good character. Considerations of justice are prior to considerations of merit and virtue.

This is the heart of Rawls’s case against meritocracy. In a just society, those who become wealthy or attain prestigious positions are entitled to their success, not because it testifies to their superior merit but only insofar as these benefits are part of a system that is fair to everyone, including the worst-off members of society.

“A just scheme, then, answers to what men are entitled to; it satisfies their legitimate expectations as founded upon social institutions. But what they are entitled to is not proportional to nor dependent upon their intrinsic worth.” The principles of justice that define people’s duties and rights “do not mention moral desert, and there is no tendency for distributive shares to correspond to it.” [50](#)

At stake in Rawls’s renunciation of merit are two issues—one political, the other philosophical. Politically, Rawls wants to show that the affluent cannot legitimately object to redistributive taxation by claiming that their wealth is their due, something they morally deserve. This is the argument about the moral arbitrariness of talent and other contingencies that contribute to success. If success in a market economy depends heavily on luck, then it is hard to claim that the money we make is a reward for superior merit or desert.

None of the precepts of justice aims at rewarding virtue. The premiums earned by scarce natural talents, for example, are to cover the costs of training and to encourage the efforts of learning, as well as to direct ability to where it best furthers the common interest. The distributive shares that result do not correlate with moral worth, since the initial endowment of natural assets and the contingencies of their growth and nurture in early life are arbitrary from a moral point of view. [51](#)

Philosophically, the assertion that principles of justice must be defined independent of considerations of merit, virtue, or moral desert is an instance of a more general feature of Rawls’s liberalism. This is the claim that the “right” (the framework of duties and rights that governs society as a whole) is prior to the “good” (the various conceptions of virtue and the good life that people pursue within the framework). Principles of justice that affirmed

a particular conception of merit, virtue, or moral desert would not be neutral toward the competing conceptions of the good life that citizens in pluralist societies espouse. Such principles would impose on some the values of others and so fail to respect everyone's right to choose and pursue their own way of life.

Rawls explains the priority of justice over merit by way of an analogy: We don't set up the institution of property because we believe thieves have bad character and we want an institution that will enable us to punish them for it. That would be, so to speak, a "meritocratic" theory of punishment. It would put the good before the right. But this gets the moral logic backward. Instead, we set up the institution of property for reasons of efficiency and justice; then, if people steal, we enforce the law by punishing them. Having violated the rights of others, they become worthy of punishment. The point of the punishment is to penalize thieves for committing an injustice, not to stigmatize them for bad character (though this may be a side effect). [52](#)

Rawls argues that a meritocratic approach to economic rewards would also reverse the proper relation between the right and the good. "For a society to organize itself with the aim of rewarding moral desert as a first principle would be like having the institution of property in order to punish thieves." [53](#)

ATTITUDES TOWARD SUCCESS

On the face of it, Rawls's non-meritocratic way of thinking about economic success should be humbling for the successful and consoling for the disadvantaged. It should restrain the tendency toward meritocratic hubris among elites and prevent the loss of self-esteem for those who lack power or wealth. If I truly believe my success is due to my good fortune rather than my own doing, I am more likely to feel an obligation to share this good fortune with others.

These sentiments are in short supply these days. Humility among the successful is not a prominent feature of contemporary social and economic life. One impetus to populist backlash is a widespread sense among working people that elites look down on them. To the extent this is the case, it could simply show that the contemporary welfare state falls short of Rawls's idea of a just society. Or it could suggest that egalitarian liberalism does not challenge the self-satisfaction of elites after all.

It is certainly true that the contemporary welfare state, especially in the United States, does not live up to Rawls's vision of a just society. Many of the inequalities of income and power we witness today do not arise from a system of fair equality of opportunity or work to the advantage of the least well-off. This leads liberals to interpret working-class resentment against elites as a complaint about injustice. If this is the only basis of anger against elites, the solution is to double down on the project of expanding opportunity and improving the economic prospects of the least well-off.

But this is not the only way of interpreting the populist backlash against elites. The hubristic attitudes toward success that invite this backlash could well be fueled by the sense of entitlement that Rawls's philosophy affirms, even as it rejects moral desert. For consider: Even a society that is perfectly just, as Rawls defines justice, admits certain inequalities—those that result from fair equality of opportunity and that work to the advantage of the least well-off. Imagine how, consistent with Rawlsian principles, a wealthy CEO could justify his or her advantages to a lower-paid worker on the factory floor:

I am not worthier than you nor morally deserving of the privileged position I hold. My generous compensation package is simply an incentive necessary to induce me, and others like me, to develop our talents for the benefit of all. It is not your fault that you lack the talents society needs, nor is it my doing that I have such talents in abundance. This is why some of my income is taxed away to help people like you. I do not morally deserve my superior pay and position, but I am entitled to them under fair rules of social cooperation. And remember, you and I would have agreed to these rules had we thought about the matter before we knew who would land on top and who at the bottom. So please do not resent me. My privileges make you better off than you would otherwise be. The inequality you find galling is for your own good. [54](#)

To be sure, this rationale would not justify all inequalities of income, wealth, power, and opportunity that exist today. What it reveals, however, is that meritocratic attitudes toward success are not necessarily softened or displaced by liberal theories of distributive justice. Entitlements to

legitimate expectations may be as potent a source of meritocratic hubris and working-class resentment as claims based on merit, virtue, or desert.

Recall the analogy with punishment. Even if the reason for punishing theft is to uphold the institution of property, a characteristic side effect of such punishment is to stigmatize thieves. Similarly, even if the reason for paying surgeons more than janitors is that such pay differentials are part of a just basic structure that works to the advantage of the least well-off, a predictable side effect of such pay differentials is to honor the special talents and contributions of surgeons. Over time, these normative “side effects” shape attitudes toward success (and failure) that are hard to distinguish from meritocratic ones.

Social esteem flows, almost ineluctably, to those who enjoy economic and educational advantages, especially if they earn those advantages under fair terms of social cooperation. Liberals might reply that, provided all members of society are accorded equal respect as citizens, the allocation of social esteem is not a political matter. Deciding what abilities and achievements are worthy of admiration is a matter of social norms and personal values—a matter of the good, not the right. [55](#)

But this reply overlooks the fact that the allocation of honor and recognition is a political question of central importance and has long been regarded as such. Aristotle considered justice to be mainly about the distribution of offices and honors, not the distribution of income and wealth. Today’s populist revolt against elites is animated in large part by anger among working-class voters at what they take to be the disdain of the professional classes for those without a college degree. Insisting on the priority of the right over the good makes social esteem a matter of personal morality, and so blinds liberals to the politics of hubris and humiliation.

But it is folly to insist that the condescending attitudes of the credentialed, professional classes toward blue-collar workers is a matter of social norms that politics cannot or should not address. Questions of honor and recognition cannot be neatly separated from questions of distributive justice. This is especially true when it turns out that patronizing attitudes toward the disadvantaged are implicit in the case for compensating them. Sometimes these attitudes find explicit expression. As Thomas Nagel, a liberal egalitarian philosopher, has written, “when racial and sexual injustice have been reduced, we shall still be left with the great injustice of

the smart and the dumb, who are so differently rewarded for comparable effort.” [56](#)

“The smart and the dumb” is a telling phrase. It confirms populists’ worst suspicions about liberal elites. Far from the democratic sensibility of Rawls, who seeks a society in which we “share one another’s fate,” [57](#) Nagel’s phrase lays bare the meritocratic hubris to which some versions of welfare state liberalism are prone.

CHANCE AND CHOICE

The tendency of welfare state liberalism to fuel the politics of hubris and humiliation became more explicit in the work of liberal egalitarian philosophers of the 1980s and 1990s. Building on Rawls’s argument that the distribution of talents is arbitrary from a moral point of view, these philosophers argued that a just society should compensate people for bad luck of all kinds—being born poor, disabled, or with meager talents, or suffering accidents and misfortunes in the course of life. As one such philosopher wrote, “Distributive justice stipulates that the lucky should transfer some or all of their gains due to luck to the unlucky.” [58](#)

At first glance, this “luck egalitarian” philosophy, as it came to be known, seems a generous response to the accidents of fortune. In seeking to redress the undeserved benefits and burdens that the lottery of life bestows, it seems to offer a humane alternative to a competitive meritocratic society.

On closer inspection, however, the luck egalitarian philosophy requires exacting judgments of merit and desert. Because it argues that people should be compensated only insofar as their misfortune is due to factors beyond their control, it conditions public assistance (for welfare, say, or health care) on whether a needy person is needy due to bad luck or bad choices. This requires policy makers to figure out who among the poor are victims of circumstance and hence deserving of help and who are responsible for their poverty and therefore undeserving. [59](#)

Elizabeth Anderson, a trenchant critic of luck egalitarianism, calls this distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor a revival of “Poor Law thinking.” [60](#) It puts the state in the position of interrogating needy citizens to determine whether they might have averted their poverty by making better choices. This parsing of responsibility is a morally

unattractive way of conceiving the obligations that democratic citizens owe one another, for at least two reasons.

First, it bases our obligation to help those in need not on compassion or solidarity but on how they came to be needy in the first place. In certain cases, this makes moral sense. Most people would agree that a capable person who refuses to work simply out of indolence, even when decent jobs are available, has a weak case for public support. Having chosen not to work, the person is responsible for the consequences. But some luck egalitarians assert a far more expansive notion of responsibility. They argue that even the failure to buy insurance for various possible adversities constitutes the kind of choice that makes people responsible for most any misfortune that befalls them. If, for example, an uninsured person suffers grievous injury in a car crash, the luck egalitarian wants to know whether she could have purchased an insurance policy. Only if no such policies were available or affordable would the community be obligated to help with the hospital bills. [61](#)

Second, beyond its severity toward the imprudent, luck egalitarianism demeans those who do qualify for public assistance by casting them as helpless victims. Here there is a paradox. Luck egalitarians place great moral weight on people's ability to choose. They seek to compensate for chance so people's income and life prospects can reflect their own choices. But this demanding ethic of responsibility and choice carries a harsh implication: those who need help must be able to show that their neediness is not their own doing. To qualify for public assistance, they must present themselves—and conceive of themselves—as victims of forces beyond their control. [62](#)

This perverse incentive spills beyond the self-image of the claimants into the terms of public discourse. Liberals who defend the welfare state on the basis of luck egalitarianism are led, almost unavoidably, to a rhetoric of victimhood that views welfare recipients as lacking agency, as incapable of acting responsibly. [63](#)

But helping the disadvantaged on the grounds that they are victims of circumstances beyond their control carries a high moral and civic price. It supports the disparaging view that welfare recipients have little to contribute and are incapable of acting responsibly. And as Anderson rightly observes, denying that those in need of public support can exercise

meaningful choice is hard to reconcile with respecting them as equal citizens, capable of sharing in self-government. [64](#)

In short, luck egalitarianism “offers no aid to those it labels irresponsible, and humiliating aid to those it labels innately inferior,” Anderson writes. “Like the Poor Law regime, it abandons those disadvantaged through their own choices to their miserable fates and defines the deserving disadvantaged in terms of their innate inferiority of talent, intelligence, ability, or social appeal.” [65](#)

As with other versions of liberalism, the luck egalitarian philosophy begins by rejecting merit and desert as the basis of justice but ends by reasserting meritocratic attitudes and norms with a vengeance. For Rawls, these norms re-enter in the guise of entitlements to legitimate expectations. For the luck egalitarians, they enter through an emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility.

The notion that we do not deserve the benefits and burdens that flow from luck—including the luck of having or lacking the talents society rewards—seems to undercut the meritocratic notion that, under conditions of fair competition, we deserve what we earn. Advantages due to chance, not choice, are undeserved. But the line between chance and choice is complicated by the fact that sometimes people choose to take chances. Skydivers risk life and limb for the thrill. Young people who feel invincible choose not to buy health insurance. Gamblers flock to casinos.

Luck egalitarians say that those who choose to take risks are responsible for their fates when their bets go badly. The community owes help only to victims of bad luck they have not courted—being struck by a meteor, for example. Those who lose a bet they have willingly made can claim no help from the winners. Ronald Dworkin makes this point with his distinction between “brute luck” (the meteor victim) and “option luck” (the losing gambler). [66](#)

The contrast between chance and choice makes judgments of merit and desert unavoidable. Although no one deserves to lose at gambling, the losing gambler, having chosen to bear the risk, deserves no help from the community in paying his gambling debts. He is responsible for his misfortune.

Of course, it can sometimes be unclear what counts as genuine choice. Some gamblers suffer from addiction, and slot machines are programmed to

manipulate gamblers to keep them playing. In these cases, gambling is less a choice than a coercive practice that preys on the vulnerable. But insofar as people freely choose to bear certain risks, the luck egalitarian considers them responsible for the consequences. They deserve their fate, at least in the sense that no one owes them help in meeting it.

Beyond familiar disputes about what counts as a truly voluntary choice, the distinction between chance and choice is blurred by another consideration—the possibility of insurance. If my house burns down, this is surely bad luck. But what if affordable fire insurance were available and I had failed to buy it, hoping that no fire would ever occur and that I could save money by avoiding the yearly premium with impunity? Although the fire itself is “brute luck,” my failure to insure against it is a choice that converts the unfortunate incident into “option luck.” Having chosen not to buy an insurance policy, I am responsible for the consequences and cannot expect taxpayers to compensate me for the loss of my house.

Of course, insurance is not available for all accidents and contingencies. Some people have the good luck to be born with the talents society prizes while others are born disabled in ways that make it hard to earn a living. Dworkin thinks the concept of insurance can be extended to deal with these contingencies as well. Since it is impossible to buy insurance before one is born, Dworkin suggests that we estimate the average amount people would pay to insure against being born with meager talents and use that figure to redistribute income from the talented to the untalented. The idea is to compensate for the unequal distribution of native ability by taxing those who have won out in the genetic lottery. [67](#)

There is reason to doubt that it is possible to calculate the premiums and payouts of a hypothetical insurance policy for the lack of native talent. But if it could be done, and if the talented were taxed and the untalented were compensated accordingly, and if, furthermore, everyone had fair access to jobs and educational opportunities, then the luck egalitarian’s ideal of a just society would be realized. All income differences due to undeserved gifts and handicaps would be compensated for, and all remaining inequalities would reflect factors for which we are responsible, such as effort and choice. And so the luck egalitarian’s attempt to banish the effects of accident and misfortune points to a meritocratic ideal after all: a distribution of income based not on morally arbitrary contingencies but on what people deserve. [68](#)

Luck egalitarianism defends inequalities that arise from effort and choice. This highlights a point of convergence with free-market liberalism. Both emphasize personal responsibility and make the community's obligation to help the needy conditional on showing that their neediness is no fault of their own. Luck egalitarians seek, by their own account, to defend the welfare state from free-market critics by accepting "the most powerful idea in the arsenal of the anti-egalitarian right: the idea of choice and responsibility." ⁶⁹ This reduces the disagreement between free-market and egalitarian liberals to a debate about the conditions under which a person's choices can be considered truly free rather than burdened by circumstance or necessity.

VALORIZING TALENT

Although free-market and egalitarian liberalism both reject merit as a first principle of justice, they ultimately share a meritocratic bent. Neither effectively counters the morally unattractive attitudes toward success and failure to which meritocracies are prone—hubris among the winners and humiliation among the losers. This has partly to do with their insistence on parsing personal responsibility. It also reflects their valorization of talent. Even as they insist that one's native abilities are a matter of luck and hence arbitrary from a moral point of view, they take talent, and in particular, natural or innate talent, incredibly seriously.

This is especially true of egalitarian liberals, who attribute income inequality in large part to the results of the genetic lottery. They devise elaborate measures, such as Dworkin's hypothetical insurance scheme, to calculate and compensate for differences of "natural" or "innate" or "inborn" talent that, unlike social and cultural advantages, cannot be offset by equal educational opportunities. They base the case for redistribution on this biologicistic conception of talent, as a genetic fact given prior to social arrangements. But this way of conceiving talent, as a kind of inborn excellence, is a hubristic conceit. Even as egalitarian liberals seek to remedy "the great injustice of the smart and the dumb," ⁷⁰ they valorize "the smart" and denigrate "the dumb."

One need not enter the fraught debate about the genetic basis of intelligence in order to see that the staggering inequalities of income and wealth we witness today have little to do with innate differences in

intelligence. The notion that the outsize earnings of people who work in finance, business, and elite professions is due to their genetic superiority is far-fetched. While it may be true that the achievements of geniuses such as Einstein or virtuosos such as Mozart are the result of innate gifts, it is absurd to think that such surpassing natural genius is what separates hedge fund managers from high school teachers.

As Elizabeth Anderson observes, it is doubtful “that inferior native endowments have much to do with observed income inequalities in capitalist economies.” Most differences in income “are due to the fact that society has invested far more in developing some people’s talents than others and that it puts very unequal amounts of capital at the disposal of each worker. Productivity attaches mainly to work roles, not to individuals.”

[71](#)

Natural talents, undeserved though they be, attract praise in meritocratic societies. This is partly because they are admired for their own sake. But it is also because they are thought to account for the vast winnings of the successful.

If a meritocracy enables people to rise “as far as their God-given talents will take them,” it is tempting to assume that the most successful are the most gifted. But this is a mistake. Success at making money has little to do with native intelligence, if such a thing exists. [72](#) By fixating on natural talent as a primary source of income inequality, egalitarian liberals exaggerate its role and, inadvertently, enlarge its prestige.

MERITOCRACY’S RISE

“Meritocracy” was born as a term of abuse but became a term of praise and aspiration. “New Labour is committed to meritocracy,” proclaimed Tony Blair in 1996, the year before he became prime minister of Britain. “We believe that people should be able to rise by their talents, not by their birth or the advantages of privilege.” [73](#) In 2001, campaigning for a second term, he said his mission was “to break down the barriers that hold people back, to create real upward mobility, a society that is open and genuinely based on merit and the equal worth of all.” He promised “a strictly meritocratic programme,” aimed at “opening up economy and society to merit and talent.” [74](#)

Michael Young, by then eighty-five years old, was dismayed. In an essay in *The Guardian*, he complained that Blair was celebrating an ideal that he (Young) had debunked in his satirical work four decades earlier. Young now feared his dark prediction had come true. “I expected that the poor and the disadvantaged would be done down, and in fact they have been ... It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.” [75](#)

Meanwhile, the rich and the powerful, “insufferably smug,” were riding high. “If meritocrats believe, as more and more of them are encouraged to do, that their advancement comes from their own merits, they can feel they deserve whatever they can get.” As a result, “inequality has been becoming more grievous with every year that passes, and without a bleat from the leaders of the party who once spoke up so trenchantly and characteristically for greater equality.” [76](#)

He did not know what could be done “about this more polarized meritocratic society.” But he wished that “Mr. Blair would drop the word from his public vocabulary, or at least admit to the downside.” [77](#)

For the last several decades, the language of merit has dominated public discourse, with little recognition of the downside. Even in the face of deepening inequality, the rhetoric of rising has provided, for mainstream parties of the center-left and center-right, the primary language of moral progress and political improvement. “Those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to rise as far as their talents will take them.”

Meritocratic elites had become so accustomed to intoning this mantra that they failed to notice it was losing its capacity to inspire. Tone-deaf to the mounting resentments of those who had not shared in the bounty of globalization, they missed the mood of discontent. The populist backlash caught them by surprise. They did not see the insult implicit in the meritocratic society they were offering.



The Sorting Machine

If meritocracy is the problem, what is the solution? Should we hire people based on nepotism or prejudice of various kinds, rather than their ability to do the job? Should we go back to the days when Ivy League colleges admitted the privileged sons of white, Protestant, upper-class families with little regard for their academic promise? No. Overcoming the tyranny of merit does not mean that merit should play no role in the allocation of jobs and social roles.

Instead, it means rethinking the way we conceive success, questioning the meritocratic conceit that those on top have made it on their own. And it means challenging inequalities of wealth and esteem that are defended in the name of merit but that foster resentment, poison our politics, and drive us apart. Such rethinking should focus on the two domains of life most central to the meritocratic conception of success: education and work.

In the next chapter, I will show how the tyranny of merit undermines the dignity of work, and how we might renew it. In this chapter, I show how higher education has become a sorting machine that promises mobility on the basis of merit but entrenches privilege and promotes attitudes toward success corrosive of the commonality democracy requires.

Colleges and universities preside over the system by which modern societies allocate opportunity. They confer the credentials that determine

access to high-paying jobs and prestigious positions. For higher education, this role is a mixed blessing.

Making colleges and universities the animating heart of meritocratic aspiration confers on them enormous cultural authority and prestige. It has made admission to elite colleges the object of fevered ambition and enabled a number of American universities to amass multibillion-dollar endowments. But converting these institutions into the bulwark of a meritocratic order may not be good for democracy, for the students who compete to attend them, or even for the colleges and universities themselves.

JAMES CONANT'S MERITOCRATIC COUP D'ÉTAT

The notion of competitive college admissions as the gateway to opportunity is by now so familiar that it is easy to forget its novelty. The meritocratic mission of American higher education is of relatively recent origin, a product of the 1950s and 1960s. During the early decades of the twentieth century, admission to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, the influential “big three” of the Ivy League, depended largely on having attended one of the private boarding schools that catered to upper-class families of the Protestant elite. Academic ability mattered less than coming from the right social background and being able to afford the tuition. Each college had its own entrance exams, but even these were flexibly administered; many who failed to get a passing grade were nonetheless admitted. Women were excluded, black students were barred from Princeton and scarce at Harvard and Yale, and Jewish enrollment was restricted by formal or informal quotas. ¹

The notion of elite colleges as meritocratic institutions, whose purpose was to recruit and train the most talented students, whatever their backgrounds, to become leaders of society, found its most influential articulation in the 1940s, by James Bryant Conant, the president of Harvard University. Conant, a chemist who served as a scientific advisor to the Manhattan Project during World War II, was troubled by the emergence, at Harvard and throughout American society, of a hereditary upper class. Such an elite was contrary to America’s democratic ideals, he believed, and ill-suited to governing at a time when the country needed intelligence and scientific prowess as never before.

Nicholas Lemann, author of an illuminating history of aptitude testing in American higher education, describes the problem as Conant saw it. At Harvard and other leading universities, “rich heedless young men with servants, whose lives revolved around parties and sports, not studying, set the tone for college life.” These men went on to dominate the leading law firms, Wall Street banks, the Foreign Service, research hospitals, and university faculties. [2](#)

All the good places were reserved for members of a certain group ... all-male, Eastern, high-Protestant, privately educated ... No Catholics or Jews were allowed, except in rare cases that required of them a careful extirpation of any accent or other noticeable expression of their alien culture. Nonwhites weren't in close enough range of membership in the elite to be excluded. And even the fiercest social reformers of the day didn't think to suggest that women ought routinely to participate in running the country. [3](#)

Conant's ambition was to upend this hereditary elite and replace it with a meritocratic one. His goal, Lemann writes, was

to depose the existing, undemocratic American elite and replace it with a new one made up of brainy, elaborately trained, public-spirited people drawn from every section and every background. These people (men, actually) would lead the country. They would manage the large technical organizations that would be the backbone of the late-twentieth-century United States and create, for the first time ever, an organized system that would provide opportunity to all Americans. [4](#)

It was, in Lemann's words, “an audacious plan for engineering a change in the leadership group and social structure of the country—a kind of quiet, planned coup d'état.” [5](#)

To pull off this meritocratic coup d'état, Conant needed a way to identify the most promising high school students, however modest their family backgrounds, and recruit them for elite college educations. He began by creating a Harvard scholarship for talented students from public schools in the Midwest, who would be chosen based on a test of intellectual aptitude.

In commissioning this test, Conant insisted that it measure native intelligence, not mastery of academic subjects, to avoid giving an advantage to those who had attended privileged secondary schools. The test he chose for this purpose, a version of an IQ test used by the army during World War I, was called the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT).

In time, Conant's scholarship program was extended to students nationwide. The test he used to select them, the SAT, eventually came to be used to determine admission to colleges and universities across the country. As Lemann observes, the SAT "would become not just a way of handing out a few scholarships at Harvard, but the basic mechanism for sorting the American population." [6](#)

Conant's attempt to transform Harvard into a meritocratic institution was part of a broader ambition to remake American society on meritocratic principles. He set out his vision in "Education for a Classless Society," an address he delivered at the University of California and published in *The Atlantic* in 1940. Conant wanted to reclaim for American society the principle of equality of opportunity, now threatened by "the development of a hereditary aristocracy of wealth." He cited Frederick Jackson Turner, the Harvard historian who had argued that the closing of the frontier cut off the traditional avenue of American opportunity—the ability to move west, to cultivate land, and to rise through effort and ingenuity unshackled by class-bound hierarchy. "The most distinctive fact" of the early period of American democracy, Turner had written, "was the freedom of the individual to rise under conditions of social mobility." [7](#)

Turner, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, was perhaps the first to use the term "social mobility." [8](#) Conant called this concept "the heart of my argument" and used it to define his ideal of a classless society.

A high degree of social mobility is the essence of the American ideal of a classless society. If large numbers of young people can develop their own capacities irrespective of the economic status of their parents, then social mobility is high. If, on the other hand, the future of a young man or woman is determined almost entirely by inherited privilege or the lack of it, social mobility is nonexistent. [9](#)

If social mobility is high, Conant explained, “sons and daughters must and can seek their own level, obtain their own economic rewards, engage in any occupation irrespective of what their parents might have done.” [10](#)

But what, in the absence of an open frontier, could serve as the instrument of the mobility a fluid, classless society required? Conant’s answer was education. As more and more Americans were attending high school, the secondary school system was becoming “a vast engine” which, if operated properly, could “aid us in recapturing ... opportunity, a gift that once was the promise of the frontier.”

According to Conant’s vision, however, the opportunity that widespread high school enrollment made possible consisted less in the education it provided than in the chance it presented to sort and rank students as candidates for higher education. In a highly industrialized society, “abilities must be assessed, talents must be developed, ambitions guided. This is the task for our public schools.” [11](#)

Although Conant believed it was important to educate all future citizens as members of a political democracy, this civic purpose of the public schools was secondary to their sorting function. More important than educating young people for citizenship was equipping them “to step on to the first rung of whatever ladder of opportunity seems most appropriate.” Conant acknowledged that this sorting role “may seem an overwhelming burden to put upon our education system,” but he hoped the public schools could be “reconstructed for this specific purpose.” [12](#) The public schools offered a broad recruiting ground for a new, meritocratic elite.

In support of his notion of culling from each generation those best suited for higher education and public leadership, Conant enlisted a formidable ally — Thomas Jefferson. Like Conant, Jefferson opposed an aristocracy of wealth and birth and wanted to replace it with an aristocracy of virtue and talents. Jefferson also believed that a well-designed educational system could be the mechanism for “the selection of the youths of genius from among the classes of the poor.” Nature had not vested talent exclusively in the wealthy but had “scattered [it] with equal hand” among all ranks of society. The challenge was to find it and cultivate it so that the most talented and virtuous could be educated and equipped to govern. [13](#)

Jefferson had proposed a system of public education for Virginia with this aim in mind. Those who did best in free primary schools would be

chosen to “receive at public expense a higher degree of education at a district school.” Those who excelled there would receive scholarships to attend the College of William and Mary and become leaders of society. “Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.” [14](#)

Jefferson’s plan was not adopted, but for Conant, it offered an inspiring precedent for the selective system of higher education he favored, one based on equality of opportunity and social mobility. Jefferson had not used either of those terms. He wrote instead of a “natural aristocracy” of talent and virtue that he hoped would prevail over “an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth.” [15](#) And he described his competitive scholarship plan in language that would have been impolitic in Conant’s more democratic age: “Twenty of the best geniuses will be raked from the rubbish annually and be instructed, at the public expense.” [16](#)

INTIMATIONS OF THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

Seen in retrospect, Jefferson’s indelicate language highlights two potentially objectionable features of a meritocratic system of education that our language of social mobility and equal opportunity obscures: First, a fluid, mobile society based on merit, though antithetical to hereditary hierarchy, is not antithetical to inequality; to the contrary, it legitimates inequalities that arise from merit rather than birth. Second, a system that celebrates and rewards “the best geniuses” is prone to denigrate the rest, implicitly or explicitly, as “rubbish.” Even as he proposed a generous scholarship scheme, Jefferson offered an early instance of our own meritocratic tendency to valorize the “smart” and stigmatize the “dumb.”

Conant addressed these two potential objections to a meritocratic order, the first more directly than the second. Regarding inequality, he frankly acknowledged that his ideal of a classless society did not aim at a more equal distribution of income and wealth. He sought a more mobile society, not a more equal one. What mattered was not easing the gap between rich and poor but ensuring that people traded places in the economic hierarchy from one generation to the next, some moving up and others moving down from the status of their parents. “For one generation at least and perhaps two, considerable differences in economic status as well as extreme

differentiation of employment may exist without the formation of classes.” Power and privilege may be unequal provided they are “automatically redistributed at the end of each generation.” [17](#)

As for the distasteful image of raking “geniuses” from “the rubbish,” Conant did not think the sorting he proposed would valorize those sorted in or denigrate those sorted out. “We must proceed from the premise that there are no educational privileges, even at the most advanced levels of instruction,” he wrote. “No one channel should have a social standing above the other.” [18](#)

As things turned out, Conant was too sanguine on both counts. Making higher education meritocratic did not bring about a classless society, nor did it avoid disparaging those excluded for the lack of talent. Some would say these developments simply reflect a failure to realize meritocratic ideals. But as Conant acknowledged, sorting for talent and seeking equality are two different projects.

Conant’s meritocratic vision was egalitarian in the sense that he wanted to open Harvard and other elite universities to the most talented students in the country, however modest their social and economic backgrounds. At a time when Ivy League colleges were dominated by families of established privilege, this was a noble ambition. But Conant was not concerned with expanding access to higher education. He did not want to increase the number of students attending college; he wanted simply to ensure that those who did attend were truly the most capable. The country “would benefit by an elimination of at least a quarter, or perhaps one-half, of those now enrolled in advanced university work,” he wrote in 1938, “and the substitution of others of more talent in their place.” In line with this view, he opposed the GI Bill, enacted by FDR in 1944, which provided free college education for returning veterans. The nation did not need more students going to college, Conant thought; it needed better ones. [19](#)

During Conant’s two decades as president, Harvard’s admissions policy fell short of the meritocratic ideals he advocated. By the end of his tenure, in the early 1950s, Harvard still rarely rejected the sons of alumni, admitting more than 87 percent of them. [20](#) It continued to favor applicants from elite New England boarding schools, accepting most who applied, while holding public school applicants to higher academic standards. This was partly because the prep school students were “paying guests” who did

not need financial aid but also because their “upper crust” pedigree brought the cultural cachet that Ivy League schools still prized. ²¹ Restrictions on the admission of Jewish students were quietly eased but not eliminated, reflecting a persisting fear that having too many Jews “would drive away the upper-class Protestant boys whom Harvard most wished to enroll.” ²² The admission of women and attempts to recruit students from racial and ethnic minorities lay in the future.

CONANT’S MERITOCRATIC LEGACY

Although the Harvard of his day did not fully implement them, the meritocratic ideals Conant proclaimed have since come to define the self-understanding of American higher education. The arguments he advanced in the 1940s about the role of colleges and universities in a democratic society have become the conventional wisdom of our day. No longer in dispute, they have devolved into the routine rhetorical fare of commencement addresses and public pronouncements by college presidents: Higher education should be open to talented students of all social and economic backgrounds, ideally without regard for their ability to pay. Although only the wealthiest colleges can afford need-blind admissions and financial aid, it is widely agreed that merit not wealth should be the basis of admission. While most colleges evaluate applicants on an array of factors, including academic promise, character, athletic prowess, and extracurricular activities, academic merit is measured mainly by high school grades and scores on the SAT, the standardized test of intellectual aptitude that Conant championed.

To be sure, the meaning of merit is fiercely contested. In debates over affirmative action, for example, some argue that counting race and ethnicity as factors in admission violates merit; others reply that the ability to bring distinctive life experiences and perspectives to the classroom and the wider society is a merit relevant to a university’s mission. But the fact that our debates about college admissions are typically arguments about merit testifies to the hold of meritocratic ideals.

Perhaps most deeply embedded is Conant’s notion of higher education as the primary gateway to opportunity, a source of upward mobility that keeps society fluid by offering all students, whatever their social or economic background, the chance to rise as far as their talents will take them.

Drawing on this idea, college presidents ritualistically remind us that excellence and opportunity go hand in hand. The fewer the social and economic barriers to college attendance, the greater the ability of colleges to recruit the most outstanding students and equip them to succeed. As each entering class arrives on campus for first-year orientation, they are lavished with praise for their excellence and diversity, and for the talent and effort that have led to their admission. [23](#)

Rhetorically and philosophically, Conant's meritocratic ideology has won the day. But it has not played out the way he expected.

SAT SCORES TRACK WEALTH

First, the SAT, it turns out, does not measure scholarly aptitude or native intelligence independent of social and educational background. To the contrary, SAT scores are highly correlated with wealth. The higher your family income, the higher your SAT score. At each successive rung on the income ladder, average SAT scores increase. [24](#) For scores that put students in contention for the most selective colleges, the gap is especially stark. If you come from a family with an annual income greater than \$200,000, your chance of scoring above 1400 (out of 1600) is one in five. If you come from a poor family (less than \$20,000 per year), your chance is one in fifty. [25](#) Those in high-scoring categories are also, overwhelmingly, children of parents with college degrees. [26](#)

Beyond the general educational advantages well-off families can provide, the SAT scores of the privileged are boosted by the use of private test-prep courses and tutors. Some, in places like Manhattan, charge as much as \$1,000 per hour for one-on-one tutoring. As meritocratic competition for college admission has intensified in recent decades, tutoring and test prep has become a billion-dollar industry. [27](#)

For years, the College Board, which administers the SAT, insisted that its test measured aptitude and that scores were unaffected by tutoring. It recently dropped that pretense and entered a partnership with the Khan Academy to provide free online SAT practice to all test takers. Although this was a worthy undertaking, it did little to level the test-prep playing field, as College Board officials hoped and claimed it would. Unsurprisingly perhaps, students from families with higher incomes and education levels

made greater use of the online help than did students from disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting in an even greater scoring gap between the privileged and the rest. [28](#)

For Conant, a test of aptitude or IQ held promise as a democratic measure of academic ability, untainted by educational disadvantage and the vagaries of high school grades. This is why he opted for the SAT to choose his scholarship students. He would be surprised to learn that high school grades are better than SAT scores at identifying low-income students who are likely to succeed in college.

Comparing the predictive power of test scores and grades is a tangled matter. For two-thirds of students, they are more or less aligned. But for those whose SAT scores and grades are discrepant, the SAT helps the privileged and hurts the disadvantaged. [29](#)

While high school grades are to some extent correlated with family income, SAT scores are more so. This is partly because, contrary to long-standing claims by the testing industry, the SAT is coachable. Private tutoring helps, and a profitable industry has arisen to teach high school students the gimmicks and tricks to boost their scores. [30](#)

MERITOCRACY ENTRENCHES INEQUALITY

Second, the system of meritocratic admission that Conant promoted did not lead to the classless society he hoped it would produce. Inequalities of income and wealth have deepened since the 1940s and 1950s, and the social mobility that Conant saw as the remedy for a stratified society has not come about. The haves and have-nots have not been trading places from one generation to the next. As we have seen, relatively few children of the poor rise to affluence, and relatively few children of affluence fall below the ranks of the upper middle class. Notwithstanding the American dream of rising from rags to riches, upward mobility is less common in the United States than in many European countries, and there is no evidence of improvement in recent decades.

More to the point, higher education in the age of meritocracy has not been an engine of social mobility; to the contrary, it has reinforced the advantages that privileged parents confer on their children. Of course, the demographic and academic profile of students on elite college campuses has changed for the better since the 1940s. The hereditary aristocracy of white,

Anglo-Saxon, Protestant wealth that Conant sought to displace no longer predominates. Women are admitted on equal terms with men, colleges actively recruit for racial and ethnic diversity, and about half of today's Ivy League students identify themselves as students of color. ³¹ The quotas and informal practices limiting Jewish enrollment that prevailed during the first half of the twentieth century have disappeared.

The favoritism that Harvard, Yale, and Princeton long accorded young men from upper-class boarding schools receded in the 1960s and 1970s. So did the routine admission to Ivy League colleges of any minimally qualified son of an alumnus. Academic standards improved and median SAT scores increased. The best-endowed colleges and universities adopted need-blind admissions and generous financial-aid policies, removing a major financial barrier for promising students of modest means.

These are the undeniable achievements. And yet, the meritocratic revolution in higher education did not bring about the social mobility and broad opportunity that its early proponents expected and that educational leaders and politicians continue to promise. America's selective colleges and universities ousted the complacent, entitled, hereditary elite that worried Conant. But this aristocracy of inherited privilege has given way to a meritocratic elite that is now as privileged and entrenched as the one it replaced.

Though far more inclusive in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity, this meritocratic elite has not produced a fluid, mobile society. Instead, today's credentialed, professional classes have figured out how to pass their privileges on to their children, not by bequeathing them large estates but by equipping them with the advantages that determine success in a meritocratic society.

Notwithstanding its newfound role as the arbiter of opportunity and the engine of upward mobility, higher education has not provided a significant counterweight to the rising inequality of recent times. Consider the class composition of higher education today, especially in its most selective domains:

- Most students at selective colleges and universities are from affluent families; very few are from low-income backgrounds. More than 70 percent of those who attend the hundred or so most competitive

colleges in the United States come from the top quarter of the income scale; only 3 percent come from the bottom quarter. [32](#)

- The wealth gap in college enrollment is most acute at the top. At Ivy League colleges, Stanford, Duke, and other prestigious places, there are more students from the wealthiest 1 percent of families than from the entire bottom half of the country. At Yale and Princeton, only about one student in fifty comes from a poor family (bottom 20 percent). [33](#)
- If you come from a rich family (top 1 percent), your chances of attending an Ivy League school are 77 times greater than if you come from a poor family (bottom 20 percent). Most young people from the bottom half of the income scale attend a two-year college or none at all. [34](#)

Over the last two decades, elite private colleges have offered more generous financial aid, and the federal government has increased college funding for students of modest means. Harvard and Stanford, for example, now provide free tuition, room, and board to any student whose family makes less than \$65,000 per year. Despite these measures, however, the share of students from low-income families at selective colleges has changed little since 2000 and in some cases has drifted downward. The percentage of “first generation” students (the first in their families to attend college) at Harvard today is no higher than it was in 1960. Jerome Karabel, the author of a history of admissions policies at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, concludes that “the children of the working class and the poor are about as unlikely to attend the Big Three [Harvard, Yale, and Princeton] today as they were in 1954.” [35](#)

WHY ELITE COLLEGES ARE NOT ENGINES OF MOBILITY

The academic reputations, scientific contributions, and rich educational offerings of America’s leading colleges and universities are admired throughout the world. But these institutions are not effective engines of upward mobility. Recently, the economist Raj Chetty and a team of colleagues undertook a comprehensive study of the role of colleges in promoting intergenerational mobility, examining the economic trajectory of 30 million college students from 1999 to 2013. For each college in the United States, they calculated the proportion of its students who rose from

the bottom rung on the income ladder to the top (i.e., from the bottom quintile to the top quintile). They asked, in other words, what proportion of students at each college came from a poor family but wound up earning enough to reach the top 20 percent. Their finding: higher education today does surprisingly little to promote upward mobility. [36](#)

This is especially true at elite private colleges. Although attending a place like Harvard or Princeton does give a poor kid a good chance of rising, such places enroll so few poor kids to begin with that their mobility rate is low. Only 1.8 percent of Harvard students (and only 1.3 percent at Princeton) rise from the bottom to the top of the income scale. [37](#)

One might expect things to be different at the major public universities. But they, too, enroll so many already-affluent students that they contribute little to upward mobility. The mobility rate at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor is only 1.5 percent. Its class-skewed profile is similar to Harvard's: two-thirds of its students come from well-off families (top quintile). Poor kids are even scarcer in Ann Arbor (fewer than 4 percent) than at Harvard. A similar pattern holds true at the University of Virginia, with a mobility rate of only 1.5 percent, due largely to the fact that fewer than 3 percent of its students come from poor families. [38](#)

Chetty and his team did identify some less-famous public universities and state colleges with higher mobility rates. These schools are both accessible to low-income students and successful at helping them rise. Cal State University at Los Angeles, for example, and the State University of New York at Stony Brook enable nearly 10 percent of their students to rise from the bottom rung to the top, about five times the mobility rate of Ivy League colleges and the most selective public universities. [39](#)

But these institutions are the exception. Taken together, the 1,800 colleges and universities Chetty studied—private and public, selective and non-selective—enabled fewer than 2 percent of their students to rise from the bottom fifth of the income scale to the top fifth. [40](#) Some might ask whether propelling students, in one generation, from the bottom quintile (\$20,000 family income or less) to the top (\$110,000 income or more) is too demanding a test of mobility. But even more modest ascents are relatively rare. At elite private colleges and universities, only about one student in ten manages to rise even two rungs (two quintiles) on the income ladder. [41](#)

American colleges and universities enable surprisingly few students to rise, despite the fact that attending such places does enhance one's economic prospects. College graduates, especially from prestigious places, do have a major edge in landing lucrative jobs. But these schools have little impact on upward mobility, because most of their students are well-off in the first place. American higher education is like an elevator in a building that most people enter on the top floor.

In practice, most colleges and universities do less to expand opportunity than to consolidate privilege. For those who look to higher education as the primary vehicle of opportunity, this is sobering news. It calls into question an article of faith in contemporary politics—that the answer to rising inequality is greater mobility, and that the way to increase mobility is to send more people to college.

Although this vision of opportunity is invoked by politicians across the ideological spectrum, it fits less and less well with the lived experience of a great many people, especially those who lack a college degree but aspire nonetheless to dignified work and a decent life. This is a reasonable aspiration that a meritocratic society ignores at its peril. For the credentialed classes, it is easy to forget that most of our fellow citizens do not have a college degree. Constantly admonishing them to better their condition by getting one (“what you earn depends on what you learn”) can be more insulting than inspiring.

What then to do about higher education? Should it retain its current role as the arbiter of opportunity? And should we continue to assume that opportunity consists in equal access to the meritocratic tournament that college admissions has become? Some say yes, provided we can improve the fairness of the tournament. They argue that the dearth of low-income students in higher education points not to a flaw in meritocratic admissions but to a failure to implement them consistently. According to this view, the cure for meritocracy's ills is a more thoroughgoing meritocracy, one that gives talented students equal access to college whatever their social and economic background.

MAKING MERITOCRACY MORE FAIR

On its face, this is a sensible position. Improving educational opportunities for poor but gifted students is an unqualified good. In recent decades, colleges and universities have made important strides in recruiting African

American and Latinx students but have done little to increase the proportion of lower-income students. In fact, as public debate has raged about affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities, colleges have quietly practiced what amounts to affirmative action for the wealthy.

For example, many selective colleges and universities give preference to the children of alumni (“legacies,” as they are called), on the grounds that admitting them builds community spirit and generates gifts to the endowment. At elite colleges, alumni children are as much as six times more likely than other applicants to win admission. Overall, Harvard admits only one applicant in twenty; of legacy applicants, it accepts one out of three. [42](#)

Some schools also ease academic standards to admit children of wealthy donors who are not alumni, reasoning that it is worth accepting some less-than-stellar students in exchange for a new library or scholarship fund. During a fundraising campaign in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Duke University devoted about one hundred places per year in the entering class to children of wealthy donors who might not otherwise have been admitted. Although some faculty worried about compromising academic standards, the policy helped boost Duke’s endowment and improve its competitive standing. [43](#) Documents filed in a recent court case about Harvard’s admissions policy revealed that nearly 10 percent of its students are admitted with the help of donor connections. [44](#)

Preferences for recruited athletes is another boon to affluent applicants. It is sometimes assumed that lowering academic standards for athletes, especially in high-profile sports such as football and basketball, helps enroll students from underrepresented minorities and low-income backgrounds. But on the whole, applicants who benefit from athletic preferences are disproportionately wealthy and white. This is because most of the sports for which elite colleges recruit are pursued mainly by well-off kids—squash, lacrosse, sailing, crew, golf, water polo, fencing, even horseback riding. [45](#)

Preferential admission for athletes is not limited to powerhouse football schools such as Michigan and Ohio State, whose bowl-bound teams fill massive stadiums. At Williams College, a small, prestigious liberal arts college in New England, 30 percent of the class consists of athletic recruits. [46](#) Few of these student athletes come from disadvantaged backgrounds. A study of nineteen selective colleges and universities co-authored by the

former president of Princeton found that recruited athletes enjoy greater admissions advantages than either underrepresented minorities or alumni children, and that only 5 percent of them come from the bottom quarter of the income scale. [47](#)

Colleges could try to address this unfairness in various ways. They could undertake class-based affirmative action by according students from poor families the same preferences they currently give legacies, donor children, and recruited athletes. Or they could reduce the advantages they give wealthy applicants by ending these preferences altogether. In addition, colleges could offset the advantages affluent applicants enjoy due to SAT scores inflated by private tutoring and test prep by no longer requiring these standardized tests, as the University of Chicago and other schools have recently done. Studies have shown that SAT scores are more likely than high school grades to be distorted as predictors of academic performance by socioeconomic background; relying on them less would enable colleges to enroll more students of modest means with little if any loss in rates of academic success. [48](#)

These are steps that colleges could take on their own. Government could also intervene to make college admission less biased in favor of the privileged. Senator Edward Kennedy, himself a legacy student at Harvard, once proposed requiring private colleges to make public the acceptance rates for alumni children and report their socioeconomic profile. Daniel Markovits, a Yale law professor and critic of meritocratic inequality, would go further. He has proposed denying private universities their tax-exempt status unless they admit at least half of their students from the bottom two-thirds of the income scale, ideally by expanding enrollments. [49](#)

These measures, whether undertaken by the colleges themselves or by government mandate, would ease the inequality that makes higher education a weak force for social mobility. They would reduce the unfairness of the system by improving access for the less-privileged. These are compelling reasons to consider them.

But focusing only on the unfairness of the current system begs a bigger question at the heart of Conant's meritocratic revolution: Should colleges and universities take on the role of sorting people based on talent to determine who gets ahead in life?

There are at least two reasons to doubt that they should. The first concerns the invidious judgments such sorting implies for those who get sorted out, and the damaging consequences for a shared civic life. The second concerns the injury the meritocratic struggle inflicts on those who get sorted in and the risk that the sorting mission becomes so all-consuming that it diverts colleges and universities from their educational mission. In short, turning higher education into a hyper-competitive sorting contest is unhealthy for democracy and education alike. Consider each of these dangers in turn.

SORTING AND THE ALLOCATION OF SOCIAL ESTEEM

Conant was aware of the risk that converting universities into sorting mechanisms could sow social discord, but he thought this risk could be avoided. His goal was to use testing and tracking to direct each person to the social role that made best use of his talents (he still assumed that only men's talents needed to be tested and tracked), without implying that the most talented people were worthier than others. He did not believe that educational sorting would generate judgments of social superiority or prestige, as the old system of inherited privilege had done. ⁵⁰

Conant's faith that it is possible to sort people without judging them ignores the moral logic and psychological appeal of the meritocratic regime he helped launch. One of the primary arguments for a meritocracy over a hereditary aristocracy is that those who rise due to their own merits have earned their success and therefore deserve the rewards their merits bring. Meritocratic sorting is bound up with judgments about earning and deserving. These are inescapably public judgments, about whose talents and achievements are worthy of honor and recognition.

Conant's conviction that higher education should shift power away from the hereditary upper class and seek out talented scientists and intellectuals was not only a way of filling socially necessary roles; it was also an argument about what qualities of intellect and character a modern, technologically advanced society should value and reward. So it was implausible to deny that the new system of sorting was also a new basis for allocating social status and esteem. This was the point of Michael Young's *Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), published just a few years after Conant stepped down as president of Harvard. Young saw what Conant either failed

or refused to see, that the new meritocracy carried with it a new, exacting basis for judging who was deserving and who was not.

Those following Conant who helped carry out the meritocratic makeover of higher education were explicit about the connection between sorting and judging. In a book entitled *Excellence* (1961), John W. Gardner, a foundation president who would later serve as secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in Lyndon Johnson's administration, expressed the spirit of the new meritocratic age. "We are witnessing a revolution in society's attitude toward men and women of high ability and advanced training. For the first time in history, such men and women are very much in demand on a very wide scale." Unlike previous societies, which were run by the few and could therefore afford to squander talent, a modern technological society governed by complex organizations needed to mount a relentless search for talent, to seek it out wherever it was to be found. The imperatives of this "great talent hunt" now set the task for education—to become a "rigorous sorting-out process." [51](#)

Unlike Conant, Gardner acknowledged the harsh aspect of meritocratic sorting. "As education becomes increasingly effective in pulling the bright youngster to the top, it becomes an increasingly rugged sorting-out process for everyone concerned ... The schools are the golden avenue of opportunity for able youngsters; but by the same token they are the arena in which less able youngsters discover their limitations." This was the downside of equality of opportunity. It enabled "every young person [to] go as far as his ability and ambition would take him, without obstacles of money, social standing, religion or race." But there was "pain involved for those who lacked the necessary ability." [52](#)

Such pain was inevitable, Gardner thought, and a price worth paying, given the urgent need to cull and cultivate talent. He acknowledged that the pain became especially acute as some students qualified for college and others fell short. "If a society sorts people out efficiently and fairly according to their gifts, the loser knows that the true reason for his lowly status is that he is not capable of better. That is a bitter pill for any man." [53](#)

For Young, this insight was the heart of the case against meritocracy. For Gardner, it was an unfortunate side effect. "Because college has gained extraordinary prestige," he conceded, it had come to define success. "Today attendance at college has become virtually a prerequisite of high attainment

in the world's eyes, so that it becomes, in the false value framework we have created, the only passport to a meaningful life." Gardner gamely argued that "achievement should not be confused with human worth" and that individuals were worthy of respect regardless of their achievements. But he seemed to understand that the meritocratic society he was helping bring about left little room for the distinction between educational achievement and social esteem. [54](#)

The plain fact is that college education is firmly associated in the public mind with personal advancement, upward social mobility, market value and self-esteem. And if enough of the American people believe that one must attend college in order to be accorded respect and confidence, then the very unanimity of opinion makes the generalization true. [55](#)

A few years later, Kingman Brewster, the president of Yale, also acknowledged the close connection between sorting students based on merit and turning college admission into a badge of social recognition and esteem. Brewster, who brought Yale into the meritocratic era, encountered resistance from influential members of his governing board to his attempts to base admission less on family legacy and more on academic talent. In 1966, Yale adopted need-blind admissions, which meant admitting students without regard for their financial need and providing them sufficient financial support to enroll. Brewster argued, shrewdly but insightfully, that the new policy would not only enable Yale to attract strong students from modest backgrounds; it would also increase Yale's appeal to wealthy students, who would be drawn to a college known to accept students based on their merits not their money. Now that "the pocketbook was no longer relevant to admission," he wrote, "the privileged took pride in the feeling that they had made it on the merits rather than on the basis of something ambiguously called 'background.'" [56](#)

Once, people took pride in sending their children to places where they could rub elbows with upper-class blue bloods. Now people took pride in sending their children to places that signified their superior merit.

The shift to meritocratic admissions heightened the prestige of colleges that could attract the most outstanding students. Prestige was typically measured by the average SAT scores of the students they admitted and also,

perversely, by the number of applicants they were able to reject. Increasingly, colleges were ranked by their selectivity, and selectivity loomed larger in students' choices.

Until the 1960s, college-bound students typically enrolled in places close to home. As a result, academic ability was spread broadly across a range of colleges and universities. But as the meritocratic recasting of higher education took form, college choice became more strategic. Students, especially those from high-income families, began to seek out the most selective college that would accept them. [57](#)

Caroline M. Hoxby, an economist who studies higher education, calls this trend the “re-sorting of higher education.” The gap between highly selective and less-selective colleges widened. Students with high SAT scores clamored for admission to the handful of colleges with other high-scoring students, and college admission became a winner-take-all competition. Although many assume that getting into college is harder today than in the past, this is not generally the case. The majority of colleges and universities in the United States accept most students who apply. [58](#)

Only at a narrow slice of elite colleges have admissions rates plunged in recent decades. These are the places that capture the headlines and animate the admissions frenzy that blights the teenage years of college-bound kids from affluent families. In 1972, as the “re-sorting” was already well under way, Stanford accepted one-third of those who applied. Today, it accepts less than 5 percent. Johns Hopkins, which accepted the majority of its applicants (54 percent) in 1988, now accepts only 9 percent. The University of Chicago experienced one of the most precipitous drops, from a 77 percent acceptance rate in 1993 to 6 percent in 2019. [59](#)

All told, forty-six colleges and universities now accept fewer than 20 percent of applicants. Several of these schools were the desired destination of students whose parents perpetrated the 2019 college admissions scandal. But only 4 percent of U.S. undergraduates attend these hyper-selective colleges. More than 80 percent attend schools that accept more than half of their applicants. [60](#)

What accounts for the re-sorting that, over the past fifty years, has concentrated high-scoring students in a relatively small group of highly selective colleges? Hoxby offers an economist's explanation: lower transportation costs made it easier to travel to colleges far from home, and

lower information costs made it easier to find out how your SAT score compared with those of other students. In addition, the most prestigious colleges spend more on the education of each student, so for those who can get in, enrolling at such places is a sound investment in one's "human capital"—even allowing for the expected donation to the college fund later in life. [61](#)

But the fact that this "re-sorting" coincided with the meritocratic transformation of higher education suggests a further explanation: Selective colleges and universities became irresistibly attractive because they stood at the apex of the emerging hierarchy of merit. Prompted by their parents, ambitious, well-off students flooded the gates of prestigious campuses not only because they wanted to study in the company of academically gifted students, but because these colleges conferred the greatest meritocratic prestige. More than a matter of bragging rights, the kudos associated with attending a highly selective college carry over into employment opportunities after graduation. This is not mainly because employers believe students learn more at elite colleges than at less-selective places, but because employers have faith in the sorting function these colleges perform and value the meritocratic honor they bestow. [62](#)

WOUNDED WINNERS

The winner-take-all re-sorting of higher education was undesirable for two reasons. First, it reinforced inequality, as the colleges that fared best in the selectivity sweepstakes were generally the ones with the highest proportion of wealthy students. Second, it exacted a damaging toll on the winners. Unlike the old hereditary elite, which assumed its place at the top without much fuss or bother, the new meritocratic elite wins its place through strenuous striving.

Although the new elite has now taken on a hereditary aspect, the transmission of meritocratic privilege is not guaranteed. It depends on "getting in." This gives meritocratic success a paradoxical moral psychology. Collectively and retrospectively, its results are almost pre-ordained, given the overwhelming predominance on elite campuses of affluent kids. But to those in the midst of the hyper-competitive struggle for admission, it is impossible to view success as anything other than the result of individual effort and achievement. This is the standpoint that generates

the conviction among the winners that they have earned their success, that they have made it on their own. This belief can be criticized as a form of meritocratic hubris; it attributes more than it should to individual striving and forgets the advantages that convert effort into success. But there is also poignance in this belief, for it is forged in pain—in the soul-destroying demands that meritocratic striving inflicts upon the young.

Prosperous parents are able to give their kids a powerful boost in the bid for admission to elite colleges, but often at the cost of transforming their high school years into a high-stress, anxiety-ridden, sleep-deprived gauntlet of Advanced Placement courses, test-prep tutoring, sports training, dance and music lessons, and a myriad of extracurricular and public service activities, often under the advice and tutelage of private admissions consultants whose fees can cost more than four years at Yale. Some of these consultants advise parents to seek disability diagnoses for their children, to get them extra time on standardized tests. (In one wealthy Connecticut suburb, 18 percent of students receive such diagnoses, more than six times the national average.) Other consultants specialize in creating customized summer foreign travel programs designed to produce compelling fodder for college application essays. [63](#)

This meritocratic arms race tilts the competition in favor of the wealthy and enables affluent parents to pass their privilege on to their kids. This way of transmitting privilege is doubly objectionable. For those who lack the apparatus of advantage, it is unfair; for children entangled in the apparatus, it is oppressive. The meritocratic struggle gives rise to a culture of invasive, achievement-driven, pushy parenting that does not serve teenagers well. The rise of helicopter parenting coincides with the decades when meritocratic competition intensified. In fact, the use of “parent” as a verb only became common in the 1970s, when the need to prepare children for academic success came to be seen as a pressing parental responsibility. [64](#)

From 1976 to 2012, the amount of time American parents devoted to helping their children with their homework increased more than fivefold. [65](#) As the college admission stakes grew, anxious, intrusive parenting became a common affliction. A 2009 *Time* magazine cover story sounded the alarm: “The Case Against Over-Parenting: Why It Is Time for Mom and Dad to Cut the Strings.” We had become “so obsessed with our kids’ success,” *Time* observed, “that parenting turned into a form of product development.”

The drive to manage childhood now began early. “Among 6-to-8-year-olds, free playtime dropped 25% from 1981 to '97, and homework more than doubled.” [66](#)

In an intriguing study, the economists Matthias Doepke and Fabrizio Zilibotti offer an economic explanation for the rise of helicopter parenting, which they define as “the heavily involved, time-intensive, controlling child-rearing approach that has become widespread over the last three decades.” They argue that such parenting is a rational response to rising inequality and increasing returns to education. Although intensive parenting has increased in many societies in recent decades, it is most pronounced in places where inequality is greatest, such as the United States and South Korea, and less prevalent in countries such as Sweden and Japan, where inequality is less acute. [67](#)

Understandable though it may be, parents’ drive to direct and manage their children’s lives for meritocratic success has taken a harsh psychological toll, especially on pre-college teenagers. In the early 2000s, Madeline Levine, a psychologist who treats young people in Marin County, California, an affluent suburb of San Francisco, began noticing that many outwardly successful teens from well-off families were extremely unhappy, disconnected, and lacking in independence. “Scratch the surface, and many of them are ... depressed, anxious, and angry ... They are overly dependent on the opinions of parents, teachers, coaches, and peers and frequently rely on others not only to pave the way on difficult tasks but to grease the wheels of everyday life as well.” She began to realize that, rather than insulating these young people from life’s difficulties, affluence and a high degree of parental involvement were contributing to their unhappiness and fragility. [68](#)

In a book entitled *The Price of Privilege*, Levine described what she called a “mental health epidemic among privileged youth.” Traditionally, psychologists had assumed that “at-risk” youth were disadvantaged kids in the inner city, “growing up in harsh and unforgiving circumstances.” [69](#) Without denying their plight, Levine observed that America’s new at-risk group consisted of teens from affluent, well-educated families.

In spite of their economic and social advantages, they experience among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety

disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children in this country. When researchers look at kids across the socioeconomic spectrum, they find that the most troubled adolescents often come from affluent homes. [70](#)

Levine cited research by Suniya S. Luthar, who has documented the “counterintuitive notion that upper-middle-class youth, who are en route to the most prestigious universities and well-paying careers in America,” suffer higher rates of emotional distress than other teens, a pattern that continues once they reach college. Compared with the general population, full-time college students are “2.5 times more likely to meet diagnostic criteria of substance abuse or dependence (23% vs. 9%),” and half of all full-time college students report binge drinking and abuse of illegal or prescription drugs. [71](#)

What accounts for the inordinate levels of emotional distress among young people from affluent families? The answer has largely to do with the meritocratic imperative—the unrelenting pressure to perform, to achieve, to succeed. “For children and parents alike,” Luthar writes, “it is nearly impossible to ignore the ubiquitous, pervasive message emblazoned from their early years onward: there is one path to ultimate happiness—having money—that in turn comes from attending prestigious colleges.” [72](#)

Those who prevail on the battlefield of merit emerge triumphant but wounded. I see this in my students. The habit of hoop-jumping is hard to break. Many still feel so driven to strive that they find it difficult to use their college years as a time to think, explore, and critically reflect on who they are and what is worth caring about. An alarming number struggle with mental health issues. The psychic toll of navigating the meritocratic gauntlet is not restricted to the Ivy League. A recent study of 67,000 undergraduates at more than a hundred colleges in the United States found that “college students face unprecedented levels of distress,” including rising rates of depression and anxiety. One in five college students reported thoughts of suicide in the previous year, and one in four was diagnosed or treated for a mental health disorder. [73](#) The suicide rate among young people (ages 20–24) increased 36 percent from 2000 to 2017; more now die from suicide than homicide. [74](#)

Beyond these clinical conditions, psychologists have found a subtler affliction bearing down on this generation of college students: a “hidden epidemic of perfectionism.” Years of anxious striving leave young people with a fragile sense of self-worth, contingent on achievement and vulnerable to the exacting judgments of parents, teachers, admissions committees, and ultimately, themselves. “Irrational ideals of the perfect self have become desirable—even necessary—in a world where performance, status and image define a person’s usefulness and value,” write Thomas Curran and Andrew P. Hill, the authors of the study. Surveying more than 40,000 American, Canadian, and British college students, the authors report a sharp increase in perfectionism from 1989 to 2016, including a 32 percent increase in perfectionist attitudes tied to social and parental expectations. [75](#)

Perfectionism is the emblematic meritocratic malady. At a time when young people are relentlessly “sorted, sifted, and ranked by schools, universities, and the workplace, neoliberal meritocracy places a strong need to strive, perform, and achieve at the center of modern life.” [76](#) Success or failure at meeting the demand to achieve comes to define one’s merit and self-worth.

Those who tend the levers and pulleys of the meritocracy machine are not unaware of its human costs. In an honest, insightful essay about the risk of burnout, Harvard College admissions officers worried that those who spend their high school and college years jumping through hoops of high achievement wind up as “dazed survivors of some bewildering life-long boot-camp.” The essay, first published in 2000, is still posted, as a kind of cautionary tale, on the Harvard admissions website. [77](#)

STILL HOOP-JUMPING

Having fomented and rewarded achievement mania by their admissions policies, elite colleges do little to dial it back once students arrive on campus. The instinct for sorting and competing invades college life, where students re-enact the ritual of accepting and rejecting. Here is an example: Harvard College has more than four hundred extracurricular clubs and organizations. Some, such as the orchestra and varsity football team, require certain abilities and so legitimately hold tryouts. But today, “comping,” or competing for admission to student organizations, whether or not they demand special skills, has become commonplace. The culture of comping is

so extreme that some students experience freshman year as “Rejection 101,” a lesson in dealing with the disappointment of failing to make the cut.
[78](#)

Like the colleges themselves, the student organizations boast about their low acceptance rates. The Harvard College Consulting Group declares itself “the most selective pre-professional student group on Harvard’s campus,” with an acceptance rate below 12 percent. The Crimson Key Society, which organizes Freshman Orientation Week and runs campus tours, also advertises its selectivity; only 11.5 percent of applicants are accepted. “We don’t want to just put anyone in front of tourists,” the Society’s comp director explains. But the need for talent seems less compelling than the impulse to re-enact the trauma—and the rush—of meritocratic competition. “You jump through this huge hoop of getting into Harvard,” a first-year student told *The Harvard Crimson*, “and you just want to jump through more to get this adrenaline going again.” [79](#)

The rise of the comping culture illustrates the conversion of college into basic training for a competitive meritocracy, an education in packaging oneself and applying for stuff. This in turn reflects a broader shift in the role of colleges and universities: their credentialing function now looms so large that it overwhelms their educational function. The sorting and striving crowd out teaching and learning. College deans and presidents abet this tendency by saying, as if self-effacingly, that students learn more outside their classes than in them. This could mean (and perhaps once meant) that students learn from their classmates through informal, ongoing discussion of questions that arise in their courses and readings. But increasingly it refers to networking.

Closely akin to the comping and networking is obsessing about grades. Although I cannot prove that students’ preoccupation with grades has intensified in recent decades, it certainly feels that way. In 2012, in one of the largest Ivy League cheating scandals in memory, some seventy students had to withdraw from Harvard College for cheating on a take-home exam.

[80](#) In 2017, the College’s Honors Council was deluged with cases of academic dishonesty, as more than sixty students in an introductory computer science course were referred for possible cheating. [81](#) But cheating is not the only manifestation of grade obsession. At one well-known law school, faculty members are instructed not to tell students when

grades for the previous semester will be released, as experience has shown that advance notice of this momentous event generates too much anxiety. The release of grades is now carefully timed to enable distressed students to seek the help of counseling services.

HUBRIS AND HUMILIATION

When Conant set Harvard, and higher education, the task of testing and sorting the American population, I doubt he imagined the relentless meritocratic competition this project would unleash. Today, the role of colleges and universities as arbiters of opportunity is so entrenched that it is difficult to imagine alternatives. But the time has come to do so. Rethinking the role of higher education is important, not only to repair the damaged psyches of the privileged but also to repair the polarized civic life that meritocratic sorting has produced.

In seeking to dismantle the sorting machine that Conant set in motion, it is worth noticing that the regime of merit exerts its tyranny in two directions at once. Among those who land on top, it induces anxiety, a debilitating perfectionism, and a meritocratic hubris that struggles to conceal a fragile self-esteem. Among those it leaves behind, it imposes a demoralizing, even humiliating sense of failure.

These two tyrannies share a common moral source—the abiding meritocratic faith that we are, as individuals, wholly responsible for our fate: If we succeed, it is thanks to our own doing, and if we fail, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Inspiring though it seems, this strenuous notion of individual responsibility makes it hard to summon the sense of solidarity and mutual obligation that could equip us to contend with the rising inequality of our time.

It would be a mistake to think that higher education is solely responsible for the inequalities of income and social esteem we witness today. The project of market-driven globalization, the technocratic turn of contemporary politics, and the oligarchic capture of democratic institutions are all complicit in this condition. But before turning, in [chapter 7](#), to the vexed question of work in a globalized economy, it is worth considering what might be done to alleviate the harsh effects of meritocratic sorting, and to do so from both directions—attending to the wounds it inflicts on those it picks out as winners and to the indignities it inflicts on those it marks as losers.

Consider first a modest proposal for reforming college admission, if only to illustrate how we might begin to ease the debilitating cycle of sorting and striving.

A LOTTERY OF THE QUALIFIED

One approach to reform would seek to improve access to elite colleges by reducing reliance on the SAT and by eliminating preferences for legacies, athletes, and donor children. ⁸² Although such reforms would make the system less unfair, they do not challenge the notion of higher education as a sorting project, whose role is to seek out talent and allocate opportunity and rewards to those who possess it. But the sorting project is the problem. Making it more truly meritocratic entrenches it more deeply.

So consider this instead: Each year, more than 40,000 students apply for the roughly 2,000 places that Harvard and Stanford have to offer. Admissions officers tell us that a great many of those who apply are qualified to do the work at Harvard or Stanford and do it well. The same is presumably true at the dozens of selective colleges and universities that attract many more qualified applicants than they are able to accept. (In 2017, eighty-seven colleges and universities accepted fewer than 30 percent of applicants.) ⁸³ As early as 1960, when the number of applicants was less daunting, a longtime member of Yale's admissions committee was quoted as saying, "You sometimes have the nasty feeling that you could take all the thousands of [applications] ... and you could throw them down the stairs, pick up any thousand, and produce as good a class as the one that will come out of the committee meeting." ⁸⁴

My proposal takes that suggestion seriously. Of the 40,000-plus applicants, winnow out those who are unlikely to flourish at Harvard or Stanford, those who are not qualified to perform well and to contribute to the education of their fellow students. This would leave the admissions committee with, say, 30,000 qualified contenders, or 25,000, or 20,000. Rather than engage in the exceedingly difficult and uncertain task of trying to predict who among them are the most surpassingly meritorious, choose the entering class by lottery. In other words, toss the folders of the qualified applicants down the stairs, pick up 2,000 of them, and leave it at that. ⁸⁵

This proposal does not ignore merit altogether; only those qualified are admitted. But it treats merit as a threshold qualification, not an ideal to be

maximized. ⁸⁶ This is sensible, first of all, on practical grounds. Even the wisest admissions officers cannot assess, with exquisite precision, which eighteen-year-olds will wind up making the most truly outstanding contributions, academic or otherwise. Although we valorize talent, it is, in the context of college admissions, a vague and watery concept. Perhaps it is possible to identify a math prodigy at an early age, but talent in general is a more complicated, less predictable thing.

Consider how difficult it is to assess even more narrowly defined talents and skills. Nolan Ryan, one of the greatest pitchers in the history of baseball, holds the all-time record for most strikeouts and was elected on the first ballot to baseball's Hall of Fame. When he was eighteen years old, he was not signed until the twelfth round of the baseball draft; teams chose 294 other, seemingly more promising players before he was chosen. ⁸⁷ Tom Brady, one of the greatest quarterbacks in the history of football, was the 199th draft pick. ⁸⁸ If even so circumscribed a talent as the ability to throw a baseball or a football is hard to predict with much certainty, it is folly to think that the ability to have a broad and significant impact on society, or on some future field of endeavor, can be predicted well enough to justify fine-grained rankings of promising high school seniors.

But the most compelling reasons for a lottery of the qualified is to combat the tyranny of merit. Setting a threshold of qualification and letting chance decide the rest would restore some sanity to the high school years, and relieve, at least to some extent, the soul-killing, résumé-stuffing, perfection-seeking experience they have become. It would also deflate meritocratic hubris, by making clear what is true in any case, that those who land on top do not make it on their own but owe their good fortune to family circumstance and native gifts that are morally akin to the luck of the draw.

I can imagine at least four objections:

1. What about academic quality?

That depends on setting the right threshold. I have a hunch that, at least for the top sixty or eighty colleges and universities, the quality of classroom discussion and academic performance would not be noticeably different. My hunch could be wrong, but there is an easy way to find out. Begin with an experiment: Admit half the class using the existing system and half by a lottery of the qualified, and then compare academic performance at the time

of graduation (and career success some years later). Stanford actually came close to trying this experiment in the late 1960s, but the plan was scuttled due to opposition by the dean of admissions. [89](#)

2. What about diversity?

In principle, the lottery could be adjusted to ensure diversity along any particular dimension a college deemed compelling by assigning each student in a favored category two lottery tickets, or three. This could produce the desired diversity without giving up on the aspect of chance. One variation worth considering: To counteract the hereditary tendency of meritocratic admissions as currently practiced, colleges could first admit a certain number of qualified applicants whose parents did not attend college, and then run the lottery.

3. What about legacies and donor children?

Ideally, colleges should stop giving preference to children of alumni. But for colleges that want to continue to do so, they could assign each alumni child two lottery tickets rather than one (as with diversity categories above), or more, if the college deemed it necessary. It is worth noting that, to replicate the current rate of legacy admissions, some schools would have to assign each alumni child five or six lottery tickets. This would at least make vivid the advantage they are conferring on privileged kids and perhaps prompt debate about whether such preferences should continue.

Favoritism for children of big donors who are not alumni should also be eliminated. But if colleges cannot resist the financial benefit of selling some places in the entering class, they could simply set aside a handful of seats to be auctioned off or sold outright. This would be a more honest way of acknowledging the compromises some colleges currently make under cover of merit. As in the current system, the recipients of the bought places would not be publicly identified, but at least they would no longer be buying a bogus presumption of superior merit.

4. Wouldn't admission by lottery render selectivity less meaningful and so erode the prestige of the top colleges and universities?

Yes, perhaps. But is this really an objection? Only if you believe that the prestige-driven “re-sorting” of higher education in recent decades has

improved the quality of teaching and learning. But this is highly doubtful. Drawing high-scoring students from a broader range of colleges across the country into a smaller circle of hyper-selective places has deepened inequality but done little if anything to improve education. The anxious striving and hoop-jumping that meritocratic sorting has induced has rendered students less open to the exploratory character of a liberal arts education. Scaling back the sorting and the prestige-mongering would be a virtue not a drawback of the lottery system.

If a sizable number of elite colleges and universities began admitting qualified students by lottery, they would alleviate, at least to some degree, the stress of high school years. College-bound teenagers and their parents would realize that, beyond demonstrating the ability to perform well in college-level courses, students would no longer need to devote their adolescence to an arms race of activities and achievements designed to impress admissions committees. Helicopter parenting might recede, to the benefit of the emotional well-being of parents and children alike. Spared the scars of the battlefield of merit, young people might arrive in college less prone to hoop-jumping and more open to personal and intellectual exploration.

These changes would ease the damage the tyranny of merit inflicts on the winners. But what about everyone else? Only about 20 percent of graduating high school seniors are swept up in the frenzy to get into prestigious colleges. What about the 80 percent who attend less-competitive universities, or two-year community colleges, or none at all? For them, the tyranny of merit is not about a soul-killing competition for admission but about a demoralizing world of work that offers meager economic rewards and scant social esteem to those who lack meritocratic credentials.

DISMANTLING THE SORTING MACHINE

An adequate response requires an ambitious project: We should power down the meritocratic sorting machine by lowering the stakes of winning admission to highly selective colleges and universities. More broadly, we should figure out how to make success in life less dependent on having a four-year college degree.

Any attempt to honor work must begin by taking seriously the various forms of learning and training that prepare people to undertake it. This

means reversing the retreat from public higher education, overcoming the neglect of technical and vocational education, and breaking down the sharp distinction, in funding and prestige, between four-year colleges and other post-secondary educational settings.

One impediment to reducing meritocratic sorting in higher education is that, in the United States at least, much of it is carried out by private colleges and universities. Nevertheless, these institutions, private though they are, rely on substantial federal funding, especially for student financial aid and federally sponsored research. In some cases, they hold vast endowments, which generate income that is traditionally tax-exempt. (The Republican tax bill of 2017 imposed a tax on the endowment income of a small number of wealthy colleges.) ⁹⁰ In principle, the federal government could use this leverage to require private colleges and universities to expand enrollment, admit more students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or even to adopt some version of the admissions lottery proposal. ⁹¹

It is unlikely, however, that such measures would by themselves lower the stakes of getting in to at least one selective college. Of greater significance would be measures to broaden access to four-year public colleges and universities, and to devote greater support to community colleges, technical and vocational education, and job training. These are, after all, the educational settings in which the majority of Americans learn the skills they need to make a decent living.

Government funding for state colleges and universities has fallen in recent decades, and tuition has increased, to the point where the public character of these institutions is in doubt. ⁹² In 1987, public colleges received three times more revenue per student from state and local governments than from tuition. But as government funding fell, tuition rose. By 2013, public higher education derived as much of its revenue from tuition as from state and local support. ⁹³

Many leading public universities are now public in name only. ⁹⁴ At the University of Wisconsin–Madison, for example, only 14 percent of the budget comes from state appropriations. ⁹⁵ At the University of Virginia, state funding accounts for just 10 percent of the budget. ⁹⁶ At the University of Texas at Austin, state appropriations provided 47 percent of

the budget in the mid-1980s; today, only 11 percent. Meanwhile, the share from tuition increased more than fourfold. [97](#)

As public support recedes and tuition rises, student debt has skyrocketed. Today's generation of students set out on their careers burdened by a mountain of debt. Over the past fifteen years, the total amount of student loan debt increased more than fivefold. By 2020, it exceeded \$1.5 *trillion* . [98](#)

The most glaring indication of the meritocratic tilt in college finance is the gap between federal support for higher education and support for technical and vocational training. Isabel Sawhill, an economist at the Brookings Institution, offers a striking account of the disparity:

Contrast the small amount being spent on employment and training with the amount spent on higher education in the form of grants, loans, and tax credits. For the academic year 2014–2015, a total of \$162 billion was spent to help people go to college. In contrast, the Department of Education spends about \$1.1 billion annually on career and technical education. [99](#)

Sawhill adds that, even combining career and technical education funding with expenditures to help displaced workers find new jobs, “we are only spending about \$20 billion per year on these work-related programs at the federal level.” [100](#)

The amount the U.S. spends on training or retraining workers is not only small compared with the amount we spend on higher education. It is also minuscule compared with the amounts other countries spend. Economists speak of “active labor market policies” to describe government programs that help equip workers with the skills the job market needs. Such policies respond to the fact that the labor market does not work smoothly on its own; training and placement programs are often needed to help workers find jobs suited to their skills. Sawhill points out that economically advanced countries spend an average of 0.5 percent of GDP on active labor market programs. France, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark spend more than 1 percent of GDP on such programs. The U.S. spends only about 0.1 percent—less than we spend on prisons. [101](#)

The American indifference to active labor market policies may reflect the market faith that supply and demand (in this case, for labor) automatically align, without outside help. But it also reflects the meritocratic conviction that higher education is the primary avenue to opportunity. “One reason the United States may have neglected employment and training,” Sawhill writes, “is because the emphasis has been on financing higher education. The assumption seems to be that everyone needs to go to college.” [102](#)

But as we have seen, only about one-third of Americans earn a bachelor’s degree. For everyone else, access to a well-paying job depends on forms of education and training that we woefully neglect. Despite its aspirational appeal, the meritocratic insistence that a four-year college degree is the gateway to success distracts us from taking seriously the educational needs of most people. This neglect not only hurts the economy; it expresses a lack of respect for the kind of work the working class does.

THE HIERARCHY OF ESTEEM

Repairing the damage the sorting machine inflicts requires more than increased funding for job training. It requires us to rethink the way we value different kinds of work. One way to begin is by dismantling the hierarchy of esteem that accords greater honor and prestige to students enrolled in name-brand colleges and universities than to those in community colleges or in technical and vocational training programs. Learning to become a plumber or electrician or dental hygienist should be respected as a valuable contribution to the common good, not regarded as a consolation prize for those who lack the SAT scores or financial means to make it to the Ivy League.

Higher education derives much of its prestige from its avowedly higher purpose: not only to equip students for the world of work but also to prepare them to be morally reflective human beings and effective democratic citizens, capable of deliberating about the common good. Having spent a career teaching moral and political philosophy, I certainly believe in the importance of moral and civic education. But why assume that four-year colleges and universities have, or should have, a monopoly on this mission? A more capacious notion of educating citizens for democracy would resist the sequestration of civic education in universities.

It should be acknowledged, first of all, that elite colleges and universities are not doing very well at this task. [103](#) For the most part, they place relatively little curricular emphasis on moral and civic education, or on the kind of historical studies that prepare students to exercise informed practical judgment about public affairs. The growing prominence of supposedly value-neutral social science, together with the proliferation of narrow, highly specialized courses, has left little room for courses that expose students to big questions of moral and political philosophy and invite them to reflect critically on their moral and political convictions.

There are exceptions, of course. And many colleges and universities require students to take some course or other that deals with ethical or civic themes. But for the most part, our leading colleges and universities today are better at inculcating technocratic skills and orientations than the ability to reason and deliberate about fundamental moral and civic questions. This technocratic emphasis may have contributed to the failure of governing elites over the past two generations, and to the morally impoverished terms of public discourse.

But even if my assessment of the state of moral and civic education at elite colleges is too harsh, there is no reason why four-year colleges should be the sole setting for courses in moral reasoning and civic argument. Civic education out of doors, so to speak, has a long tradition.

An inspiring example is the demand made by the Knights of Labor, one of America's first major labor unions, for reading rooms in factories, so that workers could inform themselves about public affairs. This demand grew out of a republican tradition that viewed civic learning as embedded in the world of work. [104](#)

As the cultural historian Christopher Lasch observed, foreign visitors to America in the nineteenth century were struck by its broad equality of condition. By this they meant neither an equal distribution of wealth nor even the opportunity to rise, but rather an independence of mind and judgment that put all citizens on a roughly equal footing:

Citizenship appeared to have given even the humbler members of society access to the knowledge and cultivation elsewhere reserved for the privileged classes ... Labor's contribution to the general well-being took the form of mind as well as muscle. American mechanics, it was said, "are not untaught operatives, but an

enlightened, reflective people, who not only know how to use their hands, but are familiar with principles.” Mechanics’ magazines returned to this theme again and again. [105](#)

Lasch makes the broader point that the egalitarian character of American society in the nineteenth century was less about social mobility than about the general diffusion of intelligence and learning across all classes and vocations. [106](#) This is the kind of equality that meritocratic sorting destroys. It seeks to concentrate intelligence and learning in the citadel of higher education and promises access to the citadel through a fair competition. But this way of allocating access to learning undermines the dignity of labor and corrupts the common good. Civic education can flourish in community colleges, job training sites, and union halls as well as on ivy-strewn campuses. There is no reason to suppose that aspiring nurses and plumbers are less suited to the art of democratic argument than aspiring management consultants.

CHASTENING MERIT’S HUBRIS

The most potent rival to merit, to the notion that we are responsible for our lot and deserve what we get, is the notion that our fate exceeds our control, that we are indebted for our success, and also for our troubles—to the grace of God, or the vagaries of fortune, or the luck of the draw. The Puritans found, as we saw in [chapter 2](#), that a thoroughgoing ethic of grace is almost impossible to sustain. Living by the belief that we have no hand in whether we will be saved in the next world or successful in this one is hard to reconcile with the idea of freedom and with the conviction that we get what we deserve. This is why merit tends to drive out grace; sooner or later, the successful assert, and come to believe, that their success is their own doing, and that those who lose out are less worthy than they.

But even in its triumph, the meritocratic faith does not deliver the self-mastery it promises. Nor does it provide a basis for solidarity. Ungenerous to the losers and oppressive to the winners, merit becomes a tyrant. And when it does, we can enlist its ancient rival to rein it in. This is what, in one small domain of life, the admissions lottery tries to do. It summons chance to chasten merit’s hubris.

Reflecting on the tyranny that merit inflicts on affluent, competitive kids brings to mind two experiences from my own teenage years.

The mania for sorting and tracking filtered down into the public junior high school and high school I attended in Pacific Palisades, California, in the late 1960s. So heavily tracked were these schools that, despite the fact that some 2,300 students attended my high school, I found myself constantly in the company of the same 30 or 40 kids in the top track. My eighth-grade math teacher took tracking to an extreme. The class may have been Algebra or Geometry; I don't remember which. But I do remember the seating arrangement. Three of the six rows were so-called honors rows, in which students were seated in precise order of their grade point average. This meant that seating assignments changed with each test or quiz. To heighten the drama, the teacher announced the new seating arrangement before handing back each graded exercise. I was good in math but not the best. I typically shuttled between the second desk and the fourth or fifth. A girl named Kay, a math whiz, almost always occupied the first desk.

As a fourteen-year-old kid, I thought this was how school worked. The better you did, the higher you were ranked. Everyone knew who the best math students were, and who had triumphed or bombed on this or that quiz. Although I didn't realize it at the time, this was my first encounter with meritocracy.

By the time we reached tenth grade, the tracking and ranking was taking its toll. Most of the top-track students had become obsessed with grades, not only our own, but everyone else's too. We were intensely competitive, so much so that our preoccupation with grades threatened to swamp our intellectual curiosity.

My tenth-grade biology teacher, Mr. Farnham, a wry, bow-tied man whose classroom teemed with snakes, salamanders, fish, mice, and other fascinating wildlife, found this troubling. One day, he gave us a pop quiz. He told us to take out a piece of paper, number from one to fifteen, and answer true or false. When students complained that he had not given us any questions, he told us to think of a statement for each question and write down whether it was true or false. Students asked anxiously whether this arbitrary quiz would be graded, and whether it would count. "Yes, of course," he said.

At the time, I found this an amusing if eccentric classroom joke. But in retrospect, I see that Mr. Farnham was trying, in his way, to push back

against the tyranny of merit. He was trying to get us to step back from the sorting and the striving long enough to marvel at the salamanders.



Recognizing Work

From the end of World War II to the 1970s, it was possible for those without a college degree to find good work, support a family, and lead a comfortable middle-class life. This is far more difficult today. Over the past four decades, the earnings difference between college and high school graduates — what economists call the “college premium” — has doubled. In 1979, college graduates made about 40 percent more than high school graduates; by the 2000s they made 80 percent more. ¹

Although the age of globalization brought rich rewards to the well-credentialed, it did nothing for most ordinary workers. From 1979 to 2016, the number of manufacturing jobs in the United States fell from 19.5 million to 12 million. ² Productivity increased, but workers reaped a smaller and smaller share of what they produced, while executives and shareholders captured a larger share. ³ In the late 1970s, CEOs of major American companies made 30 times more than the average worker; by 2014, they made 300 times more. ⁴

The median income of American males has been stagnant, in real terms, for half a century. Although per capita income has increased 85 percent since 1979, white men without a four-year college degree make less now, in real terms, than they did then. ⁵

ERODING THE DIGNITY OF WORK

It is not surprising that they are unhappy. But economic hardship is not the only source of their distress. The meritocratic age has also inflicted a more insidious injury on working people: eroding the dignity of work. By valorizing the “brains” it takes to score well on college admission tests, the sorting machine disparages those without meritocratic credentials. It tells them that the work they do, less valued by the market than the work of well-paid professionals, is a lesser contribution to the common good, and so less worthy of social recognition and esteem. It legitimates the lavish rewards the market bestows on the winners and the meager pay it offers workers without a college degree.

This way of thinking about who deserves what is not morally defensible. For reasons we explored earlier ([chapter 5](#)), it is a mistake to assume that the market value of this or that job is the measure of its contribution to the common good. (Recall the richly compensated meth dealer and the modestly paid high school teacher.) But over the last several decades, the idea that the money we make reflects the value of our social contribution has become deeply embedded. It echoes throughout the public culture.

Meritocratic sorting helped entrench this idea. So did the neoliberal, or market-oriented, version of globalization embraced by mainstream parties of the center-right and center-left since the 1980s. Even as globalization produced massive inequality, these two outlooks—the meritocratic and the neoliberal—narrowed the grounds for resisting it. They also undermined the dignity of work, fueling resentment of elites and political backlash.

Since 2016, pundits and scholars have debated the source of populist discontent. Is it about job loss and stagnant wages or cultural displacement? But this distinction is too sharply drawn. Work is both economic and cultural. It is a way of making a living and also a source of social recognition and esteem.

This is why the inequality brought about by globalization produced such anger and resentment. Those left behind by globalization not only struggled while others prospered; they also sensed that the work they did was no longer a source of social esteem. In society’s eyes, and perhaps also their own, their work no longer signified a valued contribution to the common good.

Working-class men without a college degree voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump. Their attraction to his politics of grievance and resentment

suggests they were distressed by more than economic hardship alone. So does an expression of futility that was mounting in the years leading up to Trump's election: As the circumstances of work for those without meritocratic credentials became bleak, growing numbers of working-age men dropped out of the labor force altogether.

In 1971, 93 percent of white working-class men were employed. By 2016, only 80 percent were. Of the 20 percent who did not have jobs, only a small fraction of them were looking for work. As if defeated by the indignities of a labor market indifferent to their skills, most had simply given up. The abandonment of work was especially acute among those who had not been to college. Of Americans whose highest academic qualification was a high school diploma, only 68 percent were employed in 2017. [6](#)

DEATHS OF DESPAIR

But giving up on work was not the most grievous expression of the damaged morale of working-class Americans. Many were giving up on life itself. The most tragic indication is the increase in “deaths of despair.” The term was coined by Anne Case and Angus Deaton, two Princeton economists who recently made a disquieting discovery. Throughout the twentieth century, as modern medicine pushed back disease, life expectancy steadily increased. But from 2014 to 2017, it stalled and even declined. For the first time in a century, life expectancy in the United States decreased for three straight years. [7](#)

This was not because medical science stopped finding new cures and treatments for disease. Mortality rates were going up, Case and Deaton found, due to an epidemic of deaths caused by suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease. They called them “deaths of despair” because they were, in various ways, self-inflicted. [8](#)

Such deaths, which had been mounting for more than a decade, were especially frequent among white adults in middle age. For white men and women aged 45–54, deaths of despair increased threefold from 1990 to 2017. [9](#) By 2014, for the first time, more people in this group were dying of drugs, alcohol, and suicide than from heart disease. [10](#)

Among those who live at some distance from working-class communities, the crisis was barely noticed at first, the scale of loss obscured by the lack of public attention. But by 2016, more Americans were dying each year from drug overdose than died during the entire Vietnam War. ¹¹ The *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof offers another stark comparison: More Americans now die deaths of despair *every two weeks* than died during eighteen years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. ¹²

What might account for this grim epidemic? A telling clue can be found in the educational background of those most vulnerable to it. Case and Deaton discovered that “the increase in deaths of despair was almost all among those without a bachelor’s degree. Those with a four-year degree are mostly exempt; it is those without a degree who are most at risk.” ¹³

The overall death rate for white men and women in middle age (ages 45–54) has not changed much over the past two decades. But mortality varies greatly by education. Since the 1990s, death rates for college graduates declined by 40 percent. For those without a college degree, they rose by 25 percent. Here then is another advantage of the well-credentialed. If you have a bachelor’s degree, your risk of dying in middle age is only one quarter of the risk facing those without a college diploma. ¹⁴

Deaths of despair account for much of this difference. People with less education have long been at greater risk than those with college degrees of dying from alcohol, drugs, or suicide. But the diploma divide in death has become increasingly stark. By 2017, men without a bachelor’s degree were three times more likely than college graduates to die deaths of despair. ¹⁵

It might be thought that the underlying cause is unhappiness borne of poverty, and that educational differences figure only because those with lesser educations are likely to be poor. Case and Deaton consider this possibility but find it unpersuasive. The dramatic increase in deaths of despair from 1999 to 2017 does not correspond to a general increase in poverty. They also looked state by state and found no convincing correlation between deaths by suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol, and rising poverty levels.

Something more than material deprivation was inciting the despair, something distinctive to the plight of people struggling to make their way in a meritocratic society without the credentials it honors and rewards. The deaths of despair, Case and Deaton conclude, “reflect a long-term and

slowly unfolding loss of a way of life for the white, less educated working class.” [16](#)

The widening gap between those with and those without a degree is not only in death but also in quality of life; those without a degree are seeing increases in their levels of pain, ill health, and serious mental distress, and declines in their ability to work and to socialize. The gap is also widening in earnings, in family stability, and in community. A four-year degree has become *the* key marker of social status, as if there were a requirement for nongraduates to wear a circular scarlet badge bearing the letters *BA* crossed through by a diagonal red line. [17](#)

This condition sadly vindicates Michael Young’s observation that “in a society that makes so much of merit” it is hard “to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.” [18](#)

It is also eerily reminiscent of John Gardner’s argument for “excellence” and educational sorting in the early 1960s. In acknowledging meritocracy’s downside, he was more prescient than he knew. Those who “saw the beauty of a system in which every young person could go as far as his ability and ambition would take him” easily overlooked “the pain involved for those who lacked the necessary ability,” Gardner wrote. “Yet pain there is and must be.” [19](#)

Two generations later, when Oxycontin was the drug that dulled the pain, the rising tide of death revealed a dark consequence of meritocratic sorting—a world of work that accords little dignity to those who have been sorted out.

SOURCES OF RESENTMENT

During the Republican primaries of 2016, Donald Trump, then an insurgent candidate running against the establishment, did best in places that had the highest rates of deaths of despair. A county-by-county electoral analysis found that, even controlling for income, the death rate among middle-aged whites was strongly correlated with support for Trump. So was the lack of a bachelor’s degree. [20](#)

One of the reasons mainstream pundits and politicians were shocked and perplexed by Trump's election is that they were oblivious to (and in some cases complicit in) the culture of elite condescension that had been building for some time. This culture arose, in large part, from the meritocratic sorting project and the inequality brought about by market-driven globalization. But it finds expression throughout American life. The working-class fathers on television sitcoms, such as Archie Bunker in *All in the Family* and Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons*, are mostly buffoons. Media scholars have found that television's blue-collar dads are depicted as ineffectual and dumb, the butt of jokes, often dominated by their more competent and sensible wives. Fathers from upper-middle-class and professional backgrounds are more favorably portrayed. [21](#)

Elite disparagement of the working class can be heard in common parlance. Joan Williams, a professor at Hastings College of Law in San Francisco, has criticized progressives for their "class cluelessness." [22](#)

Too often in otherwise polite society, elites (progressives emphatically included) unselfconsciously belittle working-class whites. We hear talk of "trailer trash" in "flyover states" afflicted by "plumber's butt"—open class insults that pass for wit. This condescension affects political campaigns, as in Hillary Clinton's comment about "deplorables" and Barack Obama's about people who "cling to guns or religion." [23](#)

Williams acknowledges that "economic resentment has fueled racial anxiety that, in some Trump supporters (and Trump himself), bleeds into open racism. But to write off white working-class anger as nothing more than racism is intellectual comfort food, and it is dangerous." [24](#)

Barbara Ehrenreich, a journalist who writes about work and class, makes a similar observation. She quotes W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in 1935: "It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage." Unlike African Americans, white working-class citizens were "admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best public schools." [25](#) This "public and psychological wage" is what today goes by the name of "white privilege."

After the civil rights movement, the racial segregation that upheld this perverse psychological wage subsidy fell away, Ehrenreich suggests, leaving poor whites without “the comfort of knowing that someone was worse off and more despised than they were.” Liberal elites who “feel righteous in their disgust for lower-class white racism” are right to condemn the racism. ²⁶ But they fail to see how attributing “white privilege” to disempowered white working-class men and women is galling; it ignores their struggle to win honor and recognition in a meritocratic order that has scant regard for the skills they have to offer.

Katherine J. Cramer, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, spent five years interviewing people in rural communities across Wisconsin, and emerged with a nuanced account of the politics of resentment. ²⁷ Residents of rural communities believed that too much tax money and government attention went to undeserving people. “The undeserving included racial minorities on welfare,” Cramer wrote, “but it also included lazy urban professionals like me working desk jobs and producing nothing more than ideas.” Racism is part of their resentment, she explained, but it is intertwined with a more basic concern “that people like them, in places like theirs, were overlooked and disrespected.” ²⁸

In one of the most compelling chronicles of working-class discontent, Arlie Russell Hochschild, a sociologist at the University of California, Berkeley, embedded herself in Louisiana bayou country. In kitchen table conversations with conservative Southern working people, she sought to understand why those who stood in desperate need of government help—not least to contend with the oil and chemical companies that brought environmental disaster to their communities—nonetheless despised and distrusted the federal government. She composed a story, an interpretive reconstruction of what she learned, describing “the hopes, fears, pride, shame, resentment, and anxiety in the lives of those [she] talked with.” ²⁹

Her story was an interwoven tale of economic deprivation and cultural dislocation. Economic progress had become harder, “restricted to a small elite.” For the bottom 90 percent, the American dream machine “had stopped due to automation, off-shoring, and the growing power of multinationals vis-à-vis their workforces. At the same time, for that 90 percent, competition between white men and everyone else had increased—for jobs, for recognition, and for government funds.” ³⁰ To make matters

worse, those who believed they had been waiting patiently in line for their chance at the American dream found that other people were cutting in line ahead of them—blacks, women, immigrants, refugees. They resented the people they viewed as line cutters (the beneficiaries of affirmative action, for example) and were angry at the political leaders who allowed them to get away with it. [31](#)

When those waiting their turn complained about the line cutters, elites called them racists, “rednecks,” “white trash,” and other insulting names. Hochschild offered this sympathetic account of the predicament confronting her beleaguered working-class hosts:

You are a stranger in your own land. You do not recognize yourself in how others see you. It is a struggle to feel seen and honored. And to feel honored you have to feel—and feel seen as—moving forward. But through no fault of your own, and in ways that are hidden, you are slipping backward. [32](#)

Any serious response to working-class frustrations must combat the elite condescension and credentialist prejudice that have become rife in the public culture. It must also put the dignity of work at the center of the political agenda. This is not as easy as it may seem. People of various ideological persuasions will hold competing notions about what it means for a society to respect the dignity of work, especially at a time when globalization and technology, with their seemingly inevitable bent, threaten to undermine it. But the way a society honors and rewards work is central to the way it defines the common good. Thinking through the meaning of work would force us to confront moral and political questions we otherwise evade, but that lurk, unaddressed, beneath the surface of our present discontents: What counts as a valuable contribution to the common good, and what do we owe one another as citizens?

RENEWING THE DIGNITY OF WORK

As inequality increased in recent years, and as working-class resentment gathered force, some politicians responded by speaking of the dignity of work. Bill Clinton used the term more than any previous president, and Donald Trump refers to it frequently. [33](#) It has become a popular rhetorical

gesture for politicians across the political spectrum, though mainly in the service of familiar political positions. [34](#)

Some conservatives argue that cutting welfare honors the dignity of work by making life harder for the idle and weaning them from dependence on government. Trump's secretary of agriculture claimed that reducing access to food stamps "restores the dignity of work to a sizable segment of our population." Defending a 2017 bill that cut taxes for corporations and mainly benefited the wealthy, Trump stated that his goal was "for every American to know the dignity of work, the pride of a paycheck." [35](#)

For their part, liberals sometimes appeal to the dignity of work in seeking to strengthen the safety net and boost the purchasing power of working people—raising the minimum wage, offering policies for health care, family leave, and child care, and providing a tax credit for low-income families. But this rhetoric, backed by these substantial policy proposals, failed to address the working-class anger and resentment that led to Trump's 2016 victory. Many liberals found this puzzling. How could so many people who stood to benefit economically from these measures vote for a candidate who opposed them?

One familiar answer is that white working-class voters, swayed by fear of cultural displacement, overlooked or overrode their economic interests to "vote with their middle finger," as some commentators put it. But this explanation is too quick. It draws too sharp a distinction between economic interests and cultural status. Economic concerns are not only about money in one's pocket; they are also about how one's role in the economy affects one's standing in society. Those left behind by four decades of globalization and rising inequality were suffering from more than wage stagnation; they were experiencing what they feared was growing obsolescence. The society in which they lived no longer seemed to need the skills they had to offer.

Robert F. Kennedy, seeking his party's nomination for president in 1968, understood this. The pain of unemployment was not simply that the jobless lacked an income but that they were deprived of the opportunity to contribute to the common good. "Unemployment means having nothing to do—which means having nothing to do with the rest of us," he explained. "To be without work, to be without use to one's fellow citizens, is to be in truth the Invisible Man of whom Ralph Ellison wrote." [36](#)

What Kennedy glimpsed about the discontent of his time is what contemporary liberals miss about ours. They have been offering working-class and middle-class voters a greater measure of distributive justice—fairer, fuller access to the fruits of economic growth. But what these voters want even more is a greater measure of contributive justice—an opportunity to win the social recognition and esteem that goes with producing what others need and value.

The liberal emphasis on distributive justice rightly offers a counterweight to a single-minded focus on maximizing GDP. It arises from the conviction that a just society aims not only to maximize the overall level of prosperity; it also seeks a fair distribution of income and wealth. According to this view, policies expected to increase GDP—such as free-trade agreements, or policies that encourage companies to outsource labor to low-wage countries—can be defended only if the winners compensate the losers. For example, the increased profits of companies and individuals who gain from globalization could be taxed to strengthen the social safety net and to provide income support or job retraining for displaced workers.

This approach has informed the thinking of mainstream center-left (and some center-right) parties in the United States and Europe since the 1980s: Embrace globalization and the increased prosperity it brings but use the gains to offset the loss that domestic workers suffer as a result. The populist protest amounts to a renunciation of this project. Looking back across the wreckage, we can see why this project failed.

First of all, it was never really implemented. Economic growth occurred but the winners did not compensate the losers. Instead, neoliberal globalization brought an unabated increase in inequality. Almost all of the gains of economic growth went to those at the top, and most working people saw little or no improvement, even after taxes. The redistributive aspect of the project fell by the wayside, due in part to the growing power of money in politics, what some call the “oligarchic capture” of democratic institutions.

But there was a further problem. The focus on maximizing GDP, even if accompanied by help for those left behind, puts the emphasis on consumption rather than production. It invites us to think of ourselves more as consumers than as producers. In practice, of course, we are both. As consumers, we want to get the most for our money, to buy goods and services as cheaply as possible, whether they are made by low-wage

workers overseas or well-paid American workers. As producers, we want satisfying and remunerative work.

It falls to politics to reconcile our identities as consumers and as producers. But the globalization project sought to maximize economic growth, and hence the welfare of consumers, with little regard for the effect of outsourcing, immigration, and financialization on the well-being of producers. The elites who presided over globalization not only failed to address the inequality it generated; they also failed to appreciate its corrosive effect on the dignity of work.

WORK AS RECOGNITION

Policy proposals to compensate for inequality by increasing the purchasing power of working- and middle-class families, or to shore up the safety net, will do little to address the anger and resentment that now run deep. This is because the anger is about the loss of recognition and esteem. While diminished purchasing power certainly matters, the injury that most animates the resentment of working people is to their status as producers. This injury is the combined effect of meritocratic sorting and market-driven globalization.

Only a political agenda that acknowledges this injury and seeks to renew the dignity of work can speak effectively to the discontent that roils our politics. Such an agenda must attend to contributive as well as distributive justice. ³⁷ This is because the anger abroad in the land is, at least in part, a crisis of recognition. And it is in our role as producers, not consumers, that we contribute to the common good and win recognition for doing so.

The contrast between consumer and producer identities points to two different ways of understanding the common good. One approach, familiar among economic policy makers, defines the common good as the sum of everyone's preferences and interests. According to this account, we achieve the common good by maximizing consumer welfare, typically by maximizing economic growth. If the common good is simply a matter of satisfying consumer preferences, then market wages are a good measure of who has contributed what. Those who make the most money have presumably made the most valuable contribution to the common good, by producing the goods and services that consumers want.

A second approach rejects this consumerist notion of the common good in favor of what might be called a civic conception. According to the civic ideal, the common good is not simply about adding up preferences or maximizing consumer welfare. It is about reflecting critically on our preferences—ideally, elevating and improving them—so that we can live worthwhile and flourishing lives. This cannot be achieved through economic activity alone. It requires deliberating with our fellow citizens about how to bring about a just and good society, one that cultivates civic virtue and enables us to reason together about the purposes worthy of our political community. [38](#)

The civic conception of the common good requires, then, a certain kind of politics, one that provides venues and occasions for public deliberation. But it also suggests a certain way of thinking about work. From the standpoint of the civic conception, the most important role we play in the economy is not as consumers but as producers. For it is as producers that we develop and exercise our abilities to provide goods and services that fulfill the needs of our fellow citizens and win social esteem. The true value of our contribution cannot be measured by the wage we receive, for wages depend, as the economist-philosopher Frank Knight pointed out (see [chapter 5](#)), on contingencies of supply and demand. The value of our contribution depends instead on the moral and civic importance of the ends our efforts serve. This involves an independent moral judgment that the labor market, however efficient, cannot provide.

The notion that economic policy is ultimately for the sake of consumption is today so familiar that it is hard to think our way beyond it. “Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production,” Adam Smith declared in *The Wealth of Nations*, “and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer.” [39](#) John Maynard Keynes echoed Smith, proclaiming that consumption “is the sole end and object of all economic activity,” [40](#) and most contemporary economists agree. But an older tradition of moral and political thought held otherwise. Aristotle argued that human flourishing depends on realizing our nature through the cultivation and exercise of our abilities. The American republican tradition taught that certain occupations—first agriculture, then artisan labor, then free labor broadly understood—cultivate the virtues that equip citizens for self-rule. [41](#)

In the twentieth century, the producer ethic of the republican tradition gradually gave way to consumerist notions of freedom, and to a political economy of economic growth. ⁴² But the idea that, even in a complex society, work draws citizens together in a scheme of contribution and mutual recognition did not disappear altogether. At times, it has found inspiring expression. Speaking to striking sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, shortly before he was assassinated, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., tied the dignity of sanitation workers to their contribution to the common good.

One day our society will come to respect the sanitation workers if it is to survive, for the person who picks up our garbage is in the final analysis as significant as the physician, for if he doesn't do his job, diseases are rampant. All labor has dignity. ⁴³

In a 1981 Encyclical Letter, "On Human Work," Pope John Paul II stated that through work man "achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes 'more a human being.'" He also saw work as bound up with community. "[T]his brings it about that man combines his deepest human identity with membership of a nation, and intends his work also to increase the common good developed together with his compatriots." ⁴⁴

A few years later, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a Pastoral Letter elaborating Catholic social teaching on the economy, giving explicit definition to "contributive" justice. All persons "have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society," and government has "a duty to organize economic and social institutions so that people can contribute to society in ways that respect their freedom and the dignity of their labor." ⁴⁵

Some secular philosophers voice similar views. The German social theorist Axel Honneth has argued that contemporary conflicts over the distribution of income and wealth can best be understood as conflicts over recognition and esteem. ⁴⁶ Although he traces this idea to the philosophy of Hegel, a notoriously difficult thinker, it is intuitively plausible to any sports fan who has followed salary disputes involving highly paid athletes. When fans complain about a player who already makes millions but is holding out

for more, the athlete invariably replies, “It’s not about the money. It’s about respect.”

This is what Hegel means by the struggle for recognition. More than a system for satisfying needs efficiently, the labor market, according to Hegel, is a system of recognition. It not only remunerates work with an income but publicly recognizes each person’s work as a contribution to the common good. Markets by themselves do not provide workers with skills or confer recognition, so Hegel proposed an institution akin to trade associations or guilds to ensure that workers’ skills were adequate to make contributions seen as worthy of public esteem. In short, Hegel argued that the capitalist organization of work emerging in his time could be ethically justified only on two conditions, described succinctly by Honneth: “first, it must provide a minimum wage; second, it must give all work activities a shape that reveals them to be a contribution to the common good.” [47](#)

Eighty years later, the French social theorist Émile Durkheim built on Hegel’s account of work, arguing that the division of labor can be a source of social solidarity, provided everyone’s contribution is remunerated according to its real value for the community. [48](#) Unlike Smith, Keynes, and many present-day economists, Hegel and Durkheim did not see work mainly as a means to the end of consumption. Instead, they argued that work, at its best, is a socially integrating activity, an arena of recognition, a way of honoring our obligation to contribute to the common good.

CONTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

In our deeply polarized time, when large numbers of working people feel ignored and unappreciated, when we desperately need sources of social cohesion and solidarity, it might seem that these more robust notions of the dignity of work would find their way into mainstream political argument. But this has not been the case. Why not? Why is the reigning political agenda resistant to the contributive aspect of justice, and to the producer-centered ethic that underlies it?

The answer might seem simply to lie in our love of consumption, along with the belief that economic growth delivers the goods. But something deeper is at stake. Beyond the material benefits it promises, making economic growth an overriding aim of public policy has a special appeal for pluralist societies like ours that are teeming with disagreement. It seems to

spare us the need for contentious debates about morally controversial questions.

People hold various views about what is important in life. We disagree about the meaning of human flourishing. As consumers, we differ in our preferences and desires. In the face of these differences, maximizing consumer welfare seems a value-neutral goal for economic policy. If consumer welfare is the goal, then notwithstanding our disparate preferences, more is better than less. Disagreements inevitably arise about how to distribute the fruits of economic growth—hence the need for debates about distributive justice. But all can agree, or so it would seem, that expanding the economic pie is better than shrinking it.

Contributive justice, by contrast, is not neutral about human flourishing or the best way to live. From Aristotle to the American republican tradition, from Hegel to Catholic social teaching, theories of contributive justice teach us that we are most fully human when we contribute to the common good and earn the esteem of our fellow citizens for the contributions we make. According to this tradition, the fundamental human need is to be needed by those with whom we share a common life. The dignity of work consists in exercising our abilities to answer such needs. If this is what it means to live a good life, then it is a mistake to conceive consumption as “the sole end and object of economic activity.”

A political economy concerned only with the size and distribution of GDP undermines the dignity of work and makes for an impoverished civic life. Robert F. Kennedy understood this: “Fellowship, community, shared patriotism—these essential values of our civilization do not come from just buying and consuming goods together.” They come instead from “dignified employment at decent pay, the kind of employment that lets a man say to his community, to his family, to his country, and most important, to himself, ‘I helped to build this country. I am a participant in its great public ventures.’” [49](#)

Few politicians speak that way today. In the decades after RFK, progressives largely abandoned the politics of community, patriotism, and the dignity of work, and offered instead the rhetoric of rising. To those who worried about stagnant wages, outsourcing, inequality, and the fear that immigrants and robots were coming for their jobs, governing elites offered bracing advice: Go to college. Equip yourself to compete and win in the

global economy. What you earn will depend on what you can learn. You can make it if you try.

This was an idealism suited to a global, meritocratic, market-driven age. It flattered the winners and insulted the losers. By 2016, its time was up. The arrival of Brexit and Trump, and the rise of hyper-nationalist, anti-immigrant parties in Europe, announced the failure of the project. The question now is what an alternative political project might look like.

DEBATING THE DIGNITY OF WORK

The dignity of work is a good place to start. On the surface, it is hardly a controversial ideal. No politician speaks against it. But a political agenda that takes work seriously—that treats it as an arena of recognition—would raise uncomfortable questions for mainstream liberals and conservatives alike. This is because it would challenge a premise that proponents of market-based globalization widely share—that market outcomes reflect the true social value of people’s contributions to the common good.

Thinking about pay, most would agree that what people make for this or that job often overstates or understates the true social value of the work they do. Only an ardent libertarian would insist that the wealthy casino magnate’s contribution to society is a thousand times more valuable than that of a pediatrician. The pandemic of 2020 prompted many to reflect, at least fleetingly, on the importance of the work performed by grocery store clerks, delivery workers, home care providers, and other essential but modestly paid workers. In a market society, however, it is hard to resist the tendency to confuse the money we make with the value of our contribution to the common good.

This confusion is not merely the result of sloppy thinking. It is not put to rest by philosophical arguments revealing its flaws. It reflects the allure of the meritocratic hope that the world is arranged in a way that aligns what we receive with what we are due. This is the hope that has fueled providentialist thinking from the Old Testament to present-day talk of being “on the right side of history.”

In market-driven societies, interpreting material success as a sign of moral desert is a persisting temptation. It is a temptation we need repeatedly to resist. One way of doing so is to debate and enact measures that prompt us to reflect, deliberately and democratically, on what counts as truly

valuable contributions to the common good and where market verdicts miss the mark.

It would be unrealistic to expect that such a debate would produce agreement; the common good is inescapably contestable. But a renewed debate about the dignity of work would disrupt our partisan complacencies, morally invigorate our public discourse, and move us beyond the polarized politics that four decades of market faith and meritocratic hubris have bequeathed.

Consider, as illustrations, two versions of a political agenda focused on the dignity of work and the need to challenge market outcomes to affirm it. One comes from a conservative direction, the other from a progressive one.

The Hubris of the “Open Agenda”

The first comes from a young conservative thinker who once worked as a policy advisor to Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. In an insightful book, *The Once and Future Worker*, Oren Cass offers a series of proposals that address the grievances Trump tapped but failed to resolve. Cass argues that the renewal of work in the United States requires Republicans to give up their orthodox embrace of free markets. Rather than push corporate tax cuts and unfettered free trade in hopes of boosting GDP, Republicans should focus on policies that enable workers to find jobs that pay well enough to support strong families and communities. This matters more for a good society, Cass maintains, than economic growth. [50](#)

One of the policies he proposes to achieve this goal is a wage subsidy for low-income workers—hardly standard Republican fare. The idea is that the government would provide a supplementary payment for each hour worked by a low-wage employee, based on a target hourly-wage rate. The wage subsidy is, in a way, the opposite of a payroll tax. Rather than deduct a certain amount of each worker’s earnings, the government would contribute a certain amount, in hopes of enabling low-income workers to make a decent living even if they lack the skills to command a substantial market wage. [51](#)

A dramatic version of the wage subsidy proposal was enacted by a number of European countries when the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 locked down their economies. Rather than offer unemployment insurance to workers who lost their jobs during the pandemic, as the U.S. government

did, Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands covered 75 to 90 percent of wages for companies that did not lay off workers. The advantage of the wage subsidy is that it enables employers to retain workers on their payroll during the emergency, rather than fire them and force them to rely on unemployment insurance. The U.S. approach, by contrast, cushions workers' lost wages but does not affirm the dignity of work by ensuring that workers keep their jobs. [52](#)

Other proposals Cass offers are more likely to appeal to conservatives, such as scaling back environmental regulations that cost jobs in manufacturing and mining industries. [53](#) On the fraught subjects of immigration and free trade, Cass urges that we view these from the standpoint of workers, not consumers. If our goal is the lowest possible consumer prices, he observes, then free trade, outsourcing, and relatively open immigration policies are desirable. But if our main concern is creating a labor market that enables low- and middle-skilled American workers to earn a decent living, raise families, and build communities, then some restrictions on trade, outsourcing, and immigration are justified. [54](#)

Whatever the merit of Cass's particular proposals, what is interesting about his project is that it works out the implications of shifting our focus from maximizing GDP to creating a labor market conducive to the dignity of work and social cohesion. In doing so, he offers a scathing critique of globalization proponents, who have insisted since the 1990s that the key political divide is no longer between left and right but between "open and closed." Cass rightly points out that this way of framing the globalization debate casts the "highly skilled, college-educated 'winners' of the modern economy" as open-minded and their critics as closed-minded, as if questioning the free flow of goods, capital, and people across national borders were a kind of bigotry. It is hard to imagine a more condescending way of defending neoliberal globalization to those it leaves behind. [55](#)

The proponents of the "open agenda" insist that the solution for those who do not prosper is better education. "The vision is supposed to be an inspiring one, in which people are lifted upward to greater opportunity," Cass writes. "Its real implications are less exalted; if the economy no longer works for the average worker, it is he who needs to transform into something it likes better." He concludes that "the open agenda is not sustainable in a democracy where the majority finds itself left behind; its

arguments are losing force.” Citing the danger of “irresponsible populism,” Cass states that “the question is not whether the open agenda will lose but rather to what.” [56](#)

Finance, Speculation, and the Common Good

A second approach to renewing the dignity of work, more likely to resonate with political progressives, would highlight an aspect of the globalization agenda that is often overlooked by mainstream politicians—the rising role of finance. The financial industry came dramatically to public attention with the financial crisis of 2008. The debate it provoked was mainly about the terms of the taxpayer bailout and how to reform Wall Street to reduce the risk of future crises.

Far less public attention has been given to the way finance remade the economy in recent decades and subtly transformed the meaning of merit and success. This transformation bears deeply on the dignity of work. Trade and immigration have figured more conspicuously than finance in the populist backlash against globalization; their impact on working-class jobs and status is palpable and visceral. But the financialization of the economy may be more corrosive of the dignity of work, and more demoralizing. This is because it offers perhaps the clearest example in a modern economy of the gap between what the market rewards and what actually contributes to the common good.

The financial industry today looms large in advanced economies, having grown dramatically during the past several decades. In the United States, its share of GDP has nearly tripled since the 1950s, and by 2008, it claimed more than 30 percent of corporate profits. Its employees make 70 percent more than comparably qualified workers in other industries. [57](#)

This would not be a problem if all this financial activity were productive, if it increased the economy’s ability to produce valuable goods and services. But this is not the case. Even at its best, finance is not productive in itself. Its role is to facilitate economic activity by allocating capital to socially useful purposes—new businesses, factories, roads, airports, schools, hospitals, homes. But as finance has exploded as a share of the U.S. economy in recent decades, less and less of it has involved investing in the real economy. More and more has involved complex financial engineering

that yields big profits for those engaged in it but does nothing to make the economy more productive. [58](#)

As Adair Turner, chair of Britain's Financial Services Authority, explained, "There is no clear evidence that the growth in the scale and complexity of the financial system in the rich developed world over the last 20 to 30 years has driven increased growth or stability, and it is possible for financial activity to extract rents [unjustified windfalls] from the real economy rather than to deliver economic value." [59](#)

This measured judgment is a devastating verdict on the conventional wisdom that led the Clinton administration and its U.K. counterparts to deregulate the financial industry in the 1990s. What it means, in simple terms, is that the complex derivatives and other financial instruments devised by Wall Street in recent decades actually hurt the economy more than they helped it.

Consider a concrete example. In his book *Flashboys*, Michael Lewis tells the story of a company that laid a fiber-optic cable linking Chicago futures traders with New York stock markets. The cable increased the speed of trades on pork belly futures and other speculative bets by a few milliseconds. This minuscule edge was worth hundreds of millions of dollars to high-speed traders. [60](#) But it is hard to claim that speeding up such transactions from the blink of an eye to something even faster contributes anything of value to the economy.

High-speed trading is not the only financial innovation of dubious economic value; credit default swaps that enable speculators to bet on future prices without investing in any productive activity are hard to distinguish from casino gambling. One party wins and the other loses, money changes hands, but no investment occurs along the way. When companies use profits to buy back shares instead of investing in research and development, or in new equipment, shareholders gain but the productive capacity of the company does not.

In 1984, as financialization was starting to take off, James Tobin, the distinguished Yale economist, offered a prescient warning of the "casino aspect of our financial markets." He worried "that we are throwing more and more of our resources, including the cream of our youth, into financial activities remote from the production of goods and services, into activities

that generate high private rewards disproportionate to their social productivity.” [61](#)

It is hard to know exactly what portion of financial activity improves the productive capacity of the real economy and what portion generates unproductive windfalls for the financial industry itself. But Adair Turner, a credible authority, has estimated that in advanced economies such as the U.S. and U.K., only 15 percent of financial flows go into new productive enterprises rather than into speculation on existing assets or fancy derivatives. [62](#) Even if this underestimates by half the productive aspect of finance, it is a sobering figure. Its implications are not only economic but also moral and political.

Economically, it suggests that much financial activity hinders rather than promotes economic growth. Morally and politically, it reveals a vast discrepancy between the rewards the market bestows on finance and the value of its contribution to the common good. This discrepancy, along with the disproportionate prestige accorded those engaged in speculative pursuits, mocks the dignity of those who earn a living producing useful goods and services in the real economy.

Those who worry about the adverse economic effects of modern finance have proposed various ways to reform it. My concern, however, is with its moral and political implications. A political agenda that recognizes the dignity of work would use the tax system to reconfigure the economy of esteem by discouraging speculation and honoring productive labor.

Generally speaking, this would mean shifting the tax burden from work to consumption and speculation. A radical way of doing so would be to lower or even eliminate payroll taxes and to raise revenue instead by taxing consumption, wealth, and financial transactions. A modest step in this direction would be to reduce the payroll tax (which makes work expensive for employers and employees alike) and make up the lost revenue with a financial transactions tax on high-frequency trading, which contributes little to the real economy.

These and other measures to shift the burden of taxation from labor to consumption and speculation could be done in ways that would make the tax system more efficient and less regressive than it is today. But these considerations, however important, are not the only ones that matter. We should also consider the expressive significance of taxation. By this I mean the attitudes toward success and failure, honor and recognition, embedded

in the way we fund our public life. Taxation is not only a way of raising revenue; it is also a way of expressing a society's judgment about what counts as a valuable contribution to the common good.

MAKERS AND TAKERS

On one level, the moral aspect of tax policy is familiar. We commonly argue about the fairness of taxation—whether this or that tax will fall more heavily on the rich or the poor. But the expressive dimension of taxation goes beyond debates about fairness, to the moral judgments societies make about which activities are worthy of honor and recognition, and which ones should be discouraged. Sometimes, these judgments are explicit. Taxes on tobacco, alcohol, and casinos are called “sin taxes” because they seek to discourage activities deemed harmful or undesirable (smoking, drinking, gambling). Such taxes express society's disapproval of these activities by raising the cost of engaging in them. Proposals to tax sugary sodas (to combat obesity) or carbon emissions (to address climate change) likewise seek to change norms and shape behavior.

Not all taxes have this aim. We do not tax income to express disapproval of paid employment or to discourage people from engaging it. Nor is a general sales tax intended as a deterrent to buying things. These are simply ways of raising revenue.

Often, however, moral judgments are implicit in seemingly value-neutral policies. This is especially true when tax touches work, and the various ways people make money. For example, why should income from capital gains be taxed at a lower rate than income from labor? Warren Buffett raised this question when he pointed out that he, a billionaire investor, paid a lower rate of tax than his secretary. [63](#)

Some argue that taxing investment less heavily than work encourages investment and so promotes economic growth. On one level, this argument is purely practical, or utilitarian; it seeks to increase GDP, not to honor wealthy investors who reap capital gains. But politically, this seemingly practical claim draws some of its persuasive force from a moral assumption—an argument about merit—that lurks just beneath the surface. This is the assumption that investors are “job creators” who should be rewarded with lower taxes.

A stark version of this argument was advanced by Republican congressman Paul Ryan, former Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, and a devotee of the libertarian writer Ayn Rand. Ryan, a critic of the welfare state, distinguished between “makers” (those who contribute the most to the economy) and “takers” (those who receive more in government benefits than they pay in taxes). He worried that, as the welfare state grew, the so-called “takers” were coming to outnumber the “makers.” [64](#)

Some objected to Ryan’s highly moralized way of speaking about economic contribution. Others accepted his distinction between makers and takers but argued that Ryan had misidentified them. Rana Foroohar, a business columnist at the *Financial Times* and CNN, offers a powerful instance of the second view in an insightful book titled *Makers and Takers: The Rise of Finance and the Fall of American Business*. Citing Adair Turner, Warren Buffett, and other critics of unproductive financialization, Foroohar argues that the primary “takers” in today’s economy are those in the financial industry who engage in speculative activity that reaps enormous windfalls without contributing to the real economy:

All this finance has not made us more prosperous. Instead, it has deepened inequality and ushered in more financial crises, which destroy massive amounts of economic value each time they happen. Far from being a help to our economy, finance has become a hindrance. More finance isn’t increasing our economic growth—it is slowing it. [65](#)

Foroohar concludes that the supposed “makers” are the ones “doing most of the taking in society: paying the least taxes as a percentage of income, grabbing a disproportionate share of the economic pie, and advancing business models that often run counter to growth.” The true “makers,” she argues, are those who labor in the real economy to provide useful goods and services, and those who invest in this productive activity. [66](#)

The debate over who is a maker in today’s economy, and who a taker, is ultimately an argument about contributive justice, about what economic roles are worthy of honor and recognition. Thinking this through requires public debate about what counts as a valuable contribution to the common good. My proposal to replace some or all of the payroll tax with a financial

transactions tax—a “sin tax,” in effect, on casino-like speculation that does not help the real economy—is intended as one way of framing such a debate. No doubt there are others. My broader point is that renewing the dignity of work requires that we contend with the moral questions underlying our economic arrangements, questions that the technocratic politics of recent decades have obscured.

One such question is what kinds of work are worthy of recognition and esteem. Another is what we owe one another as citizens. These questions are connected. For we cannot determine what counts as a contribution worth affirming without reasoning together about the purposes and ends of the common life we share. And we cannot deliberate about common purposes and ends without a sense of belonging, without seeing ourselves as members of a community to which we are indebted. Only insofar as we depend on others, and recognize our dependence, do we have reason to appreciate their contributions to our collective well-being. This requires a sense of community sufficiently robust to enable citizens to say, and to believe, that “we are all in this together”—not as a ritual incantation in times of crisis, but as a plausible description of our everyday lives.

Over the past four decades, market-driven globalization and the meritocratic conception of success, taken together, have unraveled these moral ties. Global supply chains, capital flows, and the cosmopolitan identities they fostered made us less reliant on our fellow citizens, less grateful for the work they do, and less open to the claims of solidarity. Meritocratic sorting taught us that our success is our own doing, and so eroded our sense of indebtedness. We are now in the midst of the angry whirlwind this unraveling has produced. To renew the dignity of work, we must repair the social bonds the age of merit has undone.

CONCLUSION:

Merit and the Common Good

Henry Aaron, one of baseball's greatest players, grew up in the segregated South. His biographer, Howard Bryant, describes how, as a young boy, "Henry would watch as his father was forced to surrender his place in line at the general store to any whites who entered." When Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color line, Henry, then thirteen years old, was inspired to believe that he, too, could play one day in the Major Leagues. Lacking a bat and ball, he practiced with what he had, using a stick to hit bottle caps pitched to him by his brother. He would go on to break Babe Ruth's career record for home runs. ¹

In a poignant observation, Bryant writes, "Hitting, it could be argued, represented the first meritocracy in Henry's life." ²

It is hard to read this line without loving meritocracy, without seeing it as the ultimate answer to injustice—a vindication of talent over prejudice, racism, and unequal opportunity. And from this thought, it is a small step to the conclusion that a just society is a meritocratic one, in which everyone has an equal chance to rise as far as their talent and hard work will take them.

But this is a mistake. The moral of Henry Aaron's story is not that we should love meritocracy but that we should despise a system of racial injustice that can only be escaped by hitting home runs. Equality of opportunity is a morally necessary corrective to injustice. But it is a remedial principle, not an adequate ideal for a good society.

BEYOND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

It is not easy to keep hold of this distinction. Inspired by the heroic rise of a few, we ask how others might also be enabled to escape the conditions that weigh them down. Rather than repair the conditions that people want to flee, we construct a politics that makes mobility the answer to inequality.

Breaking down barriers is a good thing. No one should be held back by poverty or prejudice. But a good society cannot be premised only on the promise of escape.

Focusing only, or mainly, on rising does little to cultivate the social bonds and civic attachments that democracy requires. Even a society more successful than ours at providing upward mobility would need to find ways to enable those who do not rise to flourish in place, and to see themselves as members of a common project. Our failure to do so makes life hard for those who lack meritocratic credentials and makes them doubt that they belong.

It is often assumed that the only alternative to equality of opportunity is a sterile, oppressive equality of results. But there is another alternative: a broad equality of condition that enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity—developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem, sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning, and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs.

Two of the best accounts of equality of condition appeared in the midst of the Depression. In a book entitled *Equality* (1931), R. H. Tawney, a British economic historian and social critic, argued that equality of opportunity is at best a partial ideal. “Opportunities to ‘rise,’” he wrote, “are not a substitute for a large measure of practical equality, nor do they make immaterial the existence of sharp disparities of income and social condition.” [3](#)

Social well-being ... depends upon cohesion and solidarity. It implies the existence, not merely of opportunities to ascend, but of a high level of general culture, and a strong sense of common interests Individual happiness does not only require that men should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not. [4](#)

In the same year, across the Atlantic, a writer named James Truslow Adams wrote a paean to his country entitled *The Epic of America*. Few recall the book, but everyone knows the phrase he coined in its closing pages: “the American dream.” Looking back from our time, it would be easy to equate his account of the American dream with our rhetoric of rising. America’s “distinctive and unique gift to mankind,” Adams wrote, was the dream “of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” [5](#)

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. [6](#)

But a closer reading reveals that the dream Adams described was not only about moving up; it was about achieving a broad, democratic equality of condition. As a concrete example, he pointed to the U.S. Library of Congress, “a symbol of what democracy can accomplish on its own behalf,” a place of public learning that drew Americans from all walks of life:

As one looks down on the general reading room, which alone contains ten thousand volumes which may be read without even the asking, one sees the seats filled with silent readers, old and young, rich and poor, black and white, the executive and the laborer, the general and the private, the noted scholar and the schoolboy, all reading at their own library provided by their own democracy. [7](#)

Adams considered this scene “to be a perfect working out in a concrete example of the American dream—the means provided by the accumulated resources of the people themselves, [and] a public intelligent enough to use them.” If this example could be “carried out in all departments of our national life,” Adams wrote, the American dream would become “an abiding reality.” [8](#)

DEMOCRACY AND HUMILITY

We do not have much equality of condition today. Public spaces that gather people together across class, race, ethnicity, and faith are few and far between. Four decades of market-driven globalization has brought inequalities of income and wealth so pronounced that they lead us into separate ways of life. Those who are affluent and those of modest means rarely encounter one another in the course of the day. We live and work and shop and play in different places; our children go to different schools. And when the meritocratic sorting machine has done its work, those on top find it hard to resist the thought that they deserve their success and that those on the bottom deserve their place as well. This feeds a politics so poisonous and a partisanship so intense that many now regard marriage across party lines as more troubling than marrying outside the faith. It is little wonder we have lost the ability to reason together about large public questions, or even to listen to one another.

Merit began its career as the empowering idea that we can, through work and faith, bend God's grace in our favor. The secular version of this idea made for an exhilarating promise of individual freedom: Our fate is in our hands. We can make it if we try.

But this vision of freedom points us away from the obligations of a shared democratic project. Recall the two conceptions of the common good we considered in [chapter 7](#), the consumerist and the civic. If the common good consists simply in maximizing the welfare of consumers, then achieving an equality of condition does not matter in the end. If democracy is simply economics by other means, a matter of adding up our individual interests and preferences, then its fate does not depend on the moral bonds of citizens. A consumerist conception of democracy can do its limited work whether we share a vibrant common life or inhabit privatized enclaves in the company of our own kind.

But if the common good can be arrived at only by deliberating with our fellow citizens about the purposes and ends worthy of our political community, then democracy cannot be indifferent to the character of the common life. It does not require perfect equality. But it does require that citizens from different walks of life encounter one another in common spaces and public places. For this is how we learn to negotiate and abide our differences. And this is how we come to care for the common good. ⁹

The meritocratic conviction that people deserve whatever riches the market bestows on their talents makes solidarity an almost impossible

project. For why do the successful owe anything to the less-advantaged members of society? The answer to this question depends on recognizing that, for all our striving, we are not self-made and self-sufficient; finding ourselves in a society that prizes our talents is our good fortune, not our due. A lively sense of the contingency of our lot can inspire a certain humility: “There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of birth, or the mystery of fate, go I.” Such humility is the beginning of the way back from the harsh ethic of success that drives us apart. It points beyond the tyranny of merit toward a less rancorous, more generous public life.

Notes

PROLOGUE

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- In the U.S., the top 1 percent receive 20.2 percent of national income, while the bottom half receive 12.5 percent.
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61. Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1855), pp. 84–85.
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66. President Barack Obama, “Remarks at an Obama Victory Fund 2012 Fundraiser in Beverly Hills, California,” [presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/obama-victory-fund-2012-fundraiser-beverly-hills-california](#) .
67. Eric Westervelt, “Greatness Is Not a Given: ‘America the Beautiful’ Asks How We Can Do Better,” *National Public Radio*, April 4, 2019, [npr.org/2019/04/04/709531017/america-the-beautiful-american-anthem](#) .
68. Katharine Lee Bates, *America the Beautiful and Other Poems* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1911), pp. 3–4.
69. See Mark Krikorian, “God Shed His Grace on Thee,” *National Review* , July 6, 2011.
70. A video of Ray Charles’s performance of “America the Beautiful” at the 2001 World Series is available at [youtube.com/watch?v=UW33W333333](#) .

3. THE RHETORIC OF RISING

1. Evan Osnos, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), pp. 1–2.
2. As president, Bill Clinton used this phrase 21 times. For example: “[W]e have a heavy responsibility to make sure that every member of a racial minority or they happen to be otherwise left behind, because we don’t have a person to waste time and it runs on people power, and we need all the people we can get.” William J. Clinton, “Remarks in San Francisco,” [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/223422](#) .
3. See Yascha Mounk, *The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
4. Ronald Reagan, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the State of the Union,” January 27, 1987, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/252758](#) .
5. Uses of the phrase by Coolidge, Hoover, and FDR can be found at the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/223422](#) .
6. As president, Reagan used the phrase “through no fault of their own” 26 times; Clinton used it 72 times, Obama : 18 times. See the searchable archive at the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search](#) .
7. William J. Clinton, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1993, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/221902](#) .
8. William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union,” January 24, 1995, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/221902](#) .
9. William J. Clinton, “Remarks on Arrival at McClellan Air Force Base, Sacramento, California,” April 7, 1995, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/220655](#) .
10. William J. Clinton, “Statement on Signing the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,” September 8, 1996, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/222686](#) .
11. Tony Blair, *New Britain: My Vision of a Young Country* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), pp. 19, 173. See also pp. 1–2.
12. Gerhard Schröder, December 31, 2002, quoted in Yascha Mounk, *The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 220–21. Translated by Mounk. See also pp. 1–6.
13. Mounk, *ibid.*, quote at p. 30; see generally pp. 28–37.
14. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at a White House Briefing for Black Administration Appointees,” June 25, 1984, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/260916](#) ; Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Tax Reform,” May 25, 1986, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/259932](#) .
15. William J. Clinton, “Remarks to the Democratic Leadership Council,” December 3, 1993, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/218963](#) ; Obama used some version of the phrase 50 times during his presidency, Reagan 3 times, George W. Bush 3 times, George H. W. Bush twice, Gerald Ford once, Richard Nixon once. The phrase appeared in written statements by Nixon and in two by Lyndon Johnson, and did not appear in spoken or written statements by any U.S. president after Clinton. Calculated by author using the searchable archive of presidential speeches at the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search](#) .
16. Barack Obama, “Remarks at the White House College Opportunity Summit,” December 4, 2014, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/308043](#) .
17. Barack Obama, “Remarks at a Campaign Rally in Austin, Texas,” July 17, 2012, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/301979](#) .
18. Google Ngram search at [books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=youth+deserve&year_start=1970&year_end=2008&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=&direct_url=t1%3Ft2%3F](#) .

. According to the searchable online archive of *The New York Times*, “you deserve” appeared 14 times in 1981 and showed a steady increase by decade, rising from 111 uses in the 1970s to 175 in the 1980s, 228 in the 1990s, 480 in the 2010s (through July 31, 2019).

19. John Lofflin, “What’s New in Subliminal Messages: ‘I Deserve to Succeed. I Deserve to Reach My Goals. I Deserve to Win,’” *Times*, March 20, 1988, [nytimes.com/1988/03/20/business/what-s-new-subliminal-messages-deserve-succeed-debate.html?searchResultPosition=1](https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/20/business/what-s-new-subliminal-messages-deserve-succeed-debate.html?searchResultPosition=1); David Tanis, “You Deserve More Succulent Chicken,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/03/29/dining/chicken-paillard-recipe.html?searchResultPosition=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/29/dining/chicken-paillard-recipe.html?searchResultPosition=1).
20. See the discussion of Friedrich Hayek, John Rawls, and the luck egalitarians in chapter 3.
21. Reagan used “you deserve” 31 times, compared with a total of 27 uses by Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, and Ford, according to the searchable archive of presidential speeches at the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search).
22. Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Members of the Commonwealth Club of California,” April 4, 1983, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262792](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/262792).
23. Reagan used “you deserve” 31 times, Clinton used it 68 times, and Obama used it 104 times, according to the searchable archive of presidential speeches at the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/advanced-search). William J. Clinton, “Remarks on Signing the California Proposition 53,” May 20, 1994, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/220148](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/220148); Barack Obama, “Remarks at Costco Wholesale Corporation Warehouse in Lanham, Maryland,” January 29, 2014, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/305268](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/305268); Barack Obama, “Remarks at Cuyahoga Community College Western Campus,” November 10, 2010, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/288117](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/288117).
24. Theresa May, “Britain, the Great Meritocracy: Prime Minister’s Speech,” September 9, 2016, at [gov.uk/government/speeches/meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech).
25. Ibid.
26. Barack Obama, Interview with Bill Simmons of ESPN, March 1, 2012, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/327087](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/327087).
27. Hillary Clinton, “Remarks at the Frontline Outreach Center in Orlando, Florida,” September 21, 2016, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319595](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319595); “Remarks at Eastern Market in Detroit, Michigan,” November 4, 2016, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319839](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319839); “Remarks at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio,” October 10, 2016, the American Presidency Project, [presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319580](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319580).
28. Erin A. Cech, “Rugged Meritocrats: The Role of Overt Bias and the Meritocratic Ideology in Trump Supporters’ Opposition to Social Justice Efforts,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* 3 (January 1, 2017), pp. 1–20, journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2378023117712395.
29. Ibid., pp. 7–12.
30. In the U.S., the top 1 percent receive 20.2 percent of national income, while the bottom half receive 12.5 percent. In the top 10 percent take in nearly half (47 percent) of national income, compared with 37 percent in Western Europe, 41 percent in China, and 55 percent in Brazil and India. Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, “Distributional National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 133, issue 2 (May 2018) available at eml.berkeley.edu/~saez/PSZ2018QJE.pdf; Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, and Zucman, *World Income Distribution Report 2018*, pp. 3, 83–84. Income distribution data for the U.S. and other countries is also available at the online World Income Database, wid.world.
31. In the United States, most of the economic growth since 1980 has gone to the top 10 percent, whose income grew almost none went to bottom half of the population, whose average income (about \$16,000) in 2014 was about the same in real terms in 1980. For working-age men, the median income was “the same in 2014 as in 1964, about \$35,000. There has been no growth for the median male worker over half a century.” Piketty, Saez, and Zucman, “Distributional National Accounts,” pp. 557, 578, 592–93. See also Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 297, where Piketty states that from 1977 to 2007, the richest 10 percent absorbed three-quarters of the entire economic growth of the U.S.
32. Americans agree by 77 to 20 percent that “most people can succeed if they are willing to work hard.” Germans agree by 48 percent. In France and Japan, majorities agree more with the statement that “hard work is no guarantee of success,” by 54 to 46 percent (France) and 59 to 40 percent (Japan). Pew Global Attitudes Project, July 12, 2012, [pewresearch.org/global/2012/07/12/chapter-4-the-casualties-faith-in-hard-work-and-capitalism](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/07/12/chapter-4-the-casualties-faith-in-hard-work-and-capitalism).
33. Seventy-three percent of Americans say working hard is “very important to getting ahead in life,” compared with 61 percent of German and 25 percent of French respondents. Among South Korean and Japanese respondents, the figures were 42 percent respectively. Pew Research Center, Spring 2014 Global Attitudes survey, October 7, 2014.

- pewresearch.org/global/2014/10/09/emerging-and-developing-economies-much-more-optimistic-than-rich-count-future/inequality-05 .
34. Asked why people are rich, 43 percent say they worked harder, and 42 percent say they had advantages in life. A people are poor, 52 percent cite circumstances beyond their control and 31 percent cite a lack of effort. Democrat Republicans differ in their responses to these questions. Amina Dunn, “Partisans Are Divided over the Fairness of Economy—and Why People Are Rich or Poor,” Pew Research Center, October 4, 2018, pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/04/partisans-are-divided-over-the-fairness-of-the-u-s-economy-and-why-people-are-rich-or-poor .
 35. Asked whether “success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control,” 74 percent of South Koreans, 66 percent of Germans, and 66 percent of Italians agree, compared with only 40 percent of Americans. Pew Research Spring 2014 Global Attitudes survey, October 9, 2014, pewresearch.org/global/2014/10/09/emerging-and-developing-economies-much-more-optimistic-than-rich-countries-about-the-future .
 36. Raj Chetty, David Grusky, Maximilian Hell, Nathaniel Hendren, Robert Manduca, and Jimmy Narang, “The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940,” *Science* 356 (6336), 2017, pp. 398–406, available at opportunityinsights.org/paper/the-fading-american-dream . Comparing the earnings of fathers and sons, the shift from 1940 to 2014: 95 percent of males born in 1940 made more than their fathers; only 41 percent of males born in 1984 exceeded their fathers’ earnings.
 37. According to a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts, 4 percent of Americans born in the bottom quintile rise to the top quintile, 30 percent rise to the middle quintile or higher, and 43 percent remain stuck in the bottom quintile. “Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations,” Pew Charitable Trusts, July 2012, p. 6, Figure 3, available at pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/economic_mobility/pursuingamericandream.pdf . A study by the Harvard economist Raj Chetty and colleagues concludes that 7.5 percent of Americans born in the bottom quintile rise to the top quintile, 38 percent rise to the middle quintile or higher, and 34 percent remain stuck at the bottom. Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, and Emmanuel Saez, “Where Is the Land of Opportunity? The Geography of Intergenerational Mobility in the United States,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 129, no. 4 (2014), pp. 1553–62, available at rajchetty.com/chettyfiles/mobility_geo.pdf (mobility figures at p. 16 and Table II). According to a study by Scott Archbridge Institute, only 3 percent of children born in the bottom quintile make it to the top quintile, and only 2 percent to the middle quintile or higher; 46 percent remain stuck at the bottom. Scott Winship, “Economic Mobility in the United States,” Archbridge Institute, March 2017, p. 18, Figure 3, available at archbridgeinst.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Contemporary-levels-of-mobility-digital-version-Winship.pdf .
 38. Miles Corak, “Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (Summer 2013), pp. 79–102 (see Figure 1, p. 82), online at pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdfplus/10.1257/jep.27.3.79 . Corak, “Do Poor Children Become Poor Adults? Lessons from a Cross Country Comparison of Generational Earnings Mobility,” IZA Discussion Paper No. 1993, March 2006 (see Table 1, p. 42), at ftp.iza.org/dp1993.pdf ; *A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), online at doi.org/10.1787/9789264301085-en . OECD study shows similar results to those of Corak, except for Germany, which according to the OECD study is less than the United States. See country comparisons in Figure 4.8, p. 195.
 39. Chetty et al., “Where Is the Land of Opportunity?” p. 16. See also Julia B. Isaacs, Isabel Sawhill, and Ron Haskin, *Ahead or Losing Ground: Economic Mobility in America* (Economic Mobility Project: An Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts, 2008), at pewtrusts.org/~media/legacy/uploadedfiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/reports/economic_mobility/economicmobilityinamerica.pdf . Mobility data for the U.S. and Denmark is at Figure 1, p. 40.
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5. SUCCESS ETHICS

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16. Justin Palmer, “Blake Trains Harder Than Me, but Won’t Take 200 Title: Bolt,” Reuters, November 12, 2011, available at reuters.com/article/us-athletics-bolt/blake-works-harder-than-me-but-wont-take-200-title-bolt-idUSTRE7AB0DE20111112 ; Allan Massie, “Can a Beast Ever Prevail Against a Bolt?,” *The Telegraph* , August 6, 2012, available at telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/athletics/9455910/Can-a-Beast-ever-prevail-against-a-Bolt.html .
17. This paragraph draws upon my book *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 28–29.
18. “Global Attitudes Project,” Pew Research Center, July 12, 2012: pewglobal.org/2012/07/12/chapter-4-the-casualties-faith-in-hard-work-and-capitalism .
19. Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 92–93.
20. Ibid., pp. 85–102.
21. Ibid., p. 93.
22. Ibid., p. 94.
23. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).
24. Ibid., pp. 73–74.
25. Ibid., p. 75.
26. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., “Harrison Bergeron” (1961) in Vonnegut, *Welcome to the Monkey House* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1998). See discussion in Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), pp. 155–56.

- [27.](#) Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* , p. 102.
- [28.](#) Ibid., pp. 101–2.
- [29.](#) Ibid., p. 104.
- [30.](#) For elaboration of this claim, see Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 96–103, 147–54.
- [31.](#) “Remarks by the President at a Campaign Event in Roanoke, Virginia,” July 13, 2012: obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/13/remarks-president-campaign-event-roanoke-virginia .
- [32.](#) Ibid.
- [33.](#) For another example of this view, see T. M. Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 117–32.
- [34.](#) Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* , pp. 94, 97.
- [35.](#) Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* , pp. 310–11; Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* , p. 94.
- [36.](#) For an illuminating discussion of the gap between liberal philosophy and common opinion on the role of desert, see Samuel Scheffler, “Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, and Liberalism in Philosophy and Politics,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1992), pp. 299–323.
- [37.](#) Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* , p. 98.
- [38.](#) C. A. R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956), p. 235, quoted in Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* , p. 440.
- [39.](#) N. Gregory Mankiw, “Spreading the Wealth Around: Reflections Inspired by Joe the Plumber,” *Eastern Economic Journal* 36 (2010), p. 295.
- [40.](#) Ibid.
- [41.](#) Frank Hyneman Knight, *The Ethics of Competition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), p. 46. This volume reprints Knight’s article “The Ethics of Competition,” which originally appeared in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* xxxvii (1923), pp. 579–624. On Knight generally, see the introduction to the Transaction edition by Richard Boyd.
- [42.](#) For a valuable account of Rawls’s debt to Knight, see Andrew Lister, “Markets, Desert, and Reciprocity,” *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 16 (2017), pp. 47–69.
- [43.](#) Ibid., pp. 48–49.
- [44.](#) Ibid., p. 34.
- [45.](#) Ibid., p. 38.
- [46.](#) Ibid., p. 41.
- [47.](#) Ibid., p. 47.
- [48.](#) Ibid., pp. 43–44.
- [49.](#) Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* , pp. 310–15.
- [50.](#) Ibid., p. 311.
- [51.](#) Ibid., pp. 311–12.
- [52.](#) Ibid., pp. 312–13.
- [53.](#) Ibid., p. 313.
- [54.](#) This explanation of pay differentials is similar in some respects to the letters I imagined a college might send to successful and unsuccessful applicants, explaining the grounds of their acceptance or rejection, in *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* , pp. 141–42.
- [55.](#) Scanlon seems to acknowledge the difficulty of disentangling the “right” from the “good” where attitudes toward success and failure are at stake. See Scanlon, *Why Does Inequality Matter?* , pp. 29, 32–35.
- [56.](#) Thomas Nagel, “The Policy of Preference,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2, no. 4 (Summer 1973), reprinted in Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 104.
- [57.](#) Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* , p. 102.
- [58.](#) Richard Arneson, “Rawls, Responsibility, and Distributive Justice,” in Marc Fleurbaey, Maurice Salles, and

John Weymark, eds., *Justice, Political Liberalism, and Utilitarianism: Themes from Harsanyi and Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 80.

^{59.} The term “luck egalitarianism” comes from Elizabeth Anderson. My discussion of this doctrine is indebted to her powerful critique of it. See Elizabeth S. Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?,” *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (January 1999), pp. 287–337.

^{60.} Ibid., p. 311.

^{61.} Ibid., pp. 292, 299–96. On the uninsured driver, Anderson cites Eric Rakowski, *Equal Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

^{62.} Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?,” pp. 302–11.

^{63.} See Yascha Mounk, *The Age of Responsibility: Luck, Choice, and the Welfare State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), pp. 14–21.

^{64.} Ibid.

^{65.} Ibid., pp. 308, 311.

^{66.} Ronald Dworkin, “What Is Equality? Part 2: Equality of Resources,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1981), p. 293.

^{67.} Ibid., pp. 297–98.

^{68.} As Samuel Scheffler observes, the luck egalitarian’s emphasis on the distinction between choice and circumstance tacitly assumes that “people *do* deserve the outcomes of their choices. This would imply that luck egalitarianism is committed to assigning a more fundamental role to desert than its proponents acknowledge.” Scheffler, “Justice and Desert in Liberal Theory,” *California Law Review* 88, no. 3 (May 2000), p. 967, n. 2.

^{69.} G. A. Cohen, “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice,” *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989), p. 933.

^{70.} Nagel, “The Policy of Preference,” p. 104.

^{71.} Anderson, “What Is the Point of Equality?,” p. 325.

^{72.} Joseph Fishkin argues that “there is no such thing as ‘natural’ talent or effort, unmediated by the opportunities the world has afforded us, which include the circumstances of our birth.” He challenges the idea that “genes and environment operate as separate, independent causal forces,” an idea he attributes to “the casual popular science of genetics.” Human development involves “an interaction among genetic activity, the person, and her environment” that cannot be disaggregated into “natural” and “socially produced” components, as most theories of equal opportunity presuppose. See Joseph Fishkin, *Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 83–99.

^{73.} Blair quoted in David Kynaston, “The Road to Meritocracy Is Blocked by Private Schools,” *The Guardian*, February 22, 2008.

^{74.} Tony Blair, “I Want a Meritocracy, Not Survival of the Fittest,” *Independent*, February 9, 2001: independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/i-want-a-meritocracy-not-survival-of-the-fittest-5365602.html.

^{75.} Michael Young, “Down with Meritocracy,” *The Guardian*, June 28, 2001.

^{76.} Ibid.

^{77.} Ibid.

6. THE SORTING MACHINE

^{1.} Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), pp. 21–23, 39–76, 232–36.

^{2.} Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 7.

^{3.} Ibid., p. 8.

^{4.} Ibid., pp. 5–6.

^{5.} Ibid.

^{6.} Ibid., p. 28.

^{7.} James Bryant Conant, “Education for a Classless Society: The Jeffersonian Tradition,” *The Atlantic*, May

- 1940, theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/95sep/ets/edcla.htm . Conant's quote from Turner on social mobility is from "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," *The Atlantic* , January 1903, reprinted in Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1921), p. 266.
8. On Turner being the first to use the term "social mobility," see Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995), p. 73. See also Lemann, *The Big Test* , p. 48. Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard from 1869 to 1909, used the term "social mobility" in his 1897 essay "The Function of Education in a Democratic Society," as quoted in Karabel, *The Chosen* , p. 41.
 9. Conant, "Education for a Classless Society."
 10. Ibid.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Ibid. Conant quoting Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784), edited by William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), Queries 14 and 19.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, October 28, 1813, in Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959).
 16. Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784).
 17. Ibid.
 18. Conant quoted in Lemann, *The Big Test* , p. 47. Lemann drew the quote from an unpublished book Conant wrote in the early 1940s: James Bryant Conant, *What We Are Fighting to Defend* , unpublished manuscript, in the papers of James B. Conant, Box 30, Harvard University Archives.
 19. Karabel, *The Chosen* , p. 152; Lemann, *The Big Test* , p. 59.
 20. Karabel, *The Chosen* , pp. 174, 189.
 21. Ibid., p. 188.
 22. Ibid., pp. 172, 193–97.
 23. See Andrew H. Delbanco, "What's Happening in Our Colleges: Thoughts on the New Meritocracy," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 156, no. 3 (September 2012), pp. 306–7.
 24. Andre M. Perry, "Students Need More Than an SAT Adversity Score, They Need a Boost in Wealth," *The Hechinger Report* , May 17, 2019, brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/05/17/students-need-more-than-an-sat-adversity-score-they-need-a-boost-in-wealth/ , Figure 1; Zachary A. Goldfarb, "These Four Charts Show How the SAT Favors Rich, Educated Families," *The Washington Post* , March 5, 2014, [washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/03/05/these-four-charts-show-how-the-sat-favors-the-rich-educated-families](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/03/05/these-four-charts-show-how-the-sat-favors-the-rich-educated-families/) . The College Board last published data on average SAT scores by family income in 2016. See "College-Bound Seniors, Total Group Profile Report, 2016," secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/sat/total-group-2016.pdf , Table 10.
 25. Paul Tough, *The Years That Matter Most: How College Makes or Breaks Us* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), p. 171, citing an unpublished analysis of 2017 College Board data by James Murphy, a tutor, testing consultant, and writer.
 26. Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), p. 133, citing Charles Murray, *Coming Apart* (New York: Crown Forum, 2012), p. 60, who reports that of college-bound seniors who took the SAT in 2010, 87 percent of students with scores over 700 in the math and verbal tests had a least one parent with a college degree, and 56 percent had a parent with a graduate degree. Murray states (p. 363) that these percentages are unpublished figures provided to him by the College Board. Using data from 1988 to the 1990s, Anthony P. Carnevale and Stephen J. Rose found that, of all students with SAT scores over 1300 (the top 8 percent), 66 percent come from families with high socioeconomic status (top quartile of family income and education), and only 3 percent come from those with low socioeconomic status (bottom quartile). See Carnevale and Rose, "Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admission," in Richard B. Kahlenberg, ed., *America's Untapped Resource: Low-Income Students in Higher Education* (New York: Century Foundation, 2004), p. 130, Table 3.14.
 27. Douglas Belkin, "The Legitimate World of High-End College Admissions," *The Wall Street Journal* ,

March 13, 2019, [wsj.com/articles/the-legitimate-world-of-high-end-college-admissions-11552506381](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-legitimate-world-of-high-end-college-admissions-11552506381) ; Dana Goldstein and Jack Healy, “Inside the Pricey, Totally Legal World of College Consultants,” *The New York Times* , March 13, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/03/13/us/admissions-cheating-scandal-consultants.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/us/admissions-cheating-scandal-consultants.html) ; James Wellemeyer, “Wealthy Parents Spend up to \$10,000 on SAT Prep for Their Kids,” *MarketWatch* , July 7, 2019, [marketwatch.com/story/some-wealthy-parents-are-dropping-up-to-10000-on-sat-test-prep-for-their-kids-2019-06-21](https://www.marketwatch.com/story/some-wealthy-parents-are-dropping-up-to-10000-on-sat-test-prep-for-their-kids-2019-06-21) ; Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* , pp. 128–29.

28. Tough, *The Years that Matter Most* , pp. 86–92.

29. Ibid., pp. 172–82.

30. Ibid.

31. At Princeton, for example, 56 percent of the Class of 2023 self-identify as students of color. See Princeton University Office of Communications, “Princeton Is Pleased to Offer Admission to 1,895 Students for Class of 2023,” March 28, 2019, princeton.edu/news/2019/03/28/princeton-pleased-offer-admission-1895-students-class-2023 . At Harvard, the figure for the Class of 2023 is 54 percent. See admissions statistics, Harvard College Admissions and Financial Aid, college.harvard.edu/admissions/admissions-statistics . For percentages at other Ivy League colleges, see Amy Kaplan, “A Breakdown of Admission Rates Across the Ivy League for the Class of 2023,” *The Daily Pennsylvanian* , April 1, 2019, thedp.com/article/2019/04/ivy-league-admission-rates-penn-cornell-harvard-yale-columbia-dartmouth-brown-princeton .

32. A study of the top 146 highly selective colleges and universities found that 74 percent of students came from the top quarter of the socioeconomic status scale. Carnevale and Rose, “Socioeconomic Status, Race/Ethnicity, and Selective College Admissions,” p. 106, Table 3.1. A similar study of the 91 most competitive colleges and universities found that 72 percent of students came from the top quarter. Jennifer Giancola and Richard D. Kahlenberg, “True Merit: Ensuring Our Brightest Students Have Access to Our Best Colleges and Universities,” Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, January 2016, Figure 1, jkcf.org/research/true-merit-ensuring-our-brightest-students-have-access-to-our-best-colleges-and-universities .

33. Raj Chetty, John N. Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan, “Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility,” NBER Working Paper No. 23618, July 2017, p. 1, opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/coll_mrc_paper.pdf . See also “Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours,” *The New York Times* , January 18, 2017, [nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html) . The *New York Times* online interactive feature draws on data from the Chetty study to show the economic profile for each of two thousand colleges. For Yale, see [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/yale-university](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/yale-university) ; for Princeton, see [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/princeton-university](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/princeton-university) .

34. Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Card,” p. 1. College enrollment percentages by income status are displayed at [nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/18/upshot/some-colleges-have-more-students-from-the-top-1-percent-than-the-bottom-60.html) .

35. Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen* , p. 547.

36. Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards,” and “Mobility Report Cards,” Executive Summary, opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/coll_mrc_summary.pdf .

37. Ibid. For Harvard and Princeton mobility rates, see [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/harvard-university](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/harvard-university) , [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/princeton-university](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/princeton-university) .

38. Ibid. For University of Michigan and University of Virginia mobility rates, see [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-michigan-ann-arbor](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-michigan-ann-arbor) , [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-virginia](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/university-of-virginia) .

39. Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards,” Table IV; Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards,” Executive Summary, opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/coll_mrc_summary.pdf .

40. Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards,” Table II.

41. The percentage of students at each college who move up at least two quintiles is presented in the *New York Times* online interactive feature based on data from Chetty et al. For example, at Harvard, 11 percent of students move up two quintiles; at Yale, 10 percent; and at Princeton, 8.7 percent. See [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/harvard-university](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/harvard-university) ; the “overall mobility index” for each college shows the likelihood of moving up two or more income quintiles.

42. On legacy admissions generally, see William G. Bowen, Martin A. Kurzweil, and Eugene M. Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 103–8, 167–71; Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, pp. 266–72, 283, 359–63, 506, 550–51; Daniel Golden, *The Price of Admission* (New York: Broadway Books, 2006), pp. 117–44. The estimate of “six times as likely” is reported in Daniel Golden, “How Wealthy Families Manipulate Admissions at Elite Universities,” *Town & Country*, November 21, 2016, townandcountrymag.com/society/money-and-power/news/a8718/daniel-golden-college-admission. The figure on Harvard legacy admissions is from data made public in a 2018 lawsuit, reported in Peter Arcidiacono, Josh Kinsler, and Tyler Ransom, “Legacy and Athlete Preferences at Harvard,” December 6, 2019, pp. 14 and 40 (Table 1), public.econ.duke.edu/~psarcidi/legacyathlete.pdf; and Delano R. Franklin and Samuel W. Zwickel, “Legacy Admit Rate Five Times That of Non-Legacies, Court Docs Show,” *The Harvard Crimson*, June 20, 2018, thecrimson.com/article/2018/6/20/admissions-docs-legacy.
43. Daniel Golden, “Many Colleges Bend Rules to Admit Rich Applicants,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 20, 2003, online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/golden2.htm; see also Golden, *The Price of Admission*, pp. 51–82.
44. Documents produced during the 2018 lawsuit challenging Harvard’s use of affirmative action showed that more than 10 percent of Harvard’s Class of 2019 was admitted from a list of applicants with donor connections maintained by Harvard administrators. For the six years from the Class of 2014 through the Class of 2019, 9.34 percent of admitted students came from the donor affiliated list. Of these students, 42 percent were accepted, about seven times the overall Harvard acceptant rate during this period. Delano R. Franklin and Samuel W. Zwickel, “In Admissions, Harvard Favors Those Who Fund It, Internal Emails Show,” *The Harvard Crimson*, October 18, 2018, thecrimson.com/article/2018/10/18/day-three-harvard-admissions-trial. The overall Harvard acceptance rate during this period was about 6 percent; see Daphne C. Thompson, “Harvard Acceptance Rate Will Continue to Drop, Experts Say,” *The Harvard Crimson*, April 16, 2015, thecrimson.com/article/2015/4/16/admissions-downward-trend-experts.
45. Golden, *The Price of Admission*, pp. 147–76.
46. David Leonhardt, “The Admissions Scandal Is Really a Sports Scandal,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2019, nytimes.com/2019/03/13/opinion/college-sports-bribery-admissions.html; Katherine Hatfield, “Let’s Lose the Directors’ Cup: A Call to End Athletic Recruitment,” *The Williams Record*, November 20, 2019, williamsrecord.com/2019/11/lets-lose-the-directors-cup-a-call-to-end-athletic-recruitment.
47. Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, pp. 105–6 (Table 5.1).
48. Tough, *The Years That Matter Most*, pp. 172–82.
49. Daniel Golden, “Bill Would Make Colleges Report Legacies and Early Admissions,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2003, online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/golden9.htm; Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019), pp. 276–77.
50. See Lemann, *The Big Test*, p. 47, and the passage quoted above (note 18) from an unpublished book Conant wrote in the early 1940s: James Bryant Conant, *What We Are Fighting to Defend*, unpublished manuscript, in the papers of James B. Conant, Box 30, Harvard University Archives.
51. John W. Gardner, *Excellence: Can We Be Equal and Excellent Too?* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), pp. 33, 35–36.
52. Ibid., pp. 65–66.
53. Ibid., pp. 71–72.
54. Ibid., pp. 80–81.
55. Ibid., p. 82.
56. Brewster quoted in Geoffrey Kabaservice, “The Birth of a New Institution,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, December 1999, archives.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/99_12/admissions.html.
57. Caroline M. Hoxby, “The Changing Selectivity of American Colleges,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 23, no. 4 (Fall 2009), pp. 95–118.
58. Ibid. On the high acceptance rates at most colleges, see Drew Desilver, “A Majority of U.S. Colleges Admit Most Students Who Apply,” Pew Research Center, April 9, 2019, pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/09/a-majority-of-u-s-colleges-admit-most-students-who-apply/; Alia Wong, “College-Admissions Hysteria Is Not the Norm,” *The Atlantic*, April 10, 2019, theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/04/harvard-uchicago-elite-colleges-are-anomaly/586627.

59. The Stanford admissions rate in 1972 was 32 percent. See Doyle McManus, "Report Shows Admission Preference," *Stanford Daily*, October 23, 1973, archives.stanforddaily.com/1973/10/23?page=1§ion=MODSMD_ARTICLE4#article; Camryn Pak, "Stanford Admit Rate Falls to Record-Low 4.34% for class of 2023," *Stanford Daily*, December 18, 2019, stanforddaily.com/2019/12/17/stanford-admit-rate-falls-to-record-low-4-34-for-class-of-2023/; Johns Hopkins 1988 acceptance rate is from Jeffrey J. Selingo, "The Science Behind Selective Colleges," *The Washington Post*, October 13, 2017, [washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/10/13/the-science-behind-selective-colleges/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2017/10/13/the-science-behind-selective-colleges/); Meagan Peoples, "University Admits 2,309 Students for the Class of 2023," *Johns Hopkins News-Letter*, March 16, 2019, jhunewsletter.com/article/2019/03/university-admits-2309-students-for-the-class-of-2023; University of Chicago 1993 acceptance rate is from Dennis Rodkin, "College Comeback: The University of Chicago Finds Its Groove," *Chicago Magazine*, March 16, 2001, chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/March-2011/College-Comeback-The-University-of-Chicago-Finds-Its-Groove/; Justin Smith, "Acceptance Rate Drops to Record Low 5.9 Percent for Class of 2023," *The Chicago Maroon*, April 1, 2019, chicagomaroon.com/article/2019/4/1/uchicago-acceptance-rate-drops-record-low.
60. Drew Desilver, "A Majority of U.S. Colleges Admit Most Students Who Apply," Pew Research Center.
61. Hoxby, "The Changing Selectivity of American Colleges."
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