

Extended Commentary:

Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Inequality in Higher Education

In March 2019, the largest college-university admissions cheating scandal in US history hit the news. As a result of a law enforcement investigation called Operation Varsity Blues (OVB), more than fifty wealthy parents were charged with paying over \$25 million between 2011 and 2018 to William “Rick” Singer to help their children fake their way into elite institutions of their choice. While the bulk of the offending parents included members of the business elite, the most high-profile names were actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman.¹

The schemes OVB targeted included a variety of transgressions designed to get under-qualified children of wealthy parents into highly competitive colleges and universities. These included the hiring of a testing surrogate to take entrance exams for the applicants, bribing exam administrators to inflate test scores, and falsification of the need for accommodations normally reserved for students with learning disabilities, which allowed the applicants extra time to take the exams. In addition, the schemes involved bribery of coaches and administrators to give them preference as athletes recruited for sports they did not play, with some parents fraudulently photoshopping their children into athletic competitions. On top of all this, the payments were funneled through a fake nonprofit that Singer had created and were written off as tax deductions by the parents.

The OVB scams were illegal, but what is perhaps more significant are the ways in which the legalized privileged of the wealthy amounts to an affirmative action program of sorts that gives students from these families an unfair advantage over less privileged students—calling into question the notion that our educational system and its impact on economic opportunities is based on merit rather than on class background or social status.

Privilege and Meritocracy

Besides cheating, in Singer's terms, there are two ways of gaining admission to top-tier colleges and universities. The "front door" is based on the merit of the applicants; the "back door" is based on donating substantial sums of money. Since the latter is no guarantee of acceptance—there is no explicit quid pro quo—it is perfectly legal, but few children of large donors are denied admission. Legal as well are expensive test preparation services, now a multimillion dollar industry, as well as privileged cultural experiences such as travel, music lessons, and opportunities to develop skills in cost-intensive sports that enhance students' personal profiles. Of course, the high price of tuition means that less privileged students cannot afford to attend these educational institutions—without substantial financial assistance and/or accumulating large amounts of debt—even if they are admitted.²

Another legal way by which privileged students gain an advantage is through their parents' ability to purchase homes in affluent neighborhoods, where property taxes fund public schools with far more educational resources than in less privileged areas. Robert Reich characterizes so-called public schools in many wealthy communities as de facto private schools "whose tuition is hidden away in the purchase price of upscale homes ... and in the corresponding property taxes."³ Moreover, about 12 percent of the more than 14,000 school districts in the United States receive supplemental funding through private foundations set up for parents to make tax-deductible contributions to their children's schools. When cash-rich public schools are not enough for the tastes of these families, there is always the elite private school, which Matthew Stewart calls the "mother lode of all affirmative-action programs."⁴ These schools cost many thousands of dollars in tuition each year and come with the expectation that parents will contribute thousands more during the annual fund drives.⁵

Economic Inequality and the New Aristocracy

The United States is currently marked by a degree of inequality not seen since the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century. After the Occupy Wall Street movement coined the slogan “We are the 99%” in 2011, the public has become more aware of the immense wealth that the top 1 percent has accumulated over the last four decades.⁶ Later, attention also was drawn to the top 0.1 percent, the group that has garnered the largest share of the gains.

Of course, benchmarks such as the 1 percent or the 0.1 percent are somewhat arbitrary ways of dividing up the population to illustrate the severity of economic inequality, which is wider in the United States than in any other developed country in the world.⁷ If we’re going to make comparisons between economic brackets, we have to start somewhere, but it’s also important to consider more fine-grade differentials. Chris Hayes, for example, notes that the income differential between the bottom 99 percent and the top 1 percent is similar to the differential between the top 0.99 percent and the top 0.01 percent, which is similar to the gap between the top 0.0099 percent and the top 0.0001 percent.⁸ At the top of the heap, three billionaires alone —Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett—hold a combined wealth that is worth more than the total wealth owned by the entire *bottom half* of the US population.⁹

On the other hand, Stewart asks us to take a step back from these uppermost brackets and look at the top 9.9 percent, because not everyone lost ground while the 0.1+ percent got richer. Rather, only those in the *bottom 90 percent* lost ground. At its peak, in the mid-1980s, the bottom 90 percent accounted for 35 percent of the nation’s wealth; three decades later, that share “had fallen 12 points—exactly as much as the wealth of the 0.1 percent rose.”¹⁰ At the same time, the top 9.9 percent has “held on to its share of ... [the] economic pie” and continues to own “substantially more wealth than do the other two [groups] combined.”

Stewart calls the top 9.9 percent the “new aristocracy.” They are the winners in the global economy—the professional, knowledge, and cultural elites who have the talent and skills to succeed in the advanced technological society that has left so many workers behind. We tell ourselves—or at least they tell themselves—that they are the cream of the crop, the ones who have risen to the top in a meritocratic system that justifiably rewards the best and the brightest. Still, in this group as well there is a big difference between the bottom and top of the 9.9 percent bracket. In 2016, for instance, it took \$1.2 million in net assets (including real estate) to get into the top 9.9 percent, \$2.4 million to reach the group’s median, and \$10 million to get into the 0.9 percent.¹¹

This group is more racially diverse than the old White Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment that dominated elite institutions of higher education in the past, but is still mostly White. About 2 percent are African American, 2.4 percent are Hispanic, and 9 percent are Asian or multiracial.¹² The good news is that there are no formal legal barriers to entry. The old barriers of inherited wealth and racial privilege have been removed, but new barriers have been put in place, which brings us back to where we began, the elite schools that are the ticket to fortune and fame. Here are a few examples.

One study of thirty-eight elite colleges and universities found that these schools admitted more students from families in the top 1 percent of the population than students from families in the bottom 60 percent (who make less than \$65,000 a year).¹³ Other data indicate that while less than 2 percent of the nation’s students attend expensive *pre-college* private schools, about a quarter or more of students admitted to the Ivy League institutions of the northeast attended one of these schools.¹⁴ Additionally, more than half of all Black students admitted to elite colleges and universities attended one of the top pre-college schools. If they cannot afford the tuition, there are slots allocated for diversity scholarships, which help administrators and White parents

feel like they are doing their part to mitigate the savage inequalities of today's hypercompetitive society. Meanwhile, the public schools are failing all too many Black students and are in dire need of more resources to do something about it.

There also are consequences for minority students who attend these elite pre-college institutions. According to Caitlin Flanagan, the experiences for Black students commonly include being exposed to “the expectation that Black kids would be excellent athletes (and possible weaker students); insulting assumptions about Black students’ family backgrounds; teachers repeatedly confusing the names of Black students; other students constantly reaching out and touching Black girls’ hair; and non-Black students using the N-word.”¹⁵ According to one student, “there’s always the preface of ‘Okay, we’re now welcoming you to the majority, where you should be’—with the white people, so to speak. ... Inherently within that, you are sacrificing who you are as a person ... sacrificing my Blackness.”

In this regard, Jamilah Lemieux thinks that most Black children would benefit from going to a “good Black school” rather than being a token in a predominately White school.¹⁶ But what is a good Black school? For Lemieux, a good Black school may not be at the top of the pre-college school rankings, but it is “one that centers the experiences and cultures of Black children and is staffed primarily by Black teachers and administrators who are both invested in the education of Black children and have the skills to teach them effectively.” Success is not measured by how many graduates go on to elite colleges and universities but rather to simply being “able to get students prepared to graduate in the first place. ... Their efforts may never be enough for most of these schools to outrank other institutions with more financial resources ... [but] disparities in academic achievement and discipline suggest that the vast majority of non-Black educators ... lack an understanding of Black history, Black identity, and Black culture that is comprehensive enough to serve our children well.”

The Dysfunctions of Meritocracy

Michael Young, a Labour Party member of the British Parliament, is credited with coining the term meritocracy in his 1958 book *The Rise of Meritocracy*, which he intended as a warning about what might happen if “those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others.”¹⁷ In this type of system, in theory, the sorting of students into occupational positions of skill, responsibility, and authority is no longer a matter of inherited wealth and privileged social status but of merit. Merit, in turn, is to be evaluated through a rigorous system of objective testing and evaluation.

According to proponents, meritocracy puts everyone on an equal playing field and allows students to receive an education that is commensurate with their intellectual acumen and work ethic. These are the individuals who are needed to perform the complicated and difficult tasks of our society, and they deserve to be financially rewarded in proportion to their contributions. This is the theory, but in practice meritocracy turns out to be something else. As we have seen, the rules of the game are not fair, because they give some families an advantage over others in assuring that their children succeed.

One indication that meritocracy as currently practiced in the United States is not working is the decline in social mobility—of children achieving a higher socioeconomic status than their parents—since the 1980s.¹⁸ In other words, it has become harder for people on the bottom of the economic ladder to climb upward. As Elizabeth Anderson observes in her review of Michael Sandel’s *The Tyranny of Merit*, “The top tier of workers has turned itself into a self-reproducing elite, flattering itself as a natural aristocracy superior to the losers in the race to succeed. And it has recruited the institutions of higher education—to perform the task of sorting, ranking, and credentialing individuals to feed the meritocratic job-allocation machine.”¹⁹

Families and students caught up in this hypercompetitive system feel an immense pressure to succeed. Knowing that “the system can be gamed,” notes Stewart, their “ability to game the system has become the new test of merit.”²⁰ Helicopter parents may be too gentle a term to describe the relentless bulldozing of parents trying to use their class privilege to make a path for their children so they can advance and not fall behind. As Anderson observes:

Students feel that they must pile on credentials, grub for grades, and even cheat to succeed. ... Ruthless competition contributes to rising rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses among college students. By the time they finally make it into the top jobs, many are burned out and cynical. Seeing themselves as having earned their success through their own hard work and neglecting the enormous socioeconomic advantages and supports they enjoyed along the way, they feel entitled to grab all they can for themselves.²¹

There is no doubt considerable snobbery—which is another way of describing arrogance and hubris—that accompanies this process. People who enjoy success feel entitled to their success because they believe they are the smartest, part of the cognitive elite,²² and they believe this with the conviction, writes Hayes, that “smartness is rankable and that the hierarchy of intelligence, like the hierarchy of wealth, never plateaus.”²³ Thus we have Jeffrey Rosen writing an article in *The New Republic* titled “The Case Against Sotomayor” in which he cites judicial clerks who had served on the Second Circuit Court with Sonia Sotomayor prior to her nomination by Barack Obama to the US Supreme Court. As one clerk said, Sotomayor is “an able lawyer ... [but] not that smart.” Another said, “Her opinions, though competent, are viewed ... as not especially clean or tight, and sometimes misses the forest for the trees.” Similarly, liberal law Harvard law professor Lawrence Tribe wrote a letter to Obama in which he opined on potential nominees and wrote that Elena Kagan was “more powerful intellectually than Sotomayor” and “even smarter” than Diane Wood. But what, Hayes asks, does it mean to assume that “intelligence is a single ordinal quality, like height.”

In the same way that Yao Ming is taller than Michael Jordan, who is taller than Danny DeVito, Elena Kagan is smarter than Diane Wood, who is smarter than Sonia Sotomayor. And yet this very notion of a single, clear, and discernible ranking of intelligence is undermined by decades of research in cognitive psychology. ... Rosen and Tribe not only assume that this ordinal ranking exists, but that it is readily apparent to anyone who reads a few writing samples or talks to a few ex-colleagues. ... While smartness is necessary for competent elites, it is far from sufficient: wisdom, judgment, empathy, and ethical rigor are all as important, even if those traits are far less valued. ... Extreme intelligence without the other qualities ... can be extremely destructive. But empathy does not impress in the same way. Smartness dazzles and ... intimidates.²⁴

In government, this also means that people in power may lose touch with average working people, which impedes their “ability to govern ... for the maximal benefit of all.”

More broadly, we must ask ourselves, what have we gotten from this meritocratic system that benefits the common good? For one, we have a financial industry that is in large part dysfunctional for anything other than the industry itself. Stewart reports that careers in finance are among the top four careers of more than half of all Ivy League graduates, the others being management consulting, medicine, and law.²⁵ In her ethnography of Wall Street bankers, Karen Ho found “not only that most bankers came from a few elite institutions, but also that most undergraduates ... assumed that the only ‘suitable’ destination for life ... was first investment banking and second management consulting.”²⁶ One investment bank executive told her, “We are ... the smartest people in the world.” But people who work at hedge funds think they are even smarter. One analyst referred to most people on Wall Street as “developmentally disabled ... second-class intellects.”

To be sure, we need a financial industry to help provide capital for investment into productive economic activity and to help people save money for retirement. But to a large extent, according to Mariana Mazzucato, “The financial sector has ... been financing itself rather than the real economy. Most finance money goes back into finance, insurance, and real estate rather than productive uses. ... Only about a fifth goes into ... companies that want to innovate, deliver

desperately needed infrastructure improvements, or retrofit industry to mitigate climate change.”²⁷ In this sector of the economy, writes Anderson, “fortunes are made from high-frequency trading, speculating on derivatives, and other kinds of financial engineering ... that merely extract wealth from others or destabilize the economy.”²⁸ Indeed, in 2008-2009, the industry showed itself capable of bringing the country to economic collapse and then harnessing the levers of government to bail them out without suffering any punitive consequences for their reckless and at times illegal conduct.²⁹ This is the system our meritocracy has wrought.

The Politics of Meritocracy

Let us be clear, it is entirely possible to get a good college education without going to an elite institution. In general, college is a prudent investment for most people, and graduates can expect to earn, on average, an annual income of about 75 percent more than high school graduates.³⁰ Of course, most of these graduates do not go on to an elite school, which are but a small fraction of the some 5,300 institutions of higher education in the United States. Moreover, the prestige of higher status schools does not necessarily mean that students get a better education than in lesser status schools. In the former, undergraduates may be taught by teaching assistants, not the top-flight research professors who don’t particularly like undergraduate teaching. In the latter, students are more likely to be taught by professors who are committed teachers who work to perfect their craft. Nonetheless, a large part of the occupational value of the higher status schools is not the quality of the education per se but the symbolism of the diploma and the social networks to which they enable access.

Beyond this, there are political implications with respect to class-based alignments in the Democratic and Republican parties that are related to meritocratic inequality. One of the features of the British meritocracy that was of concern to Michael Young was that it would deprive the working class of potential leaders to advance working-class interests.³¹ At the same time, one of

the ironies of our current politics over the last few decades is the movement of White working class men without college degrees from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. In the period between the Second World War and the 1960s, this group had the advantage of employment in unionized manufacturing jobs (and the GI Bill), which enabled them to achieve middle-class status for their families in terms of wages, benefits, and home ownership, all with just one parent in two-parent households in the workforce. These workers, whom Karl Marx called the proletariat, had been aligned with the Democratic Party since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, but this alliance started to wane in the 1960s when Democrats lent their support to demands for equality of opportunity for people of all races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. The ascendancy of these previously marginalized groups threatened to undermine the relative advantages of working-class White men and enhanced the potential for divergent interests and political conflict.³²

As Democrats became aligned with people of color, women, and sexual minorities, they began to look elsewhere to build an electoral coalition that did not rely on working-class White men. The new class of college-educated voters who have been successful in the new economy is one group that increasingly lent its support. Longitudinal data from presidential elections show a growing polarization by which the Democratic Party has gained support from college-educated voters and the Republican Party has gained support from non-college educated voters.³³ In the 2016 presidential election, for example, David Brooks reports that "Hillary Clinton won the 50 most-educated counties by an average of 26 points—while losing the 50 least-educated counties by an average of 31 points."³⁴ Stewart adds that counties supporting "Clinton represented an astonishing 64 percent of the GDP, while Trump counties accounted for a mere 36 percent. ... The median home value in Clinton counties was \$250,000, while the median in Trump counties was \$154,000."³⁵

In this political context, education status is not a measure of intelligence or knowledge acquisition but a proxy for geography, cultural orientation, and different life experiences. College-educated people are more likely to live in urban areas and are more cosmopolitan in their outlook and more embracing of multiculturalism and diversity than their non-college counterparts.³⁶ They are by no means a homogenous group in terms of income and wealth, and at the upper end they include Stewart's "new aristocracy," a group that is protective of its privilege and complicit with the system of concentrated wealth that is not serving the broader public good. The dilemma for the Democratic Party is that it has gotten a little too cozy with this group, including Wall Street financiers, and has been complicit in the bipartisan deregulation of the financial industry and failure to advance a serious agenda for working people.³⁷ The coronavirus pandemic and its associated economic malaise have forced the Democrats, under the leadership of Joe Biden, to change course and offer a bold program for addressing the crises. However, it remains to be seen if this effort can be sustained and how it will pan out politically.

Not surprisingly, resentment of the college-educated class has become part of the cultural outlook of those who do not benefit from the current meritocratic system. In her study of rural Wisconsin, for instance, Katherine Cramer found people expressing animosity toward "university types" who they characterize as sitting behind a desk all day, hardly appearing in the classroom, having summers off, and drawing lucrative salaries paid for by hardworking taxpayers.³⁸ In Wisconsin, this stereotype of university employees tends to conflate the state's flagship campus at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with what goes on at the twenty-five other University of Wisconsin System campuses, where teaching loads are higher and salaries are lower. At the same time, the resentful are not wrong in their assessment of the elitism of many UW-Madison faculty and administrators, who may feel superior to and look down upon both rural people and the personnel at the other campuses.

It is not just people who live in rural areas who hold this view, however. Private sector workers who live in small and medium-sized cities and even in suburbs of larger cities also resent having to subsidize public workers in general and educators in particular, and they tend to support the diversion of educational tax dollars to pre-college private schools, some religious in nature, rather than investing further in public schools.³⁹ The danger of this view is that it undermines the notion that public education is not a private investment but a public good, and that only if students are educated “in common,” as Horace Mann would remind us, can we truly have a democratic republic.⁴⁰

What has the Democratic Party offered instead? For one, there is the philosophy underlying the Obama administration’s “Race to the Top” initiative aimed at reforming K-12 education by giving grants to states and local schools for policies that improve the operation of meritocracy through the adoption of common standards and performance evaluations of schools, teachers, administrators, and students. While the “race to the top” slogan may have been directed at the schools themselves, it also implies a view of students as in a relentless race for meritocratic success, which is often a zero-sum game that leaves many behind.⁴¹

Additionally, one of the underlying critiques of the current meritocratic system is that it entails a dysfunctional allocation of rewards for actual contributions to society. As previously noted, the financial industry is one area in which reward vastly exceeds contribution and even harms the broader society. Similarly, the gap between executive compensation and worker compensation in large corporations has widened over the last few decades—all in the context of downsizing companies, squeezing the compensation of remaining workers, and making decisions geared to short-term gain in shareholder returns rather than to the long-term benefit of workers and the broader society.⁴²

Michael Sandel, among others, suggests the need to rethink the meritocratic assumption that the cream of the crop always rises to the top and that income and wealth are good indicators of an individual's contribution to society.⁴³ In Anderson's words, we need to "dislodge the morally obnoxious pretense that the market offers a neutral way to value people's contributions."⁴⁴ What is needed instead is a cultural ethos of "contributive justice" by which people are appreciated and recognized for the work they contribute to the common good.⁴⁵ This is the essence of Senator Sherrod Brown's message of the "dignity of work" and OXFAM International's campaign of "reward work, not wealth," a theme that has been picked up by the Biden administration.⁴⁶ However, achieving this objective will require tax reforms that eliminate the favorable treatment that is currently given to income from investment capital relative to income from wages.

With regards to education, four years of undergraduate college and especially of graduate education are not for everyone. People should have the opportunity to acquire training and skills through apprenticeships and two-year programs that enable them to obtain stable employment with sufficient compensation in terms of wages and benefits to raise their families, educate their children, and achieve financial security in retirement.⁴⁷

Importantly, the rising costs of higher education overall will need to be addressed. For starters, at a minimum, two years of post-high school education at an accredited public school should be viewed as an extension of K-12 public school and be free of charge to students.⁴⁸ Additionally, factors that are increasing the costs of four-year colleges and universities need to be scrutinized. For one, the decline in state funding has shifted more of the financial burden to students and their families.⁴⁹ Rising costs of administration and other noninstructional activities has also made college more expensive, with one study of public and private institutions finding that the percent of total funds devoted to classroom instruction declined from 41 percent in 1980-

1981 to 29 percent in 2014-2015.⁵⁰ Expanded staff required for federal regulatory compliance, career counseling, health services, and a more diverse student body explain part of the increase. Implicated as well are competition between institutions for the best athletic programs, state-of-the-art facilities, and other amenities designed to enhance the “college experience.”⁵¹

Beyond the question of costs, rethinking the place of meritocracy in higher education will require fundamental reforms to the broader political economy. As Anderson observes, “policies that were originally designed for heterosexual working-class white men can’t serve the working class as it is constituted today.”⁵² Today’s workforce has to contend with “the feminization of poverty, the lack of paid family leave and affordable dependent care, and our failure to honor dependent-care labor as an essential contribution to the common good.” It is not enough to take economic privilege out of the educational “sorting-and-ranking game” or “repudiate the condescension of meritocratic liberals.” We need to rein in the corporate model of extracting value from labor without commensurate compensation, disempowering unions, and turning secure work into gig work. In other words, we need to direct “more of our attention not only to meritocracy but to capitalism itself.”

ENDNOTES

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