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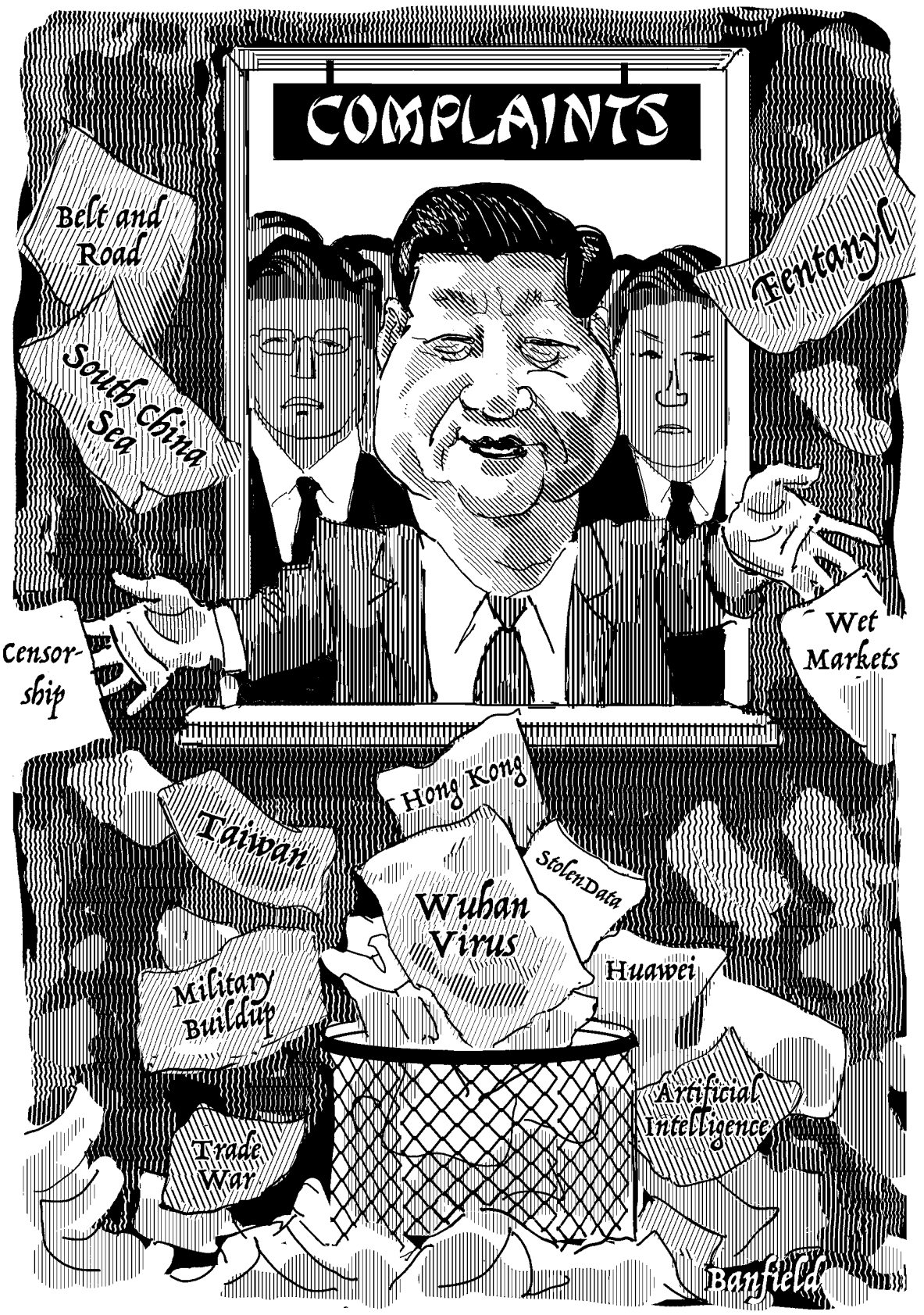

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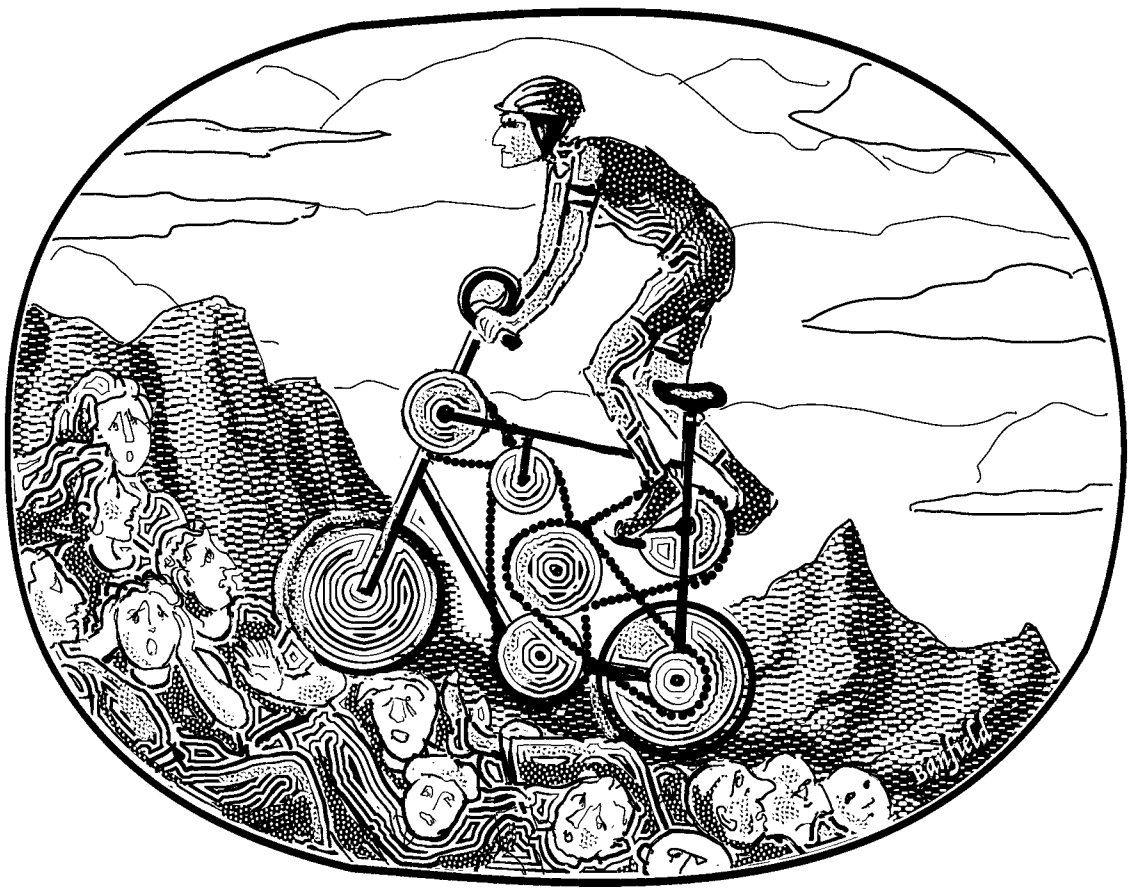
Book Review by Amy L. Wax

Merit and Misery

The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite, by Daniel Markovits. Penguin Books, 448 pages, $30



What's the matter with meritocracy? Just about everything, argues Professor Daniel Markovits of Yale Law School in *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. The competitive process by which our society has come to assign tasks, rewards, and esteem is a "colossal wreck" that "serves no one's interests." It causes "near-universal harm" by inflicting a host of ills on winners, losers, and the shrinking ranks of everyone in between.

The book does not lack for useful strengths. It puts forth an astute and mostly accurate picture of our country's evolution from mid-20th-century unity to our present fault lines. Markovits plausibly assigns a pivotal role to the rapid proliferation of college graduates, who made up less than 10% of the population before World War II and now constitute more than 25% (with another 25% attending college without obtaining a degree). This rise in the supply of highly educated people decisively influenced the direction of the economy by "induc[ing] the innovations that would make their skills valuable and raise the wage premium that they enjoy." The new "glossy jobs" in finance, the media, business, public management, and the professions delivered higher pay, interesting challenges, and job advancement to workers equipped for complexity and flexible thinking. Simultaneously, secure "middle-skill" opportunities, especially in manufacturing, dwindled. Workers without a bachelor's degree made do with "gloomy jobs"—humdrum, routinized, lower-paying, and less prestigious.

Unlike the old hereditary aristocracy, our new educated elites are expected to work hard and put in long hours to attain and maintain their glossy jobs. The less educated, in contrast, are relatively underemployed. Another hallmark of the status quo is that the winners and losers in the new economy appear to deserve their fate and so to lack legitimate grounds for dissatisfaction or complaint. But in fact, according to Markovits, there are many perfectly legitimate reasons to be disgruntled.

Two of those reasons take pride of place in the book's critique. First, meritocracy makes people miserable. Meritocratically trained and selected elites now live anxious, inauthentic, pressured lives, caught in a status-maintaining rat race. They are forced to forgo the cultivation of authentic selves and passions in exchange for long hours and unceasing effort. The less educated suffer as well, but for different reasons: insecure jobs, flat wages, and enforced periods of idleness lead to demoralization and diminished agency. Although primarily motivated by economic grievances, the less well-educated also resent being disdained for their lack of sophistication and credentials. Their frustration at elites' outsized power over institutions and political discourse turns them toward populism and personal self-destruction.

Markovits's second cause for complaint is that our current system is unfair and unjust. By economically overvaluing intellectual ability and workaholism, the meritocracy accentuates inequalities and slows mobility in ways that appear inevitable and legitimate, but are neither. The British sociologist Michael Young already predicted in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) that ever-more extensive and rigorous merit-based incentives would generate a "massive, stable, and complete social stratification by ability." The more effectively the meritocracy operated over generations, Young argued, the more mobility would slow. According to Markovits, that prophecy has largely been fulfilled. Educated elites have figured out how to perpetuate and pass down privilege to their children by throwing money into expensive schooling and exclusive neighborhoods. They live among themselves and wall themselves off from the less educated and less fortunate. As a result, even if the system appears to offer ample and equal opportunity, in reality those born at the top have a much greater chance of staying there. According to Markovits, none of this is necessary, let alone inevitable. He repeatedly relies on the assertion that our meritocratic system of values is simply a matter of convention—a "social construction" that we could decide to deconstruct. It is time for something entirely different and better for everyone.

The Meritocracy Trap accurately identifies many unfortunate shortcomings of meritocracy and shows the difficulty of addressing them. But the book never quite persuades. To begin with, Markovits largely ignores the extensive history of nuanced philosophical debate on distributive justice and "luck egalitarianism," which attempts to distinguish the economic and social disparities that are justified from those, including the products of pure chance, that are unfair and should be eliminated. This debate has spawned a variety of conclusions and yielded no uniform consensus. At one extreme, John Rawls famously suggested in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) that people deserve neither their talents, nor their willingness to put them to good use, nor the upbringing that inclines them to both. Ergo, all market rewards are arbitrary and fair game for social rearrangement. Other philosophers, like Ronald Dworkin and Robert Nozick, rejected this categorical "no desert" position and insisted that people do have some meaningful control over their life outcomes. Markovits seems to come close to Rawls's position. But he fails to defend or even cite Rawls, let alone acknowledge his detractors.

More importantly, many ordinary people—despite being well aware of meritocracy's flaws and capitalism's caprice—resist absolutism of the Rawlsian kind. Likewise, many would be skeptical of the claim that meritocracy is entirely a "social construction" which we should feel free to abandon or seriously modify. Markovits makes the rather remarkable assertion that "[p]resent-day ideals concerning justice, entitlement, and even merit are all meritocracy's offspring," implying that our basic notions of socioeconomic justice are byproducts of our arbitrary meritocratic system. In fact, it is closer to the other way around. What is optional is not necessarily arbitrary, if there are good reasons for choosing. Leaving aside abstract questions of justice and desert, our increasingly complex market systems—though they impose costs—yield obvious payoffs (and not just for "winners"). Like it or not, the economic abundance we currently enjoy, although unevenly distributed, seems increasingly dependent on meritocratic screening and job placement both in matching talent to tasks and in spurring people to do their best.

Markovits's engagement with these issues is virtually non-existent. He does implicitly acknowledge that his own outlook is not the one generally held by people of common sense. But he provides few particulars about what the consequences of altering or abandoning present practices would be, let alone how we would actually overhaul our system of selection, sorting, and rewards. He delves most deeply into the world of finance, noting that banking and lending back in the 1950s were managed mostly by armies of mid-skilled mediocrities who made localized and personalized decisions about where to lend and whom to trust. Clearly that decentralized cottage industry had its virtues, including the host of respectable and reasonably secure jobs it generated for people with fewer formal credentials and no particular distinction. But the specific gains we achieved by moving away from this system, how we might get back to it, and at what cost, are topics Markovits does not engage.

The financial sector is an easy target: it is plagued today by dubious practices, opaque manipulations, catastrophic fluctuations, and questionable economic benefits. But there's a lot more to the economy. Although Markovits devotes some attention to some other business sectors (detailing, for instance, changes in food sales and distribution), he neglects recent transformations in technology, transportation, energy, consumer products, retail, medicine, law, and the physical and biological sciences. These advances depend on and richly reward people of extraordinary skill and high intelligence, but they have also deliv-

ered widespread benefits that many of us, including non-elites, would be reluctant to forgo. Should we turn the clock back in all these areas if indeed, as Markovits seems to believe, we can? More precisely: are we better off now, on balance, than we were before the rise of our ever more ruthless, exacting, and discerning meritocratic regime? That question cannot be answered without detailed instructions on how to transform society to reduce reliance on the best and the brightest and on the devices we have developed for identifying them.

In fact, the effects of doing so will surely vary widely and will not all be felicitous. Markovits often writes as if intelligence and talent don't matter much or can be generated in abundance. But to quote Christopher Caldwell's *The Age of Entitlement*, "only a small fraction of people in any society is equipped to do brainwork." Despite wishful thinking, that fraction is not easily increased. Likewise, finding the best and the brightest—something selective universities are still pretty good at doing—requires both savvy and investment. Finally, there is the challenge of getting the most capable people (or anyone, for that matter) to put their abilities to work. Markovits never discusses what will happen if we reduce or do away with the compensation, rewards, prerogatives—and yes, privileges—that people accrue in proportion to their efforts and achievements. That people respond to incentives is an insight he simply chooses to ignore.

Ultimately, he never really defends or adequately explains the book's arresting first line: "Merit is a sham." The word "sham" is a careless misnomer, an unsuccessful attempt to deflect from the realities of human capital and the virtues of a system that takes their measure and puts them to constructive use. No one ever denied that meritocracy has shortcomings, operates imperfectly, and generates unintended and undesirable consequences. Its potential to elicit unwarranted arrogance, stoke class animosity, and destabilize settled arrangements was the cause of much handwringing well before Michael Young put pen to paper. As Helen Andrews pointed out in her superb essay, "The New Ruling Class" (*Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2016), meritocratic principles have always had their astute and thoughtful detractors. But, for better or worse, there is very little appetite for real alternatives in our society today. Duke University psychologist John Staddon recently affirmed when discussing our college admissions system, "Some kind of meritocracy is here to stay."

Markovits's repeated insistence that the meritocracy is arbitrary, "socially constructed," and costlessly defeasible goes hand in hand with his acceptance of a decidedly "blank slate" position on human ability that is popular with many elite academics. He asserts that "modern meritocracy operates not through more and more accurate testing for natural talent...but rather through more and more intensive cultivation of nurtured talent, extending longer and longer." He seems to take for granted that potential is evenly distributed, that nurture is virtually all-important, and that kids' academic prowess and work ethic can be engineered through the offices of money and intensive cultivation by families and pre-university schools. In other words, innate ability is unimportant to the meritocratic order. But he does not give us any reason to believe this is so. Is it?

Despite plentiful research and an abundance of theories, we don't really know. A complex mix of cognitive, cultural, economic, and familial factors appears to be behind the observable academic disparities between wealthy children of educated parents and their less fortunate peers. We haven't succeeded in eliminating those disparities, despite many programs directed at trying. In any event, even if nurture is as all-important as Markovits seems to assume, nothing he suggests will disrupt its effects or undermine the intensive childrearing efforts that elites currently expend. Good parenting, an example of what he terms "individually innocent choices" which end up further entrenching class divides, is also a virtuous pattern of behavior that we have reason to encourage and that we penalize at our peril.

> Are we better off now than we were before the rise of our ruthless meritocratic regime?

The Meritocracy Trap also suffers from a not-uncommon tendency to conflate two distinct features of our present dilemma: inequality (which has increased) and mobility (which has slowed). The latter trend, which obsesses Markovits, may not be reversible without aggressive and ill-advised intervention. In hierarchies like ours that rely heavily on degrees of competence, not all can improve their status. For those who do, it's a zero-sum game: the tautological fact is that only one quintile of the population can be in the top quintile. We also don't know how to alter or counter effectively the generational practices of selective mating, educational investment, and social self-segregation which keep that top quintile on top. Markovits is thus trying to change realities which are stubbornly intransigent at the expense of addressing important problems more amenable to a fix. Worries about mobility are and should be secondary to concerns about widening inequalities in average life conditions.

Charles Murray already observed in his book *Coming Apart* (2012) that the distance between baccalaureate holders and those lacking a college degree has grown steadily in terms of hours worked, neighborhood choices, marriage and parenting, political attitudes, cultural tastes, and above all prestige and social position. Markovits agrees: Stable marriages and families survive and thrive among college-degree holders, who devote "intense personal attention to raising children within these marriages." The rest of the population, meanwhile, rides a merry-go-round of volatile families and chaotic coupling. Among the college-educated, especially whites, sexual libertinism (mostly "non-practicing," in Markovits's words) and an all-consuming identity politics are *de rigueur*. Meanwhile traditional values, nationalist loyalties, and old-style individualism retain appeal among the working classes.

Although he documents these patterns in detail, he fails to engage the full range of thinking about why things have changed so much and how these important divisions emerged. There is widespread agreement that the economy has undergone significant changes that are beyond any individual's control and have devastated less-educated residents of industrial and formerly industrialized areas. Nonetheless, as a card-carrying citizen of ivyland, Markovits overemphasizes economics and underplays the cultural origins of present discontents. Considerable research, such as a 2019 paper by Israeli economist Yotam Margalit, "Economic Insecurity and the Causes of Populism, Reconsidered" (*Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Fall 2019), indicates that elite cultural hegemony has been at least as important as the economy in motivating populist sentiment, if not more so.

Markovits's treatment of these non-economic factors is superficial, rote, and brief. Though he alludes to changes in family structure, for instance, he does not address the pervasive influence of feminism, aggressive deregulation of sexual norms, denigration of marital expectations, progressive celebration of family "diversity," and contempt for manliness and masculine roles that increasingly dominate the culture. He never really gets what the deplorables are upset about and why they harbor so much "resentment" (a word he favors, fraught with implications

of displaced discontent and unwarranted petulance) toward established institutions and the educated elites. He admits, in passing, that "meritocratic parents use economic segregation to insulate themselves and their children from the disorder and disruption that have become facts of life among the less stable families that make up the rest of society." But he never delves into the nature of the "disorder and disruption," nor does he actually name the social pathologies and dysfunctional behaviors—broken families, crime-ridden neighborhoods, predatory youth, lack of public decorum, indiscipline in schools—that cause the educated classes to flee to their own upscale neighborhoods and well-run schools.

Since he does not concede the force of these cultural concerns, Markovits's lament that meritocratic rat racing interferes with the elite's quest for true selfhood and "authentic freedom" comes across as tone-deaf and parochial. He does admit at one point that less educated people, unlike elites, tend to "derive...self-worth outside of (and even in opposition to) work." But he shows little regard for ordinary people's sources of fulfillment and meaning. In *Identity* (2018), Francis Fukuyama pointed out that most people "do not have infinite depths of individuality that is theirs alone." They look not to creative self-expression but rather to "relationships with other people" and to "the norms and expectations that those others provide." Devotion to family, community, nation, duty, faith, and service give their life content and direction. Discharging honorable roles and adhering to the conventions of respectable society are their sources of fulfillment and self-respect.

It is precisely such conventions that progressive elites disparage as backward and oppressive. That such deprecation might serve to weaken and discredit important sources of community order, civic cohesion and social stability are not possibilities that Markovits even alludes to, let alone takes seriously. But he should. His failure to do so causes him to miss important potential avenues for mitigating meritocracy's worst excesses.

These avenues are much more satisfyingly explored by Howard Husock, a policy analyst at the Manhattan Institute, in *Who Killed Civil Society?: The Rise of Big Government and Decline of Bourgeois Norms*. Husock's subject is ostensibly the evolution of American poor relief and the growth of the welfare state. But in addressing those subjects he documents the process whereby private relief agencies, settlement houses, and early social workers relinquished their focus on inculcating "bourgeois values." That abandonment in turn served as a bellwether of broader cultural changes that undermined ordinary working people's struggle to craft a decent, dignified, and meaningful life despite modest economic circumstances.

As progressive ideas about what ailed the poor took root in the New Deal era, public and private philanthropy moved away from "the modeling of habits and values that lay the foundation for upward social mobility and life as a contributor to one's community." Rather than preach self-reliance, social workers adopted a therapeutic outlook that favored entitlements, government benefits, and services. In Husock's words, "the social welfare firmament turned dramatically—and permanently—away from an emphasis on character and morals as prerequisites for upward mobility." Instead, philanthropists both public and private began to emphasize the "structural" impediments to self-improvement and to depict the poor as helpless victims of circumstance. A society that once sought the *formation* of competent citizens shifted its attention to the *reformation* of people who were already suffering under the

yoke of dysfunction. By the 1960s the welfare state comprised a burgeoning roster of government programs without any moral message.

Much was lost in this transfer of responsibility from individuals to their sociopolitical circumstances. Bourgeois values initially were not seen as elitist but as "social and behavioral norms that everyone should strive to practice." They were deemed essential for anyone seeking to live a good and decent life regardless of background, economic status, or social class. Widespread consensus on this point was vital to the social cohesion of mid-century that Markovits so admires. Bourgeois values united the poor, the wealthy, and those in between under a single code of ideal conduct for all.

Time and evidence have vindicated that code. We now have data on what has been termed the "success sequence": people who graduate from high school, get married before having children, and work steadily, are rarely poor. Obeying the law also helps people avoid poverty. In other words, individual behavior matters. But with the advent of the social service welfare state, the well-off and successful stopped openly promoting these social norms among the less fortunate, even as they themselves continued to live by them. For Husock, the elites' current reluctance to endorse and inculcate high standards of conduct goes a long way toward explaining why order has degraded and social problems mushroomed in recent decades among the less educated. This cultural shift, and the resulting divergence in behavior and values between the haves and the have-nots, has rendered the lives of the lower classes increasingly lonely, chaotic, mean, and empty.

Markovits barely hints at all this, and only selectively. Although happy to turn back the clock to economic structures and practices that prevailed in the 1950s, he declines to extend his '50s nostalgia to non-economic aspects of the decade that might help mitigate the depredations he ascribes to meritocracy. He is at pains throughout to de-emphasize or avoid confronting the impact of cultural changes on lower-class malaise. This is a serious blind spot at the heart of *The Meritocracy Trap*.

That blind spot is quite apparent in the final chapter on "What Should We Do?" The narrow and tentative conclusions set forth in his finale sidestep a core question raised by Markovits's own and previous critiques: if the meritocracy is so awful, why not abolish it? Why not, for instance, accept Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia's proposal that prestigious universities do away with affirmative action and choose between top applicants by lottery? Or, as Frederick M. Hess and J. Grant Addison suggested last year in an article for *National Affairs*, "Busting the College-Industrial Complex" (Winter 2020), why not legally prohibit employers from requiring college degrees for jobs that can be done without them? Markovits also curiously neglects the formidable forces already at work in our society to dilute meritocratic principles or abolish them entirely—trends that appear to be pushing toward his desired ends. Hostility toward the apparatus of merit-based distinctions now emanates from many left-leaning strongholds of the educated elite, where the postmodern logic of identity politics has yielded efforts to revamp the education system from top to bottom. There is pressure to dumb down and politicize school curricula, eliminate programs for the gifted and talented, abolish elite exam schools, revise graduation requirements, make the SATs optional, add mandatory "diversity statements" for university hiring, and implement racial affirmative action everywhere.

Most well-heeled professionals have so far ducked the full force of these initiatives at the K-12 level by retreating to largely white neighborhoods and opting for private schools. But as identitarian politics keeps gaining steam, no one will be able to avoid discovering what it's like to do with a lot less meritocracy in the educational system, on the job, and in the economy as a whole. On these accelerating developments and their potential for undermining the meritocratic systems he so reviles, Markovits is coyly and studiously silent.

He also seems oblivious to a countervailing political trend that could serve to intensify meritocratic practices and reinforce their effects: surging immigration. He takes a few passing potshots at lower-class anti-immigrant sentiment, parroting the Left's received view that working-class antipathy is misplaced economic anxiety expressed as xenophobia. But such a reflexive stance takes little account of immigration's demography and its economic and cultural consequences. America has seen a large influx of low-skilled, hard-working Hispanics who tend to stagnate in lower socioeconomic tiers, as well as a growing contingent of ambitious Asians who, as true believers in meritocratic norms, strive diligently to accumulate credentials and climb into the upper class. By fueling inequality and feeding meritocratic frenzy, the presence of these groups accentuates the patterns Markovits laments.

Instead of giving us his take on these developments, he recommends a few half-hearted measures of startling timidity that make it difficult to take his sweeping indictment seriously or to believe that the meritocracy is as bad as he suggests. And indeed, even he has no real desire to discard it. He says he wants to exchange "meritocracy's exclusive, narrow, and profligately educated elites for an inclusive, broad, and yet still well-educated replacement." His suggestions for accomplishing this are 1) to withdraw the tax-exempt status of universities, including the most selective, unless they take half their students from the bottom two thirds of society, and 2) to mandate opening more slots at high-profile colleges that today admit only a small percentage of their applicants.

These proposed reforms are most obviously directed at a small part of the higher education landscape, albeit the one that looms largest in the minds of highly qualified law professors and other Ivy-League types. Only about 4% of college students attend institutions that admit less than a quarter of applicants. Still fewer go to the most exclusive schools, which now maintain single-digit admission rates. Doubling or tripling a miniscule number yields a miniscule number. And adjusting the tax code won't dent these schools' lavish endowments, which are regularly replenished by ample private and public funds. A massive redirection of money to other priorities would be required—Markovits doesn't advocate this, and it is not in the offing any time soon. In short, his suggested reforms amount to minor tinkering. They would do almost nothing to dismantle the basic structure of the meritocracy or its operation in the job market and the economy overall. Nor would they alter the role that the universities play in maintaining our present well-oiled merit machine.

Although passionately argued, teeming with ideas, and replete with erudite details, *The Meritocracy Trap* is hobbled by shortcomings all too emblematic of the elite class to which its author belongs. The exposition is overheated, needlessly abstract, and enamored of its own rhetoric. Meritocracy becomes an all-purpose whipping boy, blamed for every one of our present divides and discontents. The actual source of suffering alleged by lower- and middle-class people themselves—the endlessly demoralizing elite hostility toward every institution and belief that they hold dear—is brushed aside with the earnest, high-minded confidence of an academic who knows what's best for the poor. The long list of names in Daniel Markovits's acknowledgments section suggests that he had an army of brainy student assistants and colleagues, most likely drawn from the ranks of the Ivies, to help him as he wrote. Reading the book itself, one cannot help wondering whether there was a single deplorable among them.

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