

**On  
meritocracy  
and  
equality**

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**I**N 1958, the English sociologist Michael Young wrote a fable, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. It purports to be a “manuscript,” written in the year 2033, which breaks off inconclusively for reasons the “narrator” failed to comprehend. The theme is the transformation of English society, by the turn of the 21st century, owing to the victory of the principle of achievement over that of ascription (i.e., the gaining of place by assignment or inheritance). For centuries, the elite positions in the society had been held by the children of the nobility on the hereditary principle of succession. But in the nature of modern society, “the rate of social progress depend[ed] on the degree to which power is matched with intelligence.” Britain could no longer afford a ruling class without the necessary technical skills. Through the successive school-reform acts, the principle of merit slowly became established. Each man had his place in the society on the basis of “I.Q. and Effort.” By 1990 or thereabouts, all adults with an I.Q. over 125 belonged to the meritocracy.

But with that transformation came an unexpected reaction. Previously, talent had been distributed throughout the society, and each class or social group had its own natural leaders. Now all men of talent were raised into a common elite, and those below had no ex-

cuses for their failures; they bore the stigma of rejection, they were known inferiors.

By the year 2034 the Populists had revolted. Though the majority of the rebels were members of the lower classes, their leaders were high-status women, often the wives of leading scientists. Relegated during the early married years to the household because of the need to nurture high-I.Q. children, the activist women had demanded equality between the sexes—a movement that was then generalized into the demand for equality for all, and a classless society. Life was not to be ruled by “a mathematical measure,” but each person would develop his own diverse capacities for leading his own life.<sup>1</sup> The Populists won. After little more than half a century, the Meritocracy had come to an end.

Is this, too, the fate of the post-industrial society? The post-industrial society, in its logic, is a meritocracy. Differential status and differential income are based on technical skills and higher education, and few high places are open to those without such qualifications. To that extent, the post-industrial society differs from society at the turn of the 20th century. The initial change, of course, came in the professions. Seventy years or so ago, one could still “read” law in a lawyer’s office and take the bar examination without a college degree. Today, in medicine, law, accounting, and a dozen other professions, one needs a college degree and accrediting, through examination, by legally sanctioned committees of the profession before one can practice one’s art. For many years, until after World War II, business was the chief route open to an ambitious and aggressive person who wanted to strike out for himself. And the rags-to-riches ascent (or, more accurately, clerk-to-capitalist, if one follows the career of a Rockefeller, Harriman, or Carnegie) required drive and ruthlessness rather than education and skills. One can still start various kinds of small businesses (usually, now, by franchise from a larger corporation), but the expansion of such enterprises takes vastly different skills than in the past. Within the corporation, as managerial positions have become professionalized, individuals are rarely promoted from below but are chosen from the outside, with a college degree as the passport. Only in politics, where position may be achieved through the ability to recruit a following or through

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<sup>1</sup>A theoretician of the Technicians Party, Professor Eagle, had argued that marriage partners, in the national interest, should consult the intelligence register, for a high-I.Q. man who mates with a low-I.Q. woman is wasting his genes. The activist women, on the other hand, took romance as their banner and beauty as their flag, arguing that marriage should be based on attraction. Their favorite slogan was, “Beauty is achievable by all.”

patronage, is the mobility ladder relatively open to those without formal credentials.

Technical skill, in the post-industrial society, is what economists call "human capital." An "investment" in four years of college, according to initial estimates of Gary Becker, yields, over the average working life of the male graduate, an annual return of about 13 per cent. Graduation from an elite college (or elite law or business school) gives one a further advantage over graduates from "mass" or state schools. Thus the university, which once merely reflected the status system of the society, has now become the arbiter of class position. As the gatekeeper, it has gained a quasi-monopoly in determining the future stratification of the society.

Any institution which gains a quasi-monopoly power over the fate of individuals is likely, in a free society, to be subject to quick attack. Thus the Populist revolt which Michael Young foresaw several decades hence has already begun, at the very onset of the post-industrial society. One sees this today in the derogation of the I.Q. and the denunciation of theories espousing a genetic basis of intelligence; in the demand for "open admissions" to universities; in the pressure for increased numbers of blacks, women, and specific minority groups such as Puerto Ricans and Chicanos on the faculties of universities, by quotas if necessary; and in the attack on "credentials" and even schooling itself as the determinant of a man's position in society. A post-industrial society reshapes the class structure of society by creating new technical elites. The populist reaction, which has begun in the 1970's, raises the demand for greater "equality" as a defense against being excluded from that society. Thus the issue of meritocracy versus equality.

### **Genetics and intelligence**

In a meritocracy as it has traditionally been conceived, the assessment of individuals and the allocation of social rewards proceed on the assumption of a close relation between achievement and intelligence and between intelligence and its measurement on the Intelligence Quotient scale. The first question to be asked about meritocracy, therefore, is what determines intelligence. In the received opinion of social science and biology, the number of talented persons in a society, as measured by I.Q., is a limited pool; and this is reflected in the bell-shaped curve of a normal distribution of test scores in a particular age category. By the logic of a meritocracy, these high-scoring individuals, no matter where they are in the

society, should be brought to the top in order to make the best use of their talents.<sup>2</sup> This is the basis of the liberal theory of equality of opportunity and of Jefferson's belief in the "natural *aristoi*," as against an ascriptive nobility.

In these circumstances, the question of the relation of intelligence to genetic inheritance becomes very touchy. Is intelligence largely inherited? Can one raise intelligence by nurture? How does one separate native ability and drive from improvements in skill acquired through education? The average I.Q. of college graduates is 120, while that of high-school graduates is only 107. As Fritz Machlup has commented, "The greater earning capacity of college graduates, compared with high-school graduates, is, no doubt, to a large extent the result of superior native intelligence and greater ambition; it would be quite wrong to attribute all of the incremental earnings to the investment in college education."

The logic of the argument has been pushed further by the Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein. Using data assembled by Arthur Jensen of Berkeley—that 80 per cent of a person's I.Q. is inherited, while environmental factors account for only 20 per cent—Herrnstein then proceeds to extend the implication:

1. If differences in mental abilities are inherited, and
2. if success in society requires those abilities, and
3. if the environment is "equalized,"
4. then social standing will be based to a great extent on inherited differences.

Herrnstein's argument mixes up two different ideas: the assertion that in American society today occupational position is largely a function of I.Q., and the model of a meritocracy, whose stratification system *would be* determined by I.Q. Herrnstein concludes that if all persons are given an equal start, and equality of opportunity is fully realized, then heredity will become the decisive factor, since the social environment would be the same for all. And he draws a dismal picture of the new poor:

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<sup>2</sup>As Michael Young describes the rationale in his fable: "The proportion of people with I.Q.s over 130 could not be raised—the task was rather to prevent a fall—but the proportion of such people in work which called upon their full capacities was steadily raised. . . . Civilization does not depend upon the stolid mass, the *homme moyen sensuel*, but upon the creative minority, the innovator who with one stroke can save the labour of 10,000, the brilliant few who cannot look without wonder, the restless elite who have made mutation a social, as well as a biological, fact. The ranks of the scientists and technologists, the artists and the teachers, have been swelled, their education shaped to their high genetic destiny, their power for good increased. Progress is their triumph; the modern world their monument."

. . . There will be precipitated out of the mass of humanity, a low-capacity (intellectual or otherwise) residue that may be unable to master the common occupations, cannot compete for success and achievement and are most likely to be born to parents who have similarly failed.

The relation of genetics to intelligence to social-class position raises five different kinds of disputed questions: first, whether one can ever fix with any exactness the proportions of genetic inheritance and environment to intelligence (this is possible only if one assumes they are *causally* independent, i.e., that biological endowment does not influence the environment—which seems highly unlikely); second, what I.Q. tests actually measure—only particular skills or some more general underlying intelligence; third, whether I.Q. tests are “culture-bound,” including even the self-styled “culture-fair” tests, which do not deal with school-taught knowledge but ask the child to deduce relations and correlates within simple non-representational drawings; fourth, whether the social class of the parent is more important than I.Q., in determining entry into college or occupational position in the society; finally, whether these relationships—between intelligence, social class background, and other factors—have changed over time at all, and whether the society is becoming more meritocratic.<sup>3</sup>

The parties to these disputes—particularly the school reformers—tend to mix up two very different issues: one, whether our society—because of social class privilege or cultural advantage (e.g., biased I.Q. tests)—actually provides genuine equal opportunity, or a fair start for all; and two, whether a society in which genuine equality of opportunity did prevail, and a new form of income and status in-

<sup>3</sup>For a powerful argument, that society is not becoming more meritocratic, see Christopher Jencks and associates, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*. (Basic Books, 1972).

Jencks argues that there is no evidence that (a) the correlation between education and occupational status has changed over the past 80 years; (b) the correlation between I.Q. and occupational status has changed over the past 50 years; (c) the correlation between education and income has changed over the past 30 years; (d) or that the correlation between I.Q. and income has changed.

Equally, says Jencks, there is no evidence for a decline in the effects of family background either on occupational status or income, at least since World War I. The work of Stephan Thernstrom suggests mobility rates as high in the 19th century as in the 20th.

“In what sense, then,” writes Jencks, “can we say that society is becoming more meritocratic, if the importance of family background and educational credentials is constant over time?” Why should we accept Herrnstein’s thesis if (a) education is no more important, and (b) he offers not a shred of evidence that I.Q. is more important than it used to be, and (c) all the indirect evidence suggests no change in the importance of I.Q. as against other factors in determining success.” (Private communication, July 25, 1972.)

equality based on merit did result, would be desirable. In other words, is it a more genuine equality of opportunity that is wanted, or an equality of result? It is the shuttling from one to another of these positions that has marked the populist argument in recent years and created a confusion in the political demands raised in its wake.

### The credentials society

Initially, equality of opportunity was the main preoccupation. The explicit fear created by a post-industrial society is that failure to get on the educational escalator means exclusion from the privileged places in society. A meritocratic society is a "credentials society" in which certification of achievement—through the college degree, the professional examination, the license—becomes a condition of higher employment. Education thus becomes a defensive necessity, as Lester Thurow has observed (in *The Public Interest*, No. 28, Summer 1972):

As the supply of educated labor increases, individuals find that they must improve their educational level simply to defend their current income positions. If they don't, others will and they will find their current jobs no longer open to them. Education becomes a good investment not because it would raise people's incomes above what they would have been if no one had increased his education, but rather because it raises their income above what it will be if others acquire an education and they do not. *In effect, education becomes a defensive expenditure necessary to protect one's "market share."* The larger the class of educated labor and the more rapidly it grows, the more such defensive expenditures become imperative.

The logical outcome of these fears is a demand on the part of disadvantaged groups for "open admissions" to universities. The underlying rationale of this demand has been the argument that social class origin of the parent was the primary factor skewing selection in the occupational system, and that open admissions to colleges would enable minority groups to compete more fairly in the society. To that extent, open admissions is no more than the historic American principle that everyone should have a chance to better himself, no matter where he starts. It is also the optimistic American belief that giving *any* student more education will do him good. This was the logic behind the land-grant college acts; it was the long-standing practice of the public universities, outside the East, even before World War II.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>But there was usually some kind of sorting device. In the Midwestern systems,

But for some the extension of this demand has become an attack on the meritocratic principle itself. As one proponent of open admissions, Jerome Karabel writes:

As long as open admissions remains limited to a few institutions, it poses no threat to the meritocracy. Recruitment into the elite will be based not on *whether* one went to college, but on *where* one went to college. Universal open admissions, however, would destroy the close articulation between the meritocracy and the system of higher education; further, by the very act of abolishing hierarchy in admissions, it would cast doubt on hierarchy in the larger society.

That argument, however, if pushed to its logical conclusion, would mean that admission to all higher schools in the country, from Parsons College to Harvard, should be by lot. And the further conclusion, since elite schools would still be defined by the faculty, would be to make teaching assignments in the national university system a matter of lot as well.

Opening admissions is a means of widening equality of opportunity by broadening access to the university for potential students. But there is also the question of place in the university structure itself—in the faculty, staff, and administration. In their comprehensive study of the American occupational structure, Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan have shown that almost all the different minority groups have been able to achieve commensurate status, power, and economic rewards—with the exception of women and blacks. Clearly, if there is discrimination—on the basis of sex, or color, or religion, or any criterion extraneous to professional qualification—there is no genuine equality of opportunity. The second effort to widen equality has been the effort to expand the number of places for minorities in the system.

In the 1960's, the government declared it a matter of public policy that "affirmative action" had to be taken to rectify the discrimination against minorities. The policy of affirmative action was first proclaimed by President Johnson in an Executive Order in 1965. It stated that on all federal projects, or in any employment situation that used federal money, employers had to prove they had sought out qualified applicants from disadvantaged groups; had to provide

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anyone with a C average or better in high school could enter the state university, but a ruthless examination system would weed out the poorer students by the end of the first or second year. In the California system, any high school graduate could go on to higher education, but a grade tracking system put the top 10 to 15 per cent directly into the universities (e.g., Berkeley, U.C.L.A.), the next 25 per cent into the state colleges, and the remainder into junior or community colleges.

special training where necessary, if qualified applicants could not be found immediately; and had to hire preferentially from among minority-group members when their qualifications were roughly equal to those of other applicants. This program, combined with others such as Head Start and compensatory education programs, was designed to redress a historic cultural disadvantage and, quite deliberately, to give minority-group members, especially blacks, an edge in the competition for place.

In the first years of the affirmative action program, efforts were directed primarily within the skilled trades—especially the building trades, where there had been a deliberate policy of racial exclusion. In the early 1970's, the Nixon Administration, acting through the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), extended the program to universities, and each school with federal contracts was asked to provide data on the number of minority persons in each position, academic and non-academic, and to set specific goals for increasing the number of minority-group persons in each classification. Edward Shils summarized the order as follows:

Universities were informed that for each category of employee in the university it would be necessary to specify rates of remuneration and number in each category by "racial breakdown, i.e., Negro, Oriental, American Indian, Spanish-surnamed Americans. . . ." This had to be accompanied by an "'Affirmative Action Program' which specifically and succinctly identifi[es] problem areas by division, department location and job classification, and includes more specific recommendations and plans for overcoming them." The "Affirmative Action Program" must "include specific goals and objectives by division, department and job classification, including target completion dates on both long and short ranges as the particular case may indicate. Analytical provision should be made for evaluating recruitment methods and sources; the total number of candidates interviewed, job offers made, the numbers hired with the number of minority group persons interviewed, made job offers, and hired. . . ."

### **From discrimination to representation**

The initial intention of the Executive Order was to eliminate *discrimination*. But discrimination is difficult to prove, especially when the qualifications required for a job are highly specific. And the government's test became: Are the members of the minority groups to be found in employment, at every level, in numbers equal to their proportion in the population? Or, if women earned 30 per cent of the Ph.D.s, are 30 per cent of the faculty women? What this meant, in theory, was to set "*target*" figures for women and blacks. In practice,



this has meant quotas, or priorities in hiring, for persons from these groups.

What is extraordinary about this change is that, without public debate, an entirely new principle of rights has been introduced into the polity. In the nature of the practice, *the principle has changed from discrimination to "representation."* Women, blacks, and Chicanos now are to be employed, as a matter of right, in proportion to their number, and the principle of professional qualification or individual achievement is subordinated to the new ascriptive principle of corporate identity.<sup>5</sup>

The implications of this new principle are far-reaching. One can "logically" insist on quotas where the skill is homogeneous, where one person can readily substitute for another. But by focusing on group identity rather than the person, by making the mechanical equation of number of women Ph.D.s to number of positions they should hold, the government assumes that "educated labor" is "homogeneous"—that individual talent or achievement is less important than the possession of the credential. This may be true in many occupations, but not in university teaching and research, where individual merit is the singular test. Putting someone in a tenure position, which is capitalized at three quarters of a million dollars, is very different from hiring a black rather than a white plumber; simply having the degree is not necessarily the qualification for the high position.

Furthermore, quotas and preferential hiring mean that standards are bent or broken. The inescapable assumption of the ascriptive criterion as regards tenured university positions is that minority persons are less qualified and could not compete with others, even if given a sufficient margin. What effect does this have on the self-esteem of a person hired on "second-class" grounds? And what effect does it have on the quality of a university, its teaching and research and morale, if its faculties are filled on the basis of quotas?

And quite apart from their effects, the quotas themselves are no simple matter. If "representation" is to be the criterion of position,

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<sup>5</sup>In full acknowledgment of this principle, the Union Theological Seminary on June 1 voted that blacks and other minority groups would henceforth make up one third and women one half of all students, faculty, staff, and directors. (At the time, blacks made up six per cent of the 566 students and eight per cent of the 38 faculty members; women 20 per cent of the student body and eight per cent of the faculty.) "It is unrealistic" said the Seminary, "to educate people in a pluralistic society in an environment that is overwhelmingly white and male-oriented." The figure of 50 per cent women was chosen to reflect their representation in society; the one third figure for minorities as a "critical mass" to give them presence. *New York Times*, June 1, 1972.

then what is the logic of extending the principle only to women, Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, American Indians, Filipinos, Chinese, and Japanese (the categories in the HEW guideline)? Why not to Irish, Italians, Poles, and other ethnic groups? And if representation is the criterion, what is the base of representation? At one California state college, as John Bunzel reports, the Mexican-Americans asked that 20 per cent of the total work force be Chicanos, because the surrounding community is 20 per cent Mexican-American. The black students rejected this argument and said that the proper base should be the state of California, which would provide a different mix of blacks and Chicanos. Would the University of Mississippi be expected to hire 37 per cent black faculty because that is the proportion of blacks in the population of Mississippi? And would the number of Jews in most faculties in the country be reduced because the Jews are clearly overrepresented in proportion to their number?

And if ethnic and minority tests, why not religion or political beliefs as the criteria of balanced representation? Governor Reagan of California has said that conservatives are highly underrepresented in the faculties of the state universities, a fact evident when the political coloration of those faculties is compared with voting results in California; should conservatives therefore be given preference in hiring? And should particular communities be asked to support the teaching of certain subjects (or the presence of certain books in school libraries) which are repugnant to the beliefs of that community—a question first raised in the Virginia House of Burgesses and a principle restated by the Tennessee legislature in the 1920's in barring the teaching of evolution in a Fundamentalist state?

The historic irony in the demand for representation on the basis of an ascriptive principle is its complete reversal of radical and humanist values. *The liberal and radical attack on discrimination was based on its denial of a justly earned place to a person on the basis of an unjust group attribute.* That person was judged—and excluded—because he was a member of a particular group. But now it is being demanded that one must have a place primarily because one possesses a particular group attribute. The person himself has disappeared. Only attributes remain. The further irony in all this is that according to the radical critique of contemporary society, an individual is treated not as a person but as a multiple of roles that divide and fragment him and reduce him to a single dominant attribute of the major role or function he plays in society. Yet in the reversal of principle we now find that a person is to be given preference by virtue of a role, his group membership, and the person is once again

“reduced” to a single overriding attribute as the prerequisite for a place in the society. That is the logic of the demand for quotas.

## II

The issues of schooling, of income, of status have all become matters of social policy because equality has been one of the central values of the American polity. But there has never been a clear-cut meaning to equality, and the earliest form of the idea in the 17th century was quite different from the popular form it assumed by the third decade of the 19th century. Those who founded the colonies—in New England, at least, beginning with the Pilgrims of the Mayflower Compact—had an image of themselves as a “community of virtuous men who understood themselves to be under sacred restraints.” There was an equality, but in the Puritan sense of an equality of the elect. Among the Founding Fathers the idea of virtue and of election by ability (if no longer by grace) predominated. A curious blend of Roman republican imagery and Lockean thinking—since both emphasized agrarian virtues and labor—informed their language. The central theme was independence, and the conditions whereby a man could be independent. But in the very use of Lockean language there was an implicit commitment to a hierarchy—the hierarchy of intellect. Since thought was prized, it was assumed that some men “thought” better than others, were more able, more intelligent—and so formed the natural aristocracy.

The initial departure from this was symbolized by the “Jacksonian persuasion.” Thought was replaced by sentiment and feeling, each man’s sentiments were held to be as good as any other’s. This is what gives point to the striking observations of Tocqueville. The opening lines of *Democracy in America* are:

No novelty in the United States struck me more vividly during my stay than the equality of conditions. It was easy to see the immense influence of this basic fact on the whole course of society. It gives a particular turn to public opinion and a particular twist to the laws, new maxims to those who govern and particular habits to the governed.

Reflecting on the power of this new principle, Tocqueville concluded:

Therefore the gradual progress of equality is something fated. The main features of this progress are the following: it is universal and permanent, it is daily passing beyond human control, and every event and every man helps it along. Is it wise to suppose that a movement which has been so long in train could be halted by one generation? Does any-

one imagine that democracy, which has destroyed the feudal system and vanquished kings, will fall back before the middle classes and the rich? Will it stop now, when it has grown so strong and its adversaries so weak?

In 19th-century America, however, the notion of equality was never sharply defined. In its voiced assertions it came down to the sentiment that each man was as good as another and no man was better than anyone else. What it meant, in effect, was that no one should take on the air of an aristocrat and lord it over other men. To this extent, it was a negative reaction to the highly mannered society of Europe, and travelers to this country at the time understood it in those terms. On its positive side, equality meant the chance to get ahead, regardless of one's origins; that no formal barriers or prescribed positions stood in one's way. It was this combination of attributes—the lack of deference and the emphasis on personal achievement—which gave 19th-century America its revolutionary appeal, so much so that when the German '48ers came here, including such members of Marx's Socialist Workers Club as Kriege and Willich, they abandoned socialism and became republicans.

### The redefinition of equality

What is at stake today is the redefinition of equality. A principle which was the weapon for changing a vast social system, the principle of equality of opportunity, is now seen as leading to a new hierarchy, and the current demand is that the "just precedence" of society, in Locke's phrase, requires the reduction of all inequality, or the creation of *equality of result*—in income, status, and power—for all men in society. This issue is the central value problem of the post-industrial society.

The principle of equality of opportunity derives from a fundamental tenet of classic liberalism: that the individual—and not the family, the community, or the state—is the basic unit of society, and that the purpose of societal arrangements is to allow the individual the freedom to fulfill his own purposes—by his labor to gain property, by exchange to satisfy his wants, by upward mobility to achieve a place commensurate with his talents. It was assumed that individuals will differ—in their natural endowments, in their energy, drive, and motivation, in their conception of what is desirable—and that the institutions of society should establish procedures for regulating fairly the competition and exchanges necessary to fulfill these diverse desires and competences.

As a principle, equality of opportunity denies the precedence of birth, of nepotism, of patronage or any other criterion which allocates place, other than fair competition open equally to talent and ambition. It asserts, in the terms of Talcott Parsons, universalism over particularism, achievement over ascription. It is an ideal derived directly from the Enlightenment as codified by Kant, the principle of individual merit generalized as a categorical imperative.

The social structure of modern society—in its bourgeois form as the universalism of money, in its romantic form as the thrust of ambition, in its intellectual form as the priority of knowledge—is based on this principle. Estate society, in the 18th century and earlier, had given honorific precedence to land, the Army, and the Church, and only the birthright of inheritance could provide access to these institutions. Even where there was nominal mobility—the institutions of the Red and the Black—commissions in the Army (as in England up to the middle of the 19th century) were only by purchase, and benefices in the Church were available through family connection. Modernity meant the uprooting of this stratified order by the principle of openness, change, and social mobility. The capitalist and the entrepreneur replaced the landed gentry, the government administrator took power over the Army, and the intellectual succeeded the priest. And, in principle, these new positions were open to all men of talent. Thus there occurred a complete social revolution: a change in the social base of status and power, and a new mode of access to place and privilege in the society.

The post-industrial society adds a new criterion to the definitions of base and access: Technical skill becomes a condition of operative power, and higher education the means of obtaining technical skill. As a result, there is a shift in the distribution of power as, in key institutions, technical competence becomes the overriding consideration. In industry, family capitalism is replaced by managerial capitalism; in government, patronage is replaced by civil service and bureaucratization; in the universities, the exclusiveness of the old social elites, particularly WASP domination of the Ivy League colleges, breaks up with the inclusion of ethnic groups, particularly the Jews. Increasingly, the newer professional occupations, particularly engineering and economics, become central to the decisions of the society. The post-industrial society, in this dimension of its status and power, is the logical extension of the meritocracy; it is the codification of a new social order based, in principle, on the priority of educated talent.

In social fact, the meritocracy is thus the displacement of one

principle of stratification by another, of ascription by achievement. In the past this new principle was considered just. Men were to be judged and rewarded on the basis not of birth or primordial ties but of individual merit. Today that principle is held to be the new source of inequality and of social, if not psychological, injustice.

### The case against meritocracy

The sociological and philosophical objections to the meritocracy are of a contradictory and overlapping nature:

1) If one assumes that a meritocracy is purely a selection by intelligence, and that intelligence is based on inherited genetic differences, then privilege is obtained on the basis of an arbitrary genetic lottery, which is the antithesis of social justice.

2) There can never be a pure meritocracy because high-status parents will invariably seek to pass on their positions, either through the use of influence or simply by the cultural advantages their children inevitably possess. Thus after one generation a meritocracy simply becomes an enclaved class.

3) There is considerable social mobility in the United States, but it is less related to schooling or ability or even family background than to intangible and random factors such as luck and competence in the particular job one falls into. Christopher Jencks and his associates, in a review of the effect of family and schooling on mobility, conclude:

Poverty is not primarily hereditary. While children born into poverty have a higher than average chance of ending up poor, there is still an enormous amount of economic mobility from one generation to the next. There is nearly as much economic inequality among brothers raised in the same homes as in the general population. . . .

. . . there is as almost as much economic inequality among those who score high on standardized tests as in the general population. Equalizing everyone's reading scores would not appreciably reduce the number of economic "failures." . . .

Our work suggests, then, that many popular explanations of economic inequality are largely wrong. We cannot blame economic inequality primarily on genetic differences in men's capacity for abstract reasoning, since there is nearly as much economic inequality among men with equal test scores as among men in general. We cannot blame economic inequality primarily on the fact that parents pass along their disadvantages to their children, since there is nearly as much inequality among men whose parents hold the same economic status as among men in general. We cannot blame economic inequality on differences between schools, since differences between schools seem to have very little effect on any measurable attribute of those who attend them. Eco-

conomic success seems to depend on varieties of luck and on-the-job competence that are only moderately related to family background, schooling, or scores on standardized tests.

Thus, a situation of inequality exists which is justified on the basis of achievement or meritocracy but does not actually derive from them, so that the rewards of mobility, or, at least, the degrees of inequality in reward, are not justified.

4) A meritocracy instills a competitive feeling into society which is damaging to those who succeed and even more so to those who fail. Jerome Karabel writes:

A meritocracy is more competitive than an overtly-based class society, and this unrelenting competition exacts a toll both from the losers, whose self-esteem is damaged, and from the winners, who may be more self-righteous about their elite status than is a more traditional ruling group. Apart from increased efficiency, it is doubtful whether a frenetically competitive inegalitarian society is much of an improvement over an ascriptive society which, at least, does not compel its poor people to internalize their failure.

5) The principle of equality of opportunity, even if fully realized on the basis of talent, simply recreates inequality anew in each generation, and thus becomes a conservative force in society. In its most vulgar form, this is the argument that equality of opportunity has been the means by which some (e.g., the Jews) have sought to get "theirs" in society and to deny latecomers (e.g., blacks) a fair share of the spoils. This is the argument employed in New York City, for example, where it is charged that in the school system Jews "used" the merit system to dispossess the Catholics, who had risen through patronage, but that the merit system now is a means of keeping out blacks from high places in the system. In its pristine form, this argument says social justice should mean equality not at the start of a race, but at the finish, equality not of opportunity but of result.

### **The Coleman Report**

This change in social temper—the distrust of meritocracy—occurred principally in the last decade. The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, as a double consequence of the civil rights revolution and the emphasis on higher education as a gateway to better place in the society, had made equality the central theme of social policy. The focus, however, was almost completely on widening equality of opportunity, principally through the schools: on compensatory education, Head Start programs, manpower training to

improve skills, school integration, busing ghetto children to suburban schools, open admissions, and the like. It was clear that black and poor children were culturally disadvantaged, and these handicaps had to be eliminated. The image that President Johnson used, in proclaiming the policy of affirmative action, was that of a shackled runner:

Imagine a hundred yard dash in which one of the two runners has his legs shackled together. He has progressed 10 yards, while the unshackled runner has gone 50 yards. At that point the judges decide that the race is unfair. How do they rectify the situation? Do they merely remove the shackles and allow the race to proceed? Then they could say that "equal opportunity" now prevailed. But one of the runners would still be forty yards ahead of the other. Would it not be the better part of justice to allow the previously shackled runner to make up the forty yard gap; or to start the race all over again? That would be affirmative action towards equality.

The change in attitude, however, began with the realization that schooling had little effect in raising the achievement or reducing the disparate standing of black children relative to white. In 1966, Professor James Coleman of Johns Hopkins University, carrying out a mandate of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, concluded a massive survey of 4,000 schools and 600,000 students. The Office of Education, which sponsored the research, and Coleman himself had expected to find gross inequality of educational resources between black and white schools and to use these findings as an argument for large-scale federal spending to redress the balance. But the report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, found that there was little difference between black and white schools in such things as physical facilities, formal curricula, and other measurable criteria; it also found that a significant gap in achievement scores between black and white children was already present in the first grade, and that despite the rough comparability of black and white schools, the gap between the two groups had widened by the end of elementary school. The only consistent variable explaining the differences in scores *within* each racial or ethnic group was the educational and economic attainment of the parents. As Coleman wrote:

First, within each racial group, the strong relation of family economic and educational background to achievement does not diminish over the period of the school, and may even increase over the elementary years. Second, *most of the variation in student achievement lies within the same school, very little of it is between schools.* The implication of these last two results is clear: family background differences account for much more variation in achievement than do school differences.



But there was no consistent variable to explain the difference *between* racial groups, not even family background—which is why some persons have fallen back on genetic explanations.

The Coleman findings dismayed the educational bureaucracy, and at first, received little attention. Issued in July 1966, the document was not reported in *The New York Times* or the newsweeklies. But as the explosive findings gradually became known, the Coleman Report became the center of the most extensive discussion of social policy in the history of American sociological debate, and the source of vehement public recrimination on such questions as compulsory integration, school busing, and the like.<sup>6</sup>

Much of the controversy over the Coleman Report dealt with integration: Some interpreted it, as did Coleman himself, in part, as a mandate to mix lower-class black schoolchildren with middle-class whites to provide stronger peer-group pressures for achievement; black-power advocates saw it as justification for black control of black schools in order to strengthen the black child's control over his own destiny; and still others felt that additional money spent on schools would be a waste, since schools were ineffective in reducing the achievement gaps between the races or between social classes.

But in the long run, the more important aspect of the report was less its findings than its major thesis, which was the redefinition of equality of opportunity. Coleman had been explicitly charged to determine the extent of inequality in the educational *resources* avail-

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<sup>6</sup>The first discussion of the report was in *The Public Interest*, No. 4 (Summer 1966), where Coleman summarized his conclusions in an article entitled "Equal Schools or Equal Students." As the debate widened, Coleman discussed the implications of the Report in *The Public Interest*, No. 9 (Fall 1967), in the article "Toward Open Schools." He argued for the utility of integration on the following grounds:

The finding is that students do better when they are in schools where their fellow students come from backgrounds strong in educational motivation and resources. The results might be paraphrased by the statement that the educational resources provided by a child's fellow students are more important for his achievement than are the resources provided by the school board. This effect appears to be particularly great for students who themselves come from educationally-deprived backgrounds. For example, it is about twice as great for Negroes as for whites.

But since family background is so important, Coleman warned that "the task of increasing achievement of lower-class children cannot be fully implemented by school integration, even if integration were wholly achieved—and the magnitude of racial and class concentrations in large cities indicates that it is not likely to be achieved soon."

The most comprehensive discussion of the Coleman Report took place in a three-year seminar at Harvard University initiated by Daniel P. Moynihan. The various papers analyzing the report, and Coleman's reply to his critics, are in *On Equality of Educational Opportunity*, edited by Frederick Mosteller and Daniel P. Moynihan (New York, 1972).

able to black and white children, the assumption being that social policy had to equalize the "inputs" into the educational process. But what Coleman took as his criterion was achievement, or results. In effect, he redefined equality of opportunity *from equal access to equally well-endowed schools (inputs) to equal performance on standardized achievement tests (equality of outcomes)*. As he put it in the title of his *Public Interest* essay, the focus had to shift from "equal schools to equal students."

What Coleman was saying was that the public schools—or the process of education itself—were not the social equalizers American society imagined them to be. Children achieved more or less in relation to family background and social class, and these were the variables that would have to be changed. Equality would not be attained until an average public school in Harlem produced as many high achievers as one in Scarsdale.

### Equality of result

The argument has been pushed one step further by Christopher Jencks. If the focus was on the "equal student," then the problem was not even the distinction between Harlem and Scarsdale. In reanalyzing the Coleman data, Jencks found that students who performed best on achievement tests "were often enrolled in the same schools as the students who performed worst," and this, he declared, was potentially the most revolutionary revelation in the Report: "In the short run it remains true that our most pressing political problem is the achievement gap between Harlem and Scarsdale. But in the long run it seems that our primary problem is not the disparity between Harlem and Scarsdale but the disparity between the top and bottom of the class in both Harlem and Scarsdale."

One can carry this still another step to the disparity among children of the same family. And Jencks in fact has done so: "There is nearly as much economic inequality among brothers raised in the same homes as in the general population. This means that inequality is recreated anew in each generation, even among people who start life in essentially identical circumstances." For Jencks, inequality is not inherited. There is no single consistent variable which explains who gets ahead and why. It is as much luck as anything else.

The logic of this argument is developed by Jencks in his book, *Inequality*. Not only can one not equalize opportunity, but even if one could, equalizing opportunity does not appreciably reduce the inequality in results. He concludes quite bluntly:

Instead of trying to reduce people's capacity to gain a competitive advantage on one another, we will have to change the rules of the game so as to reduce the rewards of competitive success and the costs of failure. Instead of trying to make everybody equally lucky or equally good at his job, we will have to devise "insurance" systems which neutralize the effects of luck, and income sharing systems which break the link between vocational success and living standards.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of social policy, thus, has to be equality of result—by sharing and redistributive policies—rather than equality of opportunity.

If equality of result is to be the main object of social policy—and it is the heart of the populist reaction against meritocracy—it will demand an entirely new political agenda for the social systems of advanced industrial countries. But no such political demand can ultimately succeed without being rooted in some powerful ethical system, and for this reason the concept of equality of result has become the Archimedean point of a major new effort to provide a philosophical foundation—a conception of justice as fairness—for a communal society.

In the nature of human consciousness, a scheme of moral equity is the necessary basis for any social order; for legitimacy to exist, power must be justified. In the end, it is moral ideas—the conception of

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<sup>1</sup>Jencks' key argument, to repeat, is that "economic success seems to depend on varieties of luck and on-the-job competence that are only moderately related to family background, schooling or scores on standardized tests." And, as he concludes, "Nobody seems able to say exactly what 'competence' in this sense entails, including employers who pay huge sums for it, but it does not seem to be at all similar from one job to another. This makes it harder to imagine a strategy for equalizing such competence. A strategy for equalizing luck is even harder to conceive."

Since the factors which make for success are, for Jencks, simply wayward, there is no ethical justification for large disparities in income and status; and since one cannot equalize luck in order to create equal opportunity, one should seek to equalize results.

While Jencks' findings are important against the vulgar Marxist notion that inheritance of social class background is all-important in determining the place of the child, and they disprove, once again, the stilted American myth that each person of ability finds a place commensurate with his merit, the inability to find a consistent set of relationships leads Jencks to emphasize "luck" as a major factor. But in his analysis, "luck" is really only a *residual factor* which is inserted because all other variables do not correlate highly. In and of itself, luck cannot be measured as a positive variable. While it may be true, as many studies show, that there is a low correlation between the career one thinks a man is educating himself for and the final outcomes, and that there is a measure of "luck" about the job one finds in relation to one's talents to fulfill the job, the fact remains, nevertheless, that on the job, particularly at the professional level, there is a high degree of talent and hard work required to succeed. By emphasizing "luck" Jencks seeks to use the randomness of an occupational roulette wheel to minimize the *earned* quality of success and to justify policies which "equalize result." And it may be that there is much more luck to the occupational system than Marxists or Meritocrats would like to admit. Yet "common observation" (that other residual category of analysis) would indicate that—

what is desirable—that shape history through human aspirations. Western liberal society was “designed” by Locke, Adam Smith, and Bentham on the premise of individual freedom and the satisfaction of private utilities; these were the axioms whose consequences were to be realized through the market and later through the democratic political system. But that doctrine is crumbling, and the political system is now being geared to the realization not of individual ends but of group and communal ends. Socialism has had political appeal for a century now not so much because of its moral depiction of what the future society would be like, as because of material disparities within disadvantaged classes, the hatred of bourgeois society by many intellectuals, and the eschatological vision of a “cunning” of History. But the normative ethic was only implicit; it was never spelled out or justified. The claim for equality of result is a socialist ethic (as equality of opportunity is the liberal ethic), and as a moral basis for society it can finally succeed in obtaining men’s allegiance not by material reward but by philosophical justification. An effort in politics has to be confirmed in philosophy. And an attempt to provide that confirmation is now under way.

### III

The starting point for the renewed discussion of inequality—as for so much of modern politics—is Rousseau. In his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (the “Second Discourse”), Rousseau sought to show that civil society ineluctably generates inequality. For Rousseau, the state of nature was a psychological construct that showed what men would be like without society. In nature and in society, there are two kinds of dependence. As he wrote in *Emile*, there is “dependence on things, which is the work of nature; and dependence on men, which is the work of society. Dependence on things, being non-moral, does no injury to liberty and begets no vices; dependence on men, being out of order, gives rise to every kind of vice, and through this master and slave become mutually depraved.” The movement from nature to society is a change in the character of dependence.

For Rousseau, there are also two kinds of inequality: One is natural or physical (such as age, health, strength); the other, moral

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again, on the professional level at least—hard work is a necessary condition for success, and that if a rough equality of opportunity has allowed one man to go further than another, he has *earned* the unequal reward—income, status, authority—which goes with that success. The important question of justice—as I argue later—is really “how much” unequal reward, in what dimensions, and for what.

or political inequality, is based on convention and established by the consent of men. Inevitably, however, as society developed, the first led to the second:

Each one began to look at the others and to want to be looked at himself, and public esteem had a value. The one who sang or danced the best, the handsomest, the strongest, the most adroit or the most eloquent became the most highly considered; and this was the first step toward inequality and, at the same time, toward vice.

Since mind, beauty, strength, skill, merit, and talent established the rank and fate of men, it was necessary to have these qualities, or to dissemble:

. . . for one's advantage, it was necessary to appear to be other than what one in fact was. To be and to seem to be become two altogether different things; and from this distinction came conspicuous ostentation, deceptive cunning, and all the vices that follow from them. . . . Finally, consuming ambition, the fervor to raise one's relative fortune less out of true need than in order to place oneself above others, inspires in all men a base inclination to harm each other, a secret jealousy all the more dangerous because, in order to strike its blow in greater safety, it often assumes the mask of benevolence. . . .

Vanity thus was one source of inequality. The other was material differences rooted in property. Property in and of itself is good and productive. Labor gives a person the right to the soil, and continuous possession is transformed into property, thus establishing "the first rules of justice." Things in this state "could have remained equal if talents had been equal . . . but this proportion was soon broken; the stronger did more work; the clever turned his to better advantage; the more ingenious found ways to shorten his labor." And one man thus had more than another.

Thus, does natural inequality imperceptibly manifest itself along with contrived inequality; and thus do the differences among men, developed by those circumstances, become more perceptible, more permanent in their effects, and begin to have a proportionate influence over the fate of individuals . . . Thus, as the most powerful or most miserable made of their force or their needs a sort of right to the goods of others, equivalent to them to the right of property, the destruction of equality was followed by the most frightful disorder. . . .

Inequalities of various kinds become formalized, "but in general, wealth, nobility or rank, power and personal merit [are] the principal distinctions by which one is measured in society." Of these four types of inequality,

as personal qualities are the origin of all the others, wealth is the last

to which they are reduced in the end because, being the most immediately useful to well-being and the easiest to communicate, it is easily used to buy all the rest: an observation which can permit a rather exact judgment of the extent to which each people is removed from its primitive institution, and the distance it has traveled toward the extreme limit of corruption.

Thus, "from the extreme inequality of conditions and fortunes . . . come scores of prejudices equally contrary to reason, happiness and virtue." This is what one finds "in discovering and following . . . the forgotten and lost routes that must have led man from the natural state to the civil state."

Since man cannot live in the state of nature, the problem is how to reduce the dependence of man upon man and yet make him a social person instead of a natural person. Rousseau's answer, of course, is the social contract, the tie by which men forswear both natural liberty and conventional liberty to gain moral liberty. One renounces one's self—one's vanity and the desire to dominate others—by becoming a member of the community; and the community itself is a single personality, a whole of which each citizen is a part.

These clauses [of the social contract], rightly understood, are reducible to one only, viz. the total alienation to the whole community of each associate with all his rights; for, in the first place, since each gives himself up entirely, the conditions are equal for all; and the conditions being equal for all, no one has any interest in making them burdensome to others.

The price of equality, then, is that "an individual can no longer claim anything"; he has no individual rights, "his person and his whole power" are dissolved into the general will. Equality is possible only in community through the eclipse of the self. Thus Rousseau pursued one logic of the meaning of equality.

### **Mill and the logic of representation**

For Rousseau, who sees social nature as ruled by passion and vice, equality is not an end in itself but a means of achieving civic virtue and making virtuous men; in his hierarchy of purposes, he retains the classical view of the goals of society. For a second, more diffuse kind of political thought, the purpose of equality is social peace, and its guiding principle is utility.

Democracy is by nature contentious because men constantly covet what other men have. Not all societies invite invidious comparisons. The peasant did not compare his lot with the lord; he had his al-

lotted place in the scheme of things and accepted it fatalistically. Democracy, with its normative commitment to equality, inevitably provides an evaluative yardstick for measuring discrepancies in status, wealth, and power. Where one is barred from modifying these discrepancies, the result is often—in Nietzsche's term—*ressentiment*, or envy, anger, and hatred toward those at the top. As Max Scheler has noted:

*Ressentiment* must therefore be strongest in a society like ours, where approximately equal rights (political and otherwise) or formal social equality, publicly recognized, go hand in hand with wide factual differences in power, property and education. . . . Quite independently of the characters and experiences of individuals, a potent charge of *ressentiment* is here accumulated by the very structure of society.<sup>8</sup>

*Ressentiment* is the chief psychological fuel of disruption and conflict, and the problem for the society is how to reduce it. Since inequality is not random but patterned—the discrepancies are grouped—all groups have to be included in the society and enabled to use the political system as a means of redressing other forms of inequality. Thus, the chief instrument of social peace is representation.

The rationale for this system was laid down by John Stuart Mill in his *Representative Government*. "The interest of the excluded is always in danger of being overlooked," he wrote. The group he had in mind, at the time, was the working class. Although the other classes no longer "deliberately" sought to sacrifice the interests of the working class to themselves, the very fact that the workers were excluded meant that questions were never regarded from their viewpoint. Mill went so far as to argue that representative government can only exist when there is proportional representation, and one chapter of his book, entitled "Representation of Minorities," explores the Hare system for this kind of election, "a scheme which has the almost unparalleled merit of carrying out a great principle of gov-

<sup>8</sup>Compare Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*: "One must not blind himself to the fact that democratic institutions most successfully develop sentiments of envy in the human heart. This is not because they provide the means for everybody to rise to the level of everybody else but because these means are constantly proving inadequate in the hands of those using them. Democratic institutions awaken and flatter the passion for equality without ever being able to satisfy it entirely. This complete equality is always slipping through the people's fingers at the moment when they think to grasp it, fleeing, as Pascal says, in an eternal flight; the people grow heated in search of this blessing, all the more precious because it is near enough to be seen but too far off to be tasted. They are excited by the chance and irritated by the uncertainty of success; the excitement is followed by weariness and then by bitterness. In that state anything which in any way transcends the people seems an obstacle to their desires, and they are tired by the sight of any superiority, however legitimate."

ernment in a manner approaching to ideal perfection as regards the special object in view. . . ." What is good about that principle of government is that "it secures a representation, in proportion to numbers, of every division of the electoral body: not two great parties alone, with perhaps a few large sectional minorities in particular places, but every minority in the whole nation, consisting of a sufficiently large number to be, on principles of equal justice, entitled to a representative."

The logic of minority representation is the quota. Any polity, to obey the dictates of equal justice, would have to insist that its representative body be made up of social units equal in proportion to the diverse composition of its membership. The Democratic Party, in its new rules for the 1972 convention, did exactly this in stipulating that all state parties had to take "affirmative steps" to make their delegations representative of their respective state populations in terms of minority groups, women, and young people (those from 18 to 30).

### The problem of quotas

But this raises two serious problems. First, how does one define a legitimate "interest," or social unit, or minority corporate group? In the early years of the Republic, it was argued that the states were the legitimate units of representation, and the Constitution, before it was amended, gave state legislatures the duty of electing each state's two senators. In the 1930's and after, the legitimate units seemed to be the "functional groups"—business, farmers, and workers. In the 1960's and 1970's, the units came to be biologically defined (sex, color, age) and culturally defined (ethnic, religious) groups. Yet if one sits in a representative body on the basis of age, sex, ethnic group, religion, or occupation, is that single corporate identity to be the overriding attribute which guarantees one's place? It is an elementary sociological fact that a person has not a single identity but a multiple number of roles. Does a black woman under 30 have three votes rather than one? Or must she choose a single attribute to be "quotaed" for?

Second, if political bodies are composed entirely of corporate groups, what happens to numerical majority rule? Do the few larger corporate bodies outvote the smaller ones? The blacks, for example, one of the most disadvantaged groups in American society, make up about 11 per cent of the population. In a few cities they are a majority, but these cities do not have sufficient financial resources



for rehabilitation or improvement. The sociologist Herbert Gans has argued that no numerical majority will ever tax itself, or redistribute its wealth, to aid a minority, so that in a majoritarian society the lot of the blacks will never be greatly improved. In consequence, he argues that if equality is to be achieved, minority groups should be given special veto rights in the society. This is, in effect, the principle of the "concurrent majority" which John C. Calhoun sought before the Civil War to protect the Southern states from being outvoted by the North.<sup>9</sup> It is also the logic behind the idea of "community control" over social resources such as schools, housing, and the like. But is there then any wider social or public interest? If corporate or community groups are to control the decisions which affect their lives, by what right can one deny a Southern community the right to practice segregation? And if a local group vetoes the passage of a highway through its neighborhood, does it not thus impose a higher tax cost on its neighbors by insisting on this relocation?

The purpose of inclusive representation of all minorities is to reduce conflict, yet the history of almost all societies shows that when politics polarize along a single overriding dimension—be it class, religion, language, tribe, or ethnic group—there is bound to be violent conflict; and when there are numerous "cross-cutting" identities—in Holland, where there are both class and religious political parties, Catholic and Protestant workers divide so that neither religion nor class wholly captures a single allegiance—there is a greater degree of checks and veto power in the society. In short, can the principle of quota representation in the polity, defined along communal or particularistic lines, escape either the polarization or the fragmentation of the polity, and the fate of ataxia for the society?

### Rawls and fairness

If Rousseau sought equality of result for the sake of virtue, and Mill equal representation proportionate to one's interest for the purpose of social stability, John Rawls wants to establish the priority of equality for reasons of justice. As he elegantly declares, "justice

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<sup>9</sup>Calhoun argued that agreement requires a consensus of all the major interests or factions, rather than a simple majority of people which cuts across such natural or social lines as regions, groups, or classes. This was a caricature, though a brilliant one, of the Madisonian model. It was a philosophical argument about representation in a heterogeneous rather than a homogeneous society, in order to sustain human inequality, white supremacy, states' rights, anti-majoritarianism, and minority power. It came, one should also note, at a time when American parties had begun to splinter.

is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought."<sup>10</sup>

What is justice? It cannot be the greatest good for the greatest number, for the price of this may be injustice for the lesser number. It has to be a distributive principle for judging competing claims—i.e., the appropriate division of social advantages. For Rawls, this is justice as fairness, and the foundation of fairness rests, initially, on two principles:

First: each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others.

Second: social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all.

The first principle deals with equal liberties of citizenship—freedom of speech, vote, and assembly; eligibility for office; and so on. The second deals with social and economic inequalities—the distribution of income and wealth, differences in the degree of authority, and the like. It is with the second principle that we are concerned. The controlling terms in the propositions are the ambiguous phrases "to everyone's advantage," and "equally open to all." What do they mean?

Rawls' argument is complex, yet lucid. "Equally open" can mean either equal in the sense that careers are open to the talented, or equal in the sense of "equality of fair opportunity." The first simply means that those who have the ability and the drive are entitled to the place they have earned; this is the conventional liberal position. But Rawls notes that it does not take account of the distortions arising out of social contingencies. "In all sectors of society," Rawls

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<sup>10</sup>John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971). Justice, for Rawls, does not encapsulate all the energies of the society; it is a principle of distributive standards, and is itself part of a larger social ideal to which a society commits itself. He writes:

A conception of social justice, then, is to be regarded as providing in the first instance a standard whereby the distributive aspects of the basic structure of society are to be assessed. This standard, however, is not to be confused with the principles defining the other virtues, for the basic structure, and social arrangements generally may be efficient or inefficient, liberal or illiberal, and many other things, as well as just or unjust. A complete conception defining principles for all the virtues of the basic structure, together with the respective weights when they conflict, is more than a conception of justice; it is a social ideal. The principles of justice are but a part, although perhaps the most important part of such a conception. A social ideal in turn is connected with a conception of society, a vision of the way in which the aims and purposes of social cooperation are to be understood. . . . Fully to understand a conception of justice we must make explicit the conception of social cooperation from which it derives.

writes, "there should be roughly equal prospects of culture and achievement for everyone similarly motivated and endowed. . . . Chances to acquire cultural knowledge and skills should not depend upon one's class position, and so the school system, whether public or private, should be designed to even out class barriers."

The liberal principle accepts the elimination of social differences in order to assure an equal start, but it justifies *unequal result* on the basis of natural abilities and talents. For Rawls, however, "natural" advantages are as arbitrary or random as social ones.

There is no more reason to permit the distribution of income and wealth to be settled by the distribution of natural assets than by historical and social fortune. . . . The extent to which natural capacities develop and reach fruition is affected by all kinds of social conditions and class attitudes. 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. It is impossible in practice to secure equal chances of achievement and culture for those similarly endowed, and therefore we may want to adopt a principle which recognizes this fact and also mitigates the arbitrary effects of the natural lottery.

Therefore, Rawls concludes, one cannot equalize opportunity, one can only bend it towards another purpose—the equality of result.

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. The basic structure can be arranged so that these contingencies work for the good of the least fortunate. Thus we are led to the difference principle if we wish to set up the social system so that no one gains or loses from his arbitrary place in the distribution of natural assets or his initial position in society without giving or receiving compensating advantages in return.<sup>11</sup>

The question thus turns from "equally open to all," to the distribution of chances for place—the distribution of **primary social goods** or values—to the meaning of "everyone's advantage." This phrase, for Rawls, can be defined in terms of either the "principle of efficiency," or the "difference principle."

The efficiency principle is congruent with what welfare economists call "Pareto optimality." The allocation of **goods** or utilities is efficient when one reaches the point where it is **impossible** to change an existing distribution pattern so as to make **some persons** (even one) better off without at the same time making **some other persons**

<sup>11</sup>As Rawls further notes, "The naturally advantaged are not to gain merely because they are more gifted, but only to cover the costs of training and education and for using their endowments in ways that help the ~~less~~ fortunate as well."

(at least one) worse off. For Rawls the difficulty with the principle of efficiency is that, as a matter of fairness, it cannot specify *who* is better off or who is not worse off. A utilitarian principle, "Pareto optimality" is interested only in a net social balance and is indifferent to actual individuals.

### The "difference principle"

The "difference principle" states that if some persons are to be better off, the less advantaged are also to be better off, and in some circumstances even more so. If one gains, so must the others. "The intuitive idea is that the social order is not to establish and secure the more attractive prospects of those better off unless doing so is to the advantage of those less fortunate."<sup>12</sup>

This leads Rawls to his more general conception of social justice, or the social ideal:

All social primary goods—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored.

For this reason, too, Rawls rejects the idea of a meritocracy. Although the meritocratic idea *is* democratic, it violates the conception of fairness:

The [meritocratic] social order follows the principle of careers open to talents and uses equality of opportunity as a way of releasing men's energies in the pursuit of economic prosperity and political domination. There exists a marked disparity between the upper and lower classes in both means of life and the rights and privileges of organizational authority. The culture of the poorer strata is impoverished while that of the governing and technocratic elite is securely based on the service of national ends of power and wealth. Equality of opportunity means an equal chance to leave the less fortunate behind in the per-

<sup>12</sup>In an interesting comparison, Rawls (like Rousseau) takes the metaphor of the family as the model for this principle:

The family in its ideal conception, and often in practice, is one place where the principle of maximizing the sum of advantages is rejected. Members of a family commonly do not wish to gain unless they can do so in ways that further the interests of the rest. Now wanting to act on the difference principle has precisely this consequence.

The difficulty with this argument—if one regards society as the family writ large—is that the family, as Freud has argued, holds together by love, which is specific. One loves one's wife and children—and tries to pass on one's advantages to them. Where love is generalized to the society, it becomes "aim-inhibited" (because one loves all) and is consequently weak and ineffective. For this reason, Freud argues in *Civilization and its Discontents* that communism is impossible in the larger society.

sonal quest for influence and social position. Thus a meritocratic society is a danger for the other interpretations of the principles of justice but not the democratic conception. For, as we have just seen, the difference principle transforms the aims of society in fundamental respects.

The difference principle has two implications for social policy. One is the principle of redress for individuals:

This is the principle that undeserved inequalities call for redress; and since the inequalities of birth and natural endowment are undeserved, these inequalities are to be somehow compensated for. Thus, the principle holds that in order to treat all persons equally, to provide genuine equality of opportunity, society must give more attention to those with fewer native assets and to those born into the less favorable social position. The idea is to redress the bias of contingencies in the direction of equality. In pursuit of this principle greater resources might be spent on the education of the less rather than the more intelligent, at least over a certain time of life, say the earlier years of school.

The second is the more general principle that talent is to be regarded as a social asset, and its fruits should be available to all, especially the less fortunate:

[The difference principle] transforms the aims of the basic structure so that the total scheme of institutions no longer emphasizes social efficiency and technocratic values. We see then that the difference principle represents, in effect, 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.

We have here a fundamental rationale for a major shift in values; instead of the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his ability," we have the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." And the justification for need is fairness to those who are disadvantaged for reasons beyond their control.

### **The end of liberalism**

With Rawls, we have the most comprehensive effort in modern philosophy to justify a socialist ethic. In this redefinition of equality as equity, we can observe the development of a political philosophy which will go far to shape the last part of the 20th century, as the doctrines of Locke and Smith molded the 19th. The liberal theory of

society was framed by the twin axes of individualism and rationality. The unencumbered individual would seek to realize his own satisfactions on the basis of his work—he was to be rewarded for effort, pluck, and risk—and the exchange of products with others was calculated by each so as to maximize his own satisfactions. Society was to make no judgments between men—only to set the procedural rules—and the most efficient distribution of resources was the one that produced the greatest net balance of satisfactions.

Today we have come to the end of classic liberalism. It is not individual satisfaction which is the measure of social good, but redress for the disadvantaged as a prior claim on the social conscience and on social policy.<sup>13</sup> Rawls' effort in *A Theory of Justice* is to establish the principle of fairness, but he pays little attention, other than using the generic term "disadvantaged," to *who* is to be helped.<sup>14</sup> Yet in contemporary society, inevitably, the disadvantaged are identifiable largely in group terms, and the principle of equity is linked with the principle of quota representation.

The claim for group rights stands in formal contradiction to the principle of individualism, with its emphasis on achievement and universalism. But in reality it is no more than the extension to hitherto excluded social units of the group principle which has undergirded American politics from the start. The group process—which was the vaunted discovery of the "realists" of American political science—consisted largely of economic bargaining between functional or pressure groups operating outside the formal structure of

<sup>13</sup>The claims of the poor are, of course, among the oldest traditions in Western thought and are central to the idea of Christian love. But Christian love—charity as *caritas*—accepted the poor as worthy in themselves and loved the poor as poor without endowing them with higher qualities than they possessed. In that sense, classic Protestant liberalism—with its sympathy and humanitarianism, rather than love—corroded the social conscience of the Catholic world. From a different source, the romanticizing of the poor, a tradition going back to Villon, also led to the erosion of *caritas* toward the poor. For a defense of Christian love as the basis of society, and a biting attack on English moral philosophy (i.e. Hutcheson, Adam Smith, Hume), see Max Scheler's *Ressentiment*.

<sup>14</sup>It is striking that Rawls, like Jencks, does not discuss either "work" or "effort"—as if those who had succeeded, in the university, or in business or government, had done so largely by contingent circumstances of fortune or social background. There is a discussion of meritocracy, but not of merit. This itself is a measure of how far we have moved from 19th-century values.

It is equally striking that, in the "issue-attention cycle," the policy concern a decade ago was with "excellence." The Stern Fund sponsored a major study on the identification of excellence; John Gardner wrote a book about excellence. At that time, meritocracy was a positive word—so much so that Merrill Peterson, in his magisterial biography of Thomas Jefferson, said that Jefferson would have used the word "meritocracy" to define his "natural aristocracy" if he had known the term. Today the concern is almost entirely with equality and the disadvantaged. Will the "issue-attention cycle" come full circle in the future?

the political system. What we now find are ethnic and ascriptive groups claiming formal representation both in the formal political structure and in all other institutions of the society.

These claims are legitimated, further, by the fact that America has been a pluralist society, or has come to accept the principle of pluralism rather than the homogeneity of Americanism. But pluralism, in its classic conceptions, made a claim for the cultural identity of ethnic and religious groups and for the institutional autonomy of cultural institutions (e.g., universities) from politics. Pluralism was based on the separation of realms. But what we have today is a thoroughgoing politicizing of society in which not only the market is subordinated to political decision but all institutions have to bend to the demands of a political center and politicize themselves. Here, too, there has been another change. In functional group politics, membership was not fixed, and one could find cross-cutting allegiances or shifting coalitions. Today the groups that claim representation—in the political parties, in the universities, in the hospitals, and in the community—are formed by primordial or biological ties; and one cannot erase the ascriptive nature of sex or color.

And yet, once one accepts the principle of redress and representation in the group terms that were initially formulated, it is difficult for the polity to deny those later claims. That is the logic of democracy which has always been present in the ambiguous legacy of the principle of equality.

#### IV

Any principle inevitably has its ambiguities, for no moral situation is ever clear-cut, particularly in the case of equal opportunity versus equal result, where the conflict is between right versus right, rather than right versus wrong. What, then, are the difficulties and the contradictions in the principle of fairness, and are they of sufficient weight to render it nugatory?

First, what is the meaning of disadvantage? What is the measure of fairness? Is it objective or subjective? Often a sense of unfairness depends upon expectation and the degree of deprivation. But by whose standard? One measure, Rawls writes,

is a definition solely in terms of relative income and wealth with no reference to social position. Thus, all persons with less than half the median income and wealth may be taken as the least advantaged segment. This definition depends only upon the lower half of the distribution and has the merit of focusing attention on the social distance between those who have the least and the average citizen.

### The relativity of disadvantage

But for most persons the question of unfairness or deprivation is not some fixed or absolute standard but a comparison with relevant others. We know from many sociological studies that large disparities of income and status are accepted as fair if individuals feel that it is the will of God, or justly earned, while small differences, if arbitrary, will often seem unfair. Orderlies in a hospital compare their income with that of a nurse but not that of a doctor. Thus relative deprivation and reference group (to use the sociological jargon) at each point stipulate the degree of disparity. But are we to accept the subjective evaluations of individuals as the moral norm, or an objective standard, and on what basis? The point is not clear.

If disadvantage is difficult to define, there is a different kind of problem in the identification of "the least fortunate group." Rawls writes:

Here it seems impossible to avoid a certain arbitrariness. One possibility is to choose a particular social position, say that of the unskilled worker, and then to count as the least advantaged all those with the average income and wealth of this group or less. The expectation of the lowest representative man is defined as the average taken over this whole class.<sup>15</sup>

Problems of borderlines and shadings apart—and in practical terms these are great—the identification of social position in this fashion raises a serious psychological question. One of the important considerations of moral philosophy has been to avoid the labelling, or public stigmatization, of the disadvantaged. This is one of the reasons why reformers have always fought a "means test" as the criterion for public aid and tried to provide help as a right. It is one of the reasons (administrative matters aside) why proposals for the redistribution of income have suggested that a stipulated sum be given to all persons, and that money above a certain level be recouped by taxation. Yet Rawls writes: ". . . we are entitled at some point to plead practical considerations in formulating the difference

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<sup>15</sup>What if the "least fortunate" are there by their own choice? Christopher Jencks points out that while "we have already eliminated virtually all economic and academic obstacles to earning a high school diploma . . . one student in five still drops out." And while one may guarantee working-class families the same educational opportunities as middle-class families, what happens if they don't want to use this opportunity? Society may have an obligation to those who are kept down or cannot advance because it is not their fault. But if individuals—for cultural or psychological reasons—do not avail themselves of opportunities, is it the society's responsibility, as the prior obligation, to devote resources to them? But if not, how does one distinguish between the genuinely disadvantaged and those who are not? This is the inextricable difficulty of social policy.



principle. Sooner or later the capacity of philosophical or other arguments to make finer discriminations is bound to run out." But it is exactly at those points where principle has to be translated into rule and case that the problems of public policy and administration begin.

The question of labelling and redress leads back to a more general contradiction, the relation of equality to a principle of universalism. One of the historical gains of equality was the establishment of a principle of universalism, so that a rule—as in the rule of law—applied equally to all, and thus avoided administrative determination between persons. For example, in the Constitution, this meant the outlawing of bills of attainder, which are aimed at one person; a law has to be written with a sufficient degree of generality to cover all persons within a category. In criminal law, we apply *equal punishment* to those who have violated the same law, regardless of the ability to bear punishment, and two men convicted of speeding are fined \$25 each though one is a millionaire and the other a pauper. The law does not inquire into their status differences; there is equal liability. And the court is enjoined from so prying in order to avoid the enlargement of judicial power which would enable the judge to make determinations between persons; his function is solely to find out whether they are guilty or not. Yet where wealth and income are concerned, we have in some areas gone far in the opposite direction.

Under the income-tax law, which was adopted in this century, not only do individuals not pay an equal amount (e.g., \$500 each), they do not even pay equal proportions (e.g., 10 per cent each, which would lead to different absolute amounts on varying incomes). In principle, they pay progressively higher proportions as incomes rise. Here ability—the ability to pay—becomes the measure. It may well be that in the area of wealth and income one wants to establish the principle "from each according to his ability, to each in accordance with another's needs;" the principle of justice here applies because *marginal* amounts must be compared. (If two persons pay the same amount, in one case it comes to half his income, in the other case only a tenth, and the same principle is at work in proportionate taxes.) But, in the larger context, the wholesale adoption of the principle of fairness in all areas of life shifts the entire society from a principle of equal liability and universalism to one of unequal burden and administrative determination.

The ground of fairness is a generalized social norm founded on a social contract. It is based, Rawls says, on the theory of rational choice whereby individuals declare their own preferences, subject to

the principle of redress and the principle of difference; and this rational choice would push the societal balance toward the social norm. Now, utility theory can order the preferences of an individual and define the rational conduct of the individual; and, in utility theory, society is rightly arranged when we have a net balance of individual gains or losses on the basis of the person's own preferences in free exchange. But here we run up against a difficulty. If rationality is the basis of the social norm, can we have a social-welfare function that amalgamates the discordant preferences of individuals into a combined choice which recapitulates the rationality of the individual choice? If one accepts the theoretical argument of the Arrow impossibility theorem—which shows that a rational combined choice is not possible—we cannot (observing the conditions of democracy and majority choice) have a social-welfare function.<sup>16</sup> What the social norm is to be then becomes a political question, subject to either consensus or to conflict—extortion by the most threatening, or collective bargaining in which people eventually accept some idea of trade-off. But if the decision is political, there are then no clear theoretical determinations, set by principles of rational choice of what the social norm should be—unless, in the Rousseauan sense, the body politic is a “single” personality. We may want a social norm for reasons of fairness, but in the structure of rational choice procedures we cannot define one.

If the definition of a social norm, then, is essentially a political one, the principle of helping the least fortunate as the *prior* social obliga-

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<sup>16</sup>Rawls avoids the difficulty of the Arrow impossibility theorem by rejecting the condition of majority rule. He writes:

It is evident from the preceding remarks that the procedure of majority rule, however it is defined and circumscribed, has a subordinate place as a procedural device. The justification for it rests squarely on the political ends that the constitution is designed to achieve, and therefore on the two principles of justice. . . . A fundamental part of the majority principle is that the procedure should satisfy the conditions of background justice. . . . When this background is absent, the first principle of justice is not satisfied; yet even when it is present, there is no assurance that just legislation will be enacted.

There is nothing to the view, then, that what the majority wills is right. . . . This question is one of political judgment and does not belong to the theory of justice. It suffices to note that while citizens normally submit their conduct to democratic authority, that is, recognize the outcome of a vote as establishing a binding rule, other things equal, they do not submit their judgment to it.

Rawls is right of course, as with most traditional conceptions of justice, that the action of a majority does not make any decision right. The tyranny of a majority has long been recognized as a source of injustice, as much as the tyranny of a despot. The procedural question, however, is whether, as a *consistent rule* there is a better method than majority vote, subject to the democratic check of a minority having the right and ability to change the decision and become a majority, in reaching consensus.

tion may mean—in a sociological as well as statistical sense—a regression toward the mean. If it is assumed that we have reached a post-scarcity stage of full abundance, this may be a desirable social policy. But if this is not so—and it is questionable whether it can ever be so—and if one defines society, as Rawls does, “as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage,” why not allow greater incentives for those who can expand the total social output and use this larger “social pie” for the mutual (yet differential) advantage of all?

It is quite striking that the one society in modern history which consciously began with a principle of almost complete equality (including almost no wage differentials)—the Soviet Union—gradually abandoned that policy, not because it was restoring capitalism but because it found that differential wages and privileges served as incentives and were also a more rational “rationing” of time. (If a manager’s time is worth more than that of an unskilled worker, since he has to make decisions, should he be expected to wait in line for a crowded tram or be given a car of his own to get to work?) Even those societies which have had relatively small differentials in income and incentives in the post-World War II years, such as Israel and Yugoslavia, have gradually widened these differences in order to stimulate productivity. And one of the chief pieces of advice which sympathetic economists have given to Fidel Castro to restore his stumbling economy (which has been largely organized on the basis of moral exhortation and the donation of extra labor time) is to make greater use of material incentives and wage differentials. In the United States, the major period when social programs could be most easily financed was from 1960 to 1965, when the increase in the rate of economic growth, not the redistribution of income, provided a fiscal surplus for such programs.

The difficult and thorny question, in the end, is not just priority—who should be helped first—but the degree of disparity among persons. How much difference should there be in income between the head of a corporation and a common laborer, between a professor at the top of the scale and an instructor? The differences in pay in a business firm are on the order of 20:1, in a hospital of 10:1, and in a university of 5:1. What is the rationale for these differences? What is fair? Traditionally, the market was the arbiter of differential reward, based on scarcity or on demand. But as economic decisions become politicized, and as the market is replaced by social decisions, what is the principle of fair reward and fair differences? Clearly this will be one of the most vexing questions in a post-industrial society.

A striking fact of Western society over the past 200 years has been the steady decrease in income disparity among persons—not by distribution policies and judgments about fairness, but by technology, which has cheapened the cost of products and made more things available to more people. The irony, of course, is that as disparities have decreased, as democracy has become more tangible, the expectations of equality have increased even faster, and people make more invidious comparisons (“people may suffer less but their sensibility is exacerbated”), a phenomenon now commonly known as the “Tocqueville effect.” The revolution of rising expectations is also the revolution of rising *ressentiment*.

The real social problem, however, may be not the abstract question of “fairness” but the social character of *ressentiment*, and the conditions which give rise to it. The fascinating sociological puzzle is why in the democratic society, as inequality decreases, *ressentiment* increases. That, too, is part of the ambiguous legacy of democracy.

### A just meritocracy

The difficulty with much of this discussion is that inequality has been considered as a unitary circumstance, and one single principle the measure of its redress, whereas in sociological fact there are different kinds of inequality. The problem is not *either/or* but what *kinds* of inequality lead to what *kinds* of social and moral differences. There are, we know, different kinds of inequality—differences in income and wealth, status, power, opportunity (occupational or social), education, services, and the like. There is not one scale but many, and the inequalities in one scale do not correlate perfectly with inequality in every other.<sup>17</sup>

We can, for example, insist on a basic social equality in that each person is to be given respect and not to be humiliated on the basis of color, or sexual proclivities, or other personal attributes. This is the

<sup>17</sup>Rawls writes: “One is not allowed to justify differences in income or organizational powers on the ground that the disadvantages of those in one position are outweighed by the greater advantages of those in another. Much less can infringements of liberty be counterbalanced in this way.” His argument is puzzling. In any interdependent society one forgoes certain liberties—in traffic and zoning regulations—to enhance others. Nor is it clear why one has to redress inequalities in every sphere rather than allow individuals to choose which sphere represents the most nagging inequality to them. As a political principle, it is unlikely that any single rule can dominate a polity without disruption. In the *Politics*, Aristotle distinguished between two kinds of justice, numerical equality (equality of result) and equality based on merit. As he concluded: “To lay it down that equality shall be exclusively of one kind or another is a bad thing, as is shown by what happens in practice; no constitution lasts long that is constructed on such a basis.”

basis of the civil rights legislation outlawing modes of public humiliation such as Jim Crow laws, and setting forth the principle of complete equal access to all public places. This principle also makes sexual conduct a purely private matter between consenting adults.

We can reduce invidious distinctions in work, whereby some persons are paid by the piece or the hour and others receive a salary by the month or year, or a system whereby some persons receive a fluctuating wage on the basis of hours or weeks worked and others have a steady, calculable income. We can assert that each person is entitled to a basic set of services and income which provides him with adequate medical care, housing, and the like. These are matters of security and dignity which must necessarily be the prior concerns of a civilized society.

But one need not impose a rigid, dogmatic egalitarianism in matters where it conflicts with other social objectives and even becomes self-defeating. Thus, on the question of wage or salary differentials, there may be good market reasons for insisting that the wages of a physician and dentist be greater than those of a nurse or dental technician, for if each cost the patient roughly the same (if one could for the same price have the services of a better qualified person), no one would want to use a nurse or dental technician, even in small matters. The price system, in this case, is a mechanism for the efficient rationing of time. If as a result of differential wages the income spread between the occupations became exceedingly high, one could then use the tax laws to reduce the differences.

But the point is that these questions of inequality have little to do with the issue of meritocracy, if we define the meritocracy as those who have an *earned* status or have achieved positions of rational authority by competence. Contemporary populism, in its desire for wholesale egalitarianism, insists in the end on complete levelling. It is not *for fairness*, but *against elitism*; its impulse is not justice but *ressentiment*. What the populists resent is not power (which they seek for the undifferentiated mass) but authority—the authority represented in the superior competence of individuals. In the populist sociology, for example, the authority of doctors should be subject to the decisions of a community council, and that of professors to the entire collegiate body (which in the extreme versions includes the janitors).

But there cannot be complete democratization in the entire range of human activities. It makes no sense, in the arts, to insist on a democracy of judgment. Which painting, which piece of music,

which novel or poem is better than another cannot be subject to popular vote—unless one assumes, as was to some extent evident in the “sensibility of the 1960’s,” that all art is reducible to experience and each person’s experience is as meaningful to him as anyone else’s. In science and scholarship achievement is measured and ranked on the basis of accomplishment—be it discovery, synthesis, acuity of criticism, comprehensive paradigms, statements of new relationships, and the like. And these are forms of intellectual authority.

Sociologists have made a distinction between power and authority. Power is the ability to command which is backed up, either implicitly or explicitly, by force. That is why power is the defining principle of politics. Authority is a competence based upon skill, learning, talent, artistry, or some similar attribute. Inevitably it leads to distinctions between those who are superior and those who are not. A meritocracy is made up of those who have earned their authority. An unjust meritocracy is one which makes these distinctions invidious and demeans those below.

Rawls has said that the most fundamental good of all is self-respect. But the English sociologist W. G. Runciman has made a useful distinction between respect and praise. While all men are entitled to respect, they are not all entitled to praise.<sup>18</sup> The meritocracy, in the best meaning of that word, is made up of those worthy of praise. They are the men who are best in their field, as judged by their peers.

And just as some individuals are worthy of praise, so are certain institutions—e.g., those engaged in the cultivation of achievement, the institutions of science and scholarship, culture and learning. The university is dedicated to the authority of scholarship and learning and to the transmission of knowledge from those who are competent to those who are capable. There is no reason why a university cannot be a meritocracy, without impairing the esteem of other institutions. There is every reason why a university has to be a meritocracy if the resources of the society—for research, for scholarship, for learning—are to be spent for “mutual advantage,” and if a degree of culture is to prevail.

And there is no reason why the principle of meritocracy should not obtain in business and government as well. One wants entrepreneurs and innovators who can expand the amount of productive wealth for society. One wants men in political office who can

<sup>18</sup>W. G. Runciman, “‘Social’ Equality,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, XVII (1967), reprinted in his *Sociology In Its Place* (London, 1970).

govern well. The quality of life in any society is determined, in considerable measure, by the quality of leadership. A society that does not have its best men at the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and moral absurdity.

Nor is this in contradiction with the fairness principle. One can acknowledge, as I would, the priority of the disadvantaged (with all its difficulty of definition) as an axiom of social policy, without diminishing the opportunity for the best to rise to the top through work and effort. The principles of merit, achievement, and universalism are, it seems to me, the necessary foundations for a productive—and cultivated—society. What is important is that the society, to the fullest extent possible, be a genuinely open one.

The question of justice arises when those at the top can convert their authority positions into large, discrepant material and social advantages over others. The sociological problem, then, is how far this convertibility is possible. In every society, there are three fundamental realms of hierarchy—wealth, power, and status. In bourgeois society, wealth could buy power and deference. In aristocratic society, status could command power and wealth (through marriage). In military and estate societies, power could command wealth and status. Today it is uncertain whether the exact relations between the three any longer hold: Income and wealth (even when combined with corporate power) rarely command prestige (who knows the names or can recognize the faces of the heads of Standard Oil, American Telephone, or General Motors?); political office does not make a man wealthy; high status (and professors rank among the highest in prestige rankings) does not provide wealth or power. Nor does the existence of a meritocracy preclude the use of other routes—particularly politics—to high position and power in the society.

But even within the realms the differences are being tempered; and the politics of contemporary society makes this even more likely in the future. Wealth allows a few to enjoy what many cannot have; but this difference can—and will—be mitigated by a social minimum. Power (not authority) allows some men to exercise domination over others; but in the polity at large, and in most institutions, such unilateral power is increasingly checked. The most difficult of all disparities is the one of status, for what is at stake is the desire to be different and to *enjoy* the disparity. With his usual acuteness, Rousseau observed: “[It is] the universal desire for reputation, honors and preferences, which devours us all, trains and compares talents and strengths . . . stimulates and multiplies passions; and making

all men competitors, rivals or rather enemies how many reverses, successes and catastrophes of all kinds it causes. . . .”

Yet, if vanity—or ego—can never be erased, one can still observe the equality of respect due to all and the differential degree of praise owed to some. As Runciman puts it, “a society in which all inequalities of prestige or esteem were inequalities of praise would to this extent be just.” It is in this sense that we can acknowledge differences between individuals. It is to that extent that a well-tempered meritocracy can be a society not of equals, but of the just.