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Winners and Losers

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

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

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

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

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

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

DIAGNOSING POPULIST DISCONTENT

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

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

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

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

TECHNOCRACY AND MARKET-FRIENDLY GLOBALIZATION

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

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

It is not difficult to see how the technocratic faith in markets set the stage for populist discontent. The market-driven version of globalization brought growing inequality. It also devalued national identities and allegiances. As goods and capital flowed freely across national borders, those who stood astride the global economy valorized cosmopolitan identities as a progressive, enlightened alternative to the narrow, parochial ways of protectionism, tribalism, and conflict. The real political divide, they argued, was no longer left versus right but open versus closed. This implied that critics of outsourcing, free-trade agreements, and unrestricted capital flows were closed-minded rather than open-minded, tribal rather than global. [1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE RHETORIC OF RISING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE MERITOCRATIC ETHIC

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

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

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

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

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

A lively sense of the contingency of our lot conduces to a certain humility: “There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of fortune, go I.” But a perfect meritocracy banishes all sense of gift or grace. It diminishes our capacity to see ourselves as sharing a common fate. It leaves little room for the solidarity that can arise when we reflect on the contingency of our talents and fortunes. This is what makes merit a kind of tyranny, or unjust rule.

THE POLITICS OF HUMILIATION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

TECHNOCRATIC MERIT AND MORAL JUDGMENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE POPULIST UPRISING

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

“Great Because Good”:

A BRIEF MORAL HISTORY OF MERIT

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

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

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

WHY MERIT MATTERS

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

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

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

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

Even the phrase "our lot in life" draws on a moral vocabulary that suggests certain limits to unbridled responsibility. To speak of one's "lot" suggests the drawing of lots, a result determined by fate, fortune, or divine providence, not our own effort. [1] It points beyond merit and choice to the realm of luck and chance, or on some accounts, grace. This reminds us that the most consequential early debates about merit were not about income and jobs but about God's favor: Is it something we earn or receive as a gift?

A COSMIC MERITOCRACY

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

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

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

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

Second, this meritocratic way of thinking gives rise to harsh attitudes toward those who suffer misfortune. The more acute the suffering, the greater the suspicion that the victim has brought it on himself. Recall the book of Job. A just and righteous man, Job is subjected to unspeakable pain and suffering, including the death of his sons and daughters in a storm. Ever faithful to God, Job cannot fathom why such suffering has been visited upon him. (He does not realize that he is the victim of a cosmic wager, in which God seeks to prove to Satan that Job's faith will not waver, whatever hardship he encounters.)

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

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

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

SALVATION AND SELF-HELP

The question of merit reappears in Christian debates about salvation: Can the faithful earn salvation through religious observance and good works, or is God entirely free to decide whom to save, regardless of how people live their lives? [6] The first option seems more just, as it rewards goodness and punishes sin. But theologically, it poses a problem, for it calls into question God's omnipotence. If salvation is something we can earn and therefore deserve, then God is bound, so to speak, to recognize our merit. Salvation becomes at least partly a matter of self-help, and this implies a limit to God's infinite power.

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

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

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

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

Despite Augustine's insistence on salvation by grace alone, the practices of the Church brought merit back in. Rites and rituals—baptism, prayer, attending Mass, performing the sacraments—cannot persist for long without prompting a sense of efficacy among the participants. It is not easy to sustain the belief that faithful religious observance and good works do not win God's favor or generate merit in his eyes. When faith is embodied in outward observance, mediated and reinforced by a complex array of Church practices, a theology of gratitude and grace slides, almost inevitably, toward a theology of pride and self-help. This at least is how Martin Luther viewed the Roman Church of his time, eleven centuries after Augustine had inveighed against salvation by merit.

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

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

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

The Calvinist doctrine of predestination created unbearable suspense. It is not hard to see why. If you believe that your place in the afterlife is more important than anything you care about in this world, you desperately want to know whether you are among the elect or the damned. But God does not announce this in advance. We cannot tell by observing people's conduct who is chosen and who is damned. The elect are “God’s invisible Church.” [14]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PROVIDENTIAL THINKING: THEN AND NOW

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ethic of mastery, by contrast, puts "human choice at the center of the spiritual order."[24] This does not imply a renunciation of God but a recasting of his providential role. Lears shows that the ethic of mastery and control emerges from within evangelical Protestantism, and eventually predominates. It brings a shift from "a covenant of grace to what Luther had reviled, a covenant of works." By the mid-eighteenth century, "the works in question were not sacred rituals (as in traditional Catholicism), but secular moral strivings."[25] But those secular strivings still derived their virtue from a providential plan.

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

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

Lears assesses the moral and civic damage in stark terms:

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

The providentialist notion that people get what they deserve reverberates in contemporary public discourse. It comes in two versions—one hubristic, the other punitive. Both versions assert a demanding notion of responsibility for our fate, be it prosperous or calamitous. The financial crisis of 2008 produced a notable example of providential hubris. Risky and greedy behavior by Wall Street banks had brought the global economy to the brink of meltdown, requiring a massive taxpayer bailout. Even as homeowners and Main Street businesses struggled to recover, leading Wall Street bankers were soon paying themselves tens of billions of dollars in bonuses. Asked how he could defend such lavish pay in the face of public outrage, Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, replied that he and his fellow bankers were "doing God's work." [29]

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

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

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

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

HEALTH AND WEALTH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The harsh face of prosperity gospel thinking can be seen in the debate about health care. [43] When Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress attempted to repeal and replace Obamacare, most argued that their market-friendly alternative would increase competition and reduce costs, while protecting people with pre-existing conditions. But Mo Brooks, a conservative Republican congressman from Alabama, made a different argument. He acknowledged that the Republican plan would require those with greater health needs to pay more. But this was a virtue, not a vice, because it would reward those who led good lives. Allowing insurance companies to charge higher premiums to those with higher health care costs was not only cost-effective but morally justified. Higher premiums for the sick would reduce the cost “to those people who lead good lives, they’re healthy, they've done the things to keep their bodies healthy. And right now, those are the people—who've done things the right way—that are seeing their costs skyrocketing." [44]

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

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

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

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

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

LIBERAL PROVIDENTIALISM

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

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

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

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

The slogan itself is relatively recent. The first president to use it was Dwight D. Eisenhower, who attributed it, mistakenly, to Alexis de Tocqueville, author of the classic work *Democracy in America* . Speaking in 1953, Eisenhower cited "a wise French visitor who came to America" seeking the source of America's success. Eisenhower quoted the visitor as follows: "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good—and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”[48]

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

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

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

THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is clear from the rest of the lyrics that the poet intends the first meaning, a prayer for God's grace. The next line makes this clear. It does not say that God “crowned” thy good with brotherhood; it expresses the hope that he will do so.

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

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

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

> *America! America!*
> *God done shed His grace on thee. Oh yes he did.*
> *And crowned thy good—I doubt you remember—saving brotherhood,*
> *From sea to shining sea.* [70]

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