

CONCLUSION:

MERIT AND THE COMMON GOOD

Henry Aaron, one of baseball's greatest players, grew up in the segregated South. His biographer, Howard Bryant, describes how, as a young boy, "Henry would watch as his father was forced to surrender his place in line at the general store to any whites who entered." When Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color line, Henry, then thirteen years old, was inspired to believe that he, too, could play one day in the Major Leagues. Lacking a bat and ball, he practiced with what he had, using a stick to hit bottle caps pitched to him by his brother. He would go on to break Babe Ruth's career record for home runs.¹

In a poignant observation, Bryant writes, "Hitting, it could be argued, represented the first meritocracy in Henry's life."²

It is hard to read this line without loving meritocracy, without seeing it as the ultimate answer to injustice—a vindication of talent over prejudice, racism, and unequal opportunity. And from this thought, it is a small step to the conclusion that a just society is a meritocratic one, in which everyone has an equal chance to rise as far as their talent and hard work will take them.

But this is a mistake. The moral of Henry Aaron's story is not that we should love meritocracy but that we should despise a system of racial

injustice that can only be escaped by hitting home runs. Equality of opportunity is a morally necessary corrective to injustice. But it is a remedial principle, not an adequate ideal for a good society.

BEYOND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

It is not easy to keep hold of this distinction. Inspired by the heroic rise of a few, we ask how others might also be enabled to escape the conditions that weigh them down. Rather than repair the conditions that people want to flee, we construct a politics that makes mobility the answer to inequality.

Breaking down barriers is a good thing. No one should be held back by poverty or prejudice. But a good society cannot be premised only on the promise of escape.

Focusing only, or mainly, on rising does little to cultivate the social bonds and civic attachments that democracy requires. Even a society more successful than ours at providing upward mobility would need to find ways to enable those who do not rise to flourish in place, and to see themselves as members of a common project. Our failure to do so makes life hard for those who lack meritocratic credentials and makes them doubt that they belong.

It is often assumed that the only alternative to equality of opportunity is a sterile, oppressive equality of results. But there is another alternative: a broad equality of condition that enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity—developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem, sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning, and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs.

Two of the best accounts of equality of condition appeared in the midst of the Depression. In a book entitled *Equality* (1931), R. H. Tawney, a British economic historian and social critic, argued that equality of opportunity is at best a partial ideal. “Opportunities to ‘rise,’” he wrote, “are not a substitute for a large measure of practical equality, nor do they make immaterial the existence of sharp disparities of income and social condition.”³

Social well-being . . . depends upon cohesion and solidarity. It implies the existence, not merely of opportunities to ascend, but of a high level of general culture, and a strong sense of common interests. . . . Individual happiness does not only require that men should be free to rise to new positions of comfort and distinction; it also requires that they should be able to lead a life of dignity and culture, whether they rise or not.⁴

In the same year, across the Atlantic, a writer named James Truslow Adams wrote a paean to his country entitled *The Epic of America*. Few recall the book, but everyone knows the phrase he coined in its closing pages: "the American dream." Looking back from our time, it would be easy to equate his account of the American dream with our rhetoric of rising. America's "distinctive and unique gift to mankind," Adams wrote, was the dream "of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement."⁵

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.⁶

But a closer reading reveals that the dream Adams described was not only about moving up; it was about achieving a broad, democratic equality of condition. As a concrete example, he pointed to the U.S. Library of Congress, "a symbol of what democracy can accomplish on its own behalf," a place of public learning that drew Americans from all walks of life:

As one looks down on the general reading room, which alone contains ten thousand volumes which may be read without even the asking, one sees the seats filled with silent readers, old and young, rich and poor, black and white, the executive and the laborer, the

general and the private, the noted scholar and the schoolboy, all reading at their own library provided by their own democracy.⁷

Adams considered this scene “to be a perfect working out in a concrete example of the American dream—the means provided by the accumulated resources of the people themselves, [and] a public intelligent enough to use them.” If this example could be “carried out in all departments of our national life,” Adams wrote, the American dream would become “an abiding reality.”⁸

DEMOCRACY AND HUMILITY

We do not have much equality of condition today. Public spaces that gather people together across class, race, ethnicity, and faith are few and far between. Four decades of market-driven globalization has brought inequalities of income and wealth so pronounced that they lead us into separate ways of life. Those who are affluent and those of modest means rarely encounter one another in the course of the day. We live and work and shop and play in different places; our children go to different schools. And when the meritocratic sorting machine has done its work, those on top find it hard to resist the thought that they deserve their success and that those on the bottom deserve their place as well. This feeds a politics so poisonous and a partisanship so intense that many now regard marriage across party lines as more troubling than marrying outside the faith. It is little wonder we have lost the ability to reason together about large public questions, or even to listen to one another.

Merit began its career as the empowering idea that we can, through work and faith, bend God’s grace in our favor. The secular version of this idea made for an exhilarating promise of individual freedom: Our fate is in our hands. We can make it if we try.

But this vision of freedom points us away from the obligations of a shared democratic project. Recall the two conceptions of the common good we considered in chapter 7, the consumerist and the civic. If the common

good consists simply in maximizing the welfare of consumers, then achieving an equality of condition does not matter in the end. If democracy is simply economics by other means, a matter of adding up our individual interests and preferences, then its fate does not depend on the moral bonds of citizens. A consumerist conception of democracy can do its limited work whether we share a vibrant common life or inhabit privatized enclaves in the company of our own kind.

But if the common good can be arrived at only by deliberating with our fellow citizens about the purposes and ends worthy of our political community, then democracy cannot be indifferent to the character of the common life. It does not require perfect equality. But it does require that citizens from different walks of life encounter one another in common spaces and public places. For this is how we learn to negotiate and abide our differences. And this is how we come to care for the common good.⁹

The meritocratic conviction that people deserve whatever riches the market bestows on their talents makes solidarity an almost impossible project. For why do the successful owe anything to the less-advantaged members of society? The answer to this question depends on recognizing that, for all our striving, we are not self-made and self-sufficient; finding ourselves in a society that prizes our talents is our good fortune, not our due. A lively sense of the contingency of our lot can inspire a certain humility: "There, but for the grace of God, or the accident of birth, or the mystery of fate, go I." Such humility is the beginning of the way back from the harsh ethic of success that drives us apart. It points beyond the tyranny of merit toward a less rancorous, more generous public life.