Following are three book reviews of The Meritocracy Trap circulated for UAA Book Club members to read before the meeting:

Book Review: The Meritocracy Trap by Daniel Markovits

Phil Bell
March 30th, 2020

In **The Meritocracy Trap**, **Daniel Markovits** *argues that rather than aiding social mobility, the concept of meritocracy has become the single greatest obstacle to equal opportunities in the United States today. This provocative book marshals extensive evidence to show the tenacity of meritocracy's narrative pull and how easy it is to get entangled in its logic, writes* **Phil Bell**, *yet its diagnosis is more compelling than its proposed solutions.*

***The Meritocracy Trap*. Daniel Markovits. Penguin Press. 2019.**

Meritocracy is a reliable story. In *The Meritocracy Trap*, Daniel Markovits argues that this endlessly repeated cultural script is damaging partly because it is so consistent. The term 'meritocracy', where society is governed based on achievement, was coined by Michael Young in 1958 as a warning. Since then it has become the overwhelming organising principle of our education system and job market, leading to a proliferation of testing, a premium on college education and a fetishisation of credentials. Markovits's *The Meritocracy Trap* is a radical critique of this logic and the institutions it has created. Meritocracy is seen by many as fair but, according to Markovits, it is more than counterproductive. Indeed, 'meritocracy has become the single greatest obstacle to equal opportunities in America today.'

The Meritocracy Trap is based on the author's long-time personal experience of meritocracy as a Professor at Yale Law School and he sees the US as an extreme example of a broader global phenomenon. He marshals extensive evidence, from both interviews and academic research from numerous disciplines, referenced in detailed endnotes, to make a polemical case.

Markovits lays out substantial evidence to show that parenting and the education system are stacked in favour of the elites, guaranteeing their offspring human capital. This, he argues, is now more important than inheriting property or financial assets, because it reaps even more significant dividends. An elite education, which involves admission to a top preschool, a private secondary school, university and then graduate school, will likely confer an elite job with a six-figure salary. This investment in education, Markovits calculates, should earn an individual $10 million over their lifetime.

Markovits's heroes are the middle class, the people who defined mid-century American social mobility but are now expelled from the 'charismatic centre of economic and social life' by meritocracy. In contrast to the British usage of this term, he uses middle class to encompass 'working people without formal degrees or professions': for example, a 'unionised auto worker.'

Education is the key division between the middle class and elites. The middle class have not benefited from the substitution of in-work training by college education and the proliferation of job applications and job interviews, which have served to fetishise credentials and to benefit elites. St Clair Shores, a town in Michigan, was a microcosm of Markovits's mid-century middle-class ideal. In this suburban town near Detroit, 18-year-olds were once hired by one of three big automakers for $100 per week (equivalent to $40,000 a year now). Without needing a degree from high school, a college degree or endless job applications, they were given unionised jobs and trained as tool and die makers. They could expect salaries to rise to up to $100,000 per year, with benefits. Meritocracy now suppresses this sort of opportunity and aspiration, Markovits argues.

However, in contrast to traditional analyses of inequality, Markovits sees highly skilled people on high incomes as equally consumed by meritocracy's trap. Markovits talks to corporate lawyers who work 120-hour weeks and are under high pressure to maintain their place in the meritocratic system. Elites are really 'high class conscripts'. However, Markovits goes further, arguing that '8 of 10 richest Americans today owe their wealth […] to compensation earned through entrepreneurial or managerial labor.' Though these meritocrats primarily gain their wealth through wages, the extraordinary size of their salaries fuels inequality. Markovits's analysis differs from other analyses of inequality, such as the equation at the heart of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*: 'R>G' (when return on investment is greater than economic growth, this creates runaway inequality). Markovits does not emphasise the fact that, though high wages are earned, they are also multiplied through the mechanism Piketty articulates, creating inordinate wealth.

Crucially, though, the extraordinary work ethic of elites has changed the way inequality is justified. Meritocracy 'frames disadvantage in terms of individual defects of skill and effort' which serves to 'dissolve resistance' and leads to a 'politics of humiliation', where an inability to get a job or pay the rent is seen as a personal failure rather than a structural flaw. The suppressed anger this generates, in turn, opens the door to reactionary populist narratives that vilify meritocratic elites for self-serving hypocrisy and 'in particular [… their] embrace of a multi-cultural elite', given their unwillingness to acknowledge the unfairness of a credentialised meritocratic system. Cue Donald Trump's famous line: 'I love the poorly educated.' Markovits also takes a different tack to those scholars who have written that the so-called 'skills biased technological change' will mean an inevitable hollowing out of middle-income jobs. This is all part of the plan, Markovits provocatively argues:

The appearance of super-skilled finance workers *induced* the innovations that then favoured their elite skills. A rising supply of meritocrats stimulates its own demand.

In other words, meritocrats are bending the skills needed for elite jobs in their favour.

Markovits shows the tenacity of meritocracy's narrative pull and how easy it is to get entangled in its logic. He also demonstrates that our university and job admissions processes are in a bind. They simultaneously respect merit, but also recognise that merit is not a fair assessment. Markovits writes of groups of underrepresented university students that 'meritocracy possesses such ideological power that these groups cannot decide whether to aim to bring down the class

structure or to ease their members' paths into the elite'. His analysis forces us to ask challenging questions: is education really a force for social mobility? Is affirmative action actually feeding into meritocracy's all-pervasive logic?

Given how radical Markovits's critique is, his solutions are surprisingly tame. The first reform dimension Markovits proposes is to make the education system fairer. Education 'must become open and inclusive', admissions 'less competitive' and 'training less all-consuming'. Private schools and universities should lose tax-exempt status and Ivy League schools should be 'doubling enrolments (drawing new students mostly from outside the elite)'. Secondly, 'a parallel agenda' would seek to rebalance the economy back in favour of 'mid-skilled production': for example, boosting jobs for 'nurse-practitioners' rather than doctors. This would involve wage subsidies for middle-class jobs and tax incentives, especially getting rid of the payroll tax (the 12.4 per cent tax on a person's first $132,900 of wages that funds social security), which makes middle-class labour more highly taxed. These two prongs of policy show that 'the rich and the rest cannot escape the meritocracy trap except jointly'.

This prognosis does not seem to follow from the analytical diagnosis offered in the preceding chapters. Markovits powerfully lays out that meritocracy itself is the trap. He argues that the knowledge economy is being curated by elites to exclude the middle class. However, none of these solutions decisively breaks with the power of meritocracy's narrative. Indeed, it is not enough to provide policy solutions alone. Markovits has pointed out the power relations that shape the structural nature of meritocratic inequality, but his theory of how to change this offers no comment on power. He observes that 'Policymakers [should…] always attend to how their choices will impact the balance between elite and middle-class jobs', but he provides no explanation of the political forces necessary to make this change.

He does point out in the postscript to the UK edition that the UK Labour Party, under Jeremy Corbyn, shifted from talking about social mobility to social justice. But Markovits does not go into detail about what this may mean, or comment on the steps necessary to make this happen. How can we, as a society, compose non-meritocratic cultural scripts about self-worth, when the institutions which shape these narratives are run by meritocrats? Though Markovits provides a compelling list of policies, this is just solutionism that evades the problem so persuasively detailed in the book: that meritocracy is a system deliberately designed to prevent social mobility.

The Meritocracy Trap is a provocative book that views inequality and social mobility through a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary perspective. It offers challenging arguments to the traditional way in which the inequality story is told. Given how compelling this is, therefore, it is disappointing that a path to transforming meritocracy is not investigated with the author's own theoretical framework in mind.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2020/03/30/book-review-the-meritocracy-trap-by-daniel-markovits/

“The Meritocracy Trap,” explained

A new book outlines how meritocracy imprisons us all.

By Roge Karma Oct 24, 2019, 8:40am EDT

Meritocracy is such an intuitive concept that defining it feels redundant. It is the idea that social and economic rewards should track talent, effort, and achievement. Spots at the most prestigious educational institutions should go to the smartest kids; positions at the highest-paying firms should be given to the most-skilled workers. While the term “meritocracy” was first coined just over 60 years ago, it has become so deeply ingrained into our collective ethos that it is hard to imagine a just society organized any other way.

It is not surprising, then, that most criticism of meritocracy is made by those who accept its basic principles. Earlier this year, the story broke of a far-reaching college admissions scandal involving at least 50 super-rich parents who essentially bribed their children’s way into elite colleges and universities. In a rare moment of national bipartisanship, voices from across the political spectrum reacted in outrage to this revelation.

The incident was a reminder that even the most critical commentary often focuses on the fact that our so-called meritocracy is not quite meritocratic enough; entrance into the ranks of the elite is still rigged in favor of the wealthy and privileged at the expense of the most intelligent and hardest working.

This is what we can think of as the *aspirational* critique of meritocracy. It posits that the problem with our current system isn’t the ideal of meritocracy itself but our collective failure to live up to that ideal. If only we could replace the forces of aristocracy, oligarchy, and corruption with a genuine meritocracy, then we would have a just and equal society.

There is also a *principled* critique of meritocracy, although it is far less common. Principled critics argue that any society where socioeconomic reward is based on the principle of “merit” itself is inherently unjust. For them, the ideal of meritocracy is flawed and must be replaced either by radical egalitarianism or a return to aristocracy.

Aspirational critics tend to dominate the meritocracy debate. Clear violations of meritocratic principles evoke bipartisan public backlash. Attempts to make the meritocratic ladder more fair and accessible — such as need-blind admission policies and nondiscriminatory hiring practices — are commonplace. The “American Dream” is itself a meritocratic notion of rising from rags to riches on hard work and talent alone.

This is what makes Daniel Markovits’s new book *The Meritocracy Trap* so fascinating. At its core, *The Meritocracy Trap* is a comprehensive — and rather scathing — critique of the aspirational view. Markovits argues that meritocracy itself is the problem: It produces radical inequality, stifles social mobility, and makes everyone — including the apparent winners —

miserable. These are not symptoms of systemic malfunction; they are the products of a system that is working exactly as it is supposed to.

At the same time, Markovits refuses to reject meritocracy altogether. He instead offers a vision for completely reimagining it.

Meritocracy is the new face of inequality

Aspirational critics tend to believe that rising inequality since the 1970s is the product of insufficient meritocracy. Some argue that the American elite is functionally an old-fashioned aristocracy that owes its income to nepotism and opportunism. Others argue that the elite is functionally an oligarchy that owes its rising income to a shift away from labor and toward capital. According to this view, elites don't even need nepotism — they are using preexisting wealth and inheritance to rebuild an old-fashioned feudal class.

Markovits's analysis leads him to the opposite conclusion: Rising inequality is the product of meritocracy itself.

At midcentury, the super-rich really were a mix of oligarchs and aristocrats. In the 1950s and '60s, the richest 1 percent of earners received around three-quarters of their income from capital. Sociologist Thorstein Veblen called elites at the time a "leisure class" because they rarely worked and instead spent their days mastering nonproductive tasks as social signifiers of their wealth. Those who did work, for instance, as managers, partners at law firms, and bankers, worked relatively few hours. All the while, ordinary working people toiled for long, strenuous hours just to make a decent living.

This is no longer the case. As Markovits explained in an interview with Vox's Ezra Klein:

Fifty, 60, 70 years ago, you could tell how poor somebody was by how hard they worked. Today, that relationship has been completely reversed. Elites work for a living. They work harder than they used to. They work harder in terms of brute hours than the middle class on average, and they get most of their income by working.

This isn't an exaggeration. A Harvard Business Review survey found that 62 percent of high-earning individuals work over 50 hours a week, more than a third work over 60 hours a week, and one in 10 work over 80 hours a week. According to Markovits, elites today work an average of 12 more hours per week than middle-class workers (the equivalent of 1.5 additional workdays).

The rich are also more skilled than ever. Students from the top 1 percent of households overwhelmingly dominate elite colleges and universities, despite the fact that bribery and nepotism are much less the norm.

The rich today are no longer an indolent "leisure class" but what Markovits calls a "superordinate" working class: they work harder, longer, and perform more high-skilled work

than ever before. As a result, Markovits calculates that three-quarters of elite income now originates from labor rather than inherited capital.

A foundational assumption of the aspirational critique is that a more fully meritocratic society is also a more equal one. But Markovits's analysis leads to the opposite conclusion: Skyrocketing inequality has taken place on meritocracy's own terms.

When meritocracy wins, everybody loses

This leads us to Markovits's second critique of the aspirational view: The cycle that produces meritocratic inequality severely harms not only the middle class but the very elite who seem to benefit most from it.

Meritocratic inequality works like this: First, elite workers acquire super-skilled jobs, displacing middle-class labor from the center of economic production. Then, those elite workers use their massive incomes to monopolize elite education for their children, ensuring that their offspring are more qualified to dominate high-skilled industries than their middle-class counterparts. The cycle continues, generating what Markovits calls "snowball inequality": a compounding feedback loop that amplifies economic inequality, dramatically suppresses social mobility, and creates a "time divide" between an elite class whose members work longer and longer (due to a higher demand for their talents) and an increasingly idle middle class (whose work has been made redundant).

The most obvious victim of this cycle is the middle class. Forced idleness excludes the middle class from a feeling of social usefulness. Stagnating wages and rising debt levels exclude the middle class from socioeconomic prosperity. Diminishing social mobility excludes the middle class from the hope of achieving the American Dream.

At the same time that meritocratic inequality excludes the middle class, meritocratic ideology convinces the middle class that this situation is their own fault. "The meritocracy trap," writes Markovits, "imprisons the imagination, casting economic exclusion as an individual failure to measure up."

The impact of this exclusion itself is impossible to measure, but increasing meritocratic inequality has coincided with the opioid epidemic, a sharp increase in "deaths of despair," and an unprecedented fall in life expectancy concentrated in poor and middle-class communities.

Meritocracy harms the elite as well. Life for the meritocratic elite is dominated by work. Substantial numbers of elites report that their work interferes with their health, prevents them from forming strong relationships with their children, gets in the way of good relationships with their spouses, and even makes it harder to have a satisfying sex life.

Most perniciously, meritocracy turns life for the elite into an endless competition. The meritocratic race begins in early childhood (the most competitive preschools admit fewer than 10 percent of applicants), continues into the teenage years (college admissions are more competitive than ever) and then extends into the workplace (elite workplaces employ "up or out" promotion

policies to cull underperformers and separate workers of the same rank into performance-based tiers).

In order to win this competition, elites are forced to exploit their own talents and abilities. They spend their lives acquiring the degrees, skills, attitudes, and habits (i.e. "human capital") that makes them valuable to elite educational institutions and employers. In doing so, elites, Markovits writes, transform themselves into "asset manager[s] whose portfolio contains [their] own persons." This process damages the very identity of its participants.

[Elites] become constituted by their achievements, so that eliteness goes from being something that a person enjoys to being everything that he is. In a mature meritocracy, schools and jobs dominate elite life so immersively that they leave no self apart from status.

In short, elites are shuttled into a life-long, endless competition that not only consumes their life quantitatively but qualitatively as well, leaving no room for self-expression, actualization, or discovery — only self-exploitation, value extraction, and endless anxiety.

Worse yet, the same habits, values, attitudes, and skills that make elites so valuable in school and at work damage life outside of those institutions. Klein and Markovits discuss this in their interview:

Ezra Klein

The meritocracy ... starts when you're young and have the space for it, but then it shapes your personality. You develop certain energies and addictions and ways to deal with your own anxiety about your own worth that becomes embedded into you as a person. That seems poisonous to me.

Daniel Markovits

I think that's right. Also, it's a skill to know how to deploy your time successfully at any activity and elites have trained themselves to do that to be successful at work. But it's also a skill to deploy your time successfully at nonproductive things: to have a hobby or a drawn out Sunday afternoon casually with family or friends. It's not just that elites are addicted to work. It's that they don't have the skill [of leisure].

There's this phrase you sometimes hear among elites about "quality time" with children. But maybe what children and families need is just quantity time -- time devoted to the project of spending time together. "Quality time" has this idea that there's some external project. It [allows elites] to remake the home on the model of work as opposed to developing the skill of spending hours meandering around human beings in a family.

That's a skill that it's very hard to develop if you're a member of the elite who from the beginning of school has been taught how to make every minute have a payoff. It's hard to shift over and learn how to make minutes not have payoffs.

As a former management consultant, I couldn't help but resonate with these words. Over the course of just a year, I watched my close personal relationships, my mental health, and my self-worth crumble under the weight of 16-hour days, a hyper-competitive payscale, and a never-off-the-clock mentality.

Along with Markovits, I will happily concede that the elite are "no objects of sympathy." But while life at the top might be materially glamorous, it can also be a spiritual and psychological nightmare that leaves no part of one's existence unscathed. When Markovits writes that meritocracy "fundamentally remakes elite life," he means it in the most dystopian sense.

This is the fundamental flaw of the aspirational critique. It assumes that a meritocracy that genuinely rewards the best and the brightest will leave everyone better off. That couldn't be further from the truth: When meritocracy is realized, misery abounds.

Down with the meritocracy?

Clearly, Markovits is no fan of the meritocracy, though he isn't willing to go so far as to reject it outright. At one point in their conversation, Klein asks whether there is some version of the meritocracy that Markovits would accept or if the very notion of merit-based competition needs to be thrown out altogether. Markovits's response is telling.

You have to be right that the best society is one where people get ahead by being good at things that are worth doing. And that sounds like a kind of meritocracy. On the other hand, one of the essential features of the sort of meritocracy we have today is intensive competition. … The kind of system that I want is one where social and economic life advantages are given to people who are "good enough" at the thing that they're doing to be socially useful.

What Markovits is striving for is not an aspirational affirmation of the meritocratic ideal nor a principled rejection of merit, but a rethinking of meritocracy's own standard of success. When we think of meritocracy, we tend to think of "the best and the brightest" being rewarded, but Markovits wants to introduce a new version of meritocracy where being "the best" is far less important than being simply "good enough."

In other words, Markovits wants to move us away from a *polarized* meritocracy — one characterized by a massive skill-and-reward gap between elite workers and other workers — to a *compressed* meritocracy defined by broad, shared prosperity between mid-skilled workers. As Markovits describes to Klein:

We should favor ways of organizing our social and economic life so things that are socially productive are more nearly equally rewarded. And we should pick ways of making things, ways of delivering services, ways of running schooling that don't skew achievement so far at the very top. … We could organize finance so that the middle of the skill distribution, the old home loan officer, is the dominant worker. We could organize medicine in such a way that the difference between the specialist doctor, the nurse practitioner, and the pharmacist is relatively small and most health care is delivered by people in the middle of the skill distribution. ... The core thing to

do is to find policies both in education and the labor market that recompress the distribution of economic roles.

The idea behind a compressed meritocracy is simple: to open meritocracy's gates to a broader portion of the population and, in doing so, make life within those gates more palatable. A more egalitarian distribution of working hours, incomes, and social esteem would not only give dignity to the middle class but diminish the heavy burden on elites. A more open and inclusive higher education system would not only increase social mobility for the middle class but reduce the hypercompetitive pressures that dominate elite life. A more egalitarian meritocracy would be a better meritocracy for all.

Markovits's modest policy recommendations for compressing American meritocracy fall well short of a comprehensive agenda. But the value of *The Meritocracy Trap* is not to give us a roadmap out of our current circumstances; it is to allow us to see our current situation for what it really is. For better or worse, meritocracy is the water all of us swim in. We implicitly accept its values, practices, arguments, and assumptions because they govern our everyday lives. This book is an opportunity for all of us to step out of the water and perhaps conclude that the meritocracy we have built is failing us.

At the same time, *The Meritocracy Trap* reminds us that we need not throw away the notion of meritocracy altogether. To build a world that is simultaneously democratic, egalitarian, *and* meritocratic may be a difficult task, but not an impossible one.

Content by Vox

https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/10/24/20919030/meritocracy-book-daniel-markovits-inequality-rich

Is Meritocracy to Blame for Our Yawning Class Divide?

THE MERITOCRACY TRAP
How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite
By Daniel Markovits

By Thomas Frank, Sept. 10, 2019

For affluent, white-collar Americans, higher learning is something close to sacred. We bask in the sunshine of enlightenment that prestige universities radiate and we speak of them in the language of dreams, of religious veneration. They are the foe of much that is evil and the source of a lot that is good. More and better education, we like to believe, will solve climate denialism, overcome bigotry and even mitigate our grotesque income inequality.

But now comes Daniel Markovits, a professor at Yale Law School, to tell us that far from solving economic inequality, higher education is one of the central forces *driving* our yawning class divide. In this ambitious and disturbing survey of the American upper class, he tells us that our elite universities' sifting and sorting of human beings has helped to herd Americans into a system of rank and status and — yes — caste that is now so clearly passed from parent to child that its most privileged beneficiaries might as well be called an "aristocracy." Indirectly and along the way, the hierarchy thus constructed has drained the promise from middle-class life and sparked a backlash from the vast presumed unexcellent whom our cult of white-collar achievement has left behind.

Top universities are the central but not only element of what Markovits calls "The Meritocracy Trap." Meritocracy is also the name for the hiring system used by America's elite law, tech and finance firms, which recruit the most elite graduates of our most elite schools and turn them into millionaires. Meritocracy is what we call the well-traveled roads connecting Harvard with Wall Street and Stanford with Silicon Valley.

On the surface, meritocracy seems fair, but in reality, Markovits writes, what we call merit is "a pretense, constructed to rationalize an unjust distribution of advantage." If you know what you're doing and if you have enough money to spend on expensive tutors and prep schools, the meritocracy is easily gamed — which basically ensures that people who are rich because they went to a fancy school will have kids who will also go to fancy schools and thus also become rich. In this way and over the years, meritocracy has become the opposite of what it purports to be: It is "a mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth, privilege and caste across generations."

The results are ugly but undeniable. At two Ivy League colleges, the author tells us, data collected by students suggests that "the share of students from households in the top quintile of the income distribution exceeds the share from the bottom two quintiles combined by a ratio of

about three and a half to one." At other elite schools, "more students come from families in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half."

The concentration of rich kids, Markovits reports, is actually increasing as the white-collar class gets richer and more proficient at the admissions game — even as prestigious colleges renounce old policies of favoritism for legacy applicants. About the Ivy League's recent embrace of diversity, he doesn't have much to say, but apparently that, too, has done little to slow the march of the entitled 1 percent.

Markovits does find a way to compare the scholarly results of this new class system with racial inequality in the mid-20th century, declaring that today's "academic gap between rich and poor students now exceeds the gap between white and black students in 1954, the year in which the Supreme Court decided Brown v. Board of Education."

The middle class, broadly defined, is of course an outcast in the meritocracy, left behind in what Markovits calls "a stagnant, depleted and shrinking world." Once, perhaps, America's elite professional class served the general public, but today its members figure out how to replace local bankers through mortgage securitization and come up with clever ways to de-skill retail supply chains. With just about every recent meritocratic "innovation" Markovits studies, the winners turn out to be — surprise! — people already at the top of the meritocratic heap.

Rank-and-file Americans are aware that the vital life of the country has passed them by, and they sense also that thanks to their inability to gain admission to elite schools, they and their families are now an excluded people. Meanwhile, our mainstream media graciously flatters our highly educated ruling class for its good taste and advanced values, adding "a moral insult to the economic injury of middle-class stagnation." One result of this ugly math, Markovits suggests, is opioid addiction and premature death. Trumpist nativism is another.

There is something salutary and urgently necessary in the way the professor pounds his message home, with his statistics and charts and sickening Ivy League anecdotes, informing his right-thinking readers that the status of which they love to boast was purchased at the expense of our egalitarian ideals.

In some ways, however, Markovits pushes his thesis too hard. Yes, smug professionals sit atop our class system, but they aren't the only winners up there. There are also self-made oil billionaires, retail billionaires, real-estate billionaires and so on. Besides, to put the blame for inequality on the shoulders of the educated elite is to overlook the particular political deeds that decimated the middle class — among them, changes to the tax code that have had a marked plutocratic effect, the crushing of organized labor and the refusal of our nation's leaders over the years to enforce antitrust laws.

But in other ways Markovits doesn't go nearly far enough. When he squares off against the meritocratic elite, he keeps pulling his punches, assuring us that its members' educational credentials really are excellent, that their skills are real and that they work extremely hard. At times he even seems to lament the psychic toll that all that work takes on our white-collar professionals, as though one might simply persuade them to give up their system of privileges.

A more resolute critique would zero in on the fraud and folly and hubris that always seem to accompany the deeds of the best and the brightest. A fuller account of the last real-estate bubble and the global financial crisis would have been helpful here; or the story of the Wall Street bailouts, when one set of high-achieving professionals simply forgave the sins of another; or a comprehensive discussion of the 2016 presidential election, when the Democratic team of geniuses managed to lose to the most unpopular presidential candidate of all time.

The book's most unfortunate blind spot is the past. Markovits asserts that the oligarchic situation we are in today has "no historical precedent," by which he seems to mean there has never been a social order in which the people on top were there because they worked so hard and thus appeared to deserve what they had.

However, the idea that the economy rewards the able and the diligent — and that therefore the successful deserve their riches — is one of the oldest and most familiar of American illusions. Yes, our modern-day, SAT-based meritocracy seems more objective than do some earlier ways of rationalizing extreme inequality (Calvinism, for example), but it is not without precedent. Social Darwinism seemed like a scientific idea once. So did eugenics.

I bring this up because if we're going to do something about inequality, we need to recall that this country has confronted seemingly merit-based class systems before, and we have seen through their falsehoods, and we have taken them apart.

Until that day arrives, we have this book, which forcefully interrupts the comfortable bath of self-flattery in which our well-graduated professionals pass their hours. We are so enlightened, they tell one another; we care so very much; we wish we knew whom to blame for our toxic, embittered society — and Markovits drags them to the mirror and bids them open their eyes.

Thomas Frank is the author of "Listen, Liberal" and "Rendezvous With Oblivion."

https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/10/books/review/the-meritocracy-trap-daniel-markovits.html