

Social closure in American elite higher education

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Abstract Elite college admissions exemplify processes of social closure in which status-group conflict, organizational self-interest, the strategic use of cultural ideals of merit, and broader social trends and contingent historical events interweave to shape institutional power in the United States. *The Chosen*, Jerome Karabel's monumental study of the history of college admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton from 1900 to 2005, offers a political sociology of elite recruitment and a cultural and social history of the definition of merit that has guided these three schools and shaped much current thinking about college admissions. As Max Weber reminded us, the very definition of cultural ideals of an epoch bear the stamp of elite group domination: not cultural ideals but cultural interests and their strategic uses guide institutional power. The book provides an impressive empirical demonstration of that proposition: it identifies four different definitions of merit as organizational gatekeeping tools that have guided Harvard, Yale, and Princeton over the last hundred years and shows how these definitions were molded by status-group conflict and organizational interests. This essay outlines the central arguments of Karabel's book; it identifies key contributions for our understanding of the history, culture, organizational interests, and politics of these three institutions; it highlights the social closure framework guiding the analysis; and it reflects on a fundamental

A review essay on Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005,

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ambiguity in Karabel's thinking about meritocratic ideals as governing principles for modern stratified societies.

Social closure: "a process of subordination whereby one group monopolizes advantages by closing off opportunities to another group of outsiders beneath it which it defines as inferior and ineligible." (Murphy 1988:8)

Widely reviewed in the print and broadcast media, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jerome Karabel's book, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005), is, as one reviewer puts it, a "scholarly epic," the "big meta-academic book of the season." The scholarly community has been even more enthusiastic. Winner of numerous awards¹ crossing disciplinary and sub-disciplinary boundaries, *The Chosen* has achieved what few sociological works have been able to do: interweave seamlessly history, organization and institutional analysis, culture, education, and politics. Indeed, this monumental oeuvre of over 550 pages of text and another 115 pages of endnotes brings original contributions to each of these subfields in sociology. It seems only fitting that this work be reviewed in the pages of *Theory and Society*, where an early installment outlining the argument, the theoretical framework, and the empirical data of the first third of the book already appeared (Karabel 1984).²

A central concern of political sociology is power, the multitude of ways that power finds expression in modern differentiated societies. In recent years new attention is being given to the ways that power is expressed through cultural resources, processes, agents, and institutions to shape political environments. A growing interest in the sociology of culture concerns how through the manifest or latent operations of definitions, classifications, distinctions, and categorizations cultural hierarchies both constitute and express social hierarchies, just as Pierre Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) argues. Karabel's book is an exemplary work of this new cultural and institutional orientation in political sociological work. It stands within the C. Wright Mills tradition of power elite research though Karabel, much more

¹ These include the Distinguished Scholarly Book Award of the American Sociological Association (2007), the Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Award from the Pacific Sociological Association (2007), the Willard Waller Award from the Sociology of Education Section of the American Sociological Association (2006), the National Jewish Book Award in American Jewish History (2006), and the Max Weber Award from the Organizations, Occupations, and Work Section of the American Sociological Association, (2006).

² In the interest of full disclosure: I participated in the very early phases of the research leading to this book and have discussed with the author various aspects of his research for the book over several years. I reviewed the manuscript for the publisher and wrote recommendation letters nominating the book for several awards. The author, however, has not seen those letters or read this review prior to publication. As the review indicates, I think quite highly of this work. My critical evaluation comes in identifying contributions to sociology that might not be immediately apparent in such a large volume, in fleshing out more explicitly the theoretical framework guiding the work, and in pointing up a fundamental ambivalence the author has about meritocratic ideals.

than Mills and his followers, includes as integral members of the power elite leaders of dominant cultural institutions.³ This remarkable study of the Big Three, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton (HYP), offers a political sociology of elite recruitment that shows both how these three institutions and their leaders have shaped America in significant ways and at the same time have been obliged to make strategic adaptations to changes in American society.

The Chosen is a history of college admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton from 1900 to 2005. But it is much more. It is also about institutional power. A central argument of the book is that power lies at the center of the decisions made by college administrators and that admissions policy tends to reflect power relations among major social groups and the organizational interests of the schools.⁴ The book also offers a cultural and social history of the definition of merit and the recurrent struggles over that definition. Although merit is frequently opposed to equality in today's popular imagination, just as equality of opportunity is opposed to equality of condition as a sort of zero-sum trade off where an advance in one necessarily means a retreat in the other, Karabel's book is a useful reminder that everything depends on how one defines "merit" and that no definition is politically neutral—a key thesis of the book. Indeed the very definitions of cultural ideals of an epoch, as Marx Weber reminded us, bear the stamp of elite group domination though they are occasionally contested.⁵ *The Chosen* provides an impressive empirical demonstration of that proposition; it identifies four different definitions of merit that have guided HYP admissions over the last 100 years and that emerged through cultural and social conflict. And these definitions all privilege the "attributes most abundantly possessed by dominant social groups" (549).

Inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]; 1996 [1989]), Karabel brings an organizational field perspective to his analysis. The book highlights the relational and power dimensions these three institutions maintain with each other and with external reference schools in a stratified and segmented system of higher education. Their decisions regarding admissions need to be

³ Karabel's elite includes "individuals who occupy the leading positions in major organizations in the economy, the polity, and the culture" whereas the Mills tradition includes military leaders in the power elite but "exclude from their definition those who preside over the nation's major cultural institutions" (560).

⁴ In his 1984 paper Karabel frames the early 1918–1940 period of HYP admissions with social closure theory and a theory of institutional autonomy and change that draws inspiration primarily from Weber (1978), and elaborated by Parkin (1974; 1979) and Murphy (1988). Two components stand out: status-group struggle and organizational self-interest. *The Chosen* expands upon and elaborates that earlier theoretical framework. It takes into account a wider range of contingent factors such as conditions of national crisis when the urban riots of 1968 propelled the Big Three to open their doors to minority students—a move that did not result directly from status group struggle among elites or the defense of organizational interests. Against both marxism and particularly functionalism, Karabel stresses both organization autonomy and status group struggle yet also interweaves historical contingency into his account of institutional change.

⁵ In discussing how cultural and educational ideals interconnect with systems of social esteem, Weber (Gerth and Mills 1970:243) remarks that the educational ideal of the "cultivated man" was "stamped by the structure of domination and the ruling stratum and by the social condition for membership in the ruling stratum."

understood in terms of fiercely competitive relations that the Big Three entertain with each other and with those socially proximate schools such as Dartmouth, Williams, and Stanford, and those socially more distant but relevant references such as Columbia, MIT, Chicago, and Penn. Indeed, *The Chosen* is one of the best organization field analyses currently available.

Karabel details with devastating precision his argument that the changes in admission policies and the definitions of merit that guided the Big Three were not arbitrary but rooted in concrete and evolving institutional interests and power struggles. The changes were spurred by the need of HYP to maintain their competitive positions within the field of higher education and to foster the “the preservation of the larger social order of which they were an integral – and privileged – part.” In the struggle over the definition of merit that would guide admissions policies, we see HYP and their leaders guided not so much by ideals but by organizational interests as they act to maintain and enhance the competitive positions of their respective schools. Thus, the decisions by Yale and Princeton finally to admit women in 1969 were made less with the ideal of equality of opportunity in mind than by their fear that their all-male character endangered their ability to attract “the best boys.” This does not mean that ideals were not important; in fact, they were often objects of struggle as the decision to admit women, particularly at Yale, was met with vigorous alumni resistance (William F. Buckley was among the leaders). Yet consideration of competing organizational interests carried the day as the leaders of the three schools behaved like “constrained managers not so very different from the heads of large corporations, whose primary task is to defend their organization’s position in a highly competitive environment.”⁶

The book also says something important comparatively: by focusing on the American case, it points up yet another striking instance of American exceptionalism. As Karabel notes with irony, the notion that “the ability to throw, kick, or hit a ball is a legitimate criterion in determining who should be admitted to our greatest research universities is a proposition that would be considered laughable in most of the world’s countries.” In France’s *École Normale Supérieure*, Japan’s University of Tokyo, and most of the world’s other elite schools, academic excellence, not extracurricular abilities, defines who is to be admitted.

Karabel turns, as the best of historical sociology does, our attention from fixation on the present to an understanding of how today’s taken-for-granted values and practices came about. As such, *The Chosen* fits with that scholarship in the “origins of the present” genre that uncovers the processes that created the basis of contemporary elite recruitment in the United States. Today, college bound high schoolers and their families toil away on the increasingly anxiety-ridden⁷ tasks of filling out college applications, prepping for and taking the SATs, collecting letters

⁶ Although written with a different issue in mind Weber’s (1970:280) famous line “Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct” is suggestive of the emphasis Karabel wishes to convey.

⁷ In a poignant remark Karabel observes that “It is no exaggeration to say that the current regime in elite college admissions has been far more successful in democratizing anxiety than opportunity” (547).

of recommendations from guidance counselors and teachers, performing for the personal interview, and trying to be creative in the personal essay. All of this embodies a defining image of individual merit that has been foisted upon us by elite college admissions. The Karabel book offers insight into the historical origins of that view of the meritorious that guides access to our best colleges and universities today. Far from being a universal attribute, merit, *The Chosen* shows, has undergone four different definitions over the last hundred years in HYP admissions.

Anyone who thinks colleges and universities at the turn of the twentieth century were just like they are today, only smaller, will be surprised. HYP did not turn down many applicants then; moreover, these schools were strikingly meritocratic, admitting students almost largely on the basis of academic criteria, especially knowledge of Latin and Greek. This worked as long as these institutions remained WASP enclaves, where limited numbers of qualified candidates applied, mostly channeled by a handful of elite northeast private schools – such as Groton, Andover, and St. Paul’s – that provided the kind of classical education HYP then required. These were the days the Protestant Establishment, described so well by E. Digby Baltzell (1964; Baltzell 1976), reigned and HYP functioned to groom its able (male) members for positions of power.

But this academic definition of merit became problematic for these institutions when it started attracting large numbers of qualified applicants from the growing urban, public-school-education children of mass immigration, notably Jews. This change occurred in the context of a powerful national movement to restrict immigration in the early part of the twentieth century. Faced with growing numbers of applicants who seemed to be not “the right kind of people,” all three institutions solved their “Jewish Problem” by setting quotas and altering their definition of merit.

Karabel unearthed a letter from Harvard’s President Lowell in which he expresses not only his prejudices, widely shared by the WASP elite of the time, but also identifies the practical institutional problem: “The summer hotel that is ruined by admitting Jews meets its fate, not because the Jews it admits are of bad character, but because they drive away the Gentiles, and then after the Gentiles have left, they leave also.” The problem was fear of WASP flight; too many East Europeans – Jews – would scare away the upper-class gentlemen whose presence was essential both to Harvard’s snob appeal and its fund-raising efforts.

Realizing that the definition of merit based on academic criteria was leading to the wrong kind of student, the solution was to change the definition of merit. And that is what Lowell – and his counterparts at Yale and Princeton – did. A meeting of New England deans in 1918 explicitly addressed this problem: how to limit the growing numbers of Jews on the elite campuses? It set in motion the redefinition of merit that would take place over the next few years. A new definition of merit shifted the focus from academic to “personal qualities.” “Character” became the central feature; it included highly subjective qualities like “manliness,” “personality,” and “leadership” and was in fact a code for an entire social ethos that could be used to keep undesirables out. Yet when presented in universal terms, qualities of character seemed indicative of only leadership potential and quite in line with the ideals of equality of opportunity. In line with this new definition, admission offices at the Big Three began asking for photographs, personal interviews, letters of recommendations, etc. to weed out the undesirable. A new symbolic boundary was erected and a new

boundary maintenance process put into operation.⁸ Karabel thus shows that the struggle over the definition of excellence was not only about a cultural ideal but also an organizational gatekeeping tool.

The response to the “Jewish problem” in the 1920s led to the emergence of a system of admissions characterized by high levels of “*discretion*” and “*opacity*” that permitted university administrators to produce the outcomes they desired under changing circumstances. “Discretion” gave the gatekeepers freedom “to do what they wished” and “opacity” permitted them to exercise their selection powers without public scrutiny. This became a defining moment of the modern Ivy League and instituted a college admissions system that we still have today. Ironically it is this same system granting discretion to college administrators and opacity to the process that permits it some forty years later to reformulate yet again the definition of merit to include “diversity” that would open the doors to racial minorities and women.

This shift begins what Karabel, echoing Robert Michels (1962), coins as the “iron law of admissions”: “a university will retain a particular admissions policy only so long as it produces outcomes that correspond to perceived institutional interests.” Admissions policies are, in other words, driven by outcome rather than principle. Indeed it is the central thesis of this institutional and cultural history that the Big Three have always determined their merit criteria according to the admissions outcomes that would suit their institutional interests.⁹

The shift from intellect to character occurred against a backdrop of social anxiety that was not limited to these particular elite schools. Situating the shift in its broader context, Karabel writes that “the redefinition of merit was part of a larger mobilization by old-stock Protestants to preserve their dominance by restricting both immigration and the educational and occupational opportunities available to recent immigrants and their children.” *The Chosen* shows how the Protestant elite under challenge was obliged to set up new symbolic boundaries to regulate the flow of candidates to these elite institutions.

By the 1960s, the challenge of growing demands for more sophisticated scientific research, of more international competitiveness, and of the Cold War – symbolized by Sputnik – ushered in a third definition of merit-as-brains. It called for recruiting intellectually gifted applicants with high standardized test scores and specialized extracurricular excellence. The book analyzes how the three schools had to deal with their own internal constituencies in response to these external pressures: the egalitarianism of the 1960s, students and the press demanding more diversity, the growing power of the faculty pressuring for “more brains,” and alumni clinging to the past and actively opposing many of the changes. The alumni revolts at Princeton and Yale – there led by William F. Buckley Jr. – remind one that this shift towards a

⁸ Karabel’s analysis of the efforts by the Big Three to find new symbolic criteria for maintaining social closure intersects with the relatively recent interest in the sociology of culture with cultural boundaries (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Fournier 1992).

⁹ Like Michels who uses the test case study of the German Democratic Party where one would least expect in terms of the political ideology to find hierarchy in party organization, Karabel shows the irony of finding that though at the very citadel of intellectual ideals and institutional self images of serving the public interest, HYP hone their ideals of merit to serve first and foremost their organizational self interests.

meritocracy was not a smooth transition but highly contested by alumni who favored preferential treatment for alumni sons. *The Chosen* is not a history of just elite domination but also one of resistance by opposing and subordinate groups. The book shows how the university presidents and admissions officers adjudicated, prodded, negotiated, and compromised with these various constituencies and drew on a variety of cultural resources to accomplish their task.

A fourth definition of merit emerges in response to the turmoil of the 1960s and includes the values of “diversity” and “inclusion.” This permitted recruitment of minorities and coeducation. Here race-based affirmative action came into being, motivated less by the moral claims of the civil rights movement than by desire to preserve the social order in response to the massive race riots of 1965–1968. But gender and racial/ethnic diversity did not bring class diversity as well. Indeed, as Karabel points out, the Big Three are no more open today to the lower socioeconomic reaches of society, than they were during the 1950s. In the concluding part, Karabel suggests the possibility – and advocates for – a possible fifth definition that would redefine merit to incorporate the socioeconomically disadvantaged, creating an expanded definition of diversity that would include class diversity as well as gender, racial, and ethnic diversity.

This history of the many definitions of “merit” that have governed admissions to HYP since 1900 is also interwoven with the larger history of America over the last 100 years, notably how America changed from one dominated by a small group of privileged white men of Anglo-Saxon origins to one that little by little enlarged its leadership to include Jews, racial minorities, and women but very few from the poor or working class.

Karabel uses painstaking archival research to document how, over the years, HYP have defined and redefined merit according to their shifting institutional priorities. He gives a patient analysis of annual admissions reports, internal memoranda and statistical studies, administrative correspondence, admissions, faculty and trustee committee minutes, biography, memoirs, and other previously private documents to provide solid empirical record of the shifts in admissions policies. Karabel treats this rich and varied material to document a central claim: admissions practices are organizational gatekeeping tools and their reports cultural artifacts that tend to reflect power relations among major social groups and struggles over how organizations define and pursue their interests within changing competitive environments. The text offers many telling details and vivid anecdotes, but always with an eye for how they express the dynamics of the institutional field in which they are generated.

Theory informs this enormous empirical work without being heavy handed. Karabel interweaves status-group conflict, organizational self-interest, and broader social trends and contingent events without reducing one to the other. *The Chosen* provides an exemplary demonstration of Bourdieu’s concept of field without the conceptual fetishism that frequently accompanies the use of his ideas. Here conceptual language does not overpower the data. Indeed, it is through numerous telling details and vivid anecdotes that Karabel is able to theorize through his rich narrative. Echoing the classical view of Weber and Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 [1970]) “cultural arbitrary,” Karabel argues that merit bears the imprint of the ideals and interests of dominant groups. No definition of “merit” is neutral, for a particular definition always advantages some groups while disadvantaging others.

Moreover, cultural ideals are frequently generated over contested terrains for recognition and legitimacy. The great virtue of this book is that it documents in considerable detail just how this occurs.

During World War Two, though facing plummeting enrollment and revenues, Yale continued to turn down qualified Jewish applicants. Ever attentive to the multiple causal factors that play in organizational life, Karabel writes “in the language of sociology, Yale judged its symbolic capital to be even more precious than its economic capital.” Yale would not sacrifice reputation for short-term gain. Echoing the contemporary theorizing of Bourdieu, Karabel points out that the history of college admissions and the definition of merit also points to a broader change in the American stratification structure: a shift away from economic capital as a means of class reproduction to indirect transmission via cultural capital; as such, the battle over the definition of merit in college admissions has largely been a battle within the elite, for the working class has largely been excluded while the economically privileged “old class” of businessmen has competed for slots with the culturally privileged “new class” of knowledge-based professionals. It is a story of the rise of cultural capital.

For all of the transitions in the definition of merit Karabel offers a finely honed analysis that points up the agency of the individual university presidents and their admissions directors, the negotiated environment of competing interest groups, and the constraints of broader society forces. It is a cultural and political history of elite higher education that integrates agency and structure, and theory, data, and method. One finds no sense of arbitrary disciplinary distinctions within this work. History and sociology, for example, are seamlessly interwoven, avoiding what Bourdieu calls the “disastrous” separation between these two academic disciplines. Karabel’s work can be seen as an expression of what Julia Adams et al. (Adams et al. 2005) identify as the recent third wave of historical sociology, which gives new emphasis to the agency of actors. Karabel shows how the HYP presidents and their admissions directors devised, modified, and adapted their admission systems to promote equality of opportunity as a safeguard against more radical demands for equality of condition. We see in his analysis multi-dimensional images of these key individuals who draw on various cultural resources to formulate their interests and desires that represent creative adaptations to changing circumstances and in doing so reorient and defend the interests of their positions and institutions. Structure and agency intersect so that we see both the effects of structure on agency and the creative innovation of agency on structures. And culture is constitutive of institutional power as well as an expression of it.

The Chosen offers memorable biographical sketches of pivotal figures, such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Princeton’s President Woodrow Wilson, Harvard’s presidents Charles W. Eliot, A. Lawrence Lowell, and James Bryant Conant, and Yale’s Kingman Brewster and his dean of admissions, R. Inslee Clark Jr. Karabel moves deftly between biographical glimpses of these important actors and the institutional contexts they stepped into and attempted to mold. He brings solid archival data and sociological theory into a lively narrative; in doing so he has created a text that has both literary appeal and sociological insight. This capacity to attract a broader appeal makes this outstanding book quite distinctive in the field of political sociology. It is also public sociology in that it informs directly the contemporary debate over race-based affirmative action. By challenging the universal notion of merit, Karabel’s book shows once again that the debate over

the nature of equality of opportunity and how it should be expanded is not just a matter of principle; it is also a matter of politics and institutional interests.

The Chosen can also be read as Karabel's critical reflections on meritocratic ideals: to what extent do, can, and should they govern the system of rewards in modern society. On this, Karabel is ambivalent. His work shows convincingly that our definitions of merit are historical rather than universal in that they both reflect and constitute social elite domination and struggle. Even when intellectual achievement becomes the ideal standard, the actual practices of these elite schools fall far short of the ideal proclaimed as this book amply demonstrates. The quasi-meritocratic regime currently in place "is not a meritocracy" (548) because of institutional preferences for certain powerful constituencies and because the very definition of "merit" itself privileges those "attributes most abundantly possessed by dominant social groups" (549).

At least until the late 1980s Harvard – widely considered the world's leading research university – had a 10% quota on "intellectuals" (those admitted strictly on academic grounds) and Yale was similar. For this reason Karabel points out – following the thinking of Max Weber – that an "ideal of a meritocracy – a system in which power plays no role in defining 'merit' and in which rich and poor alike enjoy genuinely equal opportunities to succeed – is inherently unattainable" (550).

Nonetheless, this does not lead Karabel to conclude that the ideal of a meritocracy should be discarded or that "attempts to render the system more meritocratic are doomed to failure" (550). He considers the imperfect meritocratic system we have today to be a vast improvement over the older system based on highly visible heritage and privilege. Elite college admissions have gained in gender, ethnic, and racial diversity that Karabel applauds. He would not have us return to the era of the early twentieth century when Harvard admitted most of its students on the basis of academic merit (knowledge of the classics). Indeed, he calls for further expansion of merit diversity. He proposes four measures that could further advance the current quasi-meritocratic regime toward its ideal: eliminate preferences for legacies, end early admissions and early action, reduce preferences for recruited athletes, and embrace a new definition of merit that would include class diversity.

While adopting these four policy changes would hardly transform the system of elite college admissions, they would push them a bit closer to the meritocratic ideals these schools proclaim. Yet the book unearths a historical record of these schools pursuing their own institutional interests above those of students and the broader society. School administrators rarely pursue policies for values or ideals without the pressure or support of powerful social carriers. Even "such modest measures are unlikely to be implemented unless powerful pressure – whether internal, external, or both – is applied" (555).¹⁰ Here Karabel seems strikingly pessimistic. While he suggests some modest reform measures, it is noteworthy that in the end Karabel does not lay out a politics for institutional change. Perhaps he does not see an obvious emerging political force that would do that. Perhaps there is none. Short of a period of social crisis similar in intensity to the 1968 urban riots that motivated elite school administrators fearful of a crumbling social order to reach out beyond their usual

¹⁰ A point made in an insightful analysis by David Karen (1991) of the politics of higher education admissions.

constituencies to the disenfranchised, there seems little chance for significant changes in prevailing patterns. “Real change does not come without cost” (555) Karabel notes, and for the possibility of increasing the class diversity of the Big Three, Karabel observes the absence of a potentially powerful advocacy force – the American working class. Indeed, without a powerful political force in sight, Karabel is obliged to resort to moral admonition. He asks:

is it too much to ask the leaders of our most prestigious institutions of higher education – institutions that constantly proclaim their commitment to the ideals of meritocracy and inclusion – that they exhibit the same integrity and firmness of character they demand of their applications?” (555)

Good question. But absent a political force in sight, and as Karabel’s history of change in admissions shows, it is much more likely that elite school leaders will follow their material and ideal interests than their ideals.

Finally, even if we were able to approach much more closely the ideal of rewarding individuals on the basis of their intellectual achievements, Karabel sees limits to even a successful meritocratic system. If the prospects for significant change seem elusive, the ideological effects of meritocratic ideals are already with us and it is this darker side of the meritocracy that Karabel also stresses. Like Michael Young in his classic *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1961[1958]), Karabel believes selecting and rewarding individuals on the basis of talent and performance is a “reasonable principle” but “seriously flawed as a governing societal ideal.” The distinction is worth considering. Equality of opportunity need not replace the ideal of equality of condition as it seems to have done in the minds and practices of so many Americans. Both Young and Karabel would retain the equality of condition as a guiding principle as his call for class diversity in college admissions suggests. But the ideology of individual merit also has its darker side as Young prophetically suggested fifty years ago. Inspired by the work of Young, Karabel argues that the meritocracy ultimately deflects “attention from the real issues of poverty and inequality of condition onto a chimerical quest for unlimited social mobility” (5). Karabel believes that Young’s prophetic fear is in full realization before us: Americans believe there is more social mobility than there actually is, Americans are strikingly tolerant of economic inequality, Americans are much more inclined to invest in higher education than in the social safety welfare net for those who fail in the competitive race, and Americans believe that the way to address economic inequality is to increase educational opportunity. More and more the coveted slots at our most selective schools go to the inheritors of cultural and social capital as well as economic capital. Yet in the minds of many Americans, success and failure go to individuals alone: winners can self-congratulate and losers have only themselves to blame. In Young’s words, the equality of opportunity in fact means the “equality of opportunity to be unequal.” It is this “dark side of the meritocracy” that both Karabel and Young would have us consider. It encourages elite self-righteousness and dampens the chances for critical insight that permits the disadvantaged to see that their “personal troubles” may well be “public issues” (Mills 1959).¹¹

¹¹ The corrosive effects of meritocratic ideology on both winners and losers is an early theme in Karabel’s (1972) work.

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