THE END OF EQUALITY

By Mickey Kaus

For three presidential elections, Democratic candidates have been lamenting the loss of "good" middle-class jobs. In 1984 Walter Mondale declared in his acceptance speech that "the help-wanted ads are full of listings for executives, and for dish washers—but not much in between." In 1988 Michael Dukakis pledged to create "good jobs at good wages." In 1992 Bill Clinton tells crowds, "I'll help you build the middle class back."

What's different this time is how Clinton proposes to accomplish this rebuilding. Mondale's appeal was that of reactionary liberalism: good, unskilled, high-paying union jobs were being lost. The solution was somehow to restore them. Clinton's pitch is state-of-the-art neoliberalism: good, unskilled, high-paying jobs have been lost and they aren't coming back, because in the global marketplace unskilled work will always be performed most cheaply overseas. If Americans want "good jobs," they will have to be *skilled* jobs. In "the new world economy," Clinton likes to say, "what you earn depends on what you can learn." The solution, which follows naturally, is to engage in a massive national training campaign. Improve schools, offer more college loans, require corporations to upgrade their employees' skills, set up apprenticeship programs for the "forgotten half" of the population that doesn't go to college.

Whether or not Clinton wins the presidency, this solution—the Skills Solution—is likely to remain the mainstream Democratic economic vision for a long time. It is the favored approach of virtually all respectable editorial pages, and of prominent Democratic academics such as Lester Thurow and Robert B. Reich (from whom Clinton gets many of his ideas). It's certainly more promising than Mondale's approach, or any vision President Bush has offered. It acknowledges that prosperity requires free international trade, but it also recognizes that in a free trade regime America's "competitive advantage" will depend on its "human capital"—the resources people carry around in their heads. By embracing the skills approach, Democrats effectively address two distinct fears bound up in the issue of "middle-class decline." The first is fear of economic stagnation. There's little doubt a retrained, flexible, Clintonized America would be a more prosperous place. The second fear is of rising economic inequality. In the 1980s the highly skilled left the middle class for loftier ranks, while the unskilled fell to the bottom. But if $5-an-hour burger-flippers can learn computer programming and land $15-an-hour jobs, the middle class should be replenished.

Yet there is something troubling about this eminently responsible, progressive agenda. Not that the government can't help Americans become more productive. Not that a better-trained America might not have a bigger middle class. The trouble has to do with Clinton's vision itself, this idea of a "smart-work, high-wage" economy. Clinton claims that creating such an economy is "the way to save the very soul of our nation." But in several respects, Clinton's ideal America might be an unfamiliar and, to be blunt, uglier place. It's one thing, after all, to have an economy in which the distribution of income is unequal. It's another to have a distribution of income ever more rigorously based on schooling and ability, where the successful can claim not just that they have more money, but that they have something else—knowledge, talent, brains—that sets them apart. What the Skills Solution somewhat smugly ignores is the possibility that greater stratification based on skills—meritocratic stratification—will undermine the traditional American sense of social equality. This may, I think, at least partly explain why voters don't seem to be whipped into a populist fervor by Clinton's talk of "smart work." Populists usually get votes by attacking educated elites, not by proposing to create them.

Sooner or later Democrats like Clinton will have to confront the increasingly nasty social implications of the skills-based meritocracy they now promote. That means exploring not just recent changes in the rate of economic growth and the distribution of income (how *many* people attain affluence) but ongoing changes in the basis of American economic mobility (*how* people attain affluence). Our society has put off this discussion, in part because these have always been very disturbing trends for a democracy to acknowledge. Honest consideration of at least one of them—the possibility of genetic stratification—has been virtually

continued on page 24

This article is adapted from *The End of Equality*, to be published by New Republic/Basic Books.

taboo for decades. But at some point in the not-so-distant future, the trends will become too evident to ignore. Better for Democrats to begin the discussion now.

Start with the most obvious trend: the growing pay gap between skilled and unskilled labor. The economist Frank Levy, among others, has documented the relative decline in income of those without college degrees. Even among people who attend college, those with more education seem to be making increasingly more money. A recent front-page *New York Times* headline announced a short-term drop in the pay of the college-educated. But Americans with postgraduate education continued to gain ground, even during the current "white-collar recession."

The pay-for-skills trend is the bedrock on which Clinton plans to "rebuild" the middle class. But the trend has an equally obvious, and more disturbing, corollary: the *range* of skills valued by the economy appears to be shrinking, with physical talents worth less, and brain skills worth more. This is an old worry. Kurt Vonnegut's 1952 novel *Player Piano*, for example, depicts a dystopia in which machines have reduced the majority of Americans to such uselessness that they must be kept busy staging parades and filling potholes. Fear of this sort of automation fueled a respectable labor-economics debate when, during World War II, it looked as if the arsenal of democracy could run with much of its work force absent. But after the war, machines didn't put people out of work. Most economists stopped worrying.

Where technology failed, however, international commerce may be succeeding—as Reich (among others) speculates. Even if unskilled physical labor is still technically necessary, free trade now enables it to be performed anywhere in the world. For an American autoworker, a strong back was once a valuable attribute. Increasingly, it's not, as "routine production" jobs (Reich's term) move overseas. Meanwhile, American brainworkers—"symbolic analysts," Reich calls them—are still competitive. They include "lawyers, investment bankers,... research scientists,... writers and editors, musicians, and television and film producers." What becomes of erstwhile American production workers if they lack the necessary skills to be "symbolic analysts"? They are left with the non-intellectual service jobs that can't be shipped overseas. They work as store clerks, waiters, cab drivers, custodians, and security guards. Unfortunately, these service workers don't get paid very well, in part because they must compete against all the other people who, in earlier times, would have been production workers.

Reich's scenario doesn't merely explain the rising relative pay of the skilled. It adds the alarming prospect of an economy in which, to an unprecedented degree, the distribution of money reflects the distribution of brains—the clever on top, the dull below. This was another, largely unspoken, fear underlying the talk of lost "middle-class" jobs in the 1980s. The point wasn't just that unemployed ex-autoworkers were hard up; it was that what they had to offer simply might not be needed anymore. The jobs they were losing were precious because they had defied the connection between middle-class affluence and mental skills. Meanwhile the hated yuppies, with their unpronounceable cheeses and foreign films, were resented not simply because they had money. The problem, as James Fallows argues, was that their "money came from 'intelligent' professional work, by people who'd done well in school."

Unfortunately, Reich's own Skills Solution does nothing to alter the unpleasant implications of the development he identifies. Quite the opposite. Suppose Americans react to the premium paid for brain skills by going out and developing them, making full use of all the college loans, apprenticeship programs, and mandatory corporate expenditures that Democrats like Reich can dream up. If millions of unskilled, low-paid workers do this, America will be richer, its middle class replenished. But those who succeed in the new brain-based order will, more than ever, be tempted to think not just that they have more money than those who remain poor, or even that they have more "skills," but that they are *smarter*.

Three factors compound this divisive tendency. By far the most significant, historically, is the peculiar mechanism America uses to select who gets what sort of brain-training. Fallows, in his recent book *More Like Us*, calls the system Confucianism; another name might be Phony Meritocracy. It attempts to identify in each of us the mysterious presence of "merit," most obviously through the dubious offices of the Educational Testing Service, the organization that administers the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Those thus selected—on the basis of *predicted* success in life—acquire college training and perhaps a professional degree. Only after being sorted on the basis of potential and then anointed with one or two degrees do the "meritorious" confront "the real world."

This system is especially noxious for the American sense of social equality. It selects and labels individuals on the basis of traits that are tested and recorded at an early age. Scores on SATs appear to be used by college gatekeepers as rough proxies for a host of desirable attributes. In this context, who can blame people for treating the tests as if they measure not what cynics say they measure (how well you do on tests), or what they're supposed to measure (how well you'll do in college), but something more, something closer to innate personal worth? Nobody believes this more deeply and guiltily than those who score well on the tests and then learn to scoff at their significance.

This meritocracy is phony, Fallows argues, for several reasons. It measures theoretical potential—"ability"—rather than competence at performing an actual job. It attempts to come up with a general ranking ("yes, you're smart enough to be a doctor and treat anything") when a multiplicity of narrower judgments ("you're dextrous enough to set broken bones") would

give a more accurate picture. Even this too-broad evaluation typically stops once someone enters a profession. Out of 615,000 American doctors, for example, only 456 lost their licenses in 1990.

Fallows doesn't propose to abolish evaluations and let anyone work as a doctor or air traffic controller. He seeks to replace irrelevant judgments with relevant ones, to supplant Phony Meritocracy with True Meritocracy. He has two models here. One is apprenticeship, where individuals start at the bottom and master progressively more difficult tasks. The other model is sports, where results are too clear-cut for coaches to rely on credentials. Sports, Fallows argues (with some exaggeration), "is the single area of American life in which *performance* matters more than anything else."

A Fallowsian meritocracy would replace our current all-purpose educational credentials with a graduated, open system of more discrete and frequent judgments of a given person's actual performance at a given job. In medicine, for example, sociologist Randall Collins has proposed beginning all medical careers with a position as orderly. Orderlies could then move up the ladder, through various levels of nursing, as they acquired specific competencies and performed well on the job. When necessary, they could go to school to acquire any academic learning necessary to move up to the next level. Eventually they'd qualify as physicians. The point would be to make judgments on the basis most relevant to the tasks that have to be done. Let the doctors be those who are good at diagnosing and healing. Let the lawyers be those who are good at questioning witnesses. Let the hitters be those who get hits and the pitchers be those who get outs. Irving Kristol likes to talk of the "tyranny of the bell-shaped curve," the hard truth that human talents are distributed unequally. But there is no single bell curve of "merit." There are many different curves corresponding to the different skills necessary for human progress. The True Meritocratic idea, in Michael Walzer's phrase, "is that many bells should ring."

Unfortunately, even a radical True Meritocracy would not undo the implications of other long-term changes in the basis of American mobility. Suppose we enacted the Fallows program. We'd have a more freewheeling capitalist society where everyone could take maximum economic advantage of his or her peculiar skills. Yet these skills would exist. The SATs may measure general traits irrelevant to performance in a particular job, but some traits will be relevant. These specific physical, mental, and moral abilities—let's call them "relevant factors," or "R-factors" for short—don't have to be the same for each job. But in each case some people would have them and some wouldn't. Some people would find their abilities were relevant to jobs worth a lot of money. That might encourage feelings of superiority even if abilities were distributed randomly to each new generation. But of course they aren't.

Here we arrive at the disturbing likelihood that many of these traits will be at least in part genetically inherited. In a famous 1971 *Atlantic* article, Harvard psychologist Richard Herrnstein made this point by offering the following syllogism:

1) If differences in mental abilities are inherited, and
2) If success requires those abilities, and
3) If earnings and prestige depend on success,
4) Then social standing (which reflects earnings and prestige) will be based to some extent on inherited differences among people.

There are two strongly held opinions about Herrnstein's thesis. The first is that he is, of course, wrong. The second, privately held by many of the same people who espouse the first view in public, is that he is of course right but we should act as if he's wrong. The taboo on confronting his syllogism is easy to maintain because Herrnstein himself is vulnerable to criticism as a defender of IQ tests who seems to believe not only that they predict who would do best in a broad range of society's "more consequential" jobs, but that they account for who has those jobs now. All this gives his enemies a variety of targets to bombard—so many that it's easy to forget, as his turrets and conning towers are being blown off, that his ship still floats.

Quite simply, you don't have to believe that our current social structure reflects functional wisdom, that IQ tests have predictive value—or even that "mental abilities" are especially valuable—to recognize the ominous implications of inherited talent for social equality. All you have to accept is that there are some traits, the R-factors, that *are* relevant to success in each human endeavor. Because whatever the R-factors are, it is likely that they'll be inherited "to some extent" (to invoke Herrnstein's elastic clause). Sure, discrete, specialized talents might not correlate with success and social standing in the dramatic, straightforward manner that Herrnstein and others claim "IQ" does. But they'll still be heritable, and at least *some* R-factors—verbal facility, for example—are likely to be relevant to a wide variety of jobs. It helps to be articulate, whether you're working at The Gap or teaching comparative literature at Harvard.

It's obvious why Herrnstein's syllogism, rightly, disquiets us. To the extent that differences in R-factors are hereditary, there presumably are limits to meritocratic mobility. We might not be able to discover these limits through testing early in life, but the limits are there all the same. The invidious conclusion that more successful people are in some respects superior people becomes, if not ineluctable, a bit harder to resist. The nerd down the street is a better software writer than you. True, that's only one skill of many—but you can probably *never* be as good at it as he is, no matter how many government-funded apprenticeship programs you join.

Worse, a class system becomes hard to avoid. Sons and daughters of successful people would be genetically more likely to succeed than the sons and daugh-

ters of unsuccessful people. That might not be such a problem if people married at random. Unfortunately, they tend to marry in their class. Let's call this phenomenon "pairing-off" (the biologists' term is "assortative mating"). Although the trend is still masked in the income statistics, it's obvious to practically everyone that pairing-off has increased in recent decades.

Feminism gets some of the blame. Male lawyers and executives used to marry their secretaries. Male doctors used to marry nurses. True, smart doctors perhaps used to marry smart nurses (who were unable to become doctors themselves). But now that high-paying careers are open to women, the pairing can be accomplished with much greater precision. As Barbara Ehrenreich notes, these days a law partner would be faintly embarrassed to fool around with anyone lower than a junior associate. As Ehrenreich also points out, more than status anxiety prompts this increased pickiness. Today, when most families send two earners into the labor force, it matters a lot how much your spouse makes.

The implications of pairing-off for even a multiple-bell-curve True Meritocracy are pretty grim. Take Fallows's favorite model, sports. Suppose athletics were all our society cared about. The only way you could get rich was through success in sports. But, in keeping with strict Fallowsian principles, society recognized that athletic ability shouldn't be measured and rewarded along a single scale. Instead, each sport selected its major leaguers and champions by True Meritocratic methods. As Fallows argues, this wouldn't be much of a change from current practice. Hundreds of different physical talents (strength, short-distance speed, endurance, coordination, etc.) would be relevant to hundreds of events. Relief pitchers would need a peculiar mix of R-factors; football linemen would need others, skiers still others.

Now add pairing-off—that is, the most successful athletes marry the most successful athletes, the least successful the least successful, etc. "Success" needn't be in the same sport. A champion figure skater might marry an all-American tackle. But despite that randomizing factor, does anyone doubt that after enough generations of pairing, the offspring of the successful athletes would tend to be noticeably more successful than the offspring of the unsuccessful athletes? If that happens with the wide variety of athletic R-factors, why not (to a lesser but still significant extent) with the admittedly wider variety of R-factors that are relevant to economic success?

I'm not saying the Herrnstein Nightmare of fully gene-determined classes is even close to being with us. Most obviously, success in America is now determined by a) luck, b) acts of will, and c) social and environmental influences as well as by inborn talents. Where R-factors are passed on from generation to generation, the "extent" to which that is currently genetic, as opposed to cultural, may be low. To pick the most obvious case, the explanation for relatively low black average achievement is surely not genetic but social. A clear goal of Democrats is to eliminate these gross environmental differences, through education, civil rights laws, and the assimilation of the inner-city underclass. Even success in this attempt to "equalize" environments won't equalize all the nongenetic forces that combine to produce R-factors. Some fathers and mothers (of all races and classes) will still be domineering, some optimistic, some embittered. Some families will split up.

But these weak spots in Herrnstein's syllogism don't disarm it. The trouble isn't that success is now primarily passed genetically from generation to generation—I assume it isn't—but that it's passed genetically from generation to generation *more now than it used to be.* Perversely, recognizing the traditional importance of class and culture is precisely what seems to compel a gloomy answer. Because (and this is Herrnstein's big point) the more we minimize gross environmental differences and eliminate class biases, the less success and failure will be influenced by environment and class, and the more it will be influenced by heredity. Clinton's elaborate training and education programs would, in this sense, be a giant step in the direction of Herrnstein's syllogism. If training is universally available, those who don't make it will increasingly be those who somehow don't have what it takes to develop a skill—usually an intellectual, "symbolic analytic" skill. Some people just aren't smart enough to be computer programmers no matter much they're trained, and at least some aspects of that smart quality are probably inherited. If you offer everyone training, you offer everyone the chance to discover the inherent limits of his or her talent.

It doesn't do any good to respond by pointing, as Fallows does, to the GI Bill, to the story of how farm boys deemed incapable of higher learning went to college and did spectacularly well. Nor does it help to cite the success of the eastern European and southern European immigrants who were once thought to be polluting America's genetic stock. These are wonderful examples of the idiocy of class and race prejudice. They are also examples that seem to confirm Herrnstein's thesis. After all, immigrants and GIs weren't held back by lack of innate ability. They were held back by *anti*-meritocratic social barriers. But now the meritocracy has been busy sucking the best and the brightest out of these pools of talent. Herrnstein suggests, not implausibly, a sort of centrifuge effect. As each new group gets processed by the meritocracy, the most talented tend to rise to the top, the least talented fall to the bottom.

The only reason this isn't obvious, perhaps, is that new groups—Vietnamese, Salvadorans, and other new immigrants, plus previously isolated African Americans—keep getting sucked into the system, which keeps us supplied with heartening examples of upward mobility that defy the notion of a static class structure. Someday, however, we may run out of new groups to run through the centrifuge. At that point, the dramatic suc-

cess stories will slow to a trickle; the process of genetic stratification will stabilize and clarify.

I don't like this argument, believe me. But it's hard to deny that something along these lines has been at work for decades, if not centuries. Even if the actual Hereditary State is a long way off, and even if it will never be reached, our sense of social equality might suffer if everybody thinks it's the direction in which we're headed. Some unspoken intimation of the Herrnstein scenario surely reinforces what Fallows identifies as the vicious core of yuppie pride—not just, "I'm smarter than you," but also, "My children will be smarter than yours. (So don't expect me to send them to the same school)."

And even if Herrnstein's scenario doesn't apply, there is a more fundamental difficulty with any attempt to defuse the inegalitarian implications of meritocracy. This is the possibility that in *any* money hierarchy—even a flexible, impermanent, True-Meritocratic hierarchy—those on the bottom will feel they somehow deserve to be on the bottom. That's likely to be bad for the nation's sense of equality whether those on the bottom fail due to lack of brains or lack of brawn, due to their genes or their environment. It's bad even if they fail as a result of their own free will—worse, maybe, since then they have nobody to blame.

Here liberals must concede a great nasty irony, long emphasized by conservatives, that might be called the Fairness Trap: the more the economy's implicit judgments are seen as based on true "merit" (and "equal opportunity"), the more those who fail will feel they deserve to fail, the easier it will be to equate economic success with individual worth, and the greater the threat to social equality. If you're offered all the opportunity in the world and *still* can't climb into the middle class, what does that make you? The losers in the subsidized scramble for skills and money will have to face the implication that they are, well, losers.

The picture isn't pleasant. What can liberals do about it? It hardly makes sense to sabotage the meritocracy—to deny Americans opportunities for training and advancement, to preserve arbitrary barriers to success that are themselves violations our notions of equality. Yet the more liberals try to give those on the bottom a "ladder up," the more they accelerate the trends that are giving success itself an invidious meaning. What happens after a few more decades in which the rich get rich—increasingly rich, in Reich's scenario—by exploiting skills and talents that are mainly mental? After a few decades of elaborate training schemes that enable everyone to discover just what skills they have, and don't have? A few more decades of "symbolic analysis" and pairing-off? The conservative writer Charles Murray speculates, not implausibly, about the emergence of a "caste system" in which the smart/rich wall themselves off in separate suburbs and attend separate schools.

Perhaps liberals don't have any way out of this conundrum. Of course, conservatives don't have an answer either (except the expedient of renouncing democratic pretense). And liberals at least have a powerful weapon at their disposal—affirmative government—that they might use to neutralize, or at least inhibit, the divisive implications of the meritocratic trends. Specifically, liberals could use public authority to incubate and spread a countervailing, egalitarian culture. The moral basis of this culture would include a recognition that in any entrepreneurial economy, even one dominated by paired-off symbolic analysts, there will always be an ineradicable element of chance, what George Gilder calls a "resemblance at some level to a lottery." Success will never correspond perfectly to applied talent.

The institutional basis for the egalitarian culture would be an expanded "public sphere" of community life. That sphere could include old institutions, such as the draft, and new ones, such as national service (an idea Clinton, for one, supports). Democrats could easily add a national health care system and a national day care system to the list. These institutions would drive home the moral arbitrariness of capitalist success by the crude expedient of treating all income classes equally, and the more subtle strategy of providing a part of daily living actually enjoyed by various classes on an equal basis. Not everyone can succeed in the private economy. But everyone, even the economy's "losers," would be able to pass the test necessary for equal dignity in this public sphere, which would simply be adherence to society's basic values of work and civility.

The goal would not be to have two contradictory spheres of life, one in which all citizens are equal and one in which the smart/rich lord it over everyone else. The idea, rather, is that the egalitarian culture will have a pervasive influence of the sort to which religions have aspired. The public sphere must be large enough to contain both dramatic economic disparities and the meritocratic trends that are making those disparities increasingly poisonous. In practice, that will be impossible without an end to the de facto segregation, by income class, of residential neighborhoods and public schools. Yet, there is at least the hope that, once the peculiarly threatening urban underclass is assimilated, class-mixing in crude institutions such as national service can set the stage for class-mixing in these more fundamental areas.

Is this a realistic strategy? It was certainly easier to have a sense of equality in a less secular time, when the equal dignity of citizens could be grounded less in the power of the state and more in shared beliefs about the relation of men to God. It was easier when "meritocracy" was mainly a mechanism for overturning old elites rather than entrenching a new ones. Now it's harder. But today's liberals have no choice but to make the attempt. The alternative is to admit, a few decades hence, that the American ideals of upward mobility and social equality were mutually defeating—that our national experiment was in the end a failure. •