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OPPORTUNITY AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

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THE IDEA of "opportunity" is central to the American creed. Americans have traditionally thought of their country as providing opportunity for all—the opportunity to better oneself, to make something of oneself, to get ahead. The individual must take advantage of the opportunity, but the opportunity itself is there.

The idea of the "land of opportunity" has been part of America's self-understanding throughout its history. Immigrants came here hoping for a better life than they had in the "old country." By comparison, land and work seemed plentiful in the "New World." Starting with little a family or an individual could build a decent life for themselves. No entrenched class system sustained by legally-enforced hereditary barriers kept a person from taking advantage of these opportunities. De Tocqueville, visiting the USA in 1830, marveled at the vistas opened to Americans by the absence of a hereditary caste system whose influence was so great in his native France. Whether or not people's actual experience in America confirmed these expectations of unbounded opportunity, there is no doubt that the idea of opportunity has been a deeply-held conception of the promise of American life.

The notion of "opportunity" was important not only for the generation of immigrants but their children as well. For the second generation opportunity came to mean "bettering oneself," i.e. rising above the situation of one's parents. Public education, generally unavailable in the family's country of origin, was an important factor in allowing the second generation to aspire to a higher position in society than their parents.

The notion of opportunity still plays a central role in our self-understanding as a society; and it has been joined by a newer conception, that of "equality of opportunity" or "equal opportunity." It

is often said that the only part of the idea of "equality" which Americans wholeheartedly accept is "equality of opportunity." Let us examine the ideas of "opportunity" and "equal opportunity," and the realities which are meant to correspond to them.

I. Opportunity and Competitive Opportunity

As it has been understood historically, the notion of "opportunity" presumes some desirable goal and involves the idea that this goal can be achieved or attained by one's own efforts. Work, land, a decent living, a small business requiring little capital to begin: these were the goals for which, historically, opportunities were cherished and sought. Central to this notion of opportunity is that the achieving of this desirable good by the individual is not dependent on his or her social standing, noble birth, or connections. An opportunity is something available if only one takes advantage of it.

This notion of "opportunity" still resonates profoundly in the American consciousness; but the reality to which it once corresponded is increasingly disappearing. Once, as long as one had a reasonable amount of ability, it was possible to open a shop, get some land, or start a small business primarily through one's own efforts. Now large corporations dominate economic life. To start a small business or open a professional practice takes more capital than most Americans can muster. The picture of the individual making his or her way in the world purely on his or her own effort, gumption, and ability has become increasingly obsolete in a world where making a living involves fitting into and striving to advance in large, complex organizations whose nature is determined by political and economic decisions far from the control of the individual.

The new reality of "opportunity" is of the *opportunity to compete with others* for a limited number of desirable positions in society. One has to make application and be considered along with others, many of whom will not be chosen; it is the organization which decides who will get the position—not the individual. What *is* available to the individual, largely independent of connections, birth, race, sex, is only the opportunity to enter this competition.

Even back in 1830, De Tocqueville noted this paradox in the American notion of opportunity. He said that when hereditary barriers to aspirations disappear people feel that unbounded opportunity lies ahead; yet the reality is that the individual is thrown into competition with all the others who, like himself, are no longer barred by hereditary disadvantage from striving for the same goals.

> The same quality that allows every citizen to conceive these lofty hopes renders all citizens less able to realize them; it circumscribes their powers on every side, while it gives freer scope to their desires. (*Democracy in America*, Vol. II, p. 146 [New York: Vintage Books, 1945].)

Let us call the opportunity to compete with others for a valued but scarce goal "competitive opportunity." By and large it is only competitive opportunity, rather than opportunity in its original, "land of opportunity" sense, that is broadly available in our society. Yet by continuing to speak simply of "opportunity," and thus carrying the older associations of the term with it, people are led to think that something is available to them which really is not. If I think of my competing with 100 others for a position in medical school purely as an opportunity to be secured by my own efforts and perseverance, but then I am not admitted, I may tend to think that it is simply my fault that I did not get in, that there is something wrong with me. But this is not necessarily so; it may be that I could readily have done the medical school course and been a competent doctor; there simply were not enough places in the medical schools. So, in contrast to the original notion of " opportunity," when one merely has "*competitive* opportunity" the failure to gain the desired good is no longer something purely in one's own control.

II. Equal Competitive Opportunity and Meritocracy

Although "competitive opportunity" is a much diminished notion of " opportunity," it is still important in its own right as a notion of opportunity suited to our own current realities; we must therefore examine it as well.

The idea of competitive opportunity links up with a view of society called "meritocracy." According to this view, among the aspirants competing for a particular position of responsibility in society, the person with the greatest *ability* to fill that position is the one who is, or should be, chosen, and who therefore is to receive the greater rewards attaching to that position. Selection based on ability alone is central to meritocracy. People's final place in society should have to do only with their abilities and efforts, not with their race, sex, class background, family, and other accidents of birth over which they had no control. If some factor other than ability determines who fills responsible positions in society, not only is this unfair to the individual but it is bad for the society as well, since the most able person will not have been chosen for the job. So an

organization or society is meritocratic, and in that sense both fair and efficient, if it embodies "equal competitive opportunity" (or, as it is usually called, "equal opportunity"), that is, if positions within the society are determined only by ability and not by irrelevant factors.

We can illustrate the notion of equal competitive opportunity with the example of physical disability. Imagine a blind college student hoping to go on to law school. At the college in question there are no special provisions for blind persons—no braille markings, no readers for blind students, no attempt of the professors to facilitate the learning of blind students (e.g. by always saying out loud everything they write on the board). On the other hand, the blind student is not prevented from doing the best she can. She is not excluded from taking any classes or participating in any activities.

Can it be claimed that this student has an equal opportunity with everyone else to do well in college and compete for a slot in law school? After all nothing prevents her from striving to achieve a grade point average necessary to get into law school. If she wishes to hire a tutor to help her she can do so. Perhaps she does have a harder time of it than the sighted students; but still she has as much opportunity as anyone else; or so it might be claimed.

Yet this claim is not true; the blind student's opportunities are *not* equal to those of the other students. Compared to them, everything is made more difficult for her. It is not only her ***abilities*** but her ***blindness*** which affects how well she is able to gain the qualifications for law school. It would only be *equal* opportunity if the college facilitated the blind student's having no more difficulty than sighted students in availing herself of the resources of the college. What is true of the blind student in the situation described is that she has *some* (competitive) opportunity—but not that she has *equal* (competitive) opportunity.

Why is this? It is because the notion of equal (competitive) opportunity involves something like a race. The race is fair—each contestant has "equal opportunity"—if each one starts from the same place, so that the winner is the person with the most ability, effort, stamina, and the like. The race is *not* fair if *not* everyone starts at the same starting line. Analogously, the blind student's performance in college must depend only on her academic abilities, and not on her physical disability; if it depended on the latter it would be as if she were beginning behind the starting line. For her to have equal opportunity, the college must provide support services for her.

Providing equal opportunity for all students, including handicapped ones, thus requires unequal expenditure. The blind student

needs to be provided, at the college's expense, with a reader or tutor not provided to everyone else. Nevertheless this is not advantaging the blind student at the expense of the others, but only bringing her to the same starting point. The blind student should not pay for her own reader, since this requires from her an expense which the other students do not have to bear in order to reach the same point (namely to read the material for classes). In the absence of the supplementary expenses the blind student has only *some* but *unequal* (competitive) opportunity. But a pure meritocracy requires not only some opportunity but equal opportunity.

III. The Reality of Competitive Opportunity

This is the theory of meritocracy and equal competitive opportunity. But is it the reality? In particular, do people in our society *actually* gain valued positions and rewards solely on the basis of their abilities? Are the successful ones always those with the greatest ability, independent of background, race, sex, connections, and the like? Is there really *equal* competitive opportunity, or only *some but unequal* competitive opportunity?

It is evident that equal competitive opportunity does not in fact exist in our country, for many reasons. In many areas women and minorities are at a disadvantage even if they are fully qualified for a position. Sometimes the reason is outright racism or sexism on the part of those choosing people for positions—the white males doing most of the hiring may just prefer other white males rather than minorities or women. Often the discrimination is more subtle. Women and minorities are simply not perceived to be qualified even when they actually *are* qualified. A qualified woman is seen, perhaps entirely unwittingly, as "aggressive," a black as "uppity." The law may not sanction this discrimination; but it exists nevertheless.

This sort of racism and sexism is now generally acknowledged, and some efforts—gathered under the general rubric of "affirmative action"—have been made to correct for it, though such efforts have diminished in recent years and the Reagan administration has mounted a strong attack (though an only partially successful one) on them. One aspect of affirmative action does itself involve at least a short-term denial of competitive equality of opportunity. More qualified white males are sometimes turned down in favor of less qualified blacks or women (or both). This development is, however, weaker, especially in recent years, than the public perception of it, especially among white males. Moreover, this so-called "reverse discrimination" is certainly a much less powerful and widespread

phenomenon than the original sexism and racism which occasioned it in the first place. And, finally, it may be that this inequality of competitive opportunity in the present is the best method for achieving true equality of competitive opportunity in the future, at least with regard to sex and race.

The controversy over affirmative action programs has actually served to cover over the deeper significance of the notion of "equal (competitive) opportunity." *Both* sides in the controversy have tended to see their position as expressing "equal opportunity," and the impression has been given that the notion of equal opportunity primarily concerns whether sex and race are to be taken into account in determining who gets jobs and places in professional schools.

But equal (competitive) opportunity is a much more general and significant idea than this, and discrimination on the basis of sex and race is by no means the only form of its denial. Persons can fail to be judged purely on ability because they have not gone to certain colleges or professional schools, because they do not know the right people, because they do not present themselves in a certain way. And, again, sometimes this sort of discrimination takes place without either those doing the discriminating or those being discriminated against realizing it. It can be quite subtle. Often these denials of equal opportunity have a lot to do with class background, as well as race or sex, or with a combination of these. For example a typical study showed that of two children with the same native abilities, the one born into the top socio-economic tenth is twelve times more likely to complete college than the one born into the bottom tenth.[1]

So our society certainly does not at this point provide equality of competitive opportunity. And yet the distance from true equality of competitive opportunity is even greater than we have mentioned so far. For we have been discussing only the situation of people with the "best" qualifications or ability failing to gain the position they seek, because of discrimination. But often there is not equal opportunity to acquire the qualifications relevant to a job in the first place. Discrimination at an earlier stage in a person's history can deny someone the equal opportunity to *acquire* qualifications. Suppose there are two candidates for a position in a medical school. Joan has had to work forty hours a week to support herself during college. While she has done relatively well, her financial and work situation have cut into her capacity to do as well as her abilities might allow for. Ted is not pressed by the same economic necessities and is able to attain higher grades than Joan, even though they each have (let us assume) roughly equal natural ability.

Let us assume that in admitting candidates to medical school, the actual qualifications of Joan and Ted are acknowledged and judged accurately, and that there is none of the sex, class, or race discrimination mentioned above. In this sense Joan and Ted have equal competitive opportunity—each is judged on qualifications alone. Yet in another sense do we not feel that full equality of competitive opportunity has not been provided? For while Joan has had *some* opportunity to acquire the qualifications for medical school, this opportunity has not really been *equal* to that of Ted. She has been disadvantaged in the *acquiring of qualifications* by her economic class position.

The idea of equal competitive opportunity within meritocracy really depends on selecting people according to *ability* and not simply *qualifications*. For it is the actual ability to carry out the responsibilities of the position (engineer, manager) which should be the basis of selection for the position. Of course it is often not practical to disregard qualifications in favor of judging ability directly (nor is the distinction between these always an easy, or even possible, one to draw). But this is precisely why it is so important to remove obstacles to people's having the equal access to acquiring the qualifications which are consonant with their abilities. Given the practicalities—that qualifications rather than ability are the usual criteria of selection—any denial of this equal access is a significant injustice in regard to equal competitive opportunity.

IV. Correcting for Unequal Competitive Opportunity

In these ways "equal competitive opportunity," like the original "opportunity for all," is a myth, not a reality, in our society. And yet even if we acknowledge that this is so, it is important to look at the resources that our system has for correction of this situation. Perhaps in time changes in attitude and practices could, with proper effort, erase the sources of discrimination which deny equal competitive opportunity. Bias and discrimination, it could be said, are distortions within the overall system; they can be corrected for within the system.

In order to evaluate this possibility, we must have a clearer picture of what it would be like for equality of competitive opportunity actually to exist. Let us take the crucial area of schools, which are rightly seen as an important underpinning of whatever degree of competitive opportunity actually exists. Schools are seen as the great equalizer; students from diverse backgrounds can equally develop their particular abilities in school. If schooling works prop-

erly in a democratic society it can provide the "same starting point" from which each can go on to compete against the others for the desirable positions in society.

Clearly some schools are in fact much better than other schools; and equally clearly a student emerging from a better school has an advantage, everything else being equal, over one emerging from a worse one. This is partly because better schools provide a better education. But it is also because if the better school also has a reputation for being better, then its students will be *thought* to be better educated to an even greater degree than they actually *are* better educated. And this will give them an advantage in being admitted for example to colleges, or to getting a job. Even if the student from Harvard has really done no better than the student from State University, the former will, in general, have an advantage over the latter, just because she *is* from Harvard. Despite the initial disadvantage, the graduate of the less excellent or prestigious college may end up doing as well as the Harvard graduate. but the point is that her chance of doing so is less than the latter's, and this is precisely what it means to say that she has less than equal opportunity.

Thus for truly equal competitive opportunity it would be necessary to eliminate, or at least greatly reduce, such strong differences in quality between schools; all schools would have to be (roughly) equally capable of developing pupils' abilities. (There would have to be "leveling up" rather than "leveling down.") There are many elements which make one school superior to another; but one contributory factor is certainly financial. Thus one necessary (though by no means sufficient) part of creating equality of competitive opportunity would be to provide some rough equality in the financial resources available to different schools. Students going to school in poorer areas, such as Charlestown or Roxbury, would have comparable educational resources to students in wealthier areas, like Wellesley or Weston. (These are all communities in the Boston area.) To do this would of course be quite a radical change from our current form of financing education, in which communities fund their schools according to their own quite divergent financial resources. But true equality of competitive opportunity would seem to require this.

Other changes in schools would probably also be necessary. If private schools existed in a meritocracy they would have to be prevented from becoming a stratum of schools distinctly superior to the public ones; otherwise people who could afford private schools would have too much advantage over those who could not. (The sys-

tem would have to be more like the California higher education system than the Massachusetts one.) The quality of the public schools would have to be made to keep pace with the privates (if the latter became, for a time, superior) to prevent the snowball effect of advantage breeding greater advantage. (This is not to deny that there may be other reasons—such as tolerance for innovation and variety—in favor of retaining private schools.)

Another way in which the provision of genuine equality of competitive opportunity would require quite radical changes concerns equal opportunity between men and women. As long as women are regarded as having a greater responsibility than men for the day-to-day running of the household and for the care of their family, there can not be *equal* competitive opportunity between men and women. For such responsibility makes it much more difficult to sustain a demanding full-time job; makes it somewhat less likely that a woman will exert the effort to acquire the necessary qualifications; makes it more likely that she will be discouraged by others (especially her husband) from attempting to secure a full-time demanding job. It seems that equal competitive opportunity in the world of work would require virtual equality between men and women in their responsibilities regarding home and family.[2] The provision of equal competitive opportunity between men and women would require a radical shift in the current sexual division of labor and the organization of the family.

The examples of school and of male/female inequality suggest that inequalities in competitive opportunity are not merely distortions within the American system, but are rather quite deeply rooted in that system itself. They could not be corrected merely by eliminating biased attitudes of individuals, for they are embodied in structural aspects of that system. It would not be enough for teachers to not favor middle class over working class children in their classroom, or for employers to regard male and female applicants in a gender-blind way; for the inequality is rooted in the superiority of the middle class school itself and in the gender-biased structure of domestic responsibilities.

To say that the inequalities are structural does not by itself mean that we should not try as much as possible to *reduce* these departures from equality of competitive opportunity by working to change those biased and stereotyped attitudes as much as possible. But it does mean that equality of competitive opportunity can not be brought about without radical and structural changes in our system.

V. Can Competitive Opportunities Ever Be Equal?

And yet there is an even deeper problem with the idea of equality of competitive opportunity than those just discussed. This is a problem with the very idea that opportunity which is *competitive* could ever also be *equal.* For equality of competitive opportunity involves the equal opportunity to become unequal. The goal for which one wants opportunity is a position on a ladder, or hierarchy—a position (e.g. doctor, executive) in which one's financial and status rewards are higher than those of positions below oneself on that scale (e.g. sales clerk, machine operator). This is the whole point of the competitive nature of equality of (competitive) opportunity, as expressed in the analogy of the "race"—each individual should have an equal chance to beat the other person.

But there is a problem of carrying this inequality of rewards into an equality of (competitive) opportunity for the next generation. Imagine a hypothetical society with true equal competitive opportunity, in which there is no discrimination due to race, sex, family background, connections, and the like. How about the next generation, the children of the persons in this hypothetical society? True equality of competitive opportunity would mean that despite the inequalities in their parents' life situations, the children would compete on an equal basis (on ability and effort alone). However, out of love for their children, or from a consciousness of family status, or for other reasons, the advantaged people from the first generation would naturally try to pass on the advantages of their positions to their children. This would result in the children from more successful families having competitive advantages over those from less successful families in the younger generation's competition for positions in society.

The high-status parents would attempt to assure better education for their children, using their superior financial resources and influence to do so. They would have a better understanding of the characteristics, both of mind and of personality, which make for success in the society; and they would be able to be more successful in passing this knowledge and these characteristics on to their children. Through living in this world of the professionals and executives, these children would gain a greater understanding than children of the waitresses and machine operators of what that world demands and how to behave within it. They would make "contacts" which, no matter how meritocratic a society is, inevitably play some part in "getting ahead." They would try to shape the rules of the competition to favor their own children's success.

Remember that we are not here imagining our own actual society, in which the inequalities of opportunity are much greater, but a hypothetical society of equal competitive opportunity. In such a society the factors which lead to inequality in the opportunities of the children would, in contrast to our own society, be mitigated by mechanisms of equal opportunity present (by hypothesis) in the larger society—equal schools, fair assessment of ability, and the like. Schools, for example, would to some extent "even out" the inequalities in family advantages. But the advantages of children of the successful would still remain substantial, undermining any claim of the society to represent true equality of (competitive) opportunity.

For the second generation and every subsequent one in our hypothetical society there would be only unequal competitive opportunity. Moreover, as each generation became more accustomed to these inequalities, influencing their expectations and aspirations, the inequalities would become progressively more solid and rigid, constituting a substantial counterweight against the forces promoting true equality of competitive opportunity in the outer society.

It seems then that "equality of competitive opportunity" is essentially impossible; it could not be achieved past one generation. For the equality at the starting point is undercut by the inequality at the end point. The only way in which this contradiction could be resolved, it seems, is by giving every child an environment which was independent of his or her family's actual position in the reward structure of the meritocratic society. Only then could one be sure of preventing a child's being advantaged, or disadvantaged, by the accident of his or her birth.

Plato recognized this dilemma in his description of an "ideal" society in his most famous work, the *Republic*. He wished the Guardian class—those who ruled the society with wisdom, integrity, and skill—to be chosen according to ability (including moral character) alone. Even if this could be accomplished, Plato saw that ensuring similar characteristics in the next generation of Guardians, if they followed out their natural familial feelings, would try to keep their offspring (whether qualified or not) in the Guardian class. But doing this would shut out the qualified offspring of the common people, and by doing so would endanger the society, since non-qualified people would therefore end up governing.

To resolve this dilemma Plato proposed what was consistent with his goal of ensuring that the Guardians would always be the most highly qualified citizens—namely taking away from their parents children who at a very young age showed a natural ability for a position in society other than that of their parents. For their

own good and the good of the society, such children would be brought up in the class of society for which their abilities suited them. In the case of the Guardians Plato abolished the private family entirely, so as to obliterate ties between individual Guardians and their particular biological offspring, and thus to guard against a favoritism which would undermine getting the most qualified persons to serve as Guardians.

The consistency of Plato's position brings out starkly what we surely regard as the repulsiveness of his solution: controlling and even breaking up families for the greater efficiency and good of society. Nevertheless, rejection of this unworkable and unattractive "solution" leaves us with the plain fact that, without it, equality of competitive opportunity is impossible to achieve. If a society is substantially unequal in the rewards it offers, then, partly because of family bonds and loyalties, it will be impossible to have equal opportunity in the competition for those rewards. Thus the very idea of *competitive* opportunity actually excludes the possibility of there ever being *equal* competitive opportunity.[4]

In summary, then, our society still holds an image of itself as providing "opportunity for all"—an image of individuals choosing, pursuing, and reaching goals by their own effort alone. Such an image is largely historically obsolete (and for a large number of citizens and slaves was never true in any case), as our complex bureaucratic and industrial society has rendered such pure individualism largely a thing of the past.

More recently the meritocratic ideal of "equality of competitive opportunity" has arisen to preserve some notion of opportunity in changed conditions. We have seen that this notion represents a substantial come-down from the original "opportunity for all"—a pale imitation of that grand inspiring ideal which animates American creed and ideology.

To add insult to injury, we have also seen that equality of competitive opportunity itself is not a reality in our country; at best we have *inequality* of competitive opportunity. Finally we have seen that this inequality is no superficial element in the system under which we live; rather it is built into its very fabric. Even if equality of competitive opportunity could be achieved at the starting point, it could not last past one generation, for the inequalities which result from the competition would necessarily render unequal the opportunities in the next generation.

Though equality of competitive opportunity does not exist and can never fully exist, it is nevertheless a worthy social goal. Making our schools more equal; making the situation of men and women

more equal in the home and at work; reducing the degree to which people who make a lot of money can thereby pass advantages on to their offspring who have done nothing to earn them; making the rewards for different jobs much less grossly unequal than they are now; trying to rid individuals and institutions of biased attitudes and practices—all these are important tasks, even if they cannot achieve complete equality of (competitive) opportunity.

Such goals are often resisted on the grounds that they seem to restrict the ability of those with money to do what they want with that money—to buy superior education, connections, opportunities for their children. Such a concern can not simply be dismissed without much further exploration beyond the scope of my discussion here; like equality of opportunity, this kind of freedom too has deep roots in our country's public philosophy. Nevertheless it is difficult to see how the unrestricted freedom to dispose of one's financial resources could itself be as fundamental a principle as that of equal opportunity. Furthermore, what seems a restraint on freedom is often relative to one's options and to what one is accustomed to. Because we are used to gross differences in quality among schools in different locales, many persons with money feel it an outrageous constraint not to be able to send their children to the "best" schools. But if schools were themselves more equal in (high) quality, there would not be such an imperative to buy one's children's way into the best ones. If people were used to a society, such as Denmark and Sweden, more closely approaching equality of competitive opportunity than does our own, its institutions would be experienced as involving less of a restraint on freedom than they do to people in our society.

VI. Ill-Effects and Irrationalities of The Myth of Equal Opportunity

Thus it is a myth that "equal opportunity" actually exists in our country. But this is a myth which can have damaging consequences, especially for those who do not "make it" in society's terms. In their book, *Hidden Injuries of Class*[5], Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb eloquently document the divided consciousness of many working class men on the issue of success and opportunity. The myth of equal opportunity tells them that, if everyone has equal opportunity, then their own lower status position in society must be their own fault. If they did not come out ahead, it must be because they are stupid or did not work hard. The myth implies that each

person is personally responsible for his or her own position in society.

This myth, particularly in its older "opportunity for all" version, encourages illusory hopes in many people of starting a small business, where one can be "one's own boss," not beholden to anyone else. But the number of small businesses has continually decreased, to a far smaller number than those cherishing hopes of having one. It is even increasingly difficult to open a dentist or lawyer's office of one's own; the amount of capital necessary is beyond the reach of many. Like the working class, the middle class is increasingly forced to work for large firms and establishments. The myth of opportunity, and especially the pure individualism which underlies it, holds out illusory hopes entirely out of step with the actual occupational possibilities of our day.

More generally, the myth of equal opportunity encourages people not to seek to improve the nature of their current work, but simply to escape it. "Getting ahead," "upward mobility," "advancement"—all these are ways of seeing a current job merely as a temporary stepping stone to something "better," rather than as something one identifies with and wishes to improve or re-structure so that it is more satisfying. To accomplish such improvement *within* one's job generally involves some form of collective action with others similarly situated. And the pure reliance on the individual which the myth of opportunity fosters discourages an orientation toward collective action. This is, in part, why the union movement is so strikingly much weaker in the United States than in other Western Countries, and why unions have so seldom taken on issues of the "quality of work" in favor of a focus on the more tangible and immediate issues of pay and job security. Under the spell of the myth of opportunity, the widespread dissatisfaction with one's work is channeled not into change but into dreams of individual escape.

Of course, as Sennett and Cobb document, people also realize that the myth *is* a myth—that equality of (competitive) opportunity does *not* exist. Working class people especially do know that they, and their children, are not really competing on an equal basis with people from professional and business families. Yet the myth makes them not quite able to believe it. It often keeps them from fully acknowledging the reality of their situation.

Consciousness of the need for collective action to make work more humanly satisfying and more reflecting of their talents, and to increase equality of competitive opportunity, has decreased in the last several years of the Reagan era, at the same time that it has

remained clear that our economy can not provide expanding benefits to the working class through continued economic growth (as seemed possible in the 60's and early 70's). That is, ironically, just as the limitations of each individual's ability to "move up" by means of his or her own ability and effort are becoming manifest, the pressures for structural change toward genuine equality of opportunity have weakened. In fact real equality of competitive opportunity seems to have dropped from the public agenda almost entirely, except in the narrowed context of affirmative action and reverse discrimination. The intensified private focus and the lack of public spirit and responsibility which Reaganism has encouraged has no doubt contributed to this development. And the blurring of the difference between there being *some* opportunity, and there being *equal* opportunity—a blurring itself promoted by an exclusive focus on individual responsibility—contributes to it as well.

Besides the politically mystifying effects of the myth of equal opportunity are other problems, which can be only briefly mentioned here. Meritocracy leaves unexamined the nature of the "higher" positions in society, and of the abilities required to carry them out. There is a vague assumption, not generally spelled out, that the positions in society which are given the greatest rewards in money, status, and power are also the ones which are most socially valuable; and, therefore, that the abilities needed to carry them out are those most valuable to society. This assumption certainly needs to be questioned. Consider some highly paid positions in our society: lawyers defending corporations in turf battles with other corporations; marketing consultants figuring out how to market a new brand of tooth-paste; executives of armaments-manufacturing companies with lucrative government contracts. Now consider some relatively poorly-paid occupations: child-care worker, elementary school teacher, car mechanic, social worker. Is it really evident that the actual difference in monetary compensation between the two groups reflects a comparably large difference in social value and contribution between the first group's work and the second? Is it even obvious that the first group's work is more valuable *at all* than the second's? Is the richly-rewarded ability to figure out how to encourage people to switch from one brand of drink or cereal to another minimally distinguishable one really "better" or more valuable than the poorly-rewarded ability to develop the minds and interpersonal abilities of 5-year-olds? These are quite *different* abilities; is it obvious which is more valuable to society?[6]

The point here is not to deny that there may be some social justification for the much greater rewards of some occupations than

others—in terms of costs of training, availability of skills, need for incentive, and the like. It is only to deny that such justification will always turn out to be in terms of the greater *social value* of higher-status positions. This is what poses a problem for the notion of equality of competitive opportunity in meritocracy. If the point of equality of competitive opportunity is a competition for scarce, valued positions, we at least want those positions to be reflective of genuinely valuable abilities. Otherwise people with valuable abilities will be rewarded much less than others with no more valuable abilities, thus defeating what seemed the whole point of the competition. Some criterion of social need or value should govern the reward structure if so much emphasis is going to be put on competition for positions within that structure.

VII. Reconstructing Equality of Opportunity

Thus the notions of "opportunity" and "equal opportunity" can mislead us about the nature of the society we live in, and of our own individual possibilities within it. Does this mean that we should jettison them entirely and begin somewhere else? I would suggest that we need to rethink the notion of "opportunity" itself, and hence of equality of opportunity. We should be struck by the fact that all of our language having to do with opportunity—"getting ahead," "bettering oneself," "moving up,"—implies doing *better than others.* It implies that unless one can look down on, or at least back at, others who have done less well, then one has not done well, has not taken advantage of one's opportunity. This competitive and hierarchical idea virtually assures that the number of people who can really feel good about where they end up in society, about how "successful" they are, will be, as de Tocqueville noted (see above, p. 3), quite small. In fact the notion of "success" itself implies such a hierarchy and assumes a scarcity of valued and worthy positions in society.

Perhaps we ought to think of opportunity not so much in terms of competition with others as in terms of the development of individual capacities, and with the idea that one's job or occupation provide one the opportunity to express and develop one's particular talents and abilities. Opportunity would then be seen not so much "vertically"—moving ahead of others—as "horizontally"—developing oneself and one's skills, abilities, and talents within one's chosen work, not as a way of leaving others behind but still as making the most of one's own potentialities.

Of course much more would have to be said to work out what this conception of opportunity would mean and how it could be em-

bodied in social institutions; but perhaps, as an alternative to both "equality of competitive opportunity" and the often and rightly-criticized "equality of results," it can guide us in breaking the hold of the myth of equal competitive opportunity, both as a reality and as an unproblematic social value.[7]

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NOTES

1. For this and comparable statistics, see Richard de Lone, *Small Futures: Children, Inequality, and the Limits of Liberal Reform* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), pp. 209 ff.

2. A possible alternative or additional change would be for the world of work to be re-structured (e.g. more flexible hours, provision of quality child care) in such a way that family responsibilities and work are not in such competition with each other as they are under our current arrangements.

3. It is worth noting that the notion of "equality of opportunity" has historically been taken as applicable to males only, and more particularly to male heads of households. A woman's status has been seen as deriving from that of her husband, if she had one. Women have not been seen as appropriately entering the race for reward and position in society. It is only since the women's movement that this exclusion has come to seem a denial of women's equal right to competitive opportunity. But it can be argued that the notion of "competitive opportunity" still retains a male bias, which makes it distorting of women's particular needs. See Juliet Mitchell, "Women and Equality" in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds.) *The Rights and Wrongs of Women* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

4. The inherent conflict between equality of (competitive) opportunity and large inequalities of reward is nicely made by Michael Walzer in "Justice Here and Now," p. 144 f, in Frank Lucash (ed.), *Justice and Equality Here and Now* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). In his very influential book, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 301, John Rawls argues similarly that the existence of families, and the differences in family circumstances, skews the structure of opportunities. He infers from this that a just society's reward structure must be less unequal than a pure market-based meritocracy's. Rawls's view is that we should not intensify the ill-effects of this inevitably unequal reward structure. I agree with James Fishkin's criticism of Rawls (in *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 155, that Rawls fails to give theoretical justification for drawing the line of equal opportunity at the family, rather than seeing a conflict between equality of opportunity and family autonomy which, at least in some contexts, ought to be resolved in favor of the former. My own view, suggested in the final section of the article, is that "equality of opportunity" can be preserved with a revised no-

tion not so tied to the idea of competition for scarce rewards; and that such a notion of equality of opportunity would not be in such conflict with the existence of the family as is pure equality of competitive opportunity.

5. These questions suggest another for further exploration: What is the significance of the fact that it is primarily (though not exclusively) *men* who fill the first sort of "higher" positions, and primarily (though not exclusively) *women* who fill the second, "lower" positions?

6. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Random House, 1973).

7. This paper was written in connection with a course on "Equality" at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. I would like to thank the many students in that course over the years whose responses to earlier drafts have so shaped the paper. I would also like to thank Tony Skillen, Richard Norman, and Judy Smith for comments on an earlier draft.