

O EAST OREGONIAN PINION

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Founded October 16, 1875

OUR VIEW

Leaping over the opportunity gap

Part of the American dream is that, despite being born poor or arriving in this country with little to your name, hard work can catapult you into higher income levels and give your offspring a better childhood than you grew up with.

For centuries, nowhere was your chance to increase your social standing better than in the USA.

Yet now, in 23 of Oregon's 36 counties — including Umatilla and Morrow — children born to the lowest 40 percent of income-earners have less than a 50 percent chance of ever reaching the middle class or above as adults, according to a report by the Oregon Community Foundation. The report also cites a national 2013 Pew Charitable Trusts study that found 70 percent of children born to the bottom 20 percent of income-earners never reach middle class. Meanwhile children born into the middle class and above — helped by parents' social connections, SAT tutors, extracurricular activities and more — are likely to stay there.

That's due in part because the cost of higher education has skyrocketed, inheritance and capital gains taxes have decreased, more children are being born outside of marriage, and it has become more difficult for the country's poor to raise children than decades ago. Our aging population has had a detrimental effect too, as government spending on health care has exploded while child welfare funding has dipped.

A recent Harvard study noted that decades ago, college-graduate parents and high-school-graduate parents invested similarly in their children. But recently, more affluent parents have invested much more in their children's futures while less affluent parents have not. And that's not just financial investment, it's investment of time and attention. College-educated parents have quadrupled the time they spend reading, talking to their kids and cheering them on at sporting events. In those intervening decades, high-school-educated parents have increased their child-care time, but only slightly.



EO file photo

A Made to Thrive volunteer talks with a student while driving him to a football game in October 2017. Made to Thrive is a Hermiston nonprofit that helps children overcome the opportunity gap by making athletics and activities accessible.

But it does come down to finances, too.

According to the same study, over the last 40 years upper-income parents have increased the amount they spend on their kids' enrichment activities, like tutoring and extracurriculars, by \$5,300 a year. Lower classes have only been able to increase their investment by \$480, adjusted for inflation.

That has made a difference: In 1972, kids from the bottom quartile of earners participated in roughly the same number of activities as kids from the top quartile. But today, richer kids are twice as likely to play sports, attend religious services and become involved in extracurriculars like drama and 4-H.

We all know those are the types of institutions that promote opportunity and inclusion, as well as confidence in your own ability to create a successful future.

It's disappointing that the United States, founded as a land of entrepreneurship and social mobility, has become European in its class divisions. But it's great to read in our local paper about schools taking steps to close that gap. Because we know that once a person is in their 30s and 40s, the class walls are much higher and almost impossible to scale.

It's when we invest in children, financially and emotionally, that all kinds of barriers can be broken.

OTHER VIEWS

The strange failure of the educated elite

Once upon a time, white male Protestants ruled the roost. You got into a fancy school if your father had gone to the fancy school. You got a job at a white-shoe law firm or climbed the corporate ladder if you golfed at the right club.

Then we smashed all that. We replaced a system based on birth with a fairer system based on talent. We opened up the universities and the workplace to Jews, women and minorities. University attendance surged, creating the most educated generation in history. We created a new boomer ethos, which was egalitarian (bluejeans everywhere!), socially conscious (recycling!) and deeply committed to ending bigotry.

You'd think all this would have made the U.S. the best governed nation in history. Instead, inequality rose. Faith in institutions plummeted. Social trust declined. The federal government became dysfunctional and society bitterly divided.

The older establishment won World War II and built the American Century. We, on the other hand, led to Donald Trump. The chief accomplishment of the current educated elite is that it has produced a bipartisan revolt against itself. What happened? How has so much talent produced such poor results?

A narrative is emerging. It is that the new meritocratic aristocracy has come to look like every other aristocracy. The members of the educated class use their intellectual, financial and social advantages to pass down privilege to their children, creating a hereditary elite that is ever more insulated from the rest of society. We need to build a meritocracy that is true to its values, truly open to all.

But the narrative is insufficient. The real problem with the modern meritocracy can be found in the ideology of meritocracy itself. Meritocracy is a system built on the maximization of individual talent, and that system unwittingly encourages several ruinous beliefs:

— Exaggerated faith in intelligence. Today's educated establishment is still basically selected on the basis of IQ. High IQ correlates with career success but is not the crucial quality required for civic leadership. Many of the great failures of the last 50 years, from Vietnam to Watergate to the financial crisis, were caused by extremely intelligent people who didn't care about the civic consequences of their actions.

— Misplaced faith in autonomy. The meritocracy is based on the metaphor that life is a journey. On graduation days, members for the educated class give their young Dr. Seuss' "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" which

shows a main character, "you," who goes on a solitary, unencumbered journey through life toward success. If you build a society upon this metaphor you will wind up with a society high in narcissism and low in social connection. Life is not really an individual journey. Life is more like settling a sequence of villages. You help build a community at home, at work, in your town and then you go off and settle more villages.

— Misplaced notion of the self. Instead of seeing the self as the seat of the soul, the meritocracy sees the self as a vessel of human capital, a series of talents to be cultivated and accomplishments to be celebrated. If you base a society on a conception of self that is about achievement, not character, you will wind up with a society that is demoralized; that puts little emphasis on the sorts of moral systems that create harmony within people, harmony between people and harmony between people and their ultimate purpose.

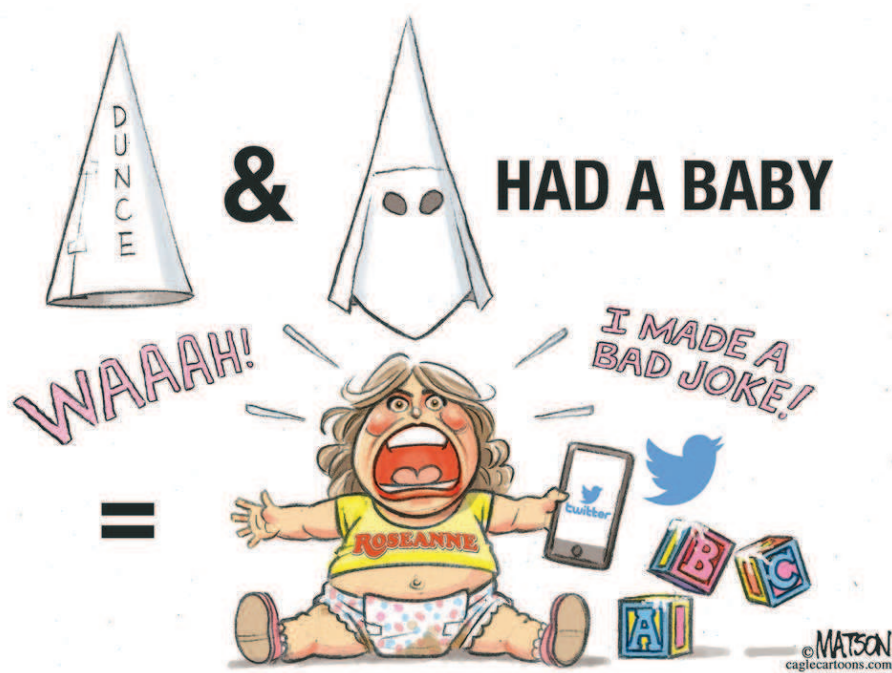
— Inability to think institutionally. Previous elites poured themselves into institutions and were pretty good at maintaining existing institutions, like the U.S. Congress, and building new ones, like the postwar global order. The current generation sees institutions as things they pass through on the way to individual success. Some institutions, like Congress and the political parties, have decayed to the point of uselessness, while others, like corporations, lose their generational consciousness and become obsessed with the short term.

— Misplaced idolization of diversity. The great achievement of the meritocracy is that it has widened opportunities to those who were formerly oppressed. But diversity is a midpoint, not an endpoint. Just as a mind has to be opened so that it can close on something, an organization has to be diverse so that different perspectives can serve some end. Diversity for its own sake, without a common telos, leads to social fragmentation.

The essential point is this: Those dimwitted, stuck-up blue bloods in the old establishment had something we meritocrats lack — a civic consciousness, a sense that we live life embedded in community and nation, and that we owe a debt to community and nation and that the essence of the admirable life is community before self.

The meritocracy is here to stay, but we probably need a new ethos to reconfigure it — to redefine how people are seen, how applicants are selected, how social roles are understood and how we narrate a common national purpose.

— David Brooks, *New York Times*



YOUR VIEWS

Stop the destructive goats along Umatilla River levee

Here along the Umatilla riverbank in Pendleton, it is nesting season for our song birds and waterfowl.

Allowing the goats to pass through this time of year is irresponsible and poor management. I am suggesting that the city council stop the goats at Main Street this year.

East of Main Street, the terrain changes and becomes more natural. Our hills and banks are full with wildlife right now. Allowing the goats to roam through causes destruction beyond repair.

I am asking that our wildlife be able to raise their young in peace this year.
Anita Crawford, Pendleton

No more breaks for troubled Pendleton Heights developer

Prior to our current mayor taking office, we had a short conversation concerning the wisdom of adding 100 apartments in the Pendleton Heights development until a solution was implemented to alleviate the traffic congestion at exit 209 and on Southgate. The mayor-elect's response was clear: "We need housing, and the traffic is not as bad as Portland." He showed little concern, probably because he didn't have to deal with it on a daily basis. However, with additional housing starts in Sunridge and a large project approved near the

Adventist academy, traffic would only get worse.

The mayor has taken notice, and with lobbyists on contract in place and working with our elected congressional representatives on a solution, a quick trip to Washington, D.C., could prove to be the catalyst for getting federal assistance on a solution to the exit 209 dilemma, and a great photo-op with Senator Wyden.

The original Pendleton Heights project promised new affordable housing. The results were far from it. The single-car driveways, narrow streets with restricted parking, and inadequate setbacks, all approved by our city planners, have created a significant parking problem. Though natural gas is much more efficient for heating and hot water, no gas was incorporated in the design. Some tenants endured months of excessive dust and weeds waiting for landscaping to be completed. The entire project has been a fiasco from the beginning.

The contractor is now asking for more city assistance while failing to fulfill an agreement to pay a \$200,000 debt owed the city. His last proposal was a hocus pocus scheme to transfer debt and agreed to by the city. It didn't fool the bankers. Should the city really be complicit in adding to the traffic problem when a more suitable location on Westgate is available to build? It's time to send Saj Jivanjee packing.
Rick Rohde, Pendleton

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