



By: **Andrés Velasco**

Can we value education without elevating the educated?



Why is Donald Trump going after Harvard University and other elite colleges? The official reason is **antisemitism**, but over 600 Harvard **professors**, many of them Jewish, think that charge is **ludicrous**.

Economics cannot be the reason, either. Higher education is a wildly successful industry that **accounts** for 4.5 million American jobs. Leaving that industry without foreign customers by refusing to issue them visas is bonkers.

The actual reason is Politics 101. Universities and their graduates are increasingly disliked by broad swaths of the US electorate. Beating up pointy-headed academics makes for excellent politics, even if it is terrible policy.

It is a cliché of American politics that Trumpian populism was fueled by the divide between arrogant college graduates brandishing elite degrees and regular folks with a high-school diploma or less.

But it is a cliché that contains more than a kernel of truth. Books with **titles** like *Polarized by Degrees: How the Diploma Divide and the Culture War Transformed American Politics* have made the point abundantly, and politicians like Hillary Clinton did not help by calling Trump voters a “basket of deplorables.”

What is to be done? Getting rid of elite educational institutions – as Trump seems to want – is a non-starter. Progressive non-Trumpistas ought to have a better alternative, but they are hemmed in by history.

Income inequalities

A generation ago, right-wing critics accused the welfare state of handing out benefits indiscriminately.

Ronald Reagan’s talk of “welfare queens” was wildly exaggerated, but it left a political mark. Liberal politicians responded by trimming the redistributive state (see Bill Clinton’s **vow** to “end welfare as we know it”) and restricting handouts to the “deserving” poor.

Liberal theorists admitted what they had long denied: that it is legitimate to distinguish between those who deserve and do not deserve help.

In moral philosophy, how and when people come to deserve their lot in life, and whether desert is a valid criterion for the allocation of honors and material rewards, is a central question.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a school of liberal philosophers, known as “luck egalitarians,” argued that justice requires that we distinguish between “circumstances” and “choices.”

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But if you inherit a fortune and choose to gamble it away, society should not rescue you from your own irresponsibility.

This position aligned liberals with the moral intuitions of the middle class. Of course the hard-working citizen who plays by the rules deserves the bankable degrees, the good jobs, the comfy house in a safe neighborhood!

The contemporary liberal’s conundrum

But this position created another problem: hubris. Winners, as the philosopher Michael J. Sandel **puts** it, tend “to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way.”

Once you have the smug conviction that you deserve your Harvard degree, it won’t take much to persuade you that those at the

bottom deserve their fate, too. Soon enough, you will be another coastal elitist, looking down on the poor souls who inhabit flyover country.

That, in a nutshell, is the contemporary liberal's conundrum: express too little belief in merit and desert, and you seem to betray the American dream; but express too much of it, and you seem to betray those left behind by the American dream – including the downwardly mobile white males without college degrees who ended up voting for Trump.

Is there a way out? Can we keep our belief in education as the ultimate source of social uplift while avoiding the uplifted noses of the educated?

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Want to piss off those not fortunate enough to have gone to university and obtain a well-paying job? Treat them as helpless victims, in the way progressive politicians and activists often have. That is no way to build a society of equals.

Universities have to take merit more seriously

Universities also have to take merit more seriously. Harvard can rightly be accused of being too woke, but more damning is the charge that it has been insufficiently meritocratic.

It is not a coincidence that in the Ivy League children of the top 1% outnumber those from the bottom half of the income distribution. Admissions preferences for alumni kids and places for athletes in elite sports like rowing and squash keep it that way.



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I am the child of academics. One of the first things that struck me after arriving in the United States, many years ago, was that the plumber who came to fix the toilet was not too impressed by the family that had hired him.

His car was larger than ours and, judging by his fees, he made quite a bit more money than my professor father.

Over the last quarter-century, technology changed this: office workers with knowledge of Word and Excel could now be paid better than a plumber or electrician.

But in the next quarter-century, technology may well operate in the opposite direction. AI will research statutes and case law better than the best paralegal, read test results better than the best radiologist, and code better than the best programmer.

By contrast, the person who can repair your sink or care for your elderly relative will become ever more valued.

A little honesty will go a long way, too. I used to be a Harvard professor, and the list of lucky breaks that put me there is long. To claim otherwise would be a violation of Harvard's motto: veritas, or truth.

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