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REVIEW

Jerome Karabel, The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale and Princeton

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The modern university got its start on 2 September 1945 on the decks of the *U.S.S. Missouri*, when representatives of Emperor Hirohito and the Imperial Japanese Army unconditionally surrendered to the Allied Forces. The end of the war meant that millions of American men and women would be coming home to resume lives that had been interrupted by war. Many hoped to enter college. As a result of the G.I. Bill, signed into law a year earlier by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, their hopes were within reach.

Some observers worried that America's colleges and universities would be overcrowded. These worries were, of course, borne out. Desks and chairs were in short supply; classes in Quonset huts were common. But everyone understood this problem to be temporary. New lecture halls would be built, furniture moved in, and bookshelves stocked. It was just a matter of time.

Others worried that academic standards at the prestigious schools would deteriorate. This concern proved unfounded and in retrospect almost laughable. With the larger pool of applicants to draw from, selective colleges and universities could afford to be even more selective. Average academic credentials of college freshmen began their inexorable climb.

Intentionally or not, higher education was being transformed. No longer was it largely the province of an established social elite. It was becoming available to

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members of the great and growing middle class. And this went beyond the initial influx due to the G.I. Bill. As veterans headed for college, so did their sisters and brothers and eventually their children. The legacy of the G.I. Bill was to make a college education an ordinary part of middle-class American life.

Competition for admission to the most prestigious schools naturally began to heat up, making them all the more prestigious. In years past, many had regarded colleges and universities like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale to be essentially gentlemen's finishing schools (or in some cases ladies' finishing schools). Gaining entry was not overwhelmingly difficult for those who had completed the required course work, had the money and, at least at many schools, were not too...uh...Jewish. Once admitted, outside of a few special programs, Ivy Leaguers were not expected to burn the midnight oil on academic pursuits too often. There was little need; a "gentleman's C" would still open doors after graduation. Long-time University President Francis Landey Patton referred to his beloved Princeton as "the finest country club in America" (Karabel, p. 20).

By the end of World War II, this was changing. Admission to the top schools was a scarce and highly sought-after commodity, and that commodity was more and more often being awarded to the most academically promising students. As these institutions became less dependent upon alumni largesse (and dependent instead on government largesse), fewer and fewer children of wealthy alumni could expect a reserved seat simply by virtue of their family connections. Most were going to have to work for it. And although "legacy preferences" did not entirely disappear, they receded in importance and began to be viewed as anachronistic. It was more important for schools to please the government than it was to please their wealthy alumni.

Standardized tests like the SAT had a special role to play in this story. They provided the common yardstick, against which all applicants could be measured. The results helped disprove the notion that even the least graduate of a fancy private school was better college material than a public school graduate. More than one Idaho farm girl or son of a Flatbush deli owner was able to beat out a scion of wealth and privilege precisely because of these tests, making the number 2 pencil as mighty a weapon for the destruction of class privilege as Americans had ever seen.

Were these rising standards a good thing? Some saw the new order in higher education as a simple matter of justice, the victory of Thomas Jefferson's "natural aristocracy among men" based on "virtue and talents" over the "artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth" (Jefferson to John Adams, letter, 28 October 1813). This view may have been overly romantic. Virtue in the usual sense—charity, courage, modesty, and the like—had no more to do with college admissions in the 1950s than it had in the 1910s, perhaps less. The Ivy League of that earlier era prided itself on educating young men of exceptional character, even though its admissions policies did not actually inquire into matters of character—until the 1920s when they purported to do so mainly as an excuse for excluding Jews.

But the new order did have a great deal to do with talent—at least academic talent—and in that sense its essential drift was Jeffersonian. In general, Americans liked that. Yes, they might disagree over how best to measure academic talent, but few questioned the idea that prestigious schools ought to select their students from the ranks of the academically talented rather than the socially or politically well connected. The various downsides to such a system, not all of which are fully

appreciated even today, were thought to be (and are still thought by many to be) vastly outweighed by its benefits. Even the *New York Times* (14 May 1960), now a cheerleader for race-based admissions, argued that the Ivy League should base admissions exclusively on academic indicators like the SAT and let the chips fall where they may.

Most important, the competitive environment created by these high standards—and accelerated by Sputnik in 1957 and the Civil Rights Act in 1964—caused prestigious schools to earn their prestige with actual academic excellence. To be sure, designating the period from 1945 to 1965 as a golden age of American higher education (or even a golden age of academically driven admissions policies) may be an exaggeration. Some changes occurred only slowly. Not all the problems of colleges and universities between the wars were resolved in the aftermath of World War II. And some of the problems that beset higher education today were already in evidence. But the 20-year period after World War II was nevertheless a time of justifiable optimism.

To those present at the time, this increasing reliance on individual potential (and decreasing reliance on membership in the "right" race, ethnicity, and social class) may have seemed inevitable. Few would have predicted the rise of race-based admissions—much less the closely related phenomenon of "political correctness" in the late twentieth century. But then history sometimes marches off in unexpected directions.

Berkeley sociologist Jerome Karabel tells a bit of this story in *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.* But much of it gets lost in this very detailed volume. Karabel has a different story he wants to get across. Most of his book is devoted to describing how these three schools went from discriminating against Jews to discriminating in favor of African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics. As a stalwart defender of race-based admissions during the 1996 campaign for California's Proposition 209, he apparently regards this change as significant progress. The story of the G.I. Bill and the simultaneous rise of academically based admissions and the modern university is sandwiched awkwardly in between—a mere transition period hardly worth dwelling upon except to point out its shortcomings.

It isn't that Karabel does not recognize the powerful attraction that non-discriminatory, academically based admissions have for Americans. Indeed, at times they seem to have a powerful attraction for him. For the most part, however, this is a book about the dark side of Ivy League admissions. It is calculated to leave the impression that admissions decisions have long been like sausages—the kind of things you'll feel better about if you're not told what went into them. Karabel suggests that we should not be concerned that admissions policies remain somewhat sausage-like today, especially since administrators seem to have quite accidentally hit upon policies of minority inclusion that are in the public interest, rather than simply in the Ivy League's interest as earlier policies have been. Rather than emphasize the great strides toward academically based decision making that took place in the postwar era, he takes apparent pleasure in pointing out that preferences for alumni children were not wholly abolished (and sadly still have not been).

The questions Karabel seems to be implicitly asking are these: If no one has ever been admitted to the Ivy League based solely on academic criteria, why should

anyone have the right to demand that they be judged that way today? Why shouldn't academic standards be lowered to admit more African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics, since doing so is so obviously in the public interest? While we're at it, why shouldn't we extend such preferential treatment to low-income students too, since that too would obviously be in the public interest? Karabel's unwarranted assumptions cause him to ask the wrong questions. No wonder he comes up with the wrong answers. Yet, despite all that, the book presents a fascinating history.

He begins the story in the era of President Charles W. Eliot, who presided over Harvard University from 1869 to 1909, well before the days of Jewish quotas. Karabel seems to have a certain respect for Eliot, describing him as a "generally liberal and tolerant man, especially by the standards of his time" (p. 39). (The qualification seems misplaced; as far as I can tell, Eliot was a man of liberal ideals by the standards of any time.) Much of his life was dedicated to ensuring that a Harvard education would be available to all who met the school's academic standards. In his inaugural address, he told his audience, "The poorest and the richest students are equally welcome here, provided that with their poverty or their wealth they bring capacity, ambition, and purity" (p. 40). Under his watch, Harvard offered more scholarships than any other school in the nation in an effort to ensure that "those who prove themselves men of capacity and character...never go away for lack of money" (p. 40).

Eliot, however, was hardly an enemy of wealth and property. "The children of a democratic society should...be taught at school, with the utmost explicitness, and with vivid illustrations," he wrote, "that inequalities of condition are a necessary result of freedom" (p. 41). But like many today, he believed that education was special. Without equal educational opportunity and the social mobility that results from it, the legitimacy of any free and democratic society would be suspect. That didn't mean that Eliot believed that everyone should be entitled to a Harvard education. He made it clear that only those who "having the capacity prove by hard work that they have also the necessary perseverance and endurance" should be so entitled (p. 41). For others, there would be other kinds of opportunities.

Eliot wrote to Charles Francis Adams, a member of the Harvard Board of Overseers (and son of John Quincy Adams), who often opposed Eliot's efforts to keep tuition affordable:

> You said at the start of this discussion about raising the College fee that you wanted the College open to young men who had either money or brains. The gist of our difference lies, I think, in this restricted alternative. I want to have the College open equally to men with much money, little money, or no money, provided that they all have brains. I care [not]...for young men who have no capacity for an intellectual life. They are not fit subjects for a college, whether their parents have money or not (p. 41).

Many today are surprised to learn that for most of their history admission to Ivy League schools was by entrance examination. All young men who passed the test—and a few who didn't—were welcome to register, often regardless of their race or religion. (At one end of the narrow spectrum was Harvard, which had a reputation for openness to African Americans; nevertheless even at Harvard, their numbers were small, perhaps as few as 165 total between 1871 and 1941. At Princeton, the least

friendly to racial minorities of the three, African Americans occasionally attended in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but not a single African American attended in the twentieth century until 1945, and at least one was actively discouraged from enrolling.) Applicants who didn't pass the exam could try again, and the bar was not set particularly high. Class size was thus not artificially limited. If a larger number of students than usual passed the exam, the class would be larger than usual.

In significant part as a result of these entrance examinations, the number of Jews in Ivy League schools skyrocketed during the 1910s, radically altering the composition of classes that had previously been overwhelmingly made up of the sons of prosperous Protestants. By 1923, Harvard's entering class was nearly 25% Jewish, Yale's was 13.3% and Princeton's almost 4%. Columbia's figure may have been as high as 40%, and the University of Pennsylvania's was similar. Most of these students were from families that had recently come to America.

None of this was particularly distressing to Eliot, who was still active on campus despite his retirement as president. It was a serious cause for concern, however, for Harvard's then-President A. Lawrence Lowell, who as a vice president of the Immigration Restriction League, an organization steeped in the new scientific racism, was very much a part of the anti-immigration tide in America. Lowell set out to do something about the "problem."

In her 1979 book, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, Marcia Graham Synott documented the efforts to exclude Jews at those institutions in great detail. If anyone had been naive enough to believe that the sudden reduction in Jewish students in the Ivy League in the 1920s had been an unintended consequence of some otherwise-legitimate admissions policy, Synott would surely have dispelled that belief. Now Karabel adds further detail to Synott's already-extensive documentation.

As Karabel illustrates, some of the pressure to limit Jewish enrollment came from alumni. As an extreme case he quotes an alumnus who had recently attended the Harvard–Yale game:

> Naturally, after twenty-five years, one expects to find many changes but to find that one's University had become so Hebrewized was a fea[r]ful shock. There were Jews to the right of me, Jews to the left of me, in fact they were so obviously everywhere that instead of leaving the Yard with pleasant memories of the past I left with a feeling of utter disgust of the present and grave doubts about the future of my Alma Mater (p. 105).

Like any college president, Lowell had to worry about the effect that such bitter feelings would have on fundraising. That's only rational. Alumni were the university's top donors; if they thought the beneficiaries of their generosity would be strangers rather than their children, grandchildren, and students like them, they might become less generous. If students shared the alumni's bitter feelings, that too could cause problems. He warned:

> The summer hotel that is ruined by admitting Jews meets its fate, not because the Jews it admits are of bad character, but because they drive away the Gentiles, and then after the Gentiles have left, they leave also. This happened to a friend of mine with a school in New York, who thought, on principle, that he

> ought to admit Jews, but who discovered in a few years that he had no school at all (p. 88).

It's unclear whether or to what degree Lowell's fears of student and alumni abandonment were well founded. His involvement in the Immigration Restriction League suggests that he may have had such feelings himself and hence overestimated their hold on others. Lowell admitted that "the Hebrew problem" as he called it was not that Jewish students who passed the entrance examination had character defects as that term is conventionally defined. Their problem appears to be simply that they were Jewish and usually members of the working class. They didn't fit in among the polished sons of the established social elite. A common complaint was that they were "grinds," even "greasy grinds." In somewhat more modern terms, Lowell might have called it a "nerd" problem; the Jewish students just weren't cool.

He wanted to deal with the problem the same way he wanted to deal with immigration—by publicly adopting a ceiling on Jewish enrollment. But he encountered fierce opposition that he had not expected. Boston Mayor James Michael Curley declared, "If the Jew is barred today, the Italian will be tomorrow, then the Spaniard and the Pole, and at some future date the Irish" (p. 93). Samuel Gompers condemned the scheme on behalf of the American Federation of Labor. Newspapers across the country editorialized against it. And a frail Eliot fought it with all the energy he had left in his nearly 90-year-old body. Obviously, many Americans, perhaps a majority, strongly favored non-discriminatory admissions policies. To its credit, the Harvard faculty rejected Lowell's plan.

Lowell needed a plan B. And he had one—a disingenuous one. Instead of an explicit quota, he argued for a character assessment of each applicant—a test that he had previously suggested "should not be supposed by anyone to be passed as a measurement of character really applicable to Jews and Gentiles alike" (p. 89). It wasn't that he thought the entrance examination system was not a good one. Indeed, he admitted that "apart from the Jews," there was no "real problem of selection, the present method of examination giving us, for the Gentile, a satisfactory result" (p. 131). He nevertheless wrote:

> To prevent a dangerous increase in the proportion of Jews, I know at present only one way which is at the same time straightforward and effective, and that is a selection by a personal estimate of character on the part of the Admission authorities, based upon the probable value to the candidate, to the college and to the community of his admission (p. 107).

Lowell knew that such a plan would have superficial appeal to traditional Ivy Leaguers. Indeed, Princeton and Yale were already quietly imposing such a plan. Even Eliot had emphasized the importance of good character and leadership ability in students, though his administration did not take on the daunting task of deciding which applicants possessed those traits and which did not. Why not explicitly take them into account in the admissions process?

The problem, of course, was that while many at Harvard genuinely prized good character, it required willful blindness (especially in view of Lowell's explicit acknowledgment) to believe that admissions officers were going to try to measure good character fairly and honestly. It was all a ruse. Furthermore, there was a good

reason that Harvard had not attempted to take character into account in the past except in the rare case of demonstrably bad character: It is devilishly difficult to do so. Efforts to employ objective measures can always be circumvented. Subjective measures will become too subjective, since admissions officers will tend to pick their personal favorites. In practice, "good character" at the Ivy League of the 1920s meant a diploma from one of the "right" prep schools and letters of recommendation from the "right" people. It meant being good with a football. It even meant being tall and handsome. Most of all, it meant not being Jewish.

Lowell's plan was nevertheless adopted at Harvard in 1926—the year of Eliot's death. Shortly thereafter, Yale's dean Clarence W. Mendell paid a visit to Harvard's admissions director. He reported that Harvard was "now going to limit the Freshman Class to 1,000.... They are also going to reduce their 25% Hebrew total to 15% or less by simply rejecting without detailed explanation. They are giving no details to any candidate any longer" (p. 109). Lowell had finally gotten his quota.

The Jewish quotas lasted many years, and remnants of their existence—letters of recommendation, emphasis on sports, and, to a lesser degree, other extracurricular activities—are still in place today, although presumably they are no longer unfairly administered to benefit WASPs relative to Jews. Once they are instituted, such requirements are difficult to terminate—as racial preference advocates will find out if diversity requirements ever become an unnecessary or unwanted means of keeping up minority numbers.

Perhaps the most significant remnant of the era, however, is the Ivy League's fondness for keeping its admissions criteria under wraps. Lowell's "selection by personal estimate of character" depended for its effectiveness on being safe from public scrutiny; no one outside the admissions office knew exactly how decisions were made. That made it easy to deviate from any kind of merit-based admissions if administrators deemed it appropriate. The stage was thus set for another round of manipulation.

By the late 1960s, the urge to create racial double standards had reemerged. This time, however, the goal was to increase the number of African Americans (and later American Indians and Hispanics) rather than to decrease the number of Jews—a change that Karabel believes rendered the urge benign. If so, it cannot be because the goal is now inclusion rather than exclusion. All racial double standards in admissions both exclude and include. The Jewish quotas of the 1920s and 1930s included more WASPs at the expense of more Jews; today's affirmative action includes more African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics at the expense of Armenians, Asians, Italians, Jews, Poles, WASPs, and others. It's a zero sum game (with Jews conspicuously on the losing side on both occasions).

Some readers will view the two cases as distinguishable and conclude that today's race-based admissions policies really are in the public interest, despite their superficial similarity to Jewish quotas. Contrary to Karabel's likely intent, however, others will draw a cautionary lesson. They will reject his double standard on double standards and take note that many supporters of Jewish quotas insisted that their discriminatory admissions policies were benign too. By limiting the numbers of Jewish students, just for a while, those students could be better assimilated into the mainstream elite culture—or so the argument ran.

The similarities between the Ivy League of the 1920s and the University of California of twenty-first century are particularly notable. Just as Lowell was forbidden by his faculty and by fear of bad publicity from engaging in explicit discrimination, University of California administrators are forbidden, in their case by Proposition 209. And yet, for them, the problem of "too many Asians and whites" remains. Their solution—like Lowell's—has been to institute what they call "comprehensive review" in undergraduate admissions. Under that "holistic" plan, admissions officers can take into consideration anything and everything in deciding who should be admitted and who should not—the applicant's history of overcoming disadvantages, the applicant's participation in sports and other activities, and anything that might make the applicant special, including...uh...character. No one is surprised to learn that the results are skewed toward the admission of more African Americans, American Indians and Hispanics.

Karabel has little to offer the debate over modern race-based admissions except for the observation that the need for racial diversity in higher education is something "we now take for granted." He seems to assume that most of his readers will agree and argues instead for the extension of preferential treatment based on social class. Hence, if the reader is looking for a book that grapples with the many objections to race-based admissions—from their tendency to benefit middle and upper–middle class minority members at the expense of less fortunate members of other races to the troubling increase in minority failure rates caused by the academic mismatch problem—he should look elsewhere. No serious and sustained discussion of those issues is offered here.

Instead Karabel tosses in a little pop social science:

> The history of admissions at the Big Three has...been, fundamentally, a history of recurrent struggles over the meaning of "merit." Yet beneath the flux has been a consistent pattern: the meaning of merit has shifted in response to changing power relations among groups as well as changes in the broader society. This proposition—that the definition of "merit" is fluid and tends to reflect the values and interests of those who have the power to impose their particular cultural ideals—is the central argument of this book (p. 5).

According to Karabel, "the main effect of the political and social upheavals of the [1960s] was to change the definition of 'merit' yet again, provoking a seismic cultural shift that elevated the values of 'diversity' and 'inclusion' to a central place in [Ivy League] selection policies." "It was in this context," he argues, "that vigorous race-based affirmative action was born...."(p. 5).

Karabel's choice of words is a bit odd. It's not the meaning of "merit" that has shifted; it's the willingness to base admissions on merit. When a businesswoman, at her mother's insistence, hires her idiot nephew as an assistant, we don't say that she has redefined her view of merit. Whether we believe she made the right decision or not, we say that she decided to hire on the basis of family connections rather than merit. The same is true in the context of college admissions, where the term "merit" is generally used to refer to academic talent along with the personal characteristics, like honesty and persistence, necessary to put that talent to good use. The identity of

one's parents isn't "merit" as that term is conventionally defined; neither is skin color or sex. If they were, there would be no point in distinguishing between "merit-based admissions" and just plain old "admissions" or "merit hiring" and "hiring." All admissions and hiring would by definition be by merit. Indeed, Karabel implicitly acknowledges this himself when, toward the end of the book, he drifts back into using the word "merit" according to its conventional definition.

Once you take away Karabel's choice of vocabulary, his observation is banal. Of course, the people who are in a position to influence admissions policy will tend to impose their own values and cultural ideals on that policy. Whose values and cultural ideas did you think they would impose? The interesting question isn't whether people tend to impose their own values and cultural ideals when making decisions, but whether those decisions are consistent with the public interest, and if not, what should be done about it. All of these values, interests, ideals, and issues usually turn out to be complex, very complex—and Karabel's "it's all just power relations" jargon tends not to do them justice.

Nevertheless, Karabel's jaded "power relations" stance is an interesting concession of sorts. During the campaign to pass Proposition 209, Karabel and his fellow opponents of the measure frequently argued that admissions policies should be set by academics, not voters or elected officials, and that state universities needed to be insulated from politics in order to perform the important task of higher education. Their view had something in common with Justice O'Connor's position in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, in which she deferred to the academic judgment of the University of Michigan in deciding whether the need for racial diversity was a "compelling purpose," sufficient to justify race discrimination to achieve it. In a very real sense, that opinion insulated state universities from otherwise-applicable requirements of the law. If it's all just "power relations," is all this deference appropriate?

Karabel describes Harvard, Princeton, and Yale as "deeply conservative," "surprisingly insecure about their status," and "intensely preoccupied with maintaining their close ties to the privileged" (p. 8). Many of their actions—including the adoption of race-based admissions—are best understood as efforts to deal with "threats" to "the preservation of the larger social order of which they were an integral—and privileged—part." According to Karabel, "the adoption...in the late 1960s of vigorous race-based affirmative action" was "a decision made less in response to the moral claims of the civil rights movement (which, after all, had been active since the mid-1950s) than to the palpable threat of social breakdown in the wake of the massive race riots of 1965–1968" (pp. 8–9).

I find myself in agreement with much of that—although I surely would not have written it to make the preservation of the social order sound like a sinister goal. For all the talk about the benefits of diversity on campus, the adoption of race preferences was not motivated by that concern. Such preferences were begun in haste by administrators, whose first priority was the prevention of future riots; a "do something now" mentality prevailed. And they were continued by later administrators, some of whom were beneficiaries of race-based admissions themselves, because they thought racial preferences were a just way to allocate the benefit of an elite college education: Minority groups should get their fair share.

All of this starts sounding an awful lot like politics (the higher education establishment led by the University of Michigan having already convinced the Supreme Court in *Grutter v. Bollinger* that racial preferences are not forbidden by law or the Constitution). And if it's all just politics, it's not obvious why the decision-making authority should not be vested in the democratic process.

If that happens, it's not likely to be good news for anyone who favors race-based admissions, since most Americans don't share their view that preferential treatment is a good thing. Last fall, November 2006, Michigan became the third state (after California and Washington) to adopt a popular initiative prohibiting preferential treatment based on race, ethnicity, or gender in, among other things, admissions to state universities. And they did so by an overwhelming majority, despite being vastly outspent by the opposition. Will other states follow suit? Almost certainly. Will there be efforts to extend the ban to private schools like Harvard, Princeton, and Yale? We'll see.