**Steven Durlauf**: Hello everyone, this is Steven Durlauf and welcome to the inequality podcast. Today I'm delighted to have Michelle Jackson, Associate Professor of Sociology at Stanford as our guest. Michelle is certainly one of the great Sociologists of her generation as fundamental work in many dimensions of inequality. What she's done, for example in meritocracy, is very integral to themes of the stone center as some of you will know. And today we're going to talk about two major books she has written. The first one of which came out just last year called the *Division of Rationalized Labor*. And the second, *Manifesto For a Dream*, is a vision of what social scientists can do to address issues of equality of opportunity. So Michelle, thanks so much for joining us.

**Michelle Jackson**: Thank you for inviting me. It's really great to be here. And yes, to finally meet you after all of these years.

**Durlauf**: So the Division of rationalized labor, it is a remarkable book. And so I was hoping that it's so rich to even ask you to do this as a little bit unfair, but to ask you to give an outline of maybe the really the major arguments that you'd like listeners to have in their minds.

**Jackson**: Sure. And if I talk for too long, please do stop me because that's the problem with books. They tend to belong. So if we go right back to the beginning, I mean, if we think about Adam Smith and Marx and Durkheim and so on, you have this idea that specialization brings productive advantages, and then that mechanism is going to encourage the development of specialization just across the labor market. And so we have this general expectation that as time goes on, we're going to see more specialization rather than less. So if we think about Smith's pin factory, the idea is that so much more will be produced insofar as workers split up and carry out these specialized tasks.

When I was thinking about this book, I was kind of struck by the idea that although there's all sorts of work on aspects of the division of labor, like what people do, how many tasks they're doing and so on, there's actually very little that takes on the division of labor as a whole. You know, it thinks about how this whole system has changed over time. And I decided that that was what I was going to work on. It's kind of striking. We don't even have a measure that tells us if there's more division of labor now than in the past, for example. And that's quite an interesting thing for a phenomenon that's so central to many social science arguments. And so my idea was I was just going to try and understand this system as a whole. And then when I started working on the book, actually things got quite a lot more puzzling because it seemed like actually a lot of occupations were not becoming hugely specialized over time. We have a fair amount of occupational specialization, that is, you know, specialization with respect to the type of outputs that we might be trying to produce. So if you could think of medicine, you've got doctors who then over time become

specialized doctors, you know, pediatricians rather than general practitioners. But in terms of the tasks that people were doing, it seemed like actually people seemed to be taking on more tasks over time rather than fewer.

And so then I was trying to understand how that happened. And of course, there's plenty of work that talks about how new tasks are taken on. So I saw David Otto just has a new paper on exactly this question, like new types of work emerge and then they're taken on by people and we understand that process. But what I think is a bit less well known is that actually those tasks get added on to many of the tasks that people are already doing in occupations. And so then the book is an attempt to try and understand why this is happening. And I basically make the argument that there are two forces that you need to understand as to what's going on. So the first one is this process of rationalization. Now this is a force that is well known to Sociologists, but it's probably a bit less well known to people outside Sociology. So rationalization.

The idea of rationalization is that this is a cultural force that emphasizes means ends reasoning. And over time we see social institutions reflecting this means ends reasoning to a much greater extent than they have in the past. It's not this idea that people become more rational over time. That's not the idea. It's that our social institutions become set up around regularized rules and processes for producing things. So instead of doing things via tradition and rules of thumb, we end up with societies that are much more regularized, much more focused on trying to produce this end that we care about and then designing procedures that might do that. And you can think of a bureaucracy as being a typical way of producing ends via some set of institutionalized means. So that's the general process of rationalization. And I make this argument that over time occupations have become more rationalized. So that instead of just saying, well, okay, this is what I do. These are the skills that I have. These are the tasks that I do. We become much more focused on what it is we're trying to produce. And then the tasks that we need to take on are just going to follow from that. So as a professor, what am I trying to produce? What do I need to do in order to make those things happen? And actually you can see specialization of one instantiation of rationalization, the idea that we're much more effectively producing our outputs if we follow the tasks that need to be taken on in order to produce those outputs. Now part of that process is that occupations become bound much more tightly to scientific development because science is a great rationalized endeavor. That's a great way of finding out how we produce our outputs most effectively, most efficiently.

And so then the other part of the story is what's happening in science. And of course, I mean, the big story about science is that there's just so much more of it now than there used to be in the past. So there's a lot more scientific material that we need to take account

of insofar as we want to design our occupational outputs effectively. But the other thing I rest on pretty heavily in the book is what happened to science, particularly the probabilistic revolution. So the probabilistic revolution is essentially this move to probabilistic reasoning that swept through science a couple of centuries ago. So we came to believe that instead of having to identify a single cause for a single effect that was going to be deterministic, we could move to probabilistic ways of thinking. And that allowed us to build much more complicated causal models. It allows us to build in many more different types of mechanisms. And so if you think about say, medicine, and instead of just taking account of biological factors, you could also build in sociological factors and think about all of those other causes of disease that might be important. And so that allows you to take on all sorts of new scientific ideas that then are going to be integrated into your job. And then the second part of it is that it gave us new tools to predict and prevent. And so a lot of occupations, you're actually just trying to prevent bad things happening these days. And having good tools to predict and prevent meant that we could actually more fundamentally build the idea of prevention into our job tasks than maybe we had done in the past.

So again, if we take medicine, we now have a load of tools that we can introduce in order to try and prevent illnesses from ever arising. Now the problem is that once you're in a very specialized occupation and you believe that science gives you all of these jobs to do, we're now in this position that really sets up what I call a paradox of specialization. That is, we're required to take on all of these new job tasks in so far as we're specializing in a given output and we're now told that all of these job tasks are necessary in order to do the job well. And so that's the thing that allows these jobs to open up in terms of the number of tasks that people are going to be taking on. So it's the very specialization that then opens the door to all of these new tasks and then explains why it is that we see so many more tasks now than we did in the past as being absolutely central to the performance of a given occupation.

**Durlauf**: There's so many lovely things I want to sort of extract from the description. One of them is just to emphasize how qualitatively different this is from classical arguments about specialization of labor. So the traditional ideas from Adam Smith–they're really specialization not in what you produce per se, it's in what you do. And so this seemed to me to be that one of the real conceptual leaps that you were able to take, which is to recognize that these organization, individual and organization, has a well-defined objective in terms of, you know, we call that a production function, et cetera. And as a result, our locations in the production function become increasingly complicated because of the capacity to take on task. So that seemed to be, to really be qualitatively different from history.

The second thing I wanted to emphasize in our conversation was this idea of the probabilistic revolution, which is extremely intriguing. It's another way to understand what

I've been maybe sent a little extreme conjecturing in this, something about the emergence of modern capitalism. In other words, what is it that is the transformation from markets to this object called capitalism and certainly historians of capitalism emphasizing the idea of capitalism as a process. And as a process in which increasing accumulation becomes essential, you are now giving some micro foundations to that. In other words, the understanding of the nature of production in terms of multiple causes, multiple capacities for rationalization, I think that that would lead to something asking to do about the commodification of different aspects of our behavior, et cetera. This is trying to link together different research agendas. But that was part of what I took from the book, which really struck me as quite remarkable. And so I really at least wanted to highlight those.

**Jackson**: That's very kind. Thank you. In respect to the classical work, I think there had been an assumption that different types of specialization are just going to travel hand in hand. And that makes complete sense, right? So if you think about, yeah, Smith and the pin factory, it was the case that as you specialized in, say, producing the heads of the pin, that was going to require a narrow range of skills in producing the pin as a whole. And that seems completely logical. I mean, in some sense, I think he might recognize both types of specialization. It was just kind of obvious that insofar as you specialize in a smaller part of that output, then that would have consequences for the number of tasks that you needed to produce. And you know, at that single moment in time, if we imagine occupation splitting, you can imagine that at that moment, then yes, okay, you're going to be doing fewer tasks. It's just partly that the other force is just heading in the opposite direction. And so that's what's then kind of pushing towards the taking on of all of these different tasks. So in some sense, it's a much more kind of dynamic model of how this system works rather than just saying, okay, occupation splits, fewer tasks. Recognizing that there's another force that is going to be operating in an opposite fashion, I think is pretty important.

**Durlauf**: So I wanted to actually ask you to talk about the relationship between the book and the research I mentioned at the beginning. So the work you did on meritocracy, for example, and maybe more generally to ask, how does your theory sort of speak to the evolution of a relationship between meritocracy and labor markets? It's a very broad question, but it was keen to know your thinking.

**Jackson**: I think you can think about it in two different ways. And the first is, well, what is required to do jobs well? And then the second is, well, what are people doing within jobs that actually might promote good stuff in the future with respect to say equality or meritocratic selection? So I mean, to take the first one first, if we think about rationalization as a process, what that does is set up standardized procedures. And you might think, okay, that actually is going to enhance meritocracy insofar as that forces operating. So if we set

up standardized procedures that presumably means we set up credentialing systems that indicates that people are going to work well in particular jobs. And so some forms of meritocracy are going to be supported. If we limit ourselves when talking about meritocracy to saying that that's about education, both based meritocracy, that educational credentials should be tightly linked to labor market outcomes, then you might think that that process of rationalization is going to do that.

I do think that we should actually be slightly cautious about that just kind of bearing in mind what has happened in recent years and particularly with respect to backlash against credentialism. I think if we think about what has happened with say, those procedures, for example, and this idea that we want to get rid of experts, experts are just a pain, we want to get rid of all of that sort of stuff, there is a potential that when you try and link credentials too tightly to other social outcomes, you get this backlash effect. You get people remarking that actually these outputs are not being improved. And that's something that we should take seriously as potentially than undermining education-based meritocracy.

The paradox of specialization itself is likely to undermine that type of meritocracy because if you're going to say, well, we need to rest our work products on science and we need to build in all of these things, people are going to notice if you get burned out because we're trying to do too much now. We're taking on too many tasks, it's too difficult, we're actually not producing our output terribly well. If you get into that mode, then again, that undermines the idea that experts know best here and you see again the type of backlash that we're seeing. So I think there could be consequences for meritocracy of just what's happening on that rationalization and scientific development side.

I think if you look on the other side of things, you think about, well, what is it that occupations are now doing, does more potential there to think that this might be good for meritocracy? Now, as you know, I certainly feel silly saying this to you, but the idea of meritocracy is somewhat nebulous and it's all about how you define merit and how we think about that and what we want to select on, what we are trying to reward. If we think about merit in, let's say, relatively traditional forms with respect to say education or some people might think about the amount of effort you put in, those sorts of things, lots of the things that have happened in occupations are trying to actually equalize some of those things. So if we think about teaching, one of the things that has changed over time is that teachers are paying more attention to social background characteristics and trying to compensate for some sort of inequality generating mechanisms. Now, if they're successful at that, you might think that that's good for meritocracy because what it does is mean that more people are going to end up getting high levels of education. We know that high levels of education are good for social mobility and it's going to kind of equalize the playing field

to some degree. And so if those types of job tasks are being built in, then that might be a good thing for societies in terms of being able to allocate people to occupations pretty well. It has potential if people are building into their jobs, some things that might be equality enhancing, let's say.

**Durlauf**: So one thing that, again, I was struck by is the relationship between your arguments and some of the criticisms of meritocracy by Daniel Markovitz. So an argument he has made is that the system has evolved in such a way that you have disproportionate productivity associated with the heads of organizations. In other words, he thinks that the production functions for firms have evolved in such a way that the CEO becomes extraordinarily consequential. And as a result, these are people that actually are very productive, but they are getting extraordinarily high compensation. And at the same time, this is inducing massive amounts of wage inequality. And you're actually providing micro foundations for that. In other words, there may be something in the system that was putting tasks and complexity on certain locations in organizations that was by implication inducing enormous inequality. And, and I think he would be sympathetic to this argument, It could be ultimately undermining because of burnout and the consequences for, I think he would also emphasize the moralization of the people that are not in that situation. So it strikes me that this book is actually opening up new ways to think about the dynamics of organizations and the way that merit is ex post defined by the organization in respect of what tasks are assigned to certain people, which has some, some endogeneity.

One thing that was really just lovely about the book is you have detailed discussions of specific sectors and sort of bring the high theory to bear in a lovely empirical exposition. So I thought that maybe the police would be one that's particularly nice to talk about.

**Jackson**: So the police chapter is actually, it's interesting that was the first chapter I wrote. I got very interested in the defund the police movement. Of course the defund the police movement. I mean, for those people who don't know about it, it was an argument that the police are committing violence and particularly against communities of color. And that was something that people were very focused on. The other aspect of it and this was the one I felt that I had, you know, maybe more capacity to address was the argument that the police are doing too much, that they're taking on tasks that are now qualified for and they're not doing them very well. And I just thought it was super interesting that we had a social movement that was in part like mobilizing around a question about the division of labor. Like that's, that's kind of super interesting for a social scientist. We don't normally expect that. And so then I was really just interested to investigate that case a little bit further.

The other thing is that because I decided I wanted to look at the division of labor over this really long period of time, it was really difficult to get data on the whole occupational

structure. And so what I really thought would be most helpful was to look in detail at particular industries and their dominant occupations. And so that was the other more kind of practical reason for focusing on this. So, you know, the police, so once you start thinking about these occupations and I had this idea about, okay, the output being particularly important and so then you ask the question–well, what is it that the police are trying to do? It's actually kind of universal agreement. I mean, both now and in the past about what the police are trying to do, they are trying to prevent crime. Like that's their job. The thing that has really changed over time is how we think that crime should best be prevented.

So if we roll back to the end of the 19th century, there was this very individualistic view of what it was that the police had to do to prevent crime. And the individualistic view was there because we just thought that criminals, there was something wrong with them. You know, they were biologically or psychologically disturbed. And so if you wanted to prevent crime, you just had to remove criminals. You just had to get them out of society. And so for police, the main job was then to identify the criminals, that is, the people who've committed the crimes, take them away and then you're done. And the thing that really changes over time is just that our understanding of how crime should best be prevented. And essentially we move from this very individualistic biological account through psychology and then onto this kind of social structural view of how crime is caused. And therefore best prevented. And what that did was then open up a lot of new activities to the police that they needed to be focused on.

So you see two main changes. I mean, the first is that they start really focusing on juveniles and juvenile crime. And that makes complete sense, you know, that the idea if you can prevent crime from happening in juveniles, then maybe that's going to have good effects later on. But the other thing that it does is to open up this idea that there's something in communities and social context that means that crime is going to happen. And that was the reason for then police officers moving into communities, getting much more heavily involved in communities and being kind of present on the ground. So you get these ideas of community policing and you know therapeutic policing as some people might call it. And that idea was that you can tackle those social circumstances head on and prevent crime that way.

Now one thing that you could do with a police occupation is to look at their job tasks over a really long period of time. So about 100 years or so. And for people who don't know, a job task analysis is an analysis in which incumbents and experts just list all of the tasks that are carried out in a given job at a given point in time. And so that allows you just to compare very straightforwardly over time and to say, well, tasks disappear from policing and what tasks are added. So some tasks do disappear. So we don't generally ask police officers now

to do things like establish fire lines or rescue domestic animals, that sort of stuff. But the number of tasks that have been added is quite phenomenal. And lots of those tasks are related to engaging with the community, engaging with school children. We have police officers going into schools trying to prevent crime in that way. We have them walking around communities, constantly being on the ground. And all of those tasks have been added in. And then you also get a lot of bureaucratic type tasks that are added in. But I think it's really important to say that those bureaucratic tasks are also about preventing crime because the idea is that the more information you have, the more you can predict. You know, it goes back to this idea that we have capacity now to do prediction. And in fact, my colleague, Sarah Brayne, has done some really interesting work looking at predictive policing.

And so if you actually think about what the police are doing today on the ground, so much of it is this much broader conception of how crime comes about and lots of their job tasks are focused on that. So they are kind of a classic example of taking on huge numbers of different tasks. And then, you know, of course, they're one of the few occupations in which occupational incumbents are carrying a gun. So you're asking police officers to do this incredibly complicated task. You're asking them to be engaged with the general public because that's how crime arises–in communities on the ground. And you have this kind of stress, large groups of people, not very high training requirements either, incidentally, if we're thinking about the meritocracy and education side of things. And now, obviously, that's kind of setting up for potentially quite bad situations. And so, yeah, the basic conclusion is that the social movement is absolutely right. The police officers are unusually overburdened with the number of tasks that they're carrying out. And it's because of this big shift in how we think that crime was produced.

**Durlauf**: So I thought we might turn to the implications of this body of ideas for thinking about labor market inequality. From the vantage point of the last half century of increasing waste disparities, how would that link up with the arguments you've made?

**Jackson**: I don't take this on directly in the book, but I think it's a really interesting question. I mean, one interpretation of what I'm finding is that there's an awful lot of kind of growth in inputs to work by workers that has gone unrewarded. I mean, if we think the wage inequality is bad now, maybe it's even worse if we take account of how much more people are doing. And so, you know, kind of one underlying question is really like, well, are we really underestimating what's happening here in terms of how poorly most workers are compensated for what it is that they're doing? I mean, I think there are a couple of aspects that maybe you could say are more directly related to the wage inequality pattern. One is what's happening at the top and you talk about CEOs and so on. Now, once you end up in

this position where everyone is taking on more tasks, presumably work is much more complicated than it was in the past. And now the jobs of those people who are managing those workers is presumably going to be even more complicated because you've just got this terribly complex division of labor that you now have to manage. If we think about just the occupational structure and organizations and so on, have become so much more complicated and partially as a result of this increase in tasks, maybe what's going on at the top is potentially more justifiable in terms of the high reward that are coming through for some of those jobs.

So, one of the chapters in the book is about the manufacturing industry, which seemed really important because, of course, worries about automation have largely been...I mean, when we think about automation, we think about factory workers and they've lost so many of their tasks and that means that it's now de-skilled as an occupation, not very high rewards. So, I did take on some of that in the book and I think, and just as a kind of an aside, what's happening there is that the two processes are kind of splitting apart. So, the rationalization process happens, the machines come in and so on, but the scientific development side of things is much slower. Now, there are periods actually over the past 100 years where scientific development has pushed and increased the number of tasks of those types of workers, but it is clear that they are sectors where actually the takeoff in tasks has been less pronounced than it has been in other parts of the labor market. So, I think that would be consistent with what's happening there.

But you do get actually the union story in those types of occupations. We focus on unions and we focus on their role in collective bargaining, which is clearly incredibly important in terms of raising the wages of people in the unions. One thing I think that we focus less on is actually how far unions were pretty important in maximizing the number of tasks that some of these workers were carrying out. The wage negotiations in unions, what they often did was to run the job test analyses of the type that I've been talking about, fix those tasks in stone as a description and definition of an occupation, and make it actually very difficult for employers to then reduce the number of different tasks that could be carried out within a given occupation. And so, some of these occupations were actually held at maybe higher levels of skill than one might think that they needed to be because you had machines that could now come in and take on some of those tasks. And so, I think that's kind of an interesting aspect of what unions may have been doing and particularly in say the mid-century period; that they may have been kind of acting as a break on some of that deskilling in a way that might have been good for wages. So, I'd be actually kind of interested in looking at that.

At the same time, I do think it's what tenders the social scientists have is to say, well, this is my theory, this must now explain everything in the world. I think it's pretty clear that, you know, I think it's interesting to think about how these kind of task burdens may be related to wage inequality, but I think there's an awful lot going on there that is probably unrelated and there's much more about power and capitalism, all of those other things. So, I feel it's important to say that.

**Durlauf**: And, well, your discussion also brought up AI. In other words, this capacity for some of the task complexity to be altered by artificial intelligence. So much works being done on it right now. I don't want to say it's being understudied. I can't, it can be very scary because who knows what's been done on it since last week. But this does strike me as a potential area to think about. And certainly in the niche that we live in, in which people are worried about the effects of AI on us, on researchers, it's clear that some tasks are going to be, are being diminished as we speak, such as coding. And so, I think that that actually may be an interesting area for future consideration.

**Jackson**: I completely agree. I think it's a fascinating time, actually, to be a social scientist. In some ways, it's a very exciting time. In other ways, it's very troubling. And you can see it going in a couple of directions. I mean, one possibility is it just makes our task burdens even worse. I mean, one of the interesting things if you compare what social scientists do to maybe 60, 70 years ago, we all have to know, insofar as you do quantitative work, you have to know statistics to some pretty serious level. You probably have to know coding to some serious level and all the rest of it. Like, we took on those tasks because we needed to understand that in order to do our jobs well. So it could be that AI takes away some of those tasks, but it could also be then just add to new ones. So it's not clear, actually, what direction it goes. And certainly if I think about my own life at this point in time, any help that AI has given me has been far outweighed by now the amount of thought I need to give to what happens to teaching. Like, how do you assess students in this new world? How do we teach students? Like, that's a huge job. But I think it has huge potential though on the complexity side of things. Like a system level. I think that it's going to be really, really helpful in terms of just simplifying things to a degree where we can get things done again.

I mean, even if I think about my own university, who do I need to talk to make something happen? I have absolutely no clue. Like, I don't even know who I need to ask in order to get some sort of job done. And so having some sort of AI system that might simplify my university structure and say, OK, you can ask this question and you are going to be able to find an answer. And maybe you don't even need to do anything. That would be incredibly helpful and valuable. And I think there's a lot of potential for AI to do that type of work. I mean, if we, I mean, Becker and Murphy, like talk about coordination as being like a big

constraint on the division of labor, and it's clearly, it's huge. And I think AI is exciting as a potential, you know, coordination machine. And so I think it has a lot of potential on that side of things.

**Durlauf**: Yeah, that's a wonderful observation. Of course, bringing up the possibility of not having to navigate university bureaucracy. I'm going to be on cloud nine for the next month.

**Jackson**: Yeah.

**Durlauf**: So I wanted to ask you about rationalization of labor and discrimination. Have you thought through the implications of the broad trends that you've talked about in terms of the ways in which discrimination can perpetuate in labor markets? I partly was thinking about this because, you know, the economist dichotomy is between Gary Becker's style animus versus statistical discrimination.

**Jackson**: It's an interesting question as to what happens when the number of tasks expands within an occupation to the degree that it's much more difficult to know if, say, a credential gives you full information about the important dimensions that relate to productivity. So one possibility is that you, you know, you vastly multiply the dimensions that you should consider insofar as you want to assess, you know, the unobservable quality of a person. If you have a very narrow range of tasks, you can design credentials really well in order to match that narrow range of tasks. And you can say, I can trust a credential and I don't need to do anything over and above, take account of that credential to know if someone is going to do a good job. If you multiply those dimensions, now we're in a position where we're going to have to rely on other judgments. And we know what happens in those circumstances. You know, people do fall back to statistical discrimination. So if the question is now, okay, does this person have all of these different unobservable dimensions and can they do a good job? It's going to fall back to questions about, well, how competent do I think this person is? And we know what that means. We know that people of color are going to be dinged relative to white people. We know that women are going to be dinged relative to men because that's how competency judgments work on the average. So that's going to be a problem. That potentially is a mechanism for increased sort of discrimination in the labor market. So that doesn't strike me as a good thing. We also add the problem that, of course, we're going to have to use credentials to judge how someone might perform in this occupation in 30, 40, 50 years time. I mean, think about academics. You know, what does happen if this occupation changes phenomenally to reward things that are entirely different from the things that were awarded when people got tenure?

I think it becomes much more challenging to make those very, very big decisions. And you know, the same is true across other occupations and other organizations. So I think the

worry would be that this is potentially a place where we fall back to different competency judgments than any credential is going to be able to capture. I think it's something that we need to be very aware of.

**Durlauf**: So I just hope that we can then turn to your second book, *Manifesto for a Dream*, which is really, to be honest, it's a remarkable book for social scientists. It's the type of big think on policy. It's a really root and stem way to exchange inequality that's not standard operating procedure in the way that social scientists often proceed. There's a tendency, I think, for maybe there's more economists and sociologists to not be very clear about normative commitments in the way that one does research. To my, there's quite a different type of book to write. Now I bring this up partially because I think that much of the strength of the book comes from the fact that it is motivated by deep normative commitments. There's often cheap talk in social media and maybe less cheap talk in academia about the relationship between one's values, one's ethics, and the research the one does. And of course, I've already revealed my view of that, which is it's the wrong question. In other words, we are always motivated by non-epistemic factors and the questions we choose. And then the remedies that we studied, what matters is that as scientists, once we've made the switch to answer the questions that we're doing the best we can. So with that, proselytizing on the importance of doing that, I hope, and we can turn to the book. And I guess I'd like you to start by giving an overview of the main arguments you make.

**Jackson**: Just to kind of go back to what you were saying there. One of the great difficulties I had in writing this book and taking on this topic is that I think social scientists do a lot of really important work and they have had phenomenal effects in terms of shifting policy that is going to help poorer people, more disadvantaged people in our society. And I certainly didn't want to look like I was treating that glibly or that it wasn't important. And so the main argument that I had in writing the book was that we need to have a better match between what it is that we really think about inequality and what it is that we propose as a way of reducing inequality. Because I think one thing that is pretty much universal across social scientists who work in these fields is that it's going to take something big if you really want to equalize opportunity, if you really want to have a more equal society. And it felt like actually social science in general had become partly because it's become increasingly professionalized partly because we've focused on narrow career incentives, partly because we want to get stuff done and it's really difficult to get big stuff done. For all of those reasons, we have pushed into this much more incremental way of doing policy. We've also pushed into this direction where we say that science equals incrementalism. Now, I think there's a perfectly reasonable argument that true, good scientific work takes a narrow question, it proposes a mechanism, it tests it very, very carefully, either via experiment or some quasi-cursor inference technique, something like that, quasi-experiment. That's a

proper scientific test of a mechanism and until we have that, we cannot know for sure what it is that is, you know, an intervention is going to do in the world and how it's going to reduce inequality.

But I feel like we've gone a kind of further down that path so that all that we do now is to focus on these incremental reforms and talk about these relatively small effects on the whole that might help in reducing inequality. But at the same time, all of us know that inequality is this huge problem and so there's this odd disjuncture between what we're saying about inequality and all of the people I think who talk about inequality tend to say it's a big problem. This is not a small problem. And then that disjuncture between that and then what we might propose as policy solutions, which are all extremely narrow on the whole. And partly because we have this nudge that we want to use and we can say, actually, if we introduce this, it doesn't cost you very much money and it's going to have some good effects. And I felt like I wanted to just kind of take that on in a little more, a little more directly. It was a very difficult thing for me to feel like I was comfortable doing because I certainly don't want to undermine anything that people are doing to reduce inequality. I think that in general, all of that stuff is probably a good thing as far as my normative commitments are concerned. But I did just think it was kind of odd that we were talking ourselves into this position where we decided that these narrow interventions were appropriate responses to all of the other work that we're doing that talks about how big this problem is. And so the idea of the book was basically to say, OK, well, if we were going to do this bigger, what would we take on? What might we want to do? And I propose a range of solutions that are in many ways fantastical and ridiculous and could never get through. But maybe bits of them could be taken on and it would allow us to do something a little bit bigger than we've taken on in the past.

**Durlauf**: Well, I certainly didn't take it as critical of standard operating procedure, but that could coexist with wanting to say there is a world elsewhere that we need to contemplate in thinking about more dramatic changes. So I was hoping we can talk about some of the specific areas where you manifest the dream. The first thing had to do with early childhood intervention, which is an important theme of the book. And I was hoping you could outline your views and perhaps draw some contrast to the way that economists, such as James Heckman, have talked about early childhood investment.

**Jackson**: So one of my motivations actually for talking about early childhood intervention was that I actually think it's quite radical in many ways. Part of my issue with it is actually the way we talk about early childhood intervention is in this kind of relatively narrow, almost incremental way. And that's fine. I think it's very important that we've had these, the trials of early intervention, particularly the ones that Heckman draws upon thinking about

the mechanisms, trying to look at the long-term results, having very strong data and analysis and replication and so on. All of those things are really important. But we shouldn't lose sight of actually just how radical this could be as a proposal. And in some sense, we do early childhood intervention a disservice if we're just going to think about it in those narrow terms. As you push the child out of the door, you get them back in the door at the end of the day. And then you're done by the time they go to elementary school and now they're into this system. And my discussion of it was simply to say, well, I mean, maybe we could think about this as in a more radical way, that we could make this more expansive, first of all, in the early childhood years. But we could also then think about all of the other institutions that this child is then going to come into contact with.

One of the things I like about early childhood intervention is that it's kind of enveloping. It doesn't just take a very narrow aspect of the child's life and try to change that. It tries to change actually lots of things. So it often will have, say, health support and educational support. It will have family support. Money may go to the family at the same time as the education is happening. And when you start thinking about it in that completely enveloping way, you see it as a very different type of intervention than I think many people think of it as being now. And if we can just extend that vision over childhood so that, okay, it's not the case that once we get to the elementary school years, for example, now it's just that the kid totals out of the door, eight o'clock and comes back at four and that's it. That's all we're going to do. But to think about it as again, that very enveloping way, I think would really help support those children and their families because it's truly the case that if you are living in, let's say, a poor household, lots of aspects of life are going to be very, very difficult.

It is going to be very difficult to, for parents to spend time with the children because of course they get often out working and like they have to work many, many hours and that has consequences for family life. People are going to be much more stressed. It's going to be more difficult to engage with schools in the way that richer families are able to. So it's basically every single institution, something is going wrong and then you don't get the institutions kind of nicely talking to each other either. You don't get the school and the doctors having these conversations in which they're saying actually maybe we could put some extra supports in place for this person. Like that's not happening in the same way. So we could build that system that is much more encompassing of all of these different institutions and the way that early childhood does. It would be great. We don't just need to think about children until the age of five and then just say, well, you know, good luck to you from that point forward, which to be fair, we don't, but it's much closer to that than this vision of early childhood is.

**Durlauf**: So this of course brings us to the more broad discussion you have about educational inequalities you have in the book, so I was hoping you could talk about those and then in particular about ideas you had about lotteries, educational slots, and the like.

**Jackson**: Education, it's not everything. It's not going to solve all social problems, but it certainly is a very good route to mobility. So if your disadvantage, getting an educational qualification is going to really help in getting a good occupation later in life and it's really going to do an awful lot to minimize the effects of your social background on where you end up. You know, we know that from Florencia Torche's work, Mike Grätz's work, and actually Raj Chetty's also shown that again recently. So we know that education is a great route to success. So I think certainly as someone that works on educational inequality, it's definitely an area I think has potential insofar as we can reduce educational inequality, we can probably do good things for mobility. So then the question is, well, yeah, how do we think about reducing educational inequality? And one of the things I talk about in the book is randomizing education essentially. Lottery is interesting because of course people in general hate lotteries as a determinant of their life, but I think social scientists like, sure, yeah, why not? That seems like a sensible way of doing things and allocating what might be scarce resources.

So the argument I had with lotteries was that, first of all, it's a good way of not tying, you know, social background to the type of school that you go to. And we know that increasingly that seems to be a very, very big problem. So you're kind of going to equalize it in that sense. But I actually think a really important function of lotteries that we discuss less is that it gives families incentives to try and improve education for everyone. Because if you don't know where your child is going to end up, it's much easier to then feel like you have to support public education on the whole. And you have to build in supports for all children. And I think kind of operating on that incentive effect is something that lotteries are really good at. And of course, the sad thing with the family is that as soon as you've got the family involved, that's always going to be bad for inequality. And you can't randomize children to families. Families are places that pass on resources like that's the job. And as soon as you have societies that are built around families, that's going to be very difficult. So in some sense, what you want to do is to work with families and to say, well, okay, let's randomize the education bit. Let's try and do something with all of these other institutions insofar as we want that family to remain as central to determine those sorts of things. And so insofar as parents do care about their children and on the whole they do, then you want to use that and use that kind of incentive structure to then say, well, let's try and make education better. Let's try and make health care better for everybody because I can't opt out of this.

**Durlauf**: So the last thing I want to ask you about is what, to my view, is the most radical suggestion, at least discussion, in the book and that added you with family structure, your idea of constructed families. As I said, the problem with the family is it's a huge inequality generating machine. But it's also the case that you probably don't want to get rid of families. I've always liked the work of Adam Swift and Harry Brighouse on this. So they give the example of reading bedtime stories to children. We know that that is hugely inequality generating. You know that if you read bedtime stories to your children, they're going to develop verbal skills, they're going to do well. And okay, that's a bad thing for inequality of opportunity. But it's also probably not something that we want to stop. Like for many of us, our families are incredibly important. They are the most important relationships that we might have in our lives and so we don't want to stand in the way of that.

So although I think the most radical position would be, well, we could get rid of the family, I think that's not sensible. And also, I mean, this is a place where I think feasibility probably as worth considering because most people are not going to go for that. But what would be nice is if we could build another layer of families kind of on top, more of an extended family style idea. Now, of course, the extended family that we actually already have is also going to be conditioned by resources. And so one thing we might want to think about is constructing communities or, as I call them**,** constructed families, that could be places where we get that sort of support that we might get from family members ordinarily. So that is that we had these communities that are split by income, for example, they're very mixed in terms of the types of people who may be within them. And they operate as this kind of network that lies above the family. It would be a group of people who you would have access to who were quite different from you potentially.

So these constructed families would be very mixed. They may have different network connections than you, they may be able to put you in touch with people insofar as you needed that sort of weak tie that we know to be very important within labor markets. And that would sit above the family. It would also make it possible for us to see people who were really quite different from us. So that children would interact with others who were not from the same sort of background as them, that they would become a border in terms of how they saw the world and how they saw social background, which would potentially have very good effects in the future. And then of course also builds in the incentive effect that I was talking about earlier. If parents know that their child will be interacting with a very broad group of children, they're going to want to try and improve those children's lives at the same time because this is now an important social contact for their child and they want to have everybody do well. So I think that building in that as a sort of incentive could be, could have very good results in terms of mobility. I think it is important. And obviously people worry a lot about things like polarization and segregation and so on. And I don't

think that we fully understand how segregating people is going to have these very bad just general social effects. And it's certainly something that I would worry about.

**Durlauf**: Michelle, I'd like to talk to you for another hour. Thank you so much for just a delightful and fascinating conversation.

**Jackson**: Well, thank you for inviting me. I've wanted to talk to you for a very long time. So this is exciting.

**Durlauf**: So this has been Michelle Jackson, a Sociologist at Stanford University talking about her research on so many aspects of inequality ranging from understanding the evolution of jobs, tasks, and the nature of labor markets from the vantage point of the, of the complexities that people experience to broad questions of how to think about fundamental, deep institutional backgrounds of the inequality and what potentially can address them. I think that this type of social science is no end of the virtues and the praise that one can give to that. It's this type of vision that, to quote Thomas Wolfe, "brings a new magic to a dusty world." And so I'm very grateful for the opportunity to learn more about her thoughts, and I, in the strongest terms, commend both the books.

The Inequality Podcast is a production of the Stone Center for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility at the University of Chicago. I want to end the podcast with thanks to the people who really make it happen. First, I want to express deep appreciation to our producer and engineer Shane McKeon who oversees every aspect of the process of creating these podcasts and really does just a splendid job. Second, I'd like to thank our Assistant Director Nina Gray for production oversight and the role she plays in bringing the podcast to fruition. And finally, I'd like to thank Grace Kolavo who's the Executive Director of the Stone Center who basically does everything in terms of making the center work. You may get in touch with us at StoneCenter@uchicago.edu. Thank you so much for listening.