

Steven Durlauf: Hello everyone and welcome to the inequality podcast. This is Steven Durlauf. It's a real delight to introduce Jahel Queralt from Pompeu Fabra as today's guest. Jahel is a leading political theorist and has written extensively on topics ranging from meritocracy to economic rights to liberal egalitarianism. I'm very much looking forward to the opportunity to chat with her. Jahel, thank you so much for joining us.

Jahel Queralt: Hi Steven, thanks for having me.

Durlauf: So I thought we would start with meritocracy. First thing is, of course, I'd like you to talk about the book that you've just written, which I think is now out in Spanish and you're in the process of an English language version. And so it'd be nice if you could describe the overall themes of the book. Let me say that one of the nice features of the book is that you actually integrate the abstract discussions with your life. In other words, the lived experience that's led to your thinking.

Queralt: What pushed me to write this book was the realization that defending meritocracy had become a sort of like right wing conservative position in public debate, certainly in Spain. But I think also in academic debates, no? So meritocracy was or has increasingly treated as something as an ideal that is suspicious reactionary, that justifies, legitimizes inequalities. And on the left, I think the dominant view had become highly critical of meritocracy, right? And these sort of like consensus, these intellectual consensus sat very uncomfortably with my own experience because I am in a literal sense, a product of meritocracy, of social mobility.

I was born in 1982 in a very poor family in a very small town. None of my family had ever gone to university before. My mother had me when she was a teenager with all the implications of that. And my father was a hippie. So we lived for a while in the countryside, in conditions that I remember as happy. But when I look at the pictures, I see poverty, right? So no books, no cultural capital, none of the stimuli that middle class family try to provide. And yet, and this is crucial, no decisive door was ever closed to me, and I had all the opportunities. I had access to very good public education. I encountered teachers who took interest in me. I benefit from scholarship, grants, institutions that were designed precisely to prevent social origin from becoming destiny. And thanks to that network, that girl, who is not me, from a small village, was able to go to universities, study law, pursue a PhD, and eventually become a professor at Pompeu Fabra, which is one of the top universities in Spain.

So when I hear people say that meritocracy is an ideology that masks injustice, I felt this tension because something had worked in my case. And I think meritocracy is the only chance for people like me to kind of like develop their talents and have better expectations

than their parents. So I began to ask myself, so what do [we] exactly criticize when we criticize meritocracy? Are we rejecting the idea that positions should be filled by the best qualified candidate? Are we rejecting the idea that social origin should not determine our life chances? Or are we rejecting something else, which is the moralization of success and failure and the idea that market outcomes reflect what people morally deserve? And I suspect it's the last thing. And the book is an attempt disentangle those things and to defend a version of meritocracy that is not guilty of many of the criticisms that we encounter in the public and academic debate.

Durlauf: So how would you outline your normative defense as it were of meritocracy and how does it differ from the conventional thinking that advocates engage in?

Queralt: There are many things here, of course, but I think let me emphasize something, which is let's not forget that meritocracy has a progressive genealogy. So meritocracy was the idea behind or one of the main ideas behind the French Revolution, and I think it was central to many of the struggles that claim equality of opportunity of some sort, meaning feminist struggles, civil rights movements and so on. So something has happened. The right has kind of like hijacked this idea, right? So there has been some movements—ideological movements, conceptual movements—that kind of change the moral meaning of this ideal. And in the book, what I try to emphasize is that meritocracy can operate over three different domains, right?

One is the most obvious and most simple, which is that meritocracy is a principle of job placement. The idea is very intuitive. Positions should be allocated on the basis of relevant competence, not because competencies is morally relevant, but I think because placing the most competent people in social[ly] important roles serves collective interest, efficiency, productivity, and even say, safety, right? So it has nothing to do with moral desert in my view. And this I think already marks the departure from some standard views on meritocracy that are very attached to the safety of moral desert. So for me, the point of view of the collectivity, the point of view of the people that benefit from placing jobs according to talents is very important and I think the discussion is very often disregarded.

The second domain concerns opportunity, right? So meritocracy is a principle that distributes opportunities to opportunities for education, mainly opportunities in the job market, right? And I think there is a broad consensus, and this also includes people like Rawls, that these two domains are domains in which meritocracy is a very reasonable principle. So who would depart from that? Who would say, no, we don't want the best surgeon, no, we don't want the best doctor, right? Or no, we don't want the best teacher. So it's very hard to say, no, let's find an alternative principle.

Where the problem begins, I think, is in the third domain, which is in the domain of rewards. And I think this is where my disagreement with conventional thinking becomes clear. So there is a widespread assumption, especially in market societies, that once positions are allocated meritocratically, the rewards attached to these positions are deserved, right? And then income, status and social esteem that follow from these positions are treated as if they naturally follow from merit in a technical sense, merit in the sense of having the capacity to occupy a certain position, right? What I want to do in the book, or what I try to do, is to defend a sort of like restricted, demoralized, and domain specific meritocracy. So I try to say that you can hold meritocracy as the right principle to distribute jobs, as the right principle to distribute opportunities, and then reject that meritocracy is a principle that says rewards should be distributed according to the market. So I'm trying to cut the connection between meritocracy and the market. In fact, what I say in the book is that meritocracy does nothing about how much people should earn.

Take the example of public employment, public employment and thinking of the exams to become a judge here in Spain or to become a police or to become a teacher. It's clearly very meritocratic, right? It's even more meritocratic than other jobs where other criteria might play a role such as who you know or for example, who was first in applying. So no, no, no, all these positions are openly very meritocratic in the selection. But then we should ask ourselves a question, which is how wages are determined. They are not determined by the market. They are determined administratively by laws according to several criteria, responsibility, preparation, whatever. But it's clearly that these are not jobs that are paid according to the market. And in fact, some of these jobs that exist in the market, but also in the public sector, they have different wages. Take the example of doctors, take the example of teachers. In the public sector, at least in Spain, they earn whatever, and then in the private sector, they earn something different, right? Sometimes more, sometimes less. Kindergarten teachers here in Spain in the public sector, they earn more than in the private sector. Doctors, they are the way around.

But I use only the example of public employment to show that you can be very meritocratic in selecting and then cut the connection between meritocracy and the market when it comes to wages. And the same happens in socialist countries, right? You can have a socialist meritocracy. I'm not advocating for that in the book. I just use it conceptually to say it is possible to have a system in which wages are not determined completely by the market and we still call it a meritocracy.

Durlauf: So let's unpack a few of these things. I think there's a number of very important issues there. Let's start with what I'm going to call the efficiency criterion you gave. And what I mean by that, is that your conceptualizing meritocracy is much about having to do

with matching. Who do you send to what school? Who do you have work in what position, in a firm or in what occupation? And matching problems have notions of efficiency associated with them. So you can ask the question, if I want to have outstanding surgeons, what's going to be the medical school assignment rule? For economists, that's kind of a natural way to think about meritocracy as functionally defined as that which is efficient.

Now going down that route, it does leave some interesting cases in my opinion. So one I would put on the table is the following and that is affirmative action with reference to medical admissions. So to play this out, some of the poorest places in the United States are Indian reservations. And if I ask the question, how do I produce the most efficient, distribution of medical resources, I may be thinking about who is willing to live on Indian reservations or willing to provide services. And so I bring that up for a couple of reasons. One of them is I fully concur with the, what I call the functional definition. I think that the functional definition—you use the word hijacked—it's often not treated as seriously as it ought to be because as a presumption that this is the objective you want to reach. Doctors I think are a good example where we care about what the doctors are going to do afterwards. So I think that that's a very important point.

I also wanted to emphasize that it has important implications for your third observation which is wages in compensation. George Stigler, who was no one's idea of a liberal in his writings mocked the idea that in a completely competitive market where everybody's paid their marginal product, all of the baseline conditions for economic efficiency, that one had some moral claim to the wages. It was what the market dictated and that did not have moral content. So I think you're exactly right there. And I think further, it's somewhat question begging to say, well, I think that somebody that is more productive should be paid more than somebody who isn't because it doesn't say what the differences should be. So in other words, does meritocracy not exist if there's an 80% marginal tax rate? I think that would be a curious argument. So the first argument made is very, very sympathetic with I think the way that economists think about efficiency questions, which is as their assignment rules. We have to match people to certain things. We have some social objective function and, by implication, merit is...comparative merit is what maximizes that. So I think that one of the things your work does really creates this link between, I'll say, the positive economist perspective and the normative perspective you developed.

Queralt: I agree with you. There is a lot to be said about the best qualified candidate, right? And I think you can accommodate some of the concerns of affirmative action with efficiency and with a sort of like an adjusted definition of what is the best qualified candidate or the better prepared candidate for a given position. Let me give you an example. So you mentioned that you have to hire a doctor in a black community or in a

community where there are a lot of black people. And you know that black people feel more comfortable explaining their health problems to someone who is black as well. Then maybe the doctor who is better in terms of like academic record, CV is a white doctor, but in terms of efficiency—because at the end of the day what you want is that people go to the doctor—they are really honest about what happens to them and the doctor serves his purpose, right, in the community.

So the notion of the best candidate is very tricky because it requires a lot of contextualization and I think some of the concerns—not all—but some of the concerns of a affirmative action at least in the job market can be accommodated in this definition, not always. And always, we have to be very careful about the taste discrimination, right? So we have to be very careful not to fall into that category, not to legitimate preferences that are discriminatory. So sometimes the line can be very thin. So for example, women who are victims of domestic violence, they say, no, I want to be treated by a female psychologist because men don't understand anything, men are blah, blah. Is this taste-based discrimination? Is this something that has to be considered? So I think there is room here to adjust, but with this thing in mind, which of these preferences are legitimate so that we can make hiring decisions that are not discriminatory, right?

About wages, it's exactly what you said. So think for example, what a CEO in Norway, like the average CEO in Norway earns vis-à-vis the average CEO in the US and compare the wage of the CEO with the wage of another's in both economies. These gaps might be very different. We might find, and I don't have these numbers, but very easily we might find that the wage gap in the US is way bigger than the wage gap in Norway, and this says absolutely nothing about whether one society is more meritocratic than the other. It might be that they are both equally meritocratic. It's not the case, but in an ideal scenario, they could be equally meritocratic in the selection process, in the distribution of opportunities, and then because of the market and because of different taxation policies, have different wage gaps. And this is exactly my point. It's like meritocracy is a very incomplete ideal, and I think meritocracy, the critics of meritocracy, put in the sort of like mouth of meritocracy, something that maybe meritocracy does not necessarily have to say, or meritocracy might be a more modest ideal than what the critics assume we have to distinguish, and this is something that I constantly see conflated in public debate, but also in academic debate. We have to distinguish between meritocracy as an idea of justice and meritocracy as an ideology, because these two things are completely different.

Durlauf: I think they absolutely are different, and I interpret a number of the leading critics of meritocracy as critics of it as an ideology. In other words, the assignment of some moral significance to the fact that somebody has a higher standardized test score than somebody

else, as opposed to something that is trying to achieve efficiency suitably defined or to achieve equality of opportunity. And I very much appreciated you bringing up the equality of opportunity dimension because if I think about examples of meritocratic advances, the civil service examinations you referred to that was extremely significant reform in the United States and in the United Kingdom. And of course, China had them 1100 years earlier, so the imperial examination system, there's debates, of course, about the effects on social mobility and the, there's disagreements within the historical literature and by social sciences, look to that, but let me leave that aside. The point is that those are actually cases where the objective of having better people in positions, ones that are more qualified, was getting rid of invidious reasons for the allocations before.

Anti-discrimination policies, I think, are suitably regarded, appropriately regarded as meritocratic. I am not allowed to refuse to hire somebody because of their gender or their ethnicity or their religion. That is clearly a meritocratic demand, because it's defining the domain of what the job is supposed to do and requiring relevance.

Queralt: Yeah, no, so I think that the relationship between meritocracy and equality of opportunity is constitutive, right? So meritocracy, as I said, so meritocracy is a principle that applies to opportunities. So how do we allocate opportunities, job opportunities, education opportunities? We have different principles. We could have strict equality, we could have sufficiency, we could have a meritocratic principle that says opportunities should be sensitive to talent and motivation and effort. So the meritocratic principle is not flat egalitarian principle. No, it's principle that says there has to be some inequality, but an inequality that is sensitive to these elements, right? Talent, effort, motivation, right? So in the absence of equality of opportunity, meritocracy consolidates privileges, is what you were saying, right? So if we kind of put aside who has the chance to become the best possible candidate, we might end up in a situation where all the best possible, the best candidates are white men from rich families. Of course, this is not meritocracy or is not meritocracy in a sense that is worth fighting for, right? So that's why fair equality of opportunity is a constitutive part of the ideal as a principle of justice.

But I also want to make two points and one is connected to some of the things that we discussed before. In the book, I also want to stress the importance, the sort of like the functional relations, so not only the constitutive relation, but the functional relation between equality of opportunity and meritocracy, which is that societies that fail to secure equality of opportunity, waste talent on a massive scale. So again, we have the efficiency issue popping up, right? So equality of opportunity is a precondition so that we kind of maximize the number of people who can apply as the best qualified candidate for a job. And we have examples in history, for example, when we allowed women to enter the job

market, this was crucial in terms of maximizing human capital, right? Maximizing the number of people who can compete, who can prepare themselves for a job. So the opportunity to find a better candidate increases, right? But I also want to emphasize a third connection between equality of opportunity and meritocracy. So some of the main critics of meritocracy, they say meritocracy is at the interest ideal because it legitimizes market outcomes for the reasons I explained before, because they make this connection. Once there is a meritocratic allocation of jobs and opportunity, whatever follows from that is deserved, right? This has a problem, which is that it ignores the intergenerational component of meritocracy, right? So when there is an inequality of outcomes which happens in the market, then this inequality in outcomes of one generation that some people call, oh, this is a meritocratic equality of outcomes, this is what meritocracy justifies, this is the natural outcome of meritocracy, and how can you secure fair equality of opportunity for the next generation, right? So in a way, if you take seriously the idea that meritocracy is intrinsically connected with fair equality of opportunities, this gives you a reason, an intrinsic reason, from the very ideal of meritocracy to restrict market outcomes. It's like you won't have a meritocracy in the next generation unless you limit market outcomes. So we don't need external arguments to the very ideal of meritocracy. It's like no, meritocracy requires fair equality of opportunity, and then you cannot say at the same time that it legitimizes market inequalities and it says, leave them in touch, because then how can you have meritocracy in the next generation?

Durlauf: Yeah, I think that's an extremely important issue. And again, putting me in the language of my world, economic theory, it's the distinction between looking at static problems and dynamic ones. In other words, what we want is a meritocratic society over time. So it's one thing to take a cross section and say conditional on all the unjust things that happen in terms of differences in school quality and the like that have led to disparities in skills of high school seniors that you're going to have a meritocratic allocation to colleges versus asking the question, what over time maximizes your social objectives, maximizes the human capital for the society as a whole. And in that sense, it's another, I think you're also spot on that it's an example of why this became politicized in a certain way. In other words, what I believe is the liberal left critique of meritocracy is not meritocracy, it's static meritocracy. And it's more that the liberal perspective really wants you to want to focus on dynamics. The other side being if one wants to reify all existing inequalities as fair to begin with, then it becomes a sequence of static problems. So I think that you brought up a very important issue.

I wanted to go back to one other thing you brought up. It's important thinking about a number of social questions as well as meritocracy per se. And it had to do with the, what sort of preferences do we want to respect in a society and how do we think about these

things. Gary Becker, maybe a year before his death, I had organized a workshop here at Chicago and he was the lunchtime speaker and he said something very interesting. And he said that his entire life, he had, for most of his life, he'd been basically a utilitarian in the sense that if you ask him a public policy question, he'd say, well, the public policy increases the well-being of some people, reduces it for more and he'd somehow want to aggregate that. He said he'd actually come to believe now that some preferences were not worthy of respect. And his specific example was same-sex marriage and that his conclusion was the people who was utility went up from banning it, they were prejudiced and there was not, that was not a preference that he felt societies ought to honor.

I bring that up for a couple of reasons. As one is that, you know, this functional definition of meritocracy, a critic could say, well, that sounds very vague. You could define anything as in the function and get any allocation you want. I don't, and I think the remedy to that is to try to use measurements that avoid these irrelevancies, et cetera. And second, I just, I think it's of interest that Becker, was an extremely profound thinker, had actually, you know, late in life, had come to a deep change in thinking about what it is and preferences that we wish to see respected in certain contexts. So I put that on the table as something that I think is of some interest.

Queralt: I wanted to go back to something that he said, which is that something that I insist on and I already said is that meritocracy at the end is more limited than what some people in the public debate or in the academic debate want to argue. And I hear all these criticisms of meritocracy and I do not find like Michael Sandel, Daniel Markovitz, it's like, are they actually providing an alternative to meritocracy? I don't think so. I did not find an alternative system that they propose.

It's like, for me, it's like democracy. Sometimes I use this to make this parallel. It's like, yes, democracy is, you know, is failing on many ways. It has a lot of room for improvement. But we do not think seriously of actually replacing democracy by something else. And I think with meritocracy it should be the same. This is the only game in town. We have to make it work. We have to make adjustments. We have to, one of the things that I said, we have to examine profoundly the relationship between meritocracy and the market. I fail to see an alternative principle for distributing jobs and alternative principles for distributing opportunities. I just don't see it. I see all the problems with meritocracy and the market and the allocation of wages, rewards. But that has to be fixed through other instruments. And meritocracy is very silent about that. And if you read the discussions on affirmative action, even the enthusiast's quotas, all sorts of policies, they always present this as a sort of like remedial thing, right? It's a temporary thing. It's something that ideally should not be there. It's something that hopefully one day we can get rid of because we already fixed the

problem. We have, we already compensated for past injustices. We already achieved a situation in which it's no longer necessary to have these policies and then what? What do we have? And I don't think so. I want to emphasize that because, as I said, and democracy is a good parallel, it's like, yes, it fails and it's problematic, but are we ready to talk about a possible replacement, a possible alternative? And I'm curious to hear what are your thoughts on this because I definitely miss this sort of like more constructive proposal from the critics.

Durlauf: I'm hesitant to speak for them, but my sense is that they have specific proposals as opposed to a grand vision in which meritocracy does not function in certain respects. So just to go down that route, Daniel Markovitz has some very interesting arguments about the organization of firms where you can have an organization in which the CEO is extraordinarily influential in the productivity of the firm versus one in which you've decentralized decision-making in such a way. And he would argue that the latter has many virtues to it. And one of them is it makes the efficiency differential between one person versus another qualitatively different. And so I don't think that that's an argument that it's not meritocratic, but it's, it says that you set up the organizations in a different way where the inequality consequences of meritocracy would be attenuated.

A different example that I've heard proposed by serious people is let's take a university. So you know, elite university, which is really trying to rank order students by some, some evaluative criteria about academic potential. Another thing to do is to set some minimal requirement and then just randomize who gets in above the requirement. To do that, however, that's actually exchanged the objective function. And so my sense is that at least a number of the proposals to replace meritocracy, a way to articulate them is they rejected the efficiency because they rejected what the criteria was to say that the best qualified, et cetera. If what I want to do is to have equal probabilities of admission and say that's my objective, then tautologically, the second one works. If my objective is to produce as many Nobel Prize winners as possible, I might choose a different strategy.

So I think that it is the case that sympathizers to meritocracy or advocates and I'll put us in that position, we think about it in terms of making it better. In other words, changing from the static conception to the dynamic conception, defining equality of opportunity as integral to what a meritocratic society is, and so for what it's worth, I think also the critics agree with all that. So I think there's actually common ground on what many of the changes ought to be, even if the objective is not treated the same way.

Queralt: Many of the proposals that Markovitz makes regarding higher education, I think they have to do with improving access, improving opportunities in accessing elite education. And this kind of lottery, so what you were mentioning, I think this is one of

Sandel's proposals, like let's, or another people have proposed this, like let's establish sort of like threshold. This is, one way of correcting something that you mentioned before, which is, we recognize that maybe we don't have a perfect or we don't have a sufficiently good way of identifying, like the best candidates. Like standardized tests, have problems, grades, have problems. So it's like, okay, let's assume that. So what's the difference between someone who has A+ and someone who has A? So maybe there is a lot of noise here, there is a lot of bias in making these decisions. So let's lower the threshold and neutralize this noise, these biases through lottery. But this is for me a way of improving meritocracy by sort of like giving less weight to a system that is not perfectly adequate, which is a system of identifying who is the best qualified candidate for accessing certain positions. So I don't see these proposals as sort of like a radical depart from the meritocratic ideal. And actually I always quote an interview by Sandel that says, yes, if I'm on a plane, I want a good qualified pilot, and if I need a doctor I want a good doctor. And who disagrees with that?

Durlauf: So I hope that we can talk about a second dimension of your work which was political liberties and the relation to social inequality. So could you outline your main arguments?

Queralt: I was trying to connect the idea of political liberties and meritocracy. So I wrote this paper about the importance of political liberties. I wrote it with another professor Inigo González-Ricoy from University of Barcelona. And I don't want to get very Rawlsian in here because maybe our audience is less interested in that. But I wanted to stress a connection between meritocracy and political liberties, which is that they are both about preventing arbitrary power and status hierarchies in social life, so to speak, right? So meritocracy are about who access socially important roles and political liberties are about access to political power. And I think it's very important that no one is excluded from these things for arbitrary reasons, right? So and another connection is the following, which is that meritocracy presupposes, as I said, fair equality of opportunity, right? So people must have, like a genuine chance to compete for positions. But whether these opportunities are genuinely fair or equal, is something that cannot be left to the market, right? So it's something that depends on political decisions about education, taxation, inheritance, labor, healthcare, social policy. So there are all sorts of decisions that have to do with this precondition or with this element of meritocracy. And I think this is where political liberties become essential, right? Because if some groups lack political liberties, they are excluded from shaping the very roots that determine how opportunities are distributed, determine these sort of like preconditions for securing fair equality of opportunity. And also the rules that determine what counts as merit, at least in the public sector, so I think there is a lot of

connection between these two ideals, although it's not evident, but I think the connection is there.

Durlauf: If I'm interpreting it correctly, you're actually making a radical egalitarian argument for the political domain. In other words, that individuals have to have equal possibility to influence policy decisions, so liberties being a necessary condition for that. In the American case, I'm obviously thinking about campaign finance and access to the corridors of power, et cetera. And the nexus that you're bringing there is that because the decisions in the society or the collective decisions via the government are so essential to understanding social inequalities. A meritocratic system is going to require what I call the radical egalitarianism in a different domain. Maybe radical is a little too dramatic in order to ensure that the type of dynamic meritocracy that we've been talking about actually is feasible.

Queralt: Exactly, exactly. So I think we have to distinguish between political power and political influence. People might be more, some people might be more charismatic, more, they like to spend more time in politics. They are more gifted to politics and they have more influence. And this is somehow unavoidable. But what is problematic is the unequal political power on how this unequal political power can be an obstacle for a full meritocratic society. And there is also this connection between meritocracy and hierarchy that unequal political liberties establish. So because I think critics would say, look, meritocracy creates this sort of like this hierarchy, this sort of like category of those who lose, of those who are not sufficiently talented, of those who, as Sandel says, of those who have this sort of like the stigma or you failed. But I think the same happens with the hierarchies that result from very unequal political power, right? So there is a, there is a bottom of the hierarchy of people who lack political voice. So I think in this, in this sense, there is also a connection between the hierarchies that unequal political liberties establish and the hierarchies that meritocracy as an ideology, which is not what I defend, but it's something that in the public discourse is well-established. I think they both create this sort of like hierarchies of positions which are problematic. But yes, I'm trying to make this argument that the two are connected through the idea of equality opportunity, which is for me very central.

Durlauf: So I thought we could finally turn to your work on economic rights, the papers that I've had an opportunity to study of yours are really quite fascinating. So can you just outline your thinking?

Queralt: It's a very important topic because it's a neglected topic, I think, in discussions among liberals, discussions about distributive justice, right? So when I think of economic rights, I think of basically rights that protect individuals' economic agency, right? So their

capacity to manage their own economic affairs on a household level, but also on a more productive level, right? These includes property rights, of course, these includes labor rights, but these include also what I call in some of my papers, entrepreneurial rights, which are essentially liberties to start and operate business to enter market competition to profit from transactions, right? And what motivated my interest in this, right, is again, some sort of like clash between, again, liberal progressive academics discussing about distributive justice, who tend to neglect these rights. They often think that they are the rights of the rich somehow, right? So they are, so who needs business rights? So the people that make a business, right? So they associate them with a libertarian opposition to redistribution and we have what John Tomassi calls economic exceptionalism, right? The idea that economic liberties deserve weaker protection than political or civil liberties. I mean, this is very standard thinking in this part of the debate.

Now, as I said, there was a clash between these discourse and then the empirical observation that in many parts of the world, these rights are absolutely essential for poor people. Now I'm working on labor justice, on issues connected to labor justice. Labor justice very often is about standard labor rights, rights that assume a labor contract. And this is not the reality for millions of poor people in poor countries. They are self-employed. They are street vendors. They have like small businesses. They sell what they produce. And they really need these property rights, these entrepreneurial rights. They need liberties to hold their property, to be able to transfer their assets, to be able to have, for example, some sort of insurance, to be able to have access to a bank account. These kind of things and these are not standard labor rights and these rights have been neglected. And I think this is an area of research that in political theory needs further development.

Durlauf: So my sense from Jerry Gaus, for example, is that one of his arguments was that philosophers, political theorists had underappreciated entrepreneurship and economic activity as one of the dimensions where people have flourishing lives. I don't think at some level it's all that surprising since the people that do it, including us. And which production of participation in the economy is not integral to our self definitions. And so I think you brought up a very important thing. Is that when we talk about flourishing, it's easy to think about a society in which, or for college professors, to think about a society and people read books all day and write them and debate them. But what's called the, by Marshall, the ordinary business of life, is fulfilling for many, many people. That's an essential thing to think about as well. And so I think that it is indeed a very interesting and open area. And of course entrepreneurship is so integral to economic productivity over time that it goes back to the idea you started with, which is that we can have an idea that we want people to have economic, normal and entrepreneurial rights, for example. And by implication, that's what produces a vibrant economy. So I think that the argument is very well taken.

Queralt: Yeah, and another thing is that which I find a bit annoying, which is the whole debate on global justice, is the debate that is focused on our obligations towards poor people. It's a debate that is purely donor-centric. It's a debate that is focused on what we do for them. And they treat it as sort of like passive agents that receive charity or receive donations or receive certain transfers as a matter of justice and different theories say different things. But there is a donor and there's someone passive that receives. And I'm not denying these transfers are necessary and are just. But there has to be another way of conceptualizing this inequality is that treats them as economic agents. Because there is one thing that is completely absent in debates about global justice, which is the thing that in real world, in practice, worked, which is productivity, increased the productivity of these countries. How China, how Brazil, of course they have problems on many other areas, but they managed to reduce poverty. How? By increasing productivity and then how can we keep on having a debate that is focused on charity and how much we owe for past injustice? That's fine, but can we talk about this other way of understanding inequalities or this other way of understanding what's more desirable for them to achieve? And I think this is a place where these rights have an important role to play because I think they recognize the agency of poor people. They don't treat them as passive.

Durlauf: So, Jahel, I think we need to come to an end, but it's just been an absolute delight to have the chance to talk with you.

Queralt: Thanks for having me.

Durlauf: This is being Jahel Queralt speaking on meritocracy, political rights and economic rights. Jahel's vision is one where she wants everybody to fulfil their potential. Part of fulfilling potential is that if people are going to be unusually productive in certain places, that's where they ought to be matched. That constitutes a part of meritocracy. Equality of opportunity, making sure that differences in the accidents at birth don't manifest themselves too deeply. That's another way of saying one fulfills potential. And similarly, the ability to act as an agent in economic context, that's fulfilling one's potential. And so it is a profoundly humane vision, and so I'm grateful that you were able to communicate it to us.

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.

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