

# **WHY EXCELLENCE MATTERS**

LORD DAHRENDORF

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**  
PRIX LATSIS UNIVERSITAIRES 1995

FONDATION LATSIS INTERNATIONALE

N° 3

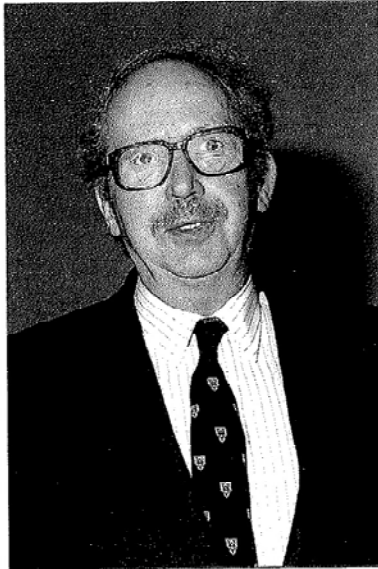
# **WHY EXCELLENCE MATTERS**

THE RT. HON. LORD DAHRENDORF KBE FBA  
WARDEN  
ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**  
PRIX LATSIS UNIVERSITAIRES 1995

FONDATION LATSIS INTERNATIONALE

# WHY EXCELLENCE MATTERS



**THE RT. HON. LORD DAHRENDORF KBE FBA**  
WARDEN  
ST. ANTONY'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

## ***Why Excellence Matters***

It is a pleasure to congratulate the prizewinners on the just reward for their remarkable achievements. It is always a pleasure to see excellence recognized. We rejoice with those who are obviously delighted with their awards. We are also glad that such individuals exist, outstanding people who set an example to which others can aspire.

But this is already a controversial statement in this democratic age which takes me to the heart of the subject of my remarks. Excellence has got a bad name; one almost has to apologize for it. Certainly the British Arts Council had to offer lengthy explanations for giving the bulk of the lottery money which it distributes to the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden and the Sadlers Wells theatre. Why did London get so much and Liverpool so little? The University of Oxford has to explain why many of its new entrants come from a limited number of top schools. How can we justify the privilege? There is even a tendency to award prizes not to individuals but to deserving yet anonymous groups or organizations - to Amnesty, to Pugwash - in order to avoid elevating individuals to hero's status. I am going to argue that this is not only mistaken, but dangerously wrong, and that excellence matters, for all of us.

What though is excellence? Vilfredo Pareto has had a go at this vexing question in the famous §2027 of his *Traité de Sociologie Générale*. Let us give marks (he argues) to people's capacity in all

branches of human activity, ten for the best, zero for the worst. Thus the successful professional gets a 10, one who has no clients a 1, and he who is *vraiment cretin* a zero. "He who has made millions, whether by fair means or foul, is given a 10. He who has made thousands is given a 6. He who just about manages to survive, is given a 1, and those who end up in the poorhouse a zero." Pareto proceeds to the *femmes politiques*, to Perikles's Aspasia, the Maintenon of Louis XIV, the Pompadour of Louis XV, who get, interestingly, not a 10, but an 8 or 9 for having captured the affection of a great man and influenced the ways in which he governs. The whore, on the other hand, who merely satisfies the senses of men and has no influence on public affairs, must make do with a zero. And so on, to the great crook who gets away with murder and the small one who is caught by the policy, the great poet and the miserable rhymcr, the grandmaster of chess and the hopeless amateur. In this way Pareto wants to constitute a whole class of tens as it were, of those who excel in their branches, a "select class" for which he introduces that other word which is never far away as one speaks of excellence, *elite*.

Two questions at least remain. One is: do we really want to lump the Pompadour, Goethe, George Soros and Gary Kasparov together in one elite which would have to include other, much less savoury characters as well? Probably not. Some public, even moral relevance has to be added to sheer achievement. The other question is: who gives the marks, the tens and the naughts? Pareto rightly observes that in chess one can count the number of games won or lost, but not in poetry, science or politics. An element of judgement enters here. Whose judgement? Who is the jury? Those who have awarded the Latsis Prize will be well aware of the agony of decision. In the end, as in the case of trial juries, we rely on the common sense of people. However, whereas trial juries can and must be based on the simple common sense of citizens, judgements of excellence require a groomed common sense; they have to be informed judgements. This is where pccr review comes in, with all

the dangers of trade unionization of peer groups and indeed mutual backscratching which it involves.

Having raised the questions, I shall assume that we know the answers: there is such a phenomenon as publicly and morally relevant excellence, and we know how to identify it. Why does it matter?

The case which I want to put to you rests on a line of argument which begins with the thesis that equality alone is stifling and ultimately deadly. Note that I said, equality *alone*. The basic entitlements of citizenship for all are an indispensable condition of civilized and liberal communities. Indeed, exclusion from these entitlements is one of the major social problems of the 1990s, not just on a world scale but within even the most advanced countries. This is the problem of the underclass, and also that of xenophobia. Inclusion involves basic rights, equality before the law, due process, the integrity of the person, freedom of expression and association. It also involves chances of participation, universal suffrage, of course, but equally importantly market access including labour market access, and social involvement in the numerous opportunities of civil society. This is what we mean by citizenship in the full sense of the word.

It can also be called, equality of opportunity. But such equality is only one half of the life chances which people seek and deserve. The other half has to do with the opportunities themselves. Freedom of expression is almost meaningless if there is only one newspaper or television station; it is severely restricted also if most newspapers and television stations are owned and run by the same proprietor, public or private. The variety needed for life chances is, moreover, not just lateral, a plurality of intrinsically similar provisions. It is also scalar, a diversity of levels, of ranks, a world in which some have more of what people value than others. This is, of course, the crux of the argument: is citizenship compatible with inequality? Or, in the words of the education debate: can we be equal and excellent too?

The answer is not simple and must not be facile; it is, nevertheless, yes. There are two limiting conditions which make inequality unacceptable. Both have been mentioned already. One is exclusion from the universe of opportunity. Where this occurs, action is needed in the interest of a civilized and liberal community. The existence of an underclass destroys the moral texture of societies. At the other end of the scale, it is not acceptable that anyone occupies a position of such power that he or she can deny others the exercise of their citizenship rights. This is meant by privilege in the strict sense of the term. Privilege by birth or arrogation denies the universality of citizenship. Some remnants of such privilege still exist; strong forces in all three British political parties want to abolish voting rights for hereditary peers in the House of Lords (though they may not have chosen the most flagrant case of privilege). More importantly today, control of unaccountable instruments of power, notably though by no means only the media, raises serious issues.

Within the limits thus set, that is in the absence of exclusion on the one hand, and privilege or concentrations of private power on the other, inequality is not only compatible with citizenship, but highly desirable. Entitlements are barren without provisions, opportunities empty without a range of possible outcomes. In that sense, the American Dream embodied a perfect vision of a free society, even if reality never fully lived up to it and perhaps (as Tocqueville first argued) could not live up to it: "They have swept away the privileges of some of their fellow creatures which stood in their way, but they have opened the door to universal competition." "But"? Or could it after all be, "and"? Competition within rules is not the worst prescription for enhancing the life chances of the greatest number.

It is easy to see that competition benefits those who succeed. Tocqueville argued that it also makes the losers envious and restless. Robert Merton made this conflict between cultural values and social capacities the central plank of his "Social Structure and Anomie"

and spoke an inherent “strain towards anomie”. What then is the answer? For Tocqueville it is the nostalgia for an age of aristocracy: “When inequality of conditions is the common law of society, the most marked inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is nearly on the same level, the slightest [inequalities] are marked enough to hurt it.” Tocqueville was no fool; he knew that the French Revolution could not be undone. His conclusion is thus gloomy. What he wants, is forever gone, what has come in its place, is not viable. A century and a half after *Democracy in America* we know that the gloom was exaggerated if not unwarranted. Robert Okun has plausibly argued (in his *Equality and Efficiency*) that government-created inequalities are much more drastic than those arising from competitive markets. In any case, competition by rules can be a highly creative process, its highly unequal outcomes notwithstanding. The American Dream was real for a long time, even if it is under threat today, when for the first time in the history of the country the majority of parents have to tell their children that they are going to be worse off than they, the parents, were.

Inequality is not the same as excellence, but where excellence is recognized, it is accepted that equality of opportunity must not mean equality of outcomes. This leaves the question still unanswered, what - apart from the intrinsic satisfaction for those who are given a Pareto ten, and a prize to go with it - is so good about excellence. I want to cite two such desirable effects.

The first is innovation. Stagnant societies - stagnant economies and polities - are precarious societies. The American economist Mancur Olson has described the risk strikingly in his *Rise and Decline of Nations*. He quotes Pandit Nehru: “Every civilization which resists change declines”. He could have quoted Immanuel Kant who built his “Idea of a General History With Cosmopolitan Intent” on the notion that while people dream of a forever tranquil Arcadia, they have fortunately not been made for it; conflict and competition drive



them on to new horizons. But a tendency towards entropy remains. Stagnation, even stagflation; “distributional coalitions”; vested interests; the desire for protection; guilds and trade unions; bureaucracy and other rigidities recur. They all serve to cement a stagnant mediocrity. Remember the word, “Eurosclerosis”?

It did not last. Europe is not alone in the world, and when the dragons and tigers elsewhere set about their predatory endeavours, the challenge was clear. Some rose to it. They were Schumpeter-type entrepreneurs with their “creative destructiveness”. They were also politicians, like Ronald Reagan or Margaret Thatcher, or on the European scene, Jacques Delors. Some of the names show that innovators are not necessarily the most likeable figures. The same is true for excellence in general. Whoever stands out not only provokes envy but is also likely to have traits which are less useful in making friends than in making headway. Arcadia is in a certain sense nicer than the open society, But it is (in Kant’s words) a place for sheep rather than human beings, or (in Popper’s words) for tribes rather than enlightened citizens.

Innovation requires outstanding deeds, inventions, their translation into reality, that is entrepreneurialism, the acceptance of the needs of leadership, thus excellence of one kind or another. It helps us break out of the “iron cage of bondage” of modern bureaucratized states. It also does something else which takes me to the second desirable effect of excellence which I wanted to cite. It sets the tone.

Here we enter a minefield of controversy, at least in a politically correct world. There is, in modern societies, not only the risk levelling, of stagnant mediocrity, but also an air of disorientation. This too can be a result of a misguided concept of democracy. Values are thought to “emerge” somehow, by freeing people from constraints, encouraging them to be their best selves, bringing them together for discourse and communication. Somehow, like geysers out of Icelandic

soil, truth and goodness and beauty will arise. This is Habermas (albeit in caricature), and Rousseau before him. But it is wrong. Values do not just emerge, not even from unconstrained discourse. We have all experienced committees in search of a big idea. It does not just come; somebody has to have it. Somebody even has to try to persuade others of it, and persuasion is bound to be a mixture of argument, marketing skills and power, on other words more than just a rational process.

Paul Feyerabend first elevated the notion that “anything goes” to a theory of knowledge. The ironic anarchist of method knew, more or less, what he was doing. What he may not have known is the extent to which the erosion of standards, and of the readiness to set standards, has in fact taken place. Mixing modern medicine with acupuncture, Oriental potions and a bit of magic is one of the more harmless results. Making what most people would still call, reality, disappear by interpretation into a multitude of virtual realities is a rather more serious phenomenon. Taking a “why not?” approach to whatever people do, say, want, and look like is a step towards anomy, the absence of rules. Anomy, however, like entropy, is ultimately death, Hobbes’s war of all against all in the case of anomy, Rousseau’s Arcadia of human sheep without memory or purpose in the case of entropy.

Somebody has to set the tone so that all of us have standards by which to measure quality, and even against which to assert alternatives. (If anything goes, all debate and dispute ceases, along with all meaning.) You will begin to wonder whether a dicd-in-the-wool liberal is turning into an authoritarian. I hope that in my final remarks I can persuade you that this is not the case; on the contrary, it is Arcadia and the war of all against all which invite warlords and dictators. Liberty requires institutions and conflict, a tone that is set and the opportunity to dispute it, it requires a society open for change rather than rigidity or meaningless multitude.

Setting the tone has much to do with excellence. If I was chairman of the Arts Council I would neither apologize for having given so much money to Covent Garden and Sadlers Wells nor promise that sooner or later provincial opera houses and theatre companies will get funds of a similar order of magnitude. I would argue that it is important for all that the very best flourish because without them all would soon lose their bearings. This is true for universities too. In the classless society which Conservative governments in Britain have first created and then openly advocated, Oxford and Cambridge are under growing pressure. Why should students get higher grants to attend the ancient universities? Because these are setting the tone for the rest, and a tone which has meant that until recently, the whole British university system was better than the sad "mass transit system" into which most Continental universities have deteriorated. It is true that not everyone can have the best, but even those who get less than the best will be better served when the best is there to see. Take away excellence and you get not only mediocrity everywhere, but worse still, complacent mediocrity.

Are there then no problems with excellence at all? There are, and I must not conclude without highlighting them. Pareto, having devised the wonderful department-store notion of an elite of the "tens" of all walks of life, states without much ado that he now wants to divide the lot into two: "We single out those who directly or indirectly play a notable role in government; they constitute the governing elite. The rest will form the non-governmental elite." This is then a ruling class of those who are given a ten for ... well, for what? And by whom? To be sure, we want to be governed well. There is also much to be said for having a political class with certain standards and even a certain cohesion (though that is another argument, and one which leads us even more deeply into controversy). But beyond that, Pareto's definitions demand words of caution rather than support. One word of caution is that power must never rest on the qualities of individuals. However excellent people are, it is more important that we make

sure that they cannot lead us astray than that we give them a free run. This is where an institutional concept of democracy comes into its own. Democracy is about being able to get rid of governments without bloodshed. It may even justify a “22nd Amendment” by which a President cannot be re-elected more than once. In other words, setting the tone is never a justification for keeping a particular person or party in power unchecked and over long periods of time. The whole point of my argument is that change is the lifeblood of liberty.

This, of course, is pure Popper, and so is another comment. I left the question open, for what capacities or achievements the ruling elites in Pareto’s sense get their tens. Using his terminology, it has got to be clear that a ten in a non-governing activity cannot and must not be thought of as a qualification for government. Popper’s vicious critique of Plato’s notion of philosopher-kings remains valid. “The sage whose magical powers raise him high above ordinary men” is a tyrant who cannot be removed because he has a claim to truth. He must not happen, or even she! A Nobel Prize does not give its laureate a special claim to wisdom in public affairs, nor does outstanding success in business, or even in acting on the stage or the screen. There are scientist-politicians, businesspeople-politicians, even actor-politicians, but their past professions are biographical facts, not sources of legitimate power. This source is in the constitution of liberty, and whether they discharge their duties well will be measured more by Socratic than by Platonic standards. To quote Popper again: Socrates “warned the statesman against the danger of being dazzled by his own power, excellence and wisdom, and [...] tried to teach him what matters most - that we are all frail human beings.

Excellence matters. It contributes to keeping societies open and capable of change. It provides innovation and sets standards. By extending the range of choices and offering a sense of direction it contributes to enhancing the life chances of all. At the same time,

identifying and praising excellence runs counter to important trends of our world. The question is therefore how we can preserve and develop opportunities for excellence. I am not even going to try and delve into this complicated issue; but I am sure that a prize like the one awarded today is itself an excellent example of how to promote excellence.