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Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity - (Preface to the Chinese Edition)

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Bottlenecks: A New Theory of Equal Opportunity

Preface to the Chinese Edition

When I began this project, my focus was the complex problems of unequal opportunity in Western societies—particularly in my home country, the United States, where a widely shared rhetoric of equal opportunity coexists with enormous inequalities of opportunity, as well as inequalities of other kinds. The more I thought about these problems, the more fundamental they seemed. Inequalities of opportunity are inevitable in any society that is made up of families, because parents will attempt to pass advantages of various kinds to their children. Moreover there is no good way to neutralize the effects of differences and inequalities that fundamentally shape not only our talents and skills but also our preferences and values.

These problems are intractable and permanent. And yet they also seem to be getting worse. But how and why worse? Thinking about that question led me to the argument at the heart of this book. It seems that the United States in particular, along with many other countries, is gradually becoming more of a winner-take-all type of society. As a society becomes more unequal, with an increasing portion of the rewards going to the top, the stakes of many competitions are heightened and the effects of unequal opportunities on individuals' lives become correspondingly more intense. At decision points such as college admissions, for example, we now see much more competition for the most sought-after, elite colleges, as many people (from around the globe!) see elite college admissions as the best route to success in life—with such success seeming more uncertain than ever, and also more necessary for a comfortable life.

The metaphor at the heart of this book is the “bottleneck”: a narrow place through which one must pass in order to reach all the paths that fan out on the other side. When we think about the ways opportunities are structured and organized in any society, we are often thinking about bottlenecks. College admissions functions as a bottleneck. But in a different way, so too do other variables such as the place where one grows up. If being from one place means a wide range of paths are wide open, while being from another place means opportunities are limited, then place of origin itself is functioning as a bottleneck, where one must be from the right sort of place to pursue many desirable paths. Gender functions as a bottleneck when society prescribes certain roles for women and other roles for men, and so on.

In trying to understand the concept of a bottleneck, it helps to imagine a society in which much depends on a single, all-important test. In my own thinking, I have always visualized this in terms of the tradition of government-sponsored, high-stakes testing that is so prevalent in many parts of the world today, but especially in East Asia. Its deepest roots can be found in the ancient Chinese Imperial Examination System, which knit together an empire and staffed its bureaucracy for over a thousand years. Indeed, for this reason I initially proposed to my publisher that the cover of this book should be an ancient painting of the Imperial examination system (an idea the publisher rejected, probably correctly, since people would mistakenly assume the book was exclusively about China!). But the Imperial Examination

System nonetheless illustrates many important points about how bottlenecks shape both individuals and societies.

The Imperial Examination System was a kind of pyramidal competition, with those who succeeded in local iterations of the exam proceeding to higher and more competitive district and provincial stages up to a national competition. Very few of those who took the initial, local tests ever found their way to the top of the pyramid or won jobs in the Imperial bureaucracy. And yet even so, the competition indelibly shaped the entire educational system of Imperial China. Preparation for the examination became, in effect, a national curriculum; it spread uniformity and a focus on the Confucian classics throughout the empire, indelibly shaping the educational experiences of enormous numbers of students who never came close to securing a spot in the Imperial bureaucracy. In other words, for both the students who succeeded and those who failed, this competitive bottleneck shaped their basic educational trajectories and their sense of what ideas and values mattered.

Today, in all industrialized nations, from China to Western Europe, educational testing is part of the process of entrance into higher education and higher-status employment. Increased inequality raises the stakes of such competitions and makes this bottleneck more significant. Some critics of such testing systems focus on the question of whether the tests are really fair. My concern with such tests in this book is different and more fundamental. To be sure, testing can be useful—especially when new systems of testing displace much less meritocratic methods of allocating of scarce educational slots such as nepotism and elite networks. The Imperial Examination System itself was surely a great improvement on the system it displaced, in which powerful offices had been open only to those born into an aristocratic elite, making class origins an overwhelmingly powerful bottleneck. But the problem with tests is this: When any single test or cluster of related tests looms too large, it shrinks the space for educational and academic pluralism, and has too outsized an effect on what everyone learns and thinks. This was one of the concerns about the Imperial exam itself near the end of its life around the turn of the twentieth century: that it caused the entire educational system to focus too much on one set of largely Confucian texts, to the exclusion of other forms of knowledge and academic disciplines.

I call the main idea of this book “opportunity pluralism.” The idea is this. We cannot make everyone’s opportunities “equal” to everyone else’s, because individual people are so different from one another, different kinds of opportunities are important for different and sometimes incommensurable reasons, and families all give their children different, sometimes incommensurable, advantages. But even if we cannot make opportunities “equal,” what we can do is change the way opportunities are *structured* so that people at all different points have a greater range of opportunities open to them that they might pursue. To achieve this requires, among other things, loosening the bottlenecks that constrain what people can do and become. We need not eliminate all educational tests, for instance, but we ought to have more paths through and around the test bottleneck: more assistance for students that would help them do well on the test, and also more pathways of different kinds, from apprenticeships to technical training programs that offer paths to good careers even for those who did not score well on the test. We need not eliminate all advantages that parents pass to children, but we ought to make sure that we have not created a social order in which only the children of the elite, who begin with enormous advantages in capital, connections, and wealth, can get ahead.

This last point that is what makes the argument of this book particularly relevant to contemporary China, a society with a deep attachment to the idea of equality, and yet one in which both wealth and opportunity are becoming ever more starkly unequal. From the perspective of this book, it is not necessarily a problem if some are rich and enjoy luxuries while others have resources that are merely adequate. But if too many doors are closed to everyone but a small elite, then that is a very serious problem—and also one that makes raw inequalities themselves far more unjust. It has been widely reported in recent years that the families of Chinese political leaders at both the regional and national level have become deeply involved in enterprises and industries that often involve state regulation, and some have become very wealthy as a result. Meanwhile, it has also been widely reported that the so-called “princelings,” the sons of the nation’s political elite, are themselves increasingly gaining political office and power—a situation that is shared by many countries, including the United States, but China appears to have quite a serious case of it. To the extent that reports such as these are true, they begin to paint a picture of a social order in which having the right family connections and party connections is a serious bottleneck and the only real route to success in certain highly remunerative fields.

Bottlenecks caused by a confluence of elite networks, nepotism, “princelings” and so forth are far from unique to China. Opening up formerly state-controlled economies to more market-based competition tends to create opportunities for extremely lucrative deals for those with the right connections; a more open and pluralistic economic structure typically takes time to develop. This is true in so many different countries that it is one important facet of the story of the creation of a new global elite. But in China, all this poses a particular conflict with ideals of equality and equal opportunity that are part of the rhetoric and self-conception of the society.

Meanwhile, China must grapple with the bottleneck-producing effects of legal policies that make distinctions among its citizens. For instance, the household registration system (Hukou) creates a legal distinction that amounts to a bottleneck: those living in cities without the proper registration face pervasive barriers across many spheres, from employment to housing and access to services. This is a bottleneck that the state has created, and that a just state would work to ameliorate, by creating paths both through it (i.e. helping people obtain residency papers) and around it (i.e. making more services and opportunities available to those without). Or perhaps by disestablishing the Hukou system altogether.

In the end, my hope for the Chinese edition of this book is that it will spur some thinking and discussion about the bottlenecks that shape the opportunity structure in China. Some of these are familiar to readers and scholars from many countries; others are unique. It is worth examining and potentially loosening them all if we want to enable people to live lives whose trajectories are more self-chosen, rather than lives whose shape is dictated completely by limited opportunity.

Joseph Fishkin

Austin, Texas, 2015

《瓶颈——机会平等新论》

中文版序

当我开始本书的研究时，我关注的焦点是西方社会，特别是我的祖国美国，那里的机会不平等问题错综复杂。机会平等的话语深入人心，但同时又与严重的机会不平等和其他类型的不平等交织在一起。我对这些问题的思考越多，就越发现这些问题的深层性。由于父母会试图将各种优势传递给他们的子女，因此在任何一个存在家庭制度的社会中，机会的不平等都是不可避免的。此外，也没有什么好的办法来消除差异和不平等带来的影响，这些影响不仅从根本上塑造了我们的才智和技能，还塑造了我们的偏好和价值观。

这些永久性的问题是难以解决的，而且似乎有恶化的趋势。但是在多大程度上恶化了，又为什么会恶化呢？对这个问题的思考引导我得出了本书的中心观点。许多西方国家，特别是美国，似乎正在逐渐成为更加“赢者通吃”的社会。随着社会变得更加不平等，越来越多的奖励被居于顶层的人所占有，许多竞争的赌注都变得更大了，机会不平等对人生的影响也相应地变得更大了。比如，在大学录取这样的选择节点上，我们会发现，成功的机会似乎比以前更飘渺了，而要过上舒适的生活又更需要成功，于是(来自世界各地的)许多人都把进入顶尖学校就读看作通向人生成功的最佳途径，这使得那些最热门最顶尖的学校的竞争变得比以往更加激烈。

本书的核心比喻是“瓶颈”：即人们为了到达对岸的所有路径而必须通过的狭窄地段。当我们思考任何一个社会中的机会是如何建构并组织的时候，我们想到的通常是瓶颈。大学录取就是一种瓶颈。但从另一个角度来看，成长地等其他变量也是瓶颈。如果在一个地方长大的人能够接触到许多不同的路径，而在另一个地方长大的人机会受限，那么一个人就必须在合适的地方长大才能追求各种理想的路径，成长地也就因此成为了一种瓶颈。当社会将某些角色局限于女性，并将其他角色局限于男性时，性别就成为了一种瓶颈。其他的例子还有很多。

为了有助于我们理解瓶颈这个概念，设想在一个社会中，大部分事情都取决于一次重要的考试。在我的思考中，我一直把这情景形象化为当今世界中的许多国家，特别是东亚国家盛行的大考制度。其根源可以追溯到中国古代的科举制度，这个制度在一千多年的历史中维系了帝国的统一并提供了充足的官僚。正是出于这个原因，我开始向出版社提议，采用一副描绘科举考试的中国国画作为本书的封面（出版社明智地否决了这个提议，因为读者会误以为本书讨论的只是中国问题！）。不过，科举制度确实能够让我们看到瓶颈是如何塑造个人和社会的。

科举制是一种金字塔式的竞争，那些通过县试的考生会晋级到更高级别的府试、乡试直至会试。在一开始参加县试的考生中，只有极少数能够爬到金字塔顶端或者获得朝廷的官职。即便如此，这一竞争还是对帝制时期的中国教育制度产生了不可磨灭的影响。对科举考试的备考成为了一个全国性的课程；这强化了帝国的同一性以及儒家经典的侧重，因而极大地塑造了许许多多未能获得官职的学生的教育经历。换句话说，对那些考试成功和考试失利的学生来说，这个竞争性的瓶颈都塑造了他们基本的教育轨迹以及他们对何种思想和价值最为重要的想法。

今天，从中国到西欧的所有工业化国家都将教育考试作为进入高等教育和高层次就业的一个环节。不平等的加剧使得这类竞争的赌注更大了，并使这个瓶颈更为突出。一些对此类考试制度的批评者质疑考试是否真的是公平的。而我在本书中对考试制度的顾虑则不同而更加深层。考试当然是有用的，特别是当新的考试制度取代了任人唯亲和权贵网络，以更加择优录取的方式来分配稀缺的教育机会时。在原有体制下，重要的公职只对贵族出身的子弟开放，使得阶级出身成为了一个非常严重的瓶颈，因此科举制本身毫无疑问是一次重大的改进。但是考试的问题在于：当一种考试的权重过大，就可能会压缩教育和学术多元主义的空间，并且会对所有人的学习和思想造成过大的影响。这正是 19 世纪末 20 世纪初科举考试废止前人们对它的主要批评：科举制造成了整个教育体系过度集中在几部儒家典籍上，以至于忽视了其他形式的知识和学术科目。

我把本书的中心思想称为“机会多元”主义。这个思想的大意是：我们不能让所有人的机会都“平等化”，这是因为人与人的个体差异太大。出于各种不同的、有时是不可通约的原因，许多类型的机会都是重要的，而家庭又赋予了子女各种不同的、有时是不可通约的优势。但是即使我们不能使机会“平等化”，我们还是能够改变机会的“建构”方式使得人们在任何时候都能够有更多可以追寻的机会。要实现这一点，一个必要条件是缓解那些限制人们做事和为人的瓶颈。比如说，我们没有必要取消所有的教育考试，但是我们应该开辟更多通过或者绕过考试这一瓶颈的路径：为学生提供帮助，使他们能够在考试中取得更好的成绩，同时找到更多不同的路径，比如学徒工或者技工培训计划，为那些考试成绩不佳的人提供良好的职业路径。我们没有必要消除父母传递给子女的所有优势，但是我们应该确保不会造成一种社会秩序，使得只有那些拥有大量资本、人际关系和财富优势的权贵子弟才能够成功。

正是最后这一点使得本书的论点和当代中国特别相关。中国社会对平等有着深切的追求，然而中国社会的财富和机会却正在变得越来越不平等。从本书的视角来看，一部分富人过着奢侈的生活而其他人只能勉强温饱，这并不见得是个问题。但是如果有太多的大门都只对少数权贵敞开而对其他人关闭，那就是非常严重的问题了，这个问题将使物质上的不平等变得更加不公正。近年来，有不少报道指出，中国的一些地方领导甚至中央领导的子女过度地参与到一些国家监管的企业和行业

中，并因此致富。同时也有报道称，一些“太子党”，也就是中国政治精英阶层的后代，正在获得越来越高的官职和权力。这一现象在美国等其他国家也存在，但中国的情况似乎颇为严重。不管这些报道的真实性如何，都让我们看到，一种社会秩序正在浮现，即家庭和党政关系形成了一个严重的瓶颈并且成为了唯一能够在一些回报丰厚的领域中获得成功的途径。

由权贵网络、裙带关系和“太子党”等因素造成的瓶颈远远不是中国特有的现象。开放原有的国有经济，引入市场竞争的过程往往会给那些有关系的人带来收益极其可观的交易机会。发展更开放、更多元的经济结构通常需要相当长的时间。在许多国家都是如此，以至于这已经成为了全球范围内新兴权贵形成的一个重要原因。然而在中国，这些问题与社会理想产生了特别严重的冲突，因为在中国社会的话语和自我认知中，一个重要的组成部分就是对平等和机会平等的追求。

同时，中国还必须应对一些用于区分其公民的法律政策所带来的瓶颈效应。比如，户口制对人口进行了法律上的区分，这造成了一个瓶颈：那些在城市居住，但没有相应户口的人面临着就业、住房和社会福利等各个方面的普遍障碍。这个瓶颈是国家造成的，而一个公正的国家应当致力于缓解这个瓶颈，一方面创造通过瓶颈的路径（即帮助这些人获得城市户口），另一方面创造绕过瓶颈的路径（即为没有城市户口的人提供更多的社会福利和机会），或者考虑全面废除户口制。

最终，我希望本书的中文版能够引发一些针对那些影响中国机会结构的各种瓶颈的思考和讨论。在这些瓶颈中，有些是其他国家的读者和学者所熟悉的，有些则是中国特有的。如果我们希望使人人都能获得更加自主的人生轨迹，而不是使他们的人生完全被有限的机会所左右，那么我们就值得认真审视并且尽可能缓解所有这些瓶颈。

约瑟夫·费西金

2015年5月

美国得克萨斯州奥斯汀

翻译：徐曦白