Book Review

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Race, Class, and Affirmative Action. By Sigal Alon. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015.

This is an important and timely book on affirmative action. In the landmark US Supreme Court decision *University of California, Davis v. Bakke* (1978), diversity in college enrollment was recognized as a compelling government interest, and subsequent decisions on the issue have reaffirmed that position. Alon points out, however, that in upholding the value of diversity in higher education, Justice Lewis Powell's opinion endorsed a concept of "broad diversity" that goes beyond race and ethnicity. The Supreme Court, unfortunately, has been rather vague in defining the components of that diversity.

Affirmative action in the United States is associated with race-conscious admissions policies. Race-based affirmative action policies are contentious, and they have failed to provide the broad diversity that many affirmative action supporters seek. Even the "holistic" approach to reviewing applications falls short. Claims of reverse discrimination represent some of the opposition to race-based affirmative action, but Alon demonstrates that growing economic barriers to higher education and increased competition for admission to elite schools have made affirmative action policies controversial.

In *Fisher v. Texas* (2013) and *Fisher v. Texas II*, under review this term, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court appears on the verge of prohibiting even narrowly tailored affirmative action policies that use race as a factor in university admissions. Do we still need such policies? If so, what kind of affirmative action policy is likely to draw more support? What kind of diversity do we seek and to what end? What is feasible in terms of implementation? Would class-based affirmative action programs work better to broaden diversity and provide social mobility? These are some of the major questions addressed in the text.

With race-based affirmative action on the defensive over the past 20 years, some argue that a class-based policy would be more effective and politically acceptable. According to Alon, supporters of class-based affirmative action break into three camps. The first camp includes ideological opponents of race-based admissions who argue that such policies promote creaming of only the most privileged minorities and create a "mismatch" by setting up minority students to fail by attending elite schools. The second camp is more pragmatic than ideological. In an attempt to cushion the decline of minority student populations, members of this camp encourage the use of family income, high school reputation, and neighborhood demographics. This group believes that class-based admissions will largely benefit black and Hispanic students. Only members of the third camp view class-based affirmative action as the best way to promote socioeconomic diversity, equality of opportunity, and social mobility. Alon argues that distinguishing between the three camps is important because the rationales they offer influence the design and implementation of class-based policies.

Outside of a few limited experiments, however, there are no class-based programs in US higher education that provide systematic data for a comparative analysis. As Alon notes, we know "almost nothing about the potential for class-based affirmative action to promote mobility for disadvantaged populations and diversity at selective colleges, relative to race-based policy" (76). She looks to Israel, where in the mid-2000s, four elite universities implemented innovative affirmative action policies that are race neutral and need blind. The policies are class based with an emphasis on the structural determinants of inequality, such as neighborhood and high school socioeconomic status, parents' education, and family size.

Using readily available data on applicant transcripts and admissions decisions at the four Israeli universities, Alon runs a series of simulations to test the diversity dividends of the class-based (actual) affirmative action policies versus ethnic-based (simulated) policies. She finds that "class-based affirmative action policy generates a higher level of socioeconomic diversity than a potential ethnic-based pol-

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icy" (154). Ethnic-based policies, however, enhance demographic diversity better than a race-neutral model. Class-based affirmative action in Israel also leads to creaming, but it does so to a lesser extent than ethnic-based policies. Alon acknowledges that there is no perfect solution. Class-based affirmative action, with an emphasis on structural factors, helps economically disadvantaged populations and enhances social mobility but at the expense of ethnic diversity.

The author then turns her attention to the United States. She runs a set of simulations comparing the race-based affirmative action policies used at elite US colleges and universities with several prototypes of class-based models. The first prototype is based on an applicant's socioeconomic status as defined by family income and parents' education level. The second prototype considers structural disadvantages such as neighborhood poverty and location of high school. The third combines the features of the first two models.

Alon finds that there would be less racial and ethnic diversity "under all types of class-based affirmative action relative to current race-based policy" (176). Admissions policies that focus on structural disadvantages, however, would lead to more racial and ethnic diversity than the socioeconomic model. Contrary to the "mismatch" hypothesis, Alon also finds that minority students perform better at elite institutions than they would at less prestigious schools. They are better integrated academically and more likely to attain a degree, and their diplomas provide for greater social mobility.

Similarly to the Israeli results, Alon concludes that "within the current [US] college admissions framework, there is a trade-off between broad diversity and race-neutrality when it comes to affirmative action policy. We cannot have both" (187). Class-based affirmative action is not a superior, problem-free alternative. The implications for diversity in higher education and social mobility are sobering. There are no easy answers. The concept of broad diversity may enjoy widespread consensus, but the devil is in the details. We have to decide which characteristics to target in order to achieve "the broadest and most desirable diversity dividends" (258).

Anyone working in higher education, public policy, sociology, and constitutional law should read this book. Even students and general readers will appreciate the clarity of organization and exposition of the arguments. Alon's rigorous comparative analysis provides empirical evidence and practical strategies that should inform the debate over affirmative action in the United States.