**Headline:** Nepo Babies and the Myth of the Meritocracy

**Teaser:** Society’s top tiers are rife with nepotism. It’s past time to expose just how much unearned wealth and power has been accrued by elites.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

**Author Bio:** Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of “[Rising Up With Sonali](https://risingupwithsonali.com/),” a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her forthcoming book is [*Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice*](https://citylights.com/city-lights-published/rise-up-the-power-of-narrative-in-pursu/) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](https://www.yesmagazine.org/authors/sonali-kolhatkar). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women’s Mission](https://www.afghanwomensmission.org/) and is a co-author of [*Bleeding Afghanistan*](https://www.sevenstories.com/books/2947-bleeding-afghanistan). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](https://justiceactioncenter.org/), an immigrant rights organization.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Media, Economy, Film, Television, Social Justice, Identity Politics, Politics, Art, News, Tech, Gender, Women’s Rights, Midterm Elections, GOP/Right Wing, Social Benefits, Law, North America/United States of America, Opinion, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

There is a common feeling that many of us have experienced in professional or academic environments, especially when we struggle against gender or racial bias. It’s called “imposter syndrome”—the feeling that one doesn’t deserve one’s position and that others will discover this lack of competence at any moment. I felt this way as a female graduate student in a science field in the 1990s. I felt it as a young journalist of color in a white-dominated industry.

The rich and the elite among us appear to feel the opposite—that they are deserving of unearned privilege. A [recent series of stories](https://www.vulture.com/the-year-of-the-nepo-baby/) in New York Magazine headlined “The Year of the Nepo Baby” has [struck a chord](https://www.thedailybeast.com/nepo-babies-are-melting-down-over-that-new-york-mag-expose) among those who are being outed for having benefited from insider status. Nepo babies are the children of the rich and famous, the ones who are borne of naked nepotism and whose ubiquity exposes the myth of American meritocracy. Nepo babies can be found everywhere there is power.

The New York Magazine stories have predictably generated defensive responses from nepo babies. Jamie Lee Curtis, actor and daughter of famed Hollywood stars Janet Leigh and Tony Curtis, wrote a [lengthy post on Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cmgx-KRLwlJ/) defending her status. Although she admitted that she benefitted from her parents’ fame—“I have navigated 44 years with the advantages my associated and reflected fame brought me, I don’t pretend there aren’t any”—she also clapped back at critics, saying she was tired of assumptions that a nepo baby like her “would somehow have no talent whatsoever.” Curtis went further in claiming that the current focus on people like her was “designed to try to diminish and denigrate and hurt.”

Curtis is clearly a talented actor, of that there is no doubt. But, in defending her privilege from critique, she reveals just how deserving she considers herself. It is the converse of imposter syndrome—the insider syndrome.

The act of calling out nepotism doesn’t necessarily imply that nepo babies are not talented. (Nepo babies are sometimes talented—and sometimes not.) It means pointing out that some talented people are able to benefit from family connections and fame that other equally talented people are not able to.

The critique is intended to call out elitism, not “diminish,” “denigrate” or “hurt,” as Curtis accuses journalists of doing. Journalism that exposes power and its corruptive influence among elites punches up, not down. Curtis is hardly a disadvantaged person whose well-being will suffer from such coverage. Rather, stories pointing out her parental advantages could potentially help to even the playing field so that it is unacceptable in the future to consider family connections in film and TV auditions.

Recall the [college admissions scandal](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-admissions-cheating-scandal.html) of 2019 when it was revealed—again through good journalism—that wealthy parents like TV star Lori Loughlin used all the power and money at their disposal to bend the rules of elite school admissions for their children. Many of those children may well have deserved to get into the schools they attended. But, in the face of stiff competition, untold numbers of equally deserving youth who did not have powerful and wealthy parents willing to break rules were not admitted. Now, many of those same nepo babies’ parents who were tried and convicted are using their money and connections to [win shortened prison sentences](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/us/college-admissions-scandal-consultants.html).

But Hollywood celebrities, however much they enjoy prestige and privilege, are an easy target. Nepotism is rife in *all* the halls of power—in the world of [art](https://www.vulture.com/article/nyc-art-world-gallery-families.html), [sports](https://www.vulture.com/article/sports-nepotism-babies-examples.html), and even [journalism](https://www.vulture.com/article/nepotism-babies-magazine-interns.html), and especially in [corporate](https://www.businessinsider.com/life-of-the-walton-family-behind-walmart-and-sams-club-2018-12) and [political](https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2020/04/majority-of-lawmakers-millionaires/) circles.

Billionaires (especially those in tech) may propagate the myth of the merit-based American dream, but some of the most dramatic success stories began with a parent using their wealth or connections to give their child the upper hand. Take Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, who became one of the world’s wealthiest people in his 30s. Gates’s early success was largely due to the [well-documented](https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/05/how-bill-gates-mother-influenced-the-success-of-microsoft.html) connections that his parents flexed on his behalf to get his fledgling company off the ground. Other [tech nepo babies](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/31/small-business-entrepreneurs-success-parents) include Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, whose father loaned him $100,000 to start his company, and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, whose parents were early investors in his online retail business to the tune of [nearly $250,000](https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/02/how-jeff-bezos-got-his-parents-to-invest-in-amazon--turning-them-into.html).

Nepotism is part of the fabric of capitalism. For centuries, unfair advantages were available to those who have historically faced fewer hurdles, through the sheer luck of being born into a family with wealth, connections, or respect within their field. Indeed, in order to beat back the imposter syndrome, many advise [channeling the unearned confidence](https://wealthofgeeks.com/have-the-confidence-of-a-mediocre-white-man/) of a [mediocre](https://slate.com/culture/2016/09/jessica-bennetts-feminist-fight-club-reviewed-by-laura-kipnis.html#:~:text=thought%20of%20him.%20%E2%80%9C-,what%20would%20josh%20do%3F,-%E2%80%9D%20became%20Bennett%E2%80%99s%20mantra) straight white man.

Our economy is [rigged](https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/substantial-income-of-wealthy-households-escapes-annual-taxation-or-enjoys) to encourage nepotism by ensuring that the already wealthy pass their wealth—and by extension the power that their money buys—to their children. The [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](https://www.cbpp.org/research/federal-tax/substantial-income-of-wealthy-households-escapes-annual-taxation-or-enjoys) (CBPP) pointed out how the tax code is written in order to benefit the moneyed classes. According to a CBPP report, “High-income, and especially high-wealth, filers enjoy a number of generous tax benefits that can dramatically lower their tax bills.”

Nepo babies who defend their status reinforce the notion that wealth, fame, and privilege equal brilliance, talent, and genius. The reality is that the privileged among us simply have the means to cheat. The rest of us are sold the lie that working hard will bring rewards—rather than unearned wealth.

This, in turn, encourages cheating among those who cannot rely on nepotism to gain power. One well-known example of the “fake-it-till-you-make-it” approach is [Anna Sorokin](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/12/arts/television/inventing-anna-true-story.html), a woman whose fabricated lies about wealth and power landed her in prison and made her the focus of a Netflix show. Sorokin faked being a nepo baby—a German heiress—in order to live a lavish lifestyle. Sorokin learned that to gain the edge that moneyed elites have, one must internalize the insider syndrome.

Republican Congressman [George Santos](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/27/opinion/letters/george-santos-falsehoods.html), who was recently exposed as a fraud for lying about his work experience, wealth, and even ethnicity, is another prime example. His political party has made a habit of encouraging (real or fake) nepo babies like Donald Trump, who [openly admitted to tax avoidance](https://www.cnbc.com/2016/09/26/trump-brags-about-not-paying-taxes-that-makes-me-smart.html) in a debate and whose company was [convicted](https://www.npr.org/2022/12/06/1140756394/former-president-donald-trumps-company-found-guilty-criminal-tax-fraud) of criminal tax fraud.

The GOP has for years led the charge to [protect the interests of the wealthy](https://washingtonmonthly.com/2019/10/22/republicans-are-the-party-of-the-wealthy-elite-2/) while insisting on [means testing](https://www.americanprogressaction.org/article/maga-republicans-plan-to-force-social-security-and-medicare-cuts/) and [drug testing](https://www.salon.com/2017/05/11/republicans-are-allowing-states-to-drug-test-people-applying-for-unemployment-benefits/) for the rest of us to receive benefits.

In truth, the emperor has no clothes. The meritocracy of American capitalism is a myth built on smoke and mirrors, on lies and false confidence. The current long-overdue conversation around nepo babies may help to further class consciousness among Americans who may see a bit more clearly now just how scantily clad the emperor really is.