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# INTRODUCTION

**M**erit is a sham.

An entire civilization resists this conclusion. Every decent person agrees that advantage should be earned through ability and effort rather than inherited alongside caste. The meritocratic ideal—that social and economic rewards should track achievement rather than breeding—anchors the self-image of the age. Aristocracy has had its day, and meritocracy is now a basic tenet of civil religion in all advanced societies.

Meritocracy promises to promote equality and opportunity by opening a previously hereditary elite to outsiders, armed with nothing save their own talents and ambitions. It further promises to harmonize private advantage and public interest, by insisting that wealth and status must be earned through accomplishment. Together, these ideals aspire to unite all of society behind a shared vision of hard work, skill, and deserved reward.

But meritocracy no longer operates as promised. Today, middle-class children lose out to rich children at school, and middle-class adults lose out to elite graduates at work. Meritocracy blocks the middle class\* from opportunity. Then it blames those who lose a competition for income and status that, even when everyone plays by the rules, only the rich can win.

Meritocracy harms the elite as well. Meritocratic schooling requires rich

\* For the difference between British and American usages of *middle class* see the Postscript, p. 287.

parents to invest thousands of hours and millions of dollars to get elite educations for their children. And meritocratic jobs require elite adults to work with grinding intensity, ruthlessly exploiting their educations in order to extract a return from these investments. Meritocracy entices an anxious and inauthentic elite into a pitiless, lifelong contest to secure income and status through its own excessive industry.

Finally, meritocracy now divides the elite from the middle class. It drives the middle class to resent the establishment and seduces the elite to cling to the corrupt prerogatives of caste. Meritocracy ensnares the society that both classes must share in a maelstrom of recrimination, disrespect, and dysfunction.

Meritocracy's charisma disguises all these harms, making it difficult to accept—indeed, seriously to consider—that meritocracy itself lies behind them. Even the angriest critics of the age embrace the meritocratic ideal. They charge that corrupt elites only pretend to reward achievement but actually favor their own. By indicting individual bad actors for failing to honor a meritocratic ideal in practice, they reaffirm meritocracy in principle.

But in fact, social and economic structures, rather than personal vices, cause the disaffection and discord that increasingly overwhelm American life. Whatever its original purposes and early triumphs, meritocracy now concentrates advantage and sustains toxic inequalities. And the taproot of all these troubles is not too little but rather too much meritocracy.

Merit itself has become a counterfeit virtue, a false idol. And meritocracy—formerly benevolent and just—has become what it was invented to combat. A mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth and privilege across generations. A caste order that breeds rancor and division. A new aristocracy, even.

## MERITOCRACY'S FALSE PROMISES

I am a meritocrat: a product and now an agent of the constellation of forces that these pages lay bare.

In the summer of 1987, as meritocracy gathered steam, I graduated from a public high school in Austin, Texas, and headed northeast, to attend Yale College. I then spent nearly fifteen years studying at various universities—the

London School of Economics, the University of Oxford, Harvard University, and finally Yale Law School—picking up a string of degrees along the way.

Today, I teach at Yale Law School, where my students unnervingly resemble my younger self: they are, overwhelmingly, products of professional parents and high-class universities. I pass on to them the advantages that my own teachers earlier bestowed on me. In all these ways, I owe my prosperity and my caste to elite institutions and to the training and employment that they confer.

Now at full flourish, meritocracy flies its flag conspicuously over the institutions that collectively ordain the elite. Harvard University, for example, calls itself “a haven for the world’s most ambitious scholars,” and Harvard’s mission statement adds that its purpose is not simply academic excellence but also to “educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society,” so that they might learn “how they can best serve the world.” The firms that dominate employment among graduates of Harvard and other top schools carry the same arguments into the elite’s adult life. Goldman Sachs has been called “probably the most elite work-society ever to be assembled on the globe,” and the firm’s website advertises the “progress” that it promotes far outside the elite, for example by brokering investments that spark a “renaissance” in Newark, New Jersey, and a “resurgence” in New Orleans. This familiar script—repeated again and again—simultaneously trumpets the elite’s exceptional talents and reconciles hierarchy to the moral imperatives of democratic life, by connecting elites to the common interest as midwives to general prosperity.

These promises mark a revolution. Once, aristocrats got status by birthright, based on race or breeding, and abused undeserved privilege to hoard unjust advantage. Today, meritocrats claim to win their status through talent and effort—to get ahead fair and square, using means open to anyone. Once, lazy aristocrats produced little or nothing at all. They lived lavishly by exploiting other people’s labor. Today, hardworking meritocrats claim to pull their weight, insisting that their enormous accomplishments contribute fair value to the societies they lead.

Earlier hierarchies were malign and offensive. But meritocracy claims to be wholesome—both just and benevolent. True to its Latin etymology, meritocracy glorifies only *earned* advantage and promises to transform the elite to suit a democratic age—to redeem the very idea of hierarchy.

Meritocracy's rituals reinforce these ideals by making them concrete and accessible, bringing the idea of deserved advantage to life. The graduation ceremonies that have become part of the rhythm of the American summer show how this works. At Yale Law School, commencement spans two splendid days. Luminaries, including Bill Clinton and Joe Biden, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor, exhort graduates to follow their passions and to deploy their talents for the greater good. Professors dress in brightly colored caps and gowns made of wool, silk, and even fur. University officers wear bejeweled collars and carry ceremonial maces. A former dean dons the sumptuous costume of an honorary doctor of laws awarded at Bologna, the oldest continuously operating university in Europe.

These celebrations are neither wanton nor casual. Instead (like weddings), they promote serious purposes and carry profound meanings, both political and personal. The speeches reaffirm the meritocratic elite's service to the common good. The medieval pageantry invests meritocracy with the remaining, inherited allure of the aristocratic hierarchies that it displaces—looking back in order to reach forward, repurposing old bottles to carry new wine. In a Gothic quad, as shadows lengthen across the summer afternoon, history feels present and alive. The university appears as a smooth band, stretching unbroken across the generations. Commencements connect a timeless past seamlessly to an inevitable future, absorbing the strains of transition and reassuring graduates who stand at the threshold of adulthood. Rituals render the future familiar, even before it arrives. They entrench meritocracy into the master narrative of modern life.

Meritocracy speaks in terms and settings so consistent that they fashion a distinctive language, repeated across contexts, again and again—a form of life, familiar to every citizen of the age. This gives meritocracy an enormously powerful charisma. Meritocracy's luster captivates the imagination and arrests the gaze, to suppress critical judgment and stifle reform. By identifying itself with basic decency and insinuating itself into the assumed background of everyday experience, meritocracy conceals the harms that it now imposes on all who encounter it. Indeed, it makes alternative ways of awarding advantage seem absurd: unfair or corrupt, as when privilege is apportioned through prejudice or nepotism; or simply foolish, as if high positions might be assigned by lot.

But as meritocracy advances, its achievements impose a new and oppressive

hierarchy, unrecognizable even a generation ago. An unprecedented and distinctively meritocratic inequality tarnishes a new gilded age. Elites increasingly monopolize not just income, wealth, and power, but also industry, public honor, and private esteem. Meritocracy comprehensively excludes the middle class from social and economic advantage, and at the same time conscripts its elite into a ruinous contest to preserve caste. Meritocratic inequality—the growing gap between the rich and the rest—bends America to an ominous arc.

As meritocratic inequality grows, and meritocracy's burdens increase, its moral claims falter and its rituals lose their power. The meritocratic code's grip over the imagination wears off, and resistance to its dogmas builds. Familiar bromides about earning advantage by promoting the general interest become unconvincing, and the rhythms of the past no longer soothe.

Instead, discontent over meritocratic inequality provides fertile ground for critical ideas. The most important is the idea that the afflictions that dominate American life arise not because meritocracy is imperfectly realized, but rather on account of meritocracy itself.

## HOW MERITOCRACY OPPRESSES THE MIDDLE CLASS AND EXPLOITS THE ELITE

Meritocratic competition expels middle-class Americans from the charismatic center of economic and social life and estranges them from the touchstones by which society measures and awards distinction, honor, and wealth. Although meritocratic energy, ambition, and innovation have transformed the mainstream of human history, meritocracy concentrates these vibrant wellsprings of creativity in a narrower and narrower elite, farther and farther beyond the practical and even the imaginative horizons of the broad middle class.

Meritocracy makes the Ivy League, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street into arenas for elite ambition. Innovators in these places can remake the life-world, transforming the internet (at Stanford and Google), social media (at Harvard and Facebook), finance (at Princeton and Wall Street generally), and a thousand other smaller domains. But a middle-class child, consigned to the backwaters of the meritocratic order, will more likely be buffeted by the next great invention than build it. Meritocracy banishes the majority of citizens to the



margins of their own society, consigning middle-class children to lackluster schools and middle-class adults to dead-end jobs.

Common usage often conflates meritocracy with equality of opportunity. But although meritocracy was embraced as the handmaiden of equality of opportunity, and did open up the elite in its early years, it now more nearly stifles than fosters social mobility. The avenues that once carried people from modest circumstances into the American elite are narrowing dramatically. Middle-class families cannot afford the elaborate schooling that rich families buy, and ordinary schools lag farther and farther behind elite ones, commanding fewer resources and delivering inferior educations. Even as top universities emphasize achievement rather than breeding, they run admissions competitions that students from middle-class backgrounds cannot win, and their student bodies skew dramatically toward wealth. Meritocratic education now predominantly serves an elite caste rather than the general public.

Meritocracy similarly transforms jobs to favor the super-educated graduates that elite universities produce, so that work extends and compounds inequalities produced in school. Competence and an honest work ethic no longer assure a good job. Middle-class workers, without elite degrees, face discrimination all across a labor market that increasingly privileges elaborate education and extravagant training.

Meritocratic exclusion reaches opportunities as well as outcomes, and meritocratic values add a moral insult to these material injuries. Even as it denies the middle class real opportunities for excellent schooling and meaningful work, meritocracy makes achievement in school and at work into the soul of honor. Meritocracy therefore frustrates efforts to satisfy the very standards that it announces, ensuring that most people will not measure up. Americans outside the elite know all this, and the dynamism in the elite only emphasizes listless weariness among the middle class. Even where material conditions remain tolerable, meritocratic inequality consigns the spiritual life of the middle class to an unbeatable, slow, devastating decline.

Meritocracy also no longer truly serves even the elite that it appears to privilege. It concentrates training and work that were once spread evenly across society onto an elite that is literally too narrow to carry their weight. The same forces that deplete the middle class overburden the elite.

Aristocrats were born; but meritocrats must be made. The old, hereditary

elite bequeathed its caste effortlessly to its children, by birthright. Each new generation of aristocrats assumed its titles and great houses automatically on the death of the old. Meritocracy, by contrast, requires families who wish to transmit caste down through their generations continually to build and rebuild privilege, as each generation must reestablish its eliteness afresh, by its own accomplishments. Meritocrats achieve this by raising children in a distinctive way. Whereas aristocrats lacked both the inclination and the capacity to train their children, meritocrats—especially women who sacrifice their own careers to do the work of meritocratic motherhood—increasingly devote their wealth and also their skills and energies to educating their children.

Rich children devote their days to absorbing this education. For fully a third of their lives—beginning at birth and extending deep into adulthood—children of rich parents benefit from and suffer through a training regimen whose planned intensity and ruthless demands would be unrecognizable to their middle-class counterparts today, or indeed to their own grandparents a half century ago. The framers of the U.S. Constitution required presidents to be at least thirty-five years old in order to ensure that only experienced adults would hold the office. Today, a thirty-five-year-old meritocrat can easily still be in school.

Elites grow more vividly strained as meritocracy matures, and today, even those at the top are beginning to turn against the intense, competitive training that makes them. The millennial generation—the first to have lived entirely inside the mature meritocracy—appreciates these burdens most keenly. Elite millennials can be precious and fragile, but not in the manner of the special snowflakes that derisive polemics describe. They do not melt or wilt at every challenge to their privilege, so much as shatter under the intense competitive pressures to achieve that dominate their lives. They are neither dissolute nor decadent, but rather tense and exhausted.

They are also increasingly self-aware. My students at Yale—the poster children for meritocracy—are more nearly overwhelmed and confounded by their apparent blessings than complacent or even just self-assured. They seek meaning that eludes their accomplishments and regard the intense education that constitutes their elevated caste with a diffidence that approaches despair. The vast majority hail from privileged families, and they recognize their overrepresentation and instinctually doubt that they deserve the advantages

they enjoy. (Privilege so dominates the culture of elite universities that the small minority of elite students who come from modest backgrounds form support groups of “first-generation professionals” in order to ease their entry into an alien society.) These students have been nurtured, but also cultivated, coached, drilled, shaped, and packaged—all in an unrelenting quest to succeed at school and preserve their caste—and they scorn all this maneuvering for advantage and deride their own complicity in it. They are consumed by what a recent survey calls a “collective frenzy” to advance in the “prestige economy” that allocates income and status.

My students, like their peers all across the meritocracy, are caught in a “collective anxiety” driven by fear of not measuring up. They doubt their past achievements and worry that the future will merely repeat a gauntlet that they have just run, only exchanging intensely competitive schools for equally competitive jobs. Even the meritocratic elite fears—inarticulately, but with good reason—that meritocracy does not promote its true flourishing, so that it will be wealthy but not well.

## HOW MERITOCRACY DIVIDES SOCIETY

Meritocracy imposes these burdens jointly and in interlocking battalions, as variations on a shared theme, two faces of a single calamity. An integrated mechanism literally concentrates income and status, as meritocratic competition simultaneously excludes the middle class from credible opportunities for real advantage and press-gangs elites into an excessively intense pursuit of fruitless gain. Meritocracy thereby draws the elite and the middle class—the rich and the rest—into a close but hostile embrace. Meritocratic inequality inspires the hostility, entwining the classes in misunderstandings, friction, discord, and even open warfare. Meritocracy, that is, nourishes a systematic class conflict that deforms social and political life.

The middle class experiences the elite as commandeering opportunities and advantages (education and work, income and status) that once rightfully belonged to it—as imposing a shameful and therefore unpardonable exclusion. The exclusion naturally breeds resentment and mistrust, directed against the ideals and institutions that meritocracy valorizes. The middle class increasingly regards elite schools, universities, and professional firms as alien

places that at best indulge eccentric values and at worst impose those values on everyone else—as clubs, dominated by worthless book learning, political correctness, and arrogant self-dealing. Ironically (although following a profound inner logic), these resentments, borne of exclusion, often focus on the forms of inclusion that meritocracy exalts, including in particular—as in complaints about political correctness—the meritocratic embrace of a multi-cultural elite.

The resentments, moreover, have direct and powerful—even world-changing—consequences. They enabled Donald Trump to become president of a wealthy, powerful, and famously optimistic nation by relentlessly attacking the status quo, repudiating what he calls “the Establishment,” and blaming the state of the country on a corrupt alliance of meritocratic elites and cultural outsiders. Trump’s dark vision replaces the American dream with what his apocalyptic inaugural address—painting a nation in deep decline, overrun by poverty, crime, and economic decay—called “this American carnage.” His imaginative world and express language (“America First”) evoke the frustration and anger of the Great Depression at home and, abroad, of nations devastated by economic crisis and humiliating defeat in total war. A powerful and prosperous society does not typically behave like one laid low by defeat and humiliation. Meritocratic inequality, and the resentments that it produces, explain why America did.

The resentments in which Trumpism traffics, and the repudiationism that it pursues, express the spiritual burden of life at the bottom of the meritocratic caste order, among what Trump’s inaugural address called “the forgotten men and women of our country [who] will be forgotten no longer.” These groups most thrill to Trumpism’s endeavor to replace the narrative of progress that dominates conventional American politics with one of rescue—to the prospect that Trump might “Make America Great Again.” Nearly two-thirds of whites without a BA reported that Trump’s similarly dark and angry speech at the Republican National Convention reflected their feelings about the country. And nearly three-fifths of Trump’s Republican Party believes that colleges and universities are bad for America.

Meritocratic inequality and class conflict also corrupt elites, including (again ironically) in ways that enable the Trumpist politics that the same elites despise. The fact that middle-class children are effectively excluded

from advantage does not guarantee inclusion for rich children. And as meritocratic inequality sharpens hierarchy to a spiky-fine point, even the privileged confront a precarious existence. Elites desperately fear losing caste, and their anxiety naturally isolates them and breeds condescension toward the middle class. Moreover, elites know that meritocracy favors their caste and they suspect that, although they cannot explain how, the same forces that burnish the gloss on the elite spread a pall of gloom over the middle class. No matter how pure their motives and how scrupulous their victories, meritocratic elites are implicated, including through achievements that they admire, in inequalities that they deplore.

Familiar maxims about privilege and its responsibilities still propose to align meritocratic inequality with the common interest, suggesting that if only the elite would behave well then all would be well. But as meritocracy's burdens mount and meritocratic inequality increases, these platitudes lose their power. The magnanimous triumphalism that suffused elite life in meritocracy's early years has given way to frightened and brittle arrogance.

Fragile elites disdain middle-class habits and values as a defense mechanism to ward off self-doubt. Meritocrats lionize achievement, or even just distinction, and disparage ordinariness as a bulwark against rising insecurity. They cling to any attitudes and practices—ranging from the absurd (food snobbery) to the callous (corporate rightsizing)—that might confirm their merit and validate their advantage, to others and, above all, to themselves. These crimped and confused attitudes further aggravate middle-class resentments, and at the same time debilitate elites politically. To this day, elites remain too disenchanted to reimpose a sanguine vision on American politics, or even to sustain it among themselves. Meritocratic discontent empowers Trump's dark populism to dominate the political imagination even among the elites who scorn it.

## THE PARADOX OF MERITOCRACY

Meritocracy's sparkle captures the imagination and distracts analytical attention. It dominates the self-image of the age, disabling criticism and corrupting critics. But scratch the surface to remove the sheen, and a deep well of

discontent opens up below. Meritocracy's discontents present a dramatic irony so deep that it looks, from inside the meritocratic order, like a paradox.

Middle-class resentment against the elite appears misguided. Today, in principle, anyone can succeed. Education has never been as extravagantly funded or widely available as it is today, and even the most exclusive schools and colleges—which once admitted only white, Christian men and even within this group selected students for breeding—today base admissions on academic achievement. Jobs and careers have similarly dismantled outmoded chauvinisms and are now overwhelmingly open to effort and talent. Institutions that once confronted large classes of citizens with a wall of categorical exclusion now expressly admit anyone who can make it.

The anxiety felt within the elite astounds especially. The training that goes into an elite degree has never before been as excellent, and graduates have never been as accomplished. The social and economic advantages conferred by education have also never been greater. Elite graduates should be proud of their past and confident about their future status and income.

Nevertheless, the complaints persist, multiply, and grow ever louder. As meritocratic inequality increases and meritocracy loses its charisma, rising elite anxieties join an older, more mature dissatisfaction, already well known to the American middle class. The grievances build because they connect lived experience to an important truth, fashioning a master key for diagnosing the troubles that dominate economic and social life today, both existentially in the individual person and politically in public life. Meritocratic inequality makes an otherwise bizarre picture of America credible and politically potent.

Meritocracy's discontents invite a structural attack on the incumbent regime, grounded in a criticism of meritocracy itself. Although they appear independent and even opposed, the oppression of the middle class and the exploitation of the elite share a common root. Through diverse means and following divergent pathways, the American elite, the American middle class, and America itself are all caught in the meritocracy trap.

Like all really big things, meritocracy is difficult to comprehend from up close. After five decades of rising economic inequality, the elite and the middle class appear—unreflectively, at first blush—to inhabit separate worlds. According to the common view, there are now two Americas, one for the rich

and the other for the rest. The loudest voices, on the left as well as the right, insist that the country—in economics, in politics, and even in social life—is coming apart.

A step back opens a wider perspective and reveals that the common view is mistaken. The elite and the middle class are not coming apart at all. Instead, the rich and the rest are entangled in a single, shared, and mutually destructive economic and social logic. Their seemingly opposite burdens are in fact two symptoms of a shared meritocratic disease. Meritocratic elites acquire their caste through processes that ruthlessly exclude most Americans and, at the same time, mercilessly assault those who do go through them. The powerfully felt but unexplained frustrations that mar both classes—unprecedented resentment among the middle class and inscrutable anxiety among the elite—are eddies in a shared stream, drawing their energies from a single current.

*The Meritocracy Trap* begins, in the manner of a doctor encountering a new disease, simply by setting out the symptoms of advanced meritocracy. Part One therefore chronicles meritocracy's discontents and reports on the human costs of a caste hierarchy that simultaneously excludes most people and damages the few that it admits. The account aspires empathetically to describe the facts of life under meritocratic inequality, and the sentiments that these facts unleash, so that people, across the meritocratic divide, will recognize their lived experience and respond: "Yes. This is how things are for us." Because meritocracy's charisma disguises its evils, and thereby bewilders those who suffer its frustrations, recognition begins to bring release. The release provides relief even when newfound wisdom recommends uncomfortable self-examination and poignant self-reproach.

Next, Part Two describes in detail how meritocracy works. This effort explains the social and economic arrangements—concerning income, education, and work—that meritocracy puts in place. It chronicles the means by which meritocratic developments have produced a vastly unequal distribution of advantage and exposes the mechanisms by which the ensuing inequality harms both the middle class and the elite. The argument shows, at each step, that these inequalities and burdens arise not on account of deviations or retreats from meritocracy but rather directly because of meritocracy's

successes, on account of its consummation. The inner movements of the meritocratic machine reveal the construction of the meritocracy trap.

Finally, Part Three unmasks meritocracy—to expose a new form of aristocracy, purpose-built for a world in which the greatest source of income and wealth is not land but labor. Meritocracy claims to be fair and benevolent, to align private interest and the common good, and to promote freedom and opportunity for all. In fact, however, meritocratic social and economic inequality betrays the values that meritocracy's stated principles endorse and that its rituals extol. Like aristocracy once did, meritocratic inequality now comprehensively organizes the lives of people caught inside it. And like aristocracy, meritocratic inequality establishes a durable, self-sustaining hierarchy, supported by feedback loops between meritocracy's moving parts. Merit itself is not a genuine excellence but rather—like the false virtues that aristocrats trumpeted in the ancien régime—a pretense, constructed to rationalize an unjust distribution of advantage.

## ESCAPING THE MERITOCRACY TRAP

*The Meritocracy Trap* was conceived inside meritocracy's institutional machinery—indeed, in one of the rituals that shore up meritocracy's charisma—and it is steeped in all the complexities and ironies that meritocracy invites.

In May 2015—one month before Donald Trump descended into his lobby to announce that he would run for president—the graduating class at Yale Law School asked me to deliver its commencement address. Like many others, I had been thinking about economic inequality, and so I determined to contrast the bloated opulence that elite graduates inherit with the diminished and devalued portion allotted to the rest of America. I had in mind to confront the graduates with a conventional morality tale—a stern warning against temptations to exploit their degrees for narrowly private gain, combined with a pious invocation to serve the public good.

But as I sat down to write and imagined actually speaking to students I knew—whose undoubted privileges produced afflictions alongside advantages—the righteous impulse deserted me, to be replaced by something



stranger: a curious amalgam of powerful empathy and sinister foreboding. Although I could not then see through meritocracy's paradoxes to resolve them, a new emotional posture and organizing frame for my remarks emerged. People are more benign than the common view supposes, but circumstances are much more malignant.

The pieties embraced by meritocracy's champions and the sanctimonious anger wielded by inequality's critics both misjudge the challenges that we face. Our anxieties concerning meritocracy and economic inequality are warranted, but they cannot be resolved by identifying villains or even righting clear wrongs. Rather, they reflect a deep and pervasive dysfunction in how we structure and reward training and work—how, in a basic and immediate way, we live our lives. This diagnosis attacks no one, but it should discomfit everybody.

The diagnosis, although uncomfortable, also kindles hope for a cure. We are trained to think of economic inequality as presenting a zero-sum game: to suppose that redistribution to benefit the bottom must burden the top. But this is not such a case. Meritocratic inequality does not in fact serve anyone well, and escaping the meritocracy trap would therefore benefit virtually everyone. Emancipation from meritocracy would restore middle-class Americans, now cut off from dignity and prosperity, to full participation in social and economic life. Emancipation would invite the elite, now entangled in strained self-exploitation, to trade a diminution in wealth and status that it can easily afford in exchange for a precious increase in leisure and liberty, a reclaiming of an authentic self. And emancipation would heal a society that meritocracy has made oppressive and mistrustful.

The problem remains how practically to escape the meritocracy trap: how to broker the politics and design the policies required to reestablish a democratic social and economic order. This is no easy task. If the book's diagnosis is correct, then meritocratic inequality stems from economic and social forces whose depth and power resemble those at play as industrial capitalism displaced feudal agriculture two centuries ago. And if a time traveler could explain to a well-meaning English king or prime minister in 1800 that, by 1860, the forces of industrialization would so disrupt the social order and generate such inequality as to drive the life expectancy of a child born in urban Manchester down to levels not seen since the Black Death, there would quite possibly have been no way to stop the decline.

Nevertheless, we are more self-aware and more effectual than past generations. If we come to understand that meritocratic inequality produces near-universal harm, then we can muster the political will to cure it. And if we can muster the political will, we enjoy more degrees of policymaking freedom and a greater capacity to influence events. The book proceeds from the faith that political understanding—concerning structural forces rather than just moralistic recriminations—is a necessary condition for intelligent and effective action. It aspires to leverage understanding into a politically potent force for change and also to propose concrete policies that will reclaim a more equal, democratic economic and social order.

These hopes invoke virtues—clarity of mind and the capacity to convert understanding into effective action—that are themselves commonly associated with meritocracy. And there is no contradiction in thinking that meritocracy might solve its own problem, unlock its own trap, to recover its original, democratic promise and refashion an open, fair society whose elite does well by promoting the public good.

On the other hand, a hope is not a plan. To escape the meritocracy trap, politics must overcome all the vulnerabilities and bad incentives that meritocracy enshrines in public life. Both the rich and the rest must learn to see through the anxieties—from populist and nativist resentment through small-minded competitiveness and arrogant condescension—that currently divide them. Both classes must recognize that their distresses, and even their antagonisms, share in meritocracy a single source. And both classes must join in a coalition in which each eases its own afflictions by empathizing with, and even shouldering, the meritocratic burdens that now afflict the other.

Even where everyone would benefit from democratic renewal, achieving this coalition requires self-disciplined imagination. But meritocracy's discontents leave the virtues that this generous and redemptive politics demands in short supply. Moreover, anxiety and bitterness block both the rich and the rest from recognizing that more immediately alluring alternatives merely seed a gathering storm. A very different coalition of manipulative oligarchs and resentful populists now threatens to repudiate meritocracy wholesale and to erect something considerably darker in its stead.

Blindness to this risk—on display when an uncomprehending America enabled Donald Trump's rise—would constitute meritocracy's final irony.



# The Meritocracy Trap



*Part One*

# Meritocracy and Its Discontents



## ONE

# THE MERITOCRATIC REVOLUTION

**F**or virtually all of human history, income and industry have charted opposite courses.

The poor worked immensely long and intensely hard. In 1800, the average English laborer worked sixty-four hours a week; in 1900, a typical American still worked sixty hours; and as late as the 1920s, blue-collar workweeks exceeded fifty hours. Virtually all these hours were drudgery and toil. The rising middle class would eventually temper both facets of working-class labor and assimilate many workers, but it abandoned neither. The manufacturing jobs that once built a flourishing middle class absorbed and exhausted the workers who did them.

The rich, by contrast, customarily led lives of extravagant and conspicuous leisure. High society, for centuries and even millennia, embraced elegant recreation, and the elite despised industry.

Low wages consigned workers inescapably to modest incomes. No amount of industry could make a nineteenth-century laborer even comfortably well-off. And while the post-World War II boom allowed mid-twentieth-century workers to earn their way into middle-class comfort, elite wealth remained flatly inaccessible.

The rich, for their part, paid for leisure using incomes derived from land,



factories, or other capital, which they generally inherited. Both the rich and the rest owed their circumstances to accidents of birth rather than choices or accomplishments. Long after formal titles of nobility had passed into neglect or even been abolished, society remained in effect a hereditary aristocracy. You could learn how poor people were simply by asking how hard they worked.

Today, unprecedented social and economic arrangements reverse these age-old associations. Middle-class jobs are disappearing, and the workers who for centuries pulled the economy's laboring oar work progressively less hard. The middle class is not idle—reluctant to work. Rather it is increasingly idled—denied opportunities to work. A profound technological transformation eliminates middle-class jobs and renders mid-skilled labor surplus to economic requirements. The total work hours lost through these trends approach the difference between the hours worked by men and by women at midcentury. The new order, that is, suppresses working- and middle-class employment today by about as much as sex discrimination suppressed women's employment two generations ago. This deprives the middle class of the income and status that industry confers.

The new technologies do not eliminate work altogether. To the contrary, they actually increase the demand for super-skilled, elite labor. The once-leisured rich, in a stark contrast to the middle class, work harder than they ever have before, harder than the rest of society, and absolutely very hard. Prime-aged adults (men and women combined) with a BA or more education are less than half as likely to have abandoned the workforce than their counterparts with a high school degree or less. Moreover, when they are employed, elites work substantially longer hours than their middle-class counterparts, and they enjoy less leisure. Indeed, despite pervasive use of labor-saving household appliances, elites actually enjoy less leisure today than they did at midcentury.

Elite values and customs have adapted to suit these new facts. High society has reversed course. Now it valorizes industry and despises leisure. As every rich person knows, when an acquaintance asks "How are you?" the correct answer is "So busy." The old leisure class would have thought this a humiliating admission. The working rich boast that they are in demand.

A revolution in wages completes the new work order. Middle-class jobs still cannot make a person rich. But the elite's intense industry now generates

colossal incomes. Top jobs commonly pay annual wages of \$500,000, \$1 million, or even \$5 million, and a few pay \$10 million, \$100 million, or even \$1 billion. Indeed, rich people today owe the bulk of their incomes to their labor, and work has become the dominant path to wealth. Moreover, elites get these high-paying jobs based on immense skill, won through rigorous training, and they keep their jobs through intense, competitive, and enormously productive industry. Today, asking how long people have studied and how hard they work reveals not how poor they are, but how rich.

This new regime radically transforms who gets and stays ahead. The new order rejects the aristocratic hierarchy that dominated the old. Instead, it embraces the meritocratic idea that economic and social advantages should track not breeding but rather ability, effort, and output, and that all three must be proved by success in ongoing competition, first in school and then at work.

Once, a leisured elite dominated and exploited a subordinate working class. Labor, moreover, constituted subordination—for slaves, for serfs, for indentured servants, and even for industrial workers (whose “labor” movement reclaimed an indignity as a marker of pride). Now the industrious rich dominate the rest. The leisured aristocracy that for millennia monopolized income and status has ceded the field to a new elite constituted through industry—not a sub-, but a *superordinate* working class.

The meritocratic elite that this regime establishes is composed of a core that captures the incomes just described (perhaps 1 percent of households) and a larger penumbra that works in the social and economic orbit of these incomes (perhaps another 5 or 10 percent). Meritocracy constructs this elite through two movements. Each involves a contest or tournament. Together, they build and then set the meritocracy trap.

First, meritocracy transforms education into a rigorous and intense contest to join the elite. It concentrates training in the narrow, super-educated caste that wins the competition for places and grades at the top schools and universities. Second, meritocracy transforms work to create the immensely demanding and enormously lucrative jobs that sustain the elite. It fetishizes skill, centering both industry and pay around a narrow caste of superordinate workers.

Both faces of meritocracy—elite education’s intense and competitive training and elite work’s immense industry and outsized rewards—have

become so ingrained that they seem natural and even inevitable. It is difficult to imagine life without them. But both faces in fact are strikingly new. The story of their rise opens a window into the meritocratic machine, and a close study of their reign exposes meritocracy's discontents.

## MÉRITOCRATIC TRAINING

Elite education used to be anything but intense. For much of the twentieth century, through the late 1950s, elite universities overwhelmingly awarded places based on breeding rather than merit. The Ivy League did not admit nor even pursue the “best and the brightest” so much as sustain and burnish the social patina of America's leading families. Even graduate and professional schools selected their students by astonishingly casual means. A midcentury graduate of Yale Law School, for example, recently told an oral historian that he came to Yale after Jack Tate, then dean of admissions, told him at a college fair—straight away, and on the basis of a single conversation—“You'll get in if you apply.”

Things began to change in the middle of the twentieth century. Presidents James Bryant Conant at Harvard and (slightly later) Kingman Brewster at Yale, seeking to open up, expand, and energize the American elite, expressly rejected aristocratic exclusion and rebuilt college admissions to emphasize achievement rather than breeding. By 1970, the cordial alliances among established families, schools, and colleges that long sustained a genteel elite had all been broken. A fierce rivalry now determines who attends America's best universities. The change, moreover, rang in a revolution—a difference of kind rather than just degree—that has transformed the basic character of elite education.

Admissions officers have exchanged casual assessments of social suitability for intensive and rigorous talent screening, and applicants have exchanged family traditions favoring one or another college for a coldblooded pursuit of status, as measured by university rankings.

The earlier example illustrates the transformation. Over fifty thousand candidates a year now apply to American law schools, and perhaps three thousand of these apply to Yale, the top-ranked school. Yale Law School now takes

admissions anything but casually—three faculty members independently evaluate each file—and following this process, Yale admits about 8 percent of applicants (making the admissions competition four times as intense today as it was at midcentury). The median admitted student received an A average in college and scored above the 99th percentile on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). Finally, applicants almost slavishly esteem status and enroll in the highest-ranked school that admits them. Roughly 80 percent of those whom Yale admits eventually enroll.

Yale Law School may present an extreme case, but it is not distinctive. Broadening the field leaves the pattern intact, indeed unaltered. The top five law schools—Yale, Stanford, Harvard, Chicago, and Columbia—collectively admit about 15 percent of applicants. The median students at all five had A averages in college and LSAT scores in the top 3 percent. And although precise and definitive data are not available, a reasonable estimate suggests that of the roughly two thousand people admitted to these schools each year, no more than five—which is to say effectively none—attend a school outside the top ten.

The law school admissions competition does not represent an aberration or isolated moment in an elite student's life. Rather, a top law school adds the final link in a long chain of rigorous schooling. Students at elite professional schools overwhelmingly earned their A grades at highly selective colleges: the admissions competition for places at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford is three times as intense today as it was just twenty years ago. Moreover, students at these elite colleges disproportionately attended highly competitive high schools and indeed highly selective elementary schools and even pre-schools. In other words, to secure a really elite education, a student must rank among the top fraction of a percent in a massive, multistage meritocratic tournament, one in which the competitors at every stage conspicuously agree about which schools constitute the biggest prize.

Every one of these schools, all along the chain, offers intensive training commensurate to its elite status. Top schools, that is, all make immense investments in their students' educations: elite private schools spend as much as \$75,000 per student per year (more than six times the national public school average), and elite colleges and graduate schools spend over \$90,000 per

student per year. The total excess investment that an elite education represents, over and above the investments made in middle-class schooling, amounts to millions of dollars.

Education works, and these enormous investments pay off. Study and testing foster diligence and ambition, and training builds skills. Harvard Law School's dean welcomes incoming students with the promise that "no law school better prepares lawyers, public servants, and leaders for a changing world," and at Yale Law School, a recent dean told each graduating class that they were "quite simply, the finest new law graduates on the planet." These claims might appear boastful and even narcissistic. But, astonishingly, the claims assert concrete, determinate, and determinable facts, which are proved in the two-sided admissions competition for places and students. Demonstrating these facts has dominated elite students' entire lives. For nearly three decades, Yale Law School graduates—and indeed graduates of every top college and professional school, in every field—have studied, worked, practiced, and drilled. They have been continually inspected. And finally, they have been selected. This, after all, is what it means to join the meritocratic elite.

The lifelong education that culminates in an elite advanced degree, and also the competition to get the training and obtain the degree, have never been as intense as they are today. Finishing schools that certified breeding and polished manners have transformed into rigorous training centers that select for accomplishment and build skills. An elite degree therefore represents relentlessly demanding, ambitious, and successful training. And no prior elite has ever been as capable or as industrious as the meritocratic elite that such training produces. None comes close.

## MERITOCRATIC WORK

Meritocratic work extends the patterns of meritocratic education through adult life. Elite jobs mirror the intensity and competitiveness of elite schools and fetishize the skills that these schools provide. At the same time, the income and status that the top jobs bestow on superordinate workers match the labor effort these jobs require. Both the demands and the rewards of elite work are greater today than they have ever been before.

The elite's work habits—the rhythms of a rich person's day—were once as

relaxed as elite schooling. This was no accident. The aristocrats possessed few special abilities and no taste for industry. They therefore lacked both the means and the motive to take over work. And so the midcentury economic order naturally and even necessarily put middle-class workers at the charismatic center of making and selling things and also of financing and managing the firms that made and sold them. Mid-skilled, middle-class labor dominated virtually all sectors of the midcentury economy. Mid-skilled industrial workers famously dominated manufacturing; mid-skilled local, independent merchants dominated retail; mid-skilled community bankers, loan officers, and stockbrokers dominated finance; and mid-skilled middle and line managers dominated the administration of virtually all American firms. The old aristocracy instinctively ceded the labor market to the middle class; a leisured elite invited middle-class industry.

No longer.

While aristocrats naturally gave work over to the middle class, meritocracy's superordinate workers possess both the skills and the inclination to work industriously. They unsurprisingly attract economic attention. Over the past forty years, computers, robots, and other new technologies have changed how goods are made and services delivered. These disruptive technologies (invented by interested innovators and tailored to suit skills that meritocratic education makes newly available) shift the center of production away from mid-skilled and toward super-skilled labor.

Automated industrial robots, for example, replace mid-skilled manufacturing workers with super-skilled workers who design and program the robots. Innovations in distribution, warehousing, and e-commerce displace middle-class independent merchants with subordinate Walmart greeters and Amazon warehouse workers at the bottom, and super-rich owners of megastores—including the world's richest family (the Waltons of Walmart) and the world's richest person (Jeff Bezos of Amazon)—at the very top. Derivatives and other new financial technologies allow elite workers on Wall Street to dispense with middle-class community bankers, loan officers, and stockbrokers. And new management techniques allow top executives and CEOs to discard middle and line managers and to exert immense powers directly to organize and control production workers. These and countless other parallel innovations simultaneously exclude middle-class workers, whose

skills they render superfluous, and elevate elite workers, whose skills they make economically essential. Collectively, they displace work away from the middle class and onto the elite, to create the superordinate working class.

Today's lawyers illustrate and document these patterns. In 1962 (when elite lawyers earned a third of what they do today), the American Bar Association could confidently declare that "there are . . . approximately 1300 fee-earning hours per year" available to the normal lawyer. Today, by contrast, a major law firm pronounces with equal confidence that a quota of 2,400 billable hours "if properly managed" is "not unreasonable," which is a euphemism for "necessary for having a hope of making partner." Billing 2,400 hours requires working from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m., six days a week, without vacation or sick days, every week of the year. Graduates of elite law schools join law firms that commonly require associates and even partners to work sixty-, eighty-, and even hundred-hour weeks.

Lawyers, because they must track billable hours in six-minute intervals, record an experience that all top workers share. Elite finance workers once kept "bankers' hours"—originally named for the ten-to-three business day fixed by banks from the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth and later used to refer more generally to any light work. Elite managers, for their part, worked as "organization men," cocooned by lifelong employment in a corporate hierarchy that rewarded seniority above performance. Today, investment bankers work "17 hours a day . . . seven days a week," in the words of one, "until midnight or one a.m. every night, including weekends, full-day weekends, and then probably pulling an all-nighter every week or every other week," in the words of another. Similarly, the organization man has given way to what the *Harvard Business Review* calls the *extreme job*: a job that involves "physical presence at [the] workplace [for] at least ten hours a day," a "large amount of travel," "availability to clients 24/7," "work-related events outside [of] regular work hours," and an "inordinate scope of responsibility that amounts to more than one job."

The work histories of law, finance, and management all reflect a broader trend—they do not report exceptions but rather illustrate a new rule governing elite work. More than half of the richest 1 percent of households now include someone who works over fifty hours per week (which is over fifteen times the rate among the poorest fifth of households). Overall, prime-aged

men from the top 1 percent of the income distribution work nearly 50 percent longer hours, on average, than their counterparts from the bottom half.

Elite jobs of all sorts nowadays demand hours—routinely, as a matter of course—that would have been thought unimaginable, because degrading, by an earlier, more genteel American elite. For centuries, the old order imposed a social taint on those who worked not from passion—for honor and exploit, or as a calling—but industriously, for wages. But that stigma, which remained at midcentury, has today been entirely erased and even reversed. Elite workers across all fields now valorize long hours and conspicuously and almost compulsively publicize their immense industry—including through their habits of speech—as a way of asserting their status. Meritocracy makes effortful and industrious work—busyness—into a sign of being valued and needed, the badge of honor.

Elite training, skill, and industry yield income as well as status. First-year associates at top law firms in New York and other big cities today earn about \$200,000 per year (and effectively every Yale Law graduate who seriously seeks such a job gets one). Moreover, elite lawyers' incomes grow markedly greater still as their careers mature. A law firm now exists that generates profits per partner exceeding \$5 million annually, and more than seventy firms now generate more than \$1 million of profits per partner every year. The partnerships at these firms are overwhelmingly dominated by graduates of elite law schools. Over half of partners at the five most profitable firms are graduates of law schools conventionally ranked in the "top ten," and four-fifths of the partners at the \$5-million-per-partner firm graduated from law schools conventionally ranked in the "top five."

Specialist doctors, professional finance-sector workers, management consultants, and elite managers all also require elite degrees and again generally make several hundred thousand dollars a year. Incomes exceeding \$1 million are startlingly common in all these fields. And the really top earners—managing directors at investment banks, C-suite executives at large corporations, and the highest-paid hedge fund managers—take home tens or hundreds of millions of dollars a year. As in law, the top employers overwhelmingly hire graduates of the very top schools—sometimes literally just Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale, and perhaps MIT and Williams. Often, they do not even recruit new workers anywhere else. The economic returns to schooling have



consequently skyrocketed in recent decades, and—especially at elite schools and colleges—double or even triple the returns to investments in stocks or bonds. This produces an astonishing segmentation of income by education.

In industry after industry, the labor market now fetishizes the skills that meritocratic education produces, so that super-skilled workers dominate production. At the same time, mid-skilled workers become redundant. In some cases, middle-class employment never recovers: mid-skilled manufacturing, retail, and middle-management jobs have notoriously disappeared. In other cases, a new work order segregates subordinate and superordinate workers: mid-skilled community bankers have been replaced by subordinate clerks on Main Street and superordinate speculators on Wall Street. Some of the newly subordinate workers even supply the booming market for personal services provided to rich households, whose members now work such long hours and command such high wages as to make it almost unreasonable for them to do their own chores.

Either way, innovation increasingly divides work into what might be called gloomy and glossy jobs: gloomy because they offer neither immediate reward nor hope for promotion, and glossy because their shine comes from income and status rather than meaningful work. (As meritocracy advances, and more middling jobs give way to gloomy and glossy ones, the lion's share become gloomy.) Meritocracy's shadow, cast over mid-skilled work, accounts for the darkness that engulfs gloomy jobs today, and its brassy light gives glossy jobs a false sheen. The meritocratic culture of industry helps to prop up the intense work effort required when a society concentrates economic production on a narrow elite.

## AN UNPRECEDENTED INEQUALITY

Meritocracy's two components, having developed together, now interact as expressions of a single, integrated whole. Elaborate elite education produces superordinate workers, who possess a powerful work ethic and exceptional skills. These workers then induce a transformation in the labor market that favors their own elite skills, and at the same time dominate the lucrative new jobs that the transformation creates. Together these two transformations idle mid-skilled workers and engage the new elite, making it both enormously

productive and extravagantly paid. The spoils of victory grow in tandem with the intensity of meritocratic competition. Indeed, the top 1 percent of earners, and even the top one-tenth of 1 percent, today owe perhaps two-thirds or even three-quarters of their total incomes to their labor and therefore substantially to their education. The new elite then invests its income in yet more elaborate education for its children. And the cycle continues.

The sum total of elite training and industry, and of the elite labor income that meritocracy sustains, is absolutely immense. Meritocracy makes economic inequality overall dramatically worse today than in the past and shockingly worse in America than in other rich countries.

The top 1 percent of households now captures about a fifth of total income and the top one-tenth of 1 percent captures about a tenth of total income. This means that the richest household out of every hundred captures as much income as twenty average earners combined and the richest out of every thousand captures as much income as a hundred average earners combined. Compared to the period between 1950 and 1970, this roughly doubles the share owned by the top 1 percent and triples the share owned by the top one-tenth of 1 percent. Moreover, in spite of common complaints that capital increasingly dominates economic life, between two-thirds and three-quarters of these increases in fact come from growing elite labor incomes—from the massive paydays to superordinate workers just described. Rising economic inequality, that is, principally comes not from a shift of income away from labor and toward capital but rather from a shift of income away from middle-class labor and toward superordinate labor.

When they get big enough, differences in degree become differences in kind. At the middle of the last century, the economic distribution in the United States broadly resembled that in other rich democracies, including Canada, Japan, and Norway. Today, income inequality in the United States exceeds that in India, Morocco, Indonesia, Iran, Ukraine, and Vietnam. These national data cumulate local conditions, and narrowing the focus renders general statistics distressingly tangible: Fairfield County, Connecticut, for example, suffers greater economic inequality than Bangkok, Thailand.

America has become an economy and a society constituted by meritocracy, implemented through an unprecedented complex of competition, assessment, achievement, and reward, all centered around training and labor. This state of

affairs—an immensely unequal economic order in which the richest person out of every thousand nevertheless overwhelmingly works for a living—has no precedent anywhere or anytime across all of human experience.

## SEDUCED BY MERIT

A powerful instinct nevertheless defends these inequalities. Early moral victories against birthright privilege, combined with the new elite's raw skills and vast energies, make it hard to quarrel with the idea that advantage should track effort and talent. Certainly this is better than the aristocratic worship of bloodlines that meritocracy displaced. Even in the face of rising discontent over the society that it has built, meritocracy itself retains an excellent reputation.

Meritocracy's champions develop these intuitions. They insist that grades and test scores measure students' academic achievements, that wages track workers' output, and that both processes align private advantage and the public interest. Meritocratic practices reinforce these associations. Entire professions—educational testing, compensation consulting—work to improve and to ratify the connections. In these ways, meritocracy makes industry—effort and skill, converted into economic and social product—into the measure of advantage.

These connections enabled the meritocratic revolution to push aside dull, sluggish, and inert aristocrats, to open the elite to anyone who is ambitious and talented, and to arouse the superordinate workers whose vigor and dynamism now light up the culture and drive the economy forward. Meritocracy, according to this view, promotes widespread prosperity. The enormous productivity of the meritocratic elite ensures that even if the rich do better under meritocratic inequality, the rest still do well. Moreover, meritocracy further ensures that advantage tracks desert. Superordinate workers owe their huge incomes to their immense industry. Indeed, the triumphalist view proposes, meritocracy transforms inequality itself, to reconstitute its moral character. Meritocratic inequality therefore arises without either deprivation or abuse. Whereas aristocratic inequality was both wasteful and unjust, meritocratic inequality declares itself at once efficient and just.

Until the financial crisis of 2007–8 unsettled meritocratic self-regard, one

or another version of this triumphalism ruled the ideological field, effectively unopposed by any substantial critics or even skeptics. Even today, critical voices remain muted, or at least distorted and defanged, by meritocratic triumphalism's enduring power.

Meritocracy disguises its external effects and inner logics, and its institutions and rituals (universities, graduations) consolidate the disguise. Meritocratic practice projects meritocratic ideas onto everyday existence, to build the settings in which people live and narrate their lives and the fixed points around which their life stories revolve. Meritocracy lives through experience and not just logic, capturing the imaginations and limiting the critical faculties of those embedded in it. Indeed, meritocratic ideology and meritocratic inequality rise in tandem and drive each other forward, much as an immune system might select for more and more resistant parasites, which in turn render it increasingly indispensable. The disguise makes meritocracy—which is in fact contingent, recent, and novel—seem necessary, natural, and inevitable. Meritocracy wrong-foots critics of inequality by making itself appear inescapable—assuming all the powers of a tyranny of no alternatives.

Even critics of the rising economic inequality that meritocracy produces refrain from attacking meritocracy itself. One common complaint, which figures prominently in popular politics on both the left and the right, alleges that the rich do not in fact owe their incomes to merit at all but rather to nepotism and opportunism—to legacies of old-fashioned aristocracy. According to this view, elite schools and universities admit students based on cultural capital, class background, or legacy status rather than intelligence or academic ability, elite employers hire based on social networks and pedigree rather than skill or talent, and superordinate workers command their immense incomes through rent seeking or outright fraud. A second familiar criticism, developed in great detail by Thomas Piketty, attributes increasing economic inequality to a shift of income away from labor and in favor of capital and, in the extreme, to a rising oligarchy. According to this view, economic and political forces are reconcentrating wealth, redistributing income to become both more capital-intensive and more concentrated at the top, and by these means rebuilding an old-fashioned rentier elite as the economically and politically dominant caste in a twenty-first-century version of patrimonial capitalism.

Both arguments attack the current elite's meritocratic bona fides. They reproach inequality for departing from meritocracy, and they implicitly cast more and better meritocracy as the solution to economic injustice. The most prominent critics of economic inequality—no less than those who celebrate current economic arrangements—therefore capitulate to meritocracy's charisma, expressing rather than rejecting meritocratic commitments. Meritocracy has become the shared frame in which conventional disagreements about economic inequality play out, the dominant dogma of the age. Meritocracy, that is, has become the present era's literal common sense.

This state of affairs arises directly out of meritocracy's nature. To begin with, economic inequality in itself—inequality without deprivation—is hard to condemn without seeming a scold. As long as the middle class has enough, what is wrong with the elite's having more, especially if it owes its great fortune to equally great industry? To complain smacks of envy. Charges of fraud, nepotism, and patrimonial capitalism give the case against inequality a more seemly face. They name clear wrongs and confer an aura of moral seriousness on economic inequality's critics. Moral outrage then acquires a life of its own, and this makes accounts that emphasize economic inequality's meritocratic roots (in elite training, effort, and skill) appear unduly sympathetic to the rich, unduly complacent about the world, and even quietist.

The commonplace objections to rising inequality also conveniently absolve their principal constituencies of primary responsibility for it. The intellectuals and other professional elites who advance these objections may belong to the 1 percent, but they can take comfort in telling themselves that they are neither fraudsters nor aristocratic rentiers. Complaints about gratuitous self-dealing and resurgent patrimonial capitalism allow superordinate workers to condemn economic inequalities from which they benefit without really questioning either their own income and status or the meritocratic system that secures both. Elites can say that the problem lies not with them but with others, and they can cast themselves as innocent bystanders to inequalities that they sincerely regret. They may shout their condemnations from the rooftops without ever admitting complicity, or accepting responsibility, or abandoning any commitments essential to their own survival. Indeed, focusing attention on the private vices of bad actors, and conspicuously distancing itself from these vices, only burnishes the broader elite's meritocratic luster.

Nevertheless, the common view romanticizes much and conceals more. Although the moral wrongs that conventional complaints emphasize are real, these corruptions operate on the margins of the meritocratic regime. Fraud, rent seeking, and the resurgence of capital make real contributions to rising inequality, and diatribes against them denounce real targets. But the dominant causes of inequality lie elsewhere, inside meritocracy itself, and therefore on ground that inequality's main critics find less congenial.

The selection processes for elite schools and jobs do include nepotism, but they remain overwhelmingly driven by achievement and skill, which is to say by good-faith judgments of merit. The intensive training that rich parents give their children produces massive achievement gaps, so that meritocratic admissions themselves skew student bodies dramatically toward wealth, and the meritocratic elite can produce dynasties even without nepotism. Indeed, this effect is so powerful that the students at the top schools can become wealthier even as the admissions process becomes more meritocratic and the size of the legacy preference declines. Universities, rightly condemned for the legacy preferences they deploy, make it difficult precisely to quantify nepotism's effects on their student bodies. But an example illustrates how powerfully merit can dominate nepotism in producing a skew to wealth among elite students. Yale Law School, facing meritocratic pressures, including to maintain the sky-high LSAT scores on which the school's ranking depends, has ended its practice of giving children of alumni an extra "point" in the scoring system that it uses to rank applicants. Nevertheless, the student body includes as many and in some years even more students from households in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half.

Similarly, although elite incomes do swell on account of self-dealing, they remain overwhelmingly driven by elite industry. A bank might gain millions of dollars in fees from sharp or misleading practices—as when Goldman Sachs, in a deal called ABACUS that the Securities and Exchange Commission declared fraudulent, received \$15 million for marketing asset-backed securities without disclosing that one of the portfolio's principal architects (the hedge fund manager John Paulson) was betting against them. But these gains pale before Goldman's total earnings, which amount to billions of dollars. More generally, while fraud accounts for billions of dollars of elite income, rising top income shares amount to trillions of dollars. Overall, the

elite's income growth remains principally driven by massive increases in performance-related pay.

Finally, although capital is seizing income share away from labor, perhaps three-quarters of the increase in the 1 percent's income share comes from shifts of income within labor, as stagnant median wages coevolve with exploding wages for superordinate workers. Some specific instances of this pattern—for example, that large-firm CEOs were paid about twenty times a typical production worker's income in the mid-1960s but are paid three hundred times as much today—are well known. But incomes across industries have followed the same trend. A cardiologist earned perhaps four times a nurse's salary in the mid-1960s and more than seven times as much in 2017. Profits per partner at elite law firms have grown from less than five times a secretary's salary in the mid-1960s to over forty times as much today.

The change is perhaps most dramatic in finance. David Rockefeller received a salary of about \$1.6 million (in 2015 dollars) when he became chairman of Chase Manhattan Bank in 1969, which amounted to roughly fifty times a typical bank teller's income. Last year Jamie Dimon, who runs JPMorgan Chase today, received a total compensation of \$29.5 million, which is over a thousand times as much as today's banks pay typical tellers.

All told, nearly a million workers do the superordinate jobs described earlier and capture the enormous wages that these jobs pay. And rising economic inequality mostly stems not from capital's increasing dominance over labor, but rather from these superordinate workers' increasing dominance over middle-class workers.

Rising inequality is not driven principally by villains, and moralistic attacks on bad actors neglect morally complex but massively more consequential structural wrongs. Indeed, the commonplace objections to rising economic inequality undermine themselves. When critics embrace meritocracy in principle, they ensure their own impotence and in fact buttress the inequality they purport to condemn. The moralists are the real trivializers. And only arguments that underline rising inequality's meritocratic bona fides confront the true depth and breadth of the problem.

Meritocracy is not the solution to rising inequality but rather its root. Meritocracy's inner logic has become undemocratic and opposed to economic equality. Even when meritocracy operates precisely as advertised, it promotes

the dynastic succession of status and wealth and turns a ratchet that increases economic inequality. Ordinarily decent people, responding reasonably to economic and social forces that they do not control and cannot escape, produce outcomes from which very few people benefit and that still fewer celebrate.

The central tragedy of the age reflects meritocracy's triumph. Meritocracy—not by betraying its ideals but rather by realizing them—imposes a caste order that equality's champions should condemn. And combating inequality requires resisting the meritocratic ideal itself.