DOI: 10.51845.37.3.13

Merit Exists, and So Does Inequality

by Roger L. Geiger

The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World, Adrian Wooldridge, Skyhorse Publishing, 2023, pp. 496, $16.00 hardcover.

The Genetic Lottery: Why DNA Matters for Social Equality, Kathryn Paige Harden, Princeton University Press, 2021, pp. 312, $14.00 hardcover.

No term in current discourse is invoked with more moral fervor and less certain meaning than "inequality." The insinuation always being that greater inequality is an evil to be extirpated and *egalité* always to be sought. How equal? With what trade-offs or consequences? The two books reviewed here address some of the controversial dimensions of inequality. Adrian Wooldridge takes an historical approach, reviewing past societies that allocated rewards on bases other than merit before considering the complications of meritocracy in the modern world. Kathryn Paige Harden employs the latest genetic science to show how individuals differ before arguing that society should strive to counteract this by evening up outcomes.

In a meritocratic society, Wooldridge notes, "people can get ahead in life on the basis of their natural talents"; equality of opportunity is provided by education for all; discrimination on the basis of race, sex, or irrelevant criteria is forbidden; and jobs are awarded through open competition rather than patronage or nepotism. (1) What's not to like? Lots, it seems.

The term "meritocracy" was coined in 1958 by Michael Young in a dystopian novel of that title which depicted a society bifurcated between a merit-based ruling elite and the masses, who ultimately revolt. Today, denigrating meritocracy has become commonplace. Professors at top law schools condemn privileged access to institutions such as their own and lament that people like themselves have such condescending

views of the lower orders. Best-selling critical race theorists with plum academic appointments insist that merit is a subterfuge for white advantage. And a consensus currently prevails on the reprehensible behavior of meritocratic elites. But Wooldridge reminds us that meritocracy has been a revolutionary concept, indispensable for shaping the modern world. Further, it has been protean in its multiple manifestations, as well as containing an inherent propensity for self-correction. Still, he readily admits that the current operation of meritocracy presents real problems. But understood in historical context its strengths are still evident.

Before the modern world, people had little opportunity to benefit from their natural talents. Social classes or estates were fixed at birth, and possible advancement was determined by family connections, patronage from those in power, or outright venality. The possibility of society ruled by the most intelligent and competent was first portrayed in Plato's *Republic* in the fourth century B.C.E., and the idea of philosopher kings became a recurring theme in Western thought. China employed meritocratic examinations to select mandarin officials for more than a millennium. Although the human costs were high, the system assured emperors of intelligent officials who posed no kinship claims to power.

In the West, opportunities gradually expanded for sponsored social mobility, in part because the aristocracy considered it beneath their station to perform non-military work. The Church was one avenue of such mobility, aided by monasteries and the rise of universities. The expansion of government required increasing numbers of competent functionaries; and the spread of commerce created a space for economic enterprise in the relative freedom of thriving towns.

However, the principle that humans are born equal and deserve equal opportunities was not widely advocated until the Enlightenment. Philosophes inspired the French Revolution's "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" (1789) which asserted equality before the law and openness of all careers to "virtues and talents." Henceforth, this ideal would be ever present in political discourse, even if societies were reluctant to implement it. Nineteenth-century bourgeois Europe was a compromise of economic freedom, class-distinction, constricted educational opportunities, and a residue of aristocratic privilege.

The United States emerged as the "Republic of Merit," and the concept was idealized by the Revolutionary generation. The new nation was infused with democratic rhetoric and an aversion to any hint of aristocracy. Jacksonian democracy represented a political repudiation of social hierarchy, and the openness of the economy and the frontier afforded unlimited opportunity, except for blacks, who were first denied freedom and then opportunity. As America grew wealthy, social distinctions became pronounced at the top of society,

"yet Gilded Age America ... preserved its faith in the great trilogy of equality, opportunity, and mobility." The U.S. civil service instituted testing in what was called the merit system, but this was at best a screen for basic competence, not a graduated scale of meritocracy. That would come later.

The author discerns a "meritocratic revolution" after World War II, but Wooldridge blurs together its two distinct developments. The first was a colossal expansion of educational opportunities and attainments. In Britain the expansion of free grammar schools and scholarships dented the rigid class structure, at least for the middle class. However, Wooldridge fails to mention the 1963 Robbins Report which justified a very tardy expansion of higher education. In the United States the GI Bill constituted both a numerical and a social expansion that only grew over time. A postwar Presidential report argued on the basis of psychological tests that 49 percent of American youth were capable of at least two years of postsecondary education, and this figure was surpassed in the 1960s.

However, more central to the concept of meritocracy was the recognition and utilization of intellectual expertise. In the U.S., the tapping of academic expertise by the Kennedy-Johnson administrations turned out badly, exemplified in David Halberstam's depiction of the Vietnam disaster, *The Best and the Brightest* (1972). The explosion of university knowledge of the 1960s affected American society, but the impact was not apparent until the 1980s. Wooldridge regards this era as inaugurating a "corruption of meritocracy."

What follows is a vivid description of the ascendancy of elites and elite culture that mobilized intelligence for economic gain: neoliberalism encouraged consultancy capitalism and financial engineering; the growing demand for elite education combined selectivity of high achievers with high expenditures and (apparent) high-quality instruction; and the globalization of elites reinforced these processes. This "marriage of merit and money" was furthered by assortative mating—the tendency of high achievers to marry one another. And its perpetuation was assured by the purchase of educational and cultural advantages by wealthy families. None of this was illegal, but it allegedly tilted meritocratic competition in favor of elites, increased inequality and, by implication, diminished opportunities for the rest.

The populist reaction to corrupted meritocracy is recounted in the sagas of Boris Johnson and Donald Trump. Popular resentment was stoked by the dominance of politics and political office by the cognitive elite and exacerbated by the condescension they manifested toward the unenlightened. On the Left, black intellectuals dismiss merit measures like testing as manifestations of "systemic racism."

Wooldridge has spent much of his career writing columns for *The Economist* using a one-page formula to analyze complex social issues, critique

existing policies, and then propose solutions. *The Aristocracy of Talent* has this same structure, and the first two phases are executed admirably. A concluding resolution is clearly more challenging. He begins with a ringing endorsement of true meritocracy. Countries with higher "meritocratic scores," including the two he has been critiquing, have experienced greater economic prosperity. Where corruption and nepotism persist, economic performance has been retarded. Meritocracy is essential for adapting to technological advancement.

Hence, the solution to the current defects of meritocracy is "*more* meritocracy." Here the goal should be to eliminate the advantages still enjoyed by the privileged. This would imply a "*wiser* meritocracy" based on "better ways to distinguish between innate ability and mere learning." (376) However, this is a distinction without a difference. Learning is anything but "mere," requiring a good deal of innate intelligence, so it seems doubtful that merit based on IQ testing, which he favors, would differ much from current results.

It may be true that selection based on intelligence testing is less socially skewed than that incorporating other criteria, or holistic assessment. But even pure IQ testing would produce differential results for ethnic/racial categories, which are the basis for current attacks on meritocracy. Opponents reject testing because they don't like the results. However, Wooldridge skates on even thinner ice when he endorses "the actual basis of human differences" as indicated by "polygenic scores." For this we need *The Genetic Lottery*.

Kathryn Harden aspires to "re-envision the relationship between genetic science and equality." (16) She is far more adept at treating the former than the latter. A psychologist and geneticist, she first explicates the foundations of genetic uniqueness. Everyone's genetic make-up is determined by chance—luck, if you will, hence the genetic lottery. Genetic differences condition (not determine) life outcomes. The focus here is on genetic material associated with intelligence (cognitive ability) and educational attainment. Harden emphasizes that there are substantial and measurable genetic differences among people and that these differences correlate with earned income and career success. All this is admirably explained with explicit qualifications on how such information should be interpreted—or not interpreted.

However, these explanations are framed in terms of an ongoing refutation of eugenics—social policies based on identifying superior and inferior individuals. Geneticists have reason to be defensive on this subject. Harden reports that 10 percent of the readers of scientific papers on genetics consist of a variety of right-wing non-scientists, presumably with dubious motives. But her "anti-eugenic project" is a red herring with examples drawn from the distant past. Individuals in modern societies are not "selected" on eugenic criteria; they are sorted by social processes. There is no purpose in beating this

dead horse for the educated readers of this volume.

The corollary of this "project" is even more problematic—to "reimagine how [social] systems could be transformed to the inclusion of everyone regardless of the outcome of the genetic lottery." (20). This quixotic goal will be considered below.

Of course, there is no education gene. Rather, geneticists have identified genetic materials (single nucleotide polymorphisms, called snips) that are associated with educational attainment. In sufficient numbers (1,271 snips in current research), these have been combined into a polygenic index. In a sample of 1990s high school students, 55 percent with the highest polygenic scores graduated from college versus 11 percent of the lowest group—a robust confirmation but one that still allows for "a lot of variability in people's life outcomes." (67) The following chapters interpret the role of genes in those variable life outcomes by establishing that there are no meaningful genetic differences in racial or ancestral populations,[1] that genes do not *cause* probabilistic outcomes, but that heredity still plays a very large role. This material provides qualifications and context for the meat of this book—five main conclusions about the mechanisms linking genetics to inequalities in education. (136-49)

1. "The genes relevant for education are active in the brain." When these genes are expressed—turned on to do their job—they are "critical to the ability of neurons to communicate with one another." Many other genes are also active in brains.
2. "The mechanisms linking genes to education" begin very early, before birth. Harden's research has found genetic effects emerging by age two, and other studies found effects of polygenetic indices evident in IQ tests at age five.
3. "Genetic effects on educational success involve ... the types of intelligence that are measured by standardized tests." The question here is what genetic effects involve basic cognitive abilities. A large role is due to executive functions, known in the psych world as *general EF*, which encompasses abilities to regulate attention, accomplish tasks, and process information. General EF would seem to allow children to mobilize and utilize their cognitive abilities. And general EF is 100 percent heritable. "At every point in formal education, people who can memorize facts quickly, easily redirect their attention, and manipulate abstract information in their head *do better on tests*."
4. "Genetic effects on educational success also involve ... 'non-cognitive' skills," meaning cognitive traits other than intelligence. These are motivational, behavioral, and emotional traits that psychologists have long studied and are to varying degrees (c.50 percent) her-

itable. Interpersonal skills, openness to experience, and the ability to defer gratification can promote greater success in schooling.

5. "[I]nteractions with the social environment are an essential part of the causal chain connecting genetics to psychological and social outcomes." There seems to be a reciprocal relationship between cognitive stimulation and the realization of cognitive abilities. Research has documented this in parent-child interactions, and it appears evident in curricular tracking in schools. These treatments compound initial advantages so that genetic effects strengthen over time—until age ten for cognitive ability and age thirty for non-cognitive personality traits.

Overall, Harden presents a complex and plausible explication of the biological basis of human inequality. The "overwhelming" scientific consensus holds that "genetic differences between people matter for who succeeds in formal education, which structures many other forms of inequality." And the genetic effects on educational success are also mediated by psychological and social factors.

Part II of this volume is called "Taking Equality Seriously," but the effort to rationalize inherent genetic inequality with social equality is itself hard to take seriously. It builds on the assertion that genetic differences are a matter of luck, and hence the differences in educational attainments and life outcomes that she has documented are not deserved. She endorses John Rawls's rather extreme theory of justice, whereby any social inequalities "must be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society." (252) Hence, according to Harden, "the problem to be fixed is society's recalcitrant unwillingness to arrange itself in ways that allow *everyone*, regardless of which genetic variants they inherit, to participate fully in the social and economic life of the country." (229) How society might rearrange itself is a mystery.[2]

She attempts to deconstruct meritocracy by noting again that merit has a genetic basis and hence depends on luck. To argue that some people deserve more rewards is an inegalitarian, "eugenic idea." She has to admit that a utilitarian need for expertise in modern society might justify some degree of meritocracy—that airline pilots need good eyesight is her example. But for such success too, "a lot of lucky events had to come together." (249) If merit is defined instrumentally, it should be measured against "the social consequences that we desire"; "*the sort of society that we want to live in.*" (250-1) This is not very helpful for the sort of society we actually live in.

These two books reach diametrically opposite conclusions—one advocating more meritocracy and the other wishing to expunge it. Stepping back, both books make important contributions to their subjects. Wooldridge establishes that a considerable degree of meritoc-

racy is fundamental to modern, democratic civilization; and Harden provides a valuable lay explanation of human genetic diversity. Both authors go off the rails when recommending how societies should respond to these "truths." And both authors have rather superficial conceptions of society.

Wooldridge is enormously well read, but not in sociology or economics. His discussion of contemporary developments is basically anecdotal, which tends to echo prevailing narratives (e.g., Boris and Donald). Harden is a scientist, but she ignores social science. Her Rawlsian conception of social justice is untethered to reality. Further, the domain of meritocracy requires a tighter definition.

Inequality and meritocracy are two different matters. Inequality concerns the distribution of income and wealth in society; meritocracy concerns the mechanisms by which a portion of those assets are acquired and by whom. It has little relevance to the mega-rich who did not learn how to make their billions at Ivy League universities or non-producers, or to retirees, youngsters, the poor, or the sick that society looks after. Thus, the true test of meritocracy is the conditions for education and advancement for the bulk of society engaged in gainful employment. In this respect, conditions in the U.S. were somewhat different than they were in Britain.

Joseph Kett's history of *Merit* in the U.S. documented a traditional belief in meritocracy despite a large degree of unmerited social stratification.[3] After World War II the GI Bill and the *President's Report* flattered this ideology. But social scientists found no evidence of merit in the country's industrial and political leadership, and social class outweighed intellect in college attendance. Still, belief in the "American Dream" predominated, and a burgeoning middle class, enjoying growing prosperity, sent increasing numbers of their children to college.

However, American higher education, unlike that in Europe, was not meritocratic. Admission was wide open. Entrance requirements were minimal or nonexistent across a large swath of colleges, and everyone knew that the "better" institutions admitted athletes and children of donors and politicians regardless of qualifications. College graduates did get good jobs, but there was disagreement as to why. Gary Becker in 1964 attributed it to human capital acquired in large part through education. But a generation of sociologists and economists argued otherwise—that college credentials merely signaled personal traits and were used to sort job applicants.

Daniel Bell wrote in *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* (1973) that the future economy would be centered on theoretical knowledge and knowledge-based industries.[4] After a pause during the 1970s' "stagflation," Becker and Bell were proved right in the 1980s. That is when the real meritocratic revolution took hold in the U.S. The earnings premium of college graduates be-

gan a steep ascent that continued to the end of the century.

Economists now identified a growing demand for the knowledge skills of college graduates.[5] Earnings premiums grew even more for those with graduate and professional degrees. Sociologist David Baker described how educational credentials increasingly determined occupational and social possibilities—not merely as signals of personality traits but rather because they signified capabilities for applying knowledge.[6]

The tech revolution transformed American industry after 1980, and knowledge became more valued across the economy. Institutions of higher education changed too as selectivity became the hallmark of quality. This was publicized, but not driven, by college rankings. Rather, rankings signified inherent knowledge potential: students were selected for cognitive ability (mostly), and they acquired greater learning from smart peers and (sometimes) from more knowledgeable professors. In the Knowledge Society, higher education was still wide open, but where one attended was now an indicator of merit.

This version of meritocracy embodied those features that critics hated—competition, privilege, and large differential rewards. These are qualities that Harden wishes to reverse, but her depiction of the strong effects of heredity on learning point in the opposite direction. Her depiction of causal chains is useful here: starting with genes, the chain can be conceptualized as progressing from cognitive ability to general EF, non-cognitive abilities, parents and home environments, schooling, and multiple social conditions. Each link in the chain has some effect on outcomes. Unfortunately for her utopian vision, the existing causal chain seems to go something like this: people with smart genes tend to obtain high incomes and have children who tend to inherit those smart genes, the effects of which are then enhanced by developmental and educational advantages. In fact, an important longitudinal study of the U.S. confirmed this dynamic: "a dollar of income appears to buy more academic achievement than it did several decades ago."[7] A marriage of money and merit indeed.

These two books, for all the faults indicated above, can help one to think about the issues of merit and inequality. Whether we like it or (probably) not, the marriage of money and merit favors perpetuation of the advantages of those who have succeeded educationally and economically. The genetic basis for acquiring and applying knowledge described by Harden amplifies this process. These advantages are based heavily on the value of knowledge and expertise in a knowledge society. Accepting these realities is a first step towards coming to terms with them. While everyone can welcome examples of upward social mobility, it takes a perverse ideological mindset to resent privileged achievement—the child of a physician becoming an MD, for example. In this case, eight years of demanding educa-

tion and training is anything but *luck*. Successful parents naturally seek to ensure the success of their children. Measures to constrain their freedom to do so would contravene democracy as well as meritocracy. The real enemies of merit are advocates of social justice and identity politics, who would cancel merit-based policies and, in effect, advance the interests of illiberal elites.

Meritocracy is fundamental to liberal values and the knowledge society. Wooldridge is right that the only acceptable course is to strengthen rather than weaken it. Preserving a liberal society depends above all upon education. Realistic steps should be encouraged wherever possible to improve the integrity and effectiveness of educational systems at all levels.

Nonetheless, although education has become the paramount meritocratic criterion of the current era, it is not the only one. There are myriad pathways to success in our society, and myriad genetic factors that might favor any one of them. Harden's study is a cautionary guide that leaves considerable scope for both variability in the genetic lottery and limitations of its effects.

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1. The polygenic index was calculated using a white population and would not necessarily be applicable to other populations.
2. Joseph Kett summarizes Rawls on merit: "Basically, Rawls exorcised moral desert from distributive justice; when it came to wealth, income, and the good things in life, no one deserves anything." *Merit: The History of a Founding Ideal from the American Revolution to the Twenty-First Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 249.
3. *Ibid.*, 222-49.
4. Roger L. Geiger, *American Higher Education Since World War II: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 91-128.
5. Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race between Education and Technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); David H. Autor, "Skills, Education, and the Rise of Income Inequality among the 'Other' 99 Percent," *Science*, 334, no. 6186 (May 23, 2014): 843-51. See Geiger, *American Higher Education*, 329-38.
6. David P. Baker, *The Schooled Society: The Educational Transformation of Global Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).
7. Geiger, *American Higher Education*, 336.