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## Meritocracy



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### Synonyms

American Dream; Equal opportunity

### Definition (or) Description

A “meritocracy” is a system ruled by the best qualified—the most skilled, intelligent, or otherwise worthy.

### Introduction

Narrowly speaking, a “meritocracy” is a system ruled by the best qualified—the most skilled, intelligent, or otherwise worthy. More broadly, “meritocracy” refers to a system where those who possess talent and work hard advance to the top. While “meritocracy” is looked upon as an ideal today—what societies aspire to become—its early adopters used the term derisively. Its first recorded use was in 1956 by the British industrial sociologist Alan Fox, who, writing in *Socialist Commentary*, described a meritocracy as a

“society in which the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and the ruthless are carefully sifted out and toward their destined positions of dominance, where they proceed not only to enjoy the fulfillment of exercising their natural endowments but also to receive a fat bonus thrown in for good measure” (Fox, 1956, p. 13). The term became closely associated with another British sociologist, Michael Young (often credited with coining the term independently), who popularized it in his 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Littler, 2017). Both authors had a cynical take on the idea of “rule by merit,” believing that it would simply replace one overbearing elite with another, even as widespread belief in its inherent justice served as a convenient justification for the continued immiseration of lower classes.

In any case, “merit” in the sense of talent and effort played a rather minor role in dictating one’s position in many early societies, which distributed resources largely based on ascription, the wealth and social status of the family a person was born into. At a time when slavery was widespread and societies were rigidly patriarchal, however, early philosophers made a case for individual achievement rather than ascription as the underlying basis for the social order. Plato, for example, argued that society should be ruled by the best-qualified leader, a knowledgeable “philosopher-king”; Aristotle proposed that society’s “deserts” (rewards like monetary compensation and social status) should be meted out in a similar fashion, with each person receiving what they—based on

their individual merit—deserved. These ideas remained radical, however, and systems where advancement was based on merit were slow to take root. One of the earliest examples of a merit-based bureaucracy emerged in China, where the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) applied Confucian principles of virtue to the selection of government officials, setting up rankings based in part on expertise; eventually, competitive examinations were used to fill positions (White, 2010). In the West, the emergence of corporations created a need for expansive bureaucracies run efficiently and rationally to maximize profit, and the British East India Company was noteworthy for hiring and promoting employees using examinations partly inspired by China's civil service—with these practices first appearing in the company's overseas Indian operations. Formal systems to select civil servants competitively later arose in Prussia and France in the eighteenth century.

The meritocratic systems just described were innovative for evaluating applicants based on their perceived individual merit. However, it was not necessarily assumed that such individuals enjoyed equal opportunities to acquire that merit. Furthermore, none of these merit-based bureaucracies emerged in countries that were, at the time, democracies. Both points are important to emphasize because meritocracy is often confused with the similar, but distinct, concept of “equality of opportunity,” and it is often closely associated in today’s discourse with democratic countries. Generally speaking, the term “meritocracy”—a system where those with merit advance to the top of the hierarchy—describes a lower hurdle for societies to leap than “equality of opportunity,” which implies not only that everyone is fairly sorted by merit, but also that everyone had similar chances to develop that merit. Furthermore, meritocracy has an uneasy relationship with democracy. For one thing, it is not necessarily exclusive to democracies: the political scientist Daniel A. Bell (2015) has even argued that the modern Chinese state offers an alternative to democracy via its Confucian-inspired “political meritocracy”—its one-party rule by the Communist Party of China, whose party cadres are purportedly selected using

merit-based criteria. Especially pertinent to our discussion, meritocratic principles may also subvert principles of political equality that are central to democratic societies, as we elaborate on below.

## Meritocracy Within the Economy and Polity

The sociologist Max Weber (2002) famously argued that capitalism emerged from the ideological crucible of Calvinism, a Christian doctrine developed by the French theologian John Calvin. Calvin argued that all worldly events were pre-ordained, and that salvation came from God’s grace alone. This moral vision that centered grace—God’s undeserved but willingly given love and forgiveness—would seem to deprive individuals of agency and contradict the tenets of meritocracy. In its disdain for idleness and worldly pleasures, however, the so-called Protestant ethic spurred individuals to invest, rather than spend, the fruits of their labors, making incessant market activity and perpetual economic growth a central feature of societies that embraced this culture. The harder the faithful worked in their calling, the greater their glorification of God. This theological perspective also led the devout to focus on their individual merit, given that the smart and industrious could see their accumulated wealth as a sign of God’s favor; in this way, as the philosopher Michael Sandel argues, merit “drove out grace” (2020, p. 41), converting a radical faith in individual acceptance into a materialist belief in individual achievement.

Enlightenment-era ideals of political equality emphasized individual rights and, implicitly, the view that individuals should not be judged based on ascriptive status, but rather individual merit. Thomas Jefferson envisioned a “natural aristocracy” of talents and virtue to replace the existing social order. His ideal citizen was a male yeoman farmer, a self-sufficient individual who advanced based on his careful stewardship of his allotted resources. Indeed, in the United States, the availability of land—often taken coercively from indigenous communities—provided white households with economic opportunities and a fresh

start, making Jeffersonian ideals of individual achievement and advancement realistic for settlers in ways they were not within the ossified European social order (Chen & Bland, 2024; Grandin, 2019). Jefferson and other founders were themselves symbols of the social shift toward leaders chosen based on merit rather than birth—even though many of them hailed from elite families, nearly half the delegates attending the 1787 constitutional convention in Philadelphia were slaveholders, and the principles of merit-based advancement the founders laid out excluded all but property-owning white men.

From the beginning, America's republican allure was built on a promise of "self-evident" natural rights—most notably, the view, enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, that "all men are created equal." Political movements inspired by Jeffersonian democratic values sought to roll back practices like primogeniture and entail (the passing down of property to the firstborn legitimate male heir) seen to be propping up the "artificial" aristocracy of inherited wealth and status. However circumscribed in scope, a principle underpinning these revolutionary efforts was equality of opportunity—specifically, that all persons would be offered opportunities for economic and social advancement, and that the only factor determining success or failure in that advancement would be their own merit. This subversive and broadly appealing notion that anyone ("all men") could rise up within society based on their ability and effort was a forceful moral challenge to the corrupt and closed European hierarchies of the day, and it seemed to connect well with the egalitarian ethos of the early American republic. Yet individual deservingness was not so easily reconciled with political equality. If one person's vote was to be equivalent to another's within the political sphere, Jefferson's natural aristocracy implied a naturally unequal (if self-evidently righteous) economic and social order. This foundational conflict would play out endlessly across liberal democracies, even as the groups falling under the state's aegis of political equality steadily expanded.

The industrial revolution created demands for labor that spurred migration into cities, fraying the

social order in agrarian communities largely rooted in tradition and ascribed roles. The market-driven need to incentivize greater efficiency within workplaces also happened to overlap with loftier political ideals of individual advancement through effort and talent rather than nepotism. Economic growth could be better facilitated by a social order that allowed for individual upward mobility through the skill and ingenuity that one brought to the market. The cultural transformation wrought by these twin economic and political revolutions can be seen in the literature of the period. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), upward mobility is to be pursued through marriage, the most effective way to ascend the tiers of the aristocratic hierarchy; in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the fact that Ebenezer Scrooge's miserliness and selfishness are taken to task is itself a sign of how commonplace it had become to believe that one's personal drive and ambition could lead to worldly riches (Shaviro, 2020). Importantly, as capitalism flourished and personal value became increasingly measured within markets, cultural understandings of "merit" took on more materialist connotations, with its definition gradually shifting away from the personal virtue upheld by the likes of Plato and Confucius and toward the individual skill and effort that generated economic rewards. Popular writings that celebrated upward mobility, such as the "rags-to-riches" stories penned by Horatio Alger, showed how both character and diligence would eventually lead to wealth and status, with even individuals from the humblest backgrounds being able—within a free society—to pull themselves, however improbably, "up by the bootstraps" (another term whose usage changed from derisive to laudatory) (Swansburg, 2014).

In the late nineteenth century, reformers made concerted efforts to uproot patronage systems and promote merit-based selection for government posts. European leaders such as Otto von Bismarck became renowned for transforming government agencies into more efficient bureaucracies through such efforts. In the United States, the Progressive Era was characterized by political conflict between well-educated activists

seeking to stamp out cronyism and corruption and political party machines that depended on patronage to solidify their working-class base of support (Skocpol, 1992). For reformers, civic service was a moral calling that should be open to all, while patronage was an anti-republican evil that propagated both dishonesty and inefficiency (Mosher, 1982). The progress of meritocratic principles during this time period is often taken as an unalloyed good, the triumph of “good government,” but it had consequences for institutions like political parties that represented—in however exclusionary a way—the interests of the working class. Furthermore, defining the kinds of “merit” that would be the basis for appointing people to civil-service positions involved subjective and somewhat arbitrary decisions that often favored the group interests of those promoting such reforms. Not unlike how literacy tests barred immigrants and the poor from voting in the United States, civil-service exams could become barriers to the hiring of otherwise talented candidates; regardless of a person’s worthiness to be a lighthouse keeper based on actual experience or relevant skill, for example, a Mississippi freedman would not easily pass federal tests of geometry, mathematics, and penmanship (Foner, 2014).

By the early twentieth century, the United States had established a global reputation as a meritocratic paradise, where poor immigrants could toil their way to better lives and the truly ambitious could attain wealth and status. The “melting pot” metaphor of assimilation, in common usage by then, spoke to the equality of *political* opportunity offered to would-be citizens, too: anyone, not just the native-born, could become an “American” if they made the effort—specifically, if they adopted the nation’s customs and culture and put away Old World things. Country-based immigration quotas imposed in 1921 squelched the flow of migrants, but the view that America was a land of opportunity embracing all—even “huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—remained central to the country’s self-conception. Indeed, the American writer and historian James Truslow Adams (1931) explicitly linked principles of meritocracy and equal opportunity in the influential term he coined, the “American Dream.” In its original formulation,

the American Dream was not necessarily about materialist aspirations—the “white picket fence” middle-class affluence that became a cliché by the end of the century. Rather, Adams argued, it was the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (p. 404).

Over the course of the twentieth century, groups excluded from Jefferson’s original vision of the natural aristocracy demanded and obtained their right to rise within the economic and social order. While political equality was the initial goal for many of these groups, their moral arguments often appealed to meritocratic principles. After all, discrimination based on ascribed characteristics made both meritocracy and equal opportunity impossible, given that factors other than a person’s ability and effort could be decisive. Through political struggle, society’s understandings of who deserved rights and opportunities broadened, with each new movement’s collective organizing ironically forcing governments, schools, and workplaces to recognize the primacy of individual merit alone.

The intertwining of these overlapping but distinct cultural values was vividly seen in the US civil rights movement of the latter half of the twentieth century. In his “I Have a Dream” speech during the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. connected his vision of a society free of bigotry to the nation’s founding principles of equal opportunity (in his description of “a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream”) and political equality (in his echoing of the nation’s founding statement, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal”). Yet by then, the view that merit was about people’s virtue—the “content of their character,” in King’s words—had given way to a preoccupation with merit within the marketplace.

## The Modern Meritocratic Ideology

In the late twentieth century, meritocratic principles became central to arguments on behalf of laissez-faire economic policies championed by the Chicago school of economics and other

scholars operating from the increasingly dominant neoclassical analytical approach. While Karl Marx had argued that society's economic rewards should be redistributed by need ("from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs"), his neoliberal foil Milton Friedman described distribution in a "just world" as wholly determined by one's individual merit within the marketplace: "to each according to what he and the instruments he owns produces" (2020, pp. 161–162). From this moral vantage point, individuals received what they deserved based on their talents and efforts, as decided by the impartial market. Any inequality in the distribution of rewards were the just results of individual choices, and any social problems that emerged would work themselves out over the long run. In turn, the monetary incentives built into markets would promote an intensity of individual effort and competition that would clarify and cut through the torpid inefficiencies of existing arrangements. If individuals were bearers of "human capital"—skills valued within the market—a society that sought greater wealth and justice should arrange itself in a way that maximized the human capital each person possessed and acquired.

Notably, neoclassical economists held that any collective efforts—say, from governments or labor unions—to rein in markets and ameliorate their distributional consequences violated self-evident theories about the optimal conditions for economic growth. Left to its own devices, they argued, the free market would generate the greatest possible good for all by incentivizing innovation and efficiency and thereby growing the size of the economic pie to be shared. In addition to being unwise practically speaking, such interventions into the market were also transgressions against the ascendant ethic of "meritocratic morality," a belief that individual talent and effort alone should decide one's position in life, which called into question the various egalitarian moral perspectives of the day and their associated policy approaches—from socialism to Keynesianism—that sought to equalize outcomes to greater or lesser degrees (Chen, 2015). Such arbitrary interference denied the individual's right

to develop their full potential, amounting to a pernicious form of government overreach that the British prime minister Margaret Thatcher famously described as the violent cutting down of society's *"tall poppies,"* and that the American author Kurt Vonnegut sharply satirized in his 1961 short story *"Harrison Bergeron"* (where American society has become so enamored with equalizing individual outcomes that dancers wear weights and masks to counteract their natural advantages of grace and beauty).

In these ways, the burgeoning neoliberal movement combined a moral perspective of individual achievement with an economic science that supported the wisdom of extending those values across the whole of society. By the turn of the millennium, these views had become mainstream among both policymakers and the economists who advised them. Governments widely pursued deregulation and privatization—initiated by rich countries and imposed on poor ones through the terms of international lending—and often chose not to intervene robustly in the face of corporate downsizing and other economic shocks, instead favoring policy approaches that would not rile up markets, such as subsidizing education and retraining (Krugman, 1997). In the emerging consensus, the proper role of government was to enforce contracts but otherwise not bungle the management of markets, in spite of historical evidence that effective regulatory power was needed to make those markets possible and level the playing field for would-be participants (Fligstein, 2001).

As corporations and governments alike cut back in search of promised increases in efficiency, less advantaged workers found themselves increasingly superfluous and unprotected from the vagaries of the market. Higher education became a popular strategy for individuals to adapt to the "new economy," and rates of college attendance soared across industrialized economies. Encouraged by policies such as the US GI Bill and federal grant and loan programs, colleges and universities admitted more diverse populations of students, losing some of their elitist culture while also diluting their older liberal-arts pretensions that their primary objective was to

cultivate a virtuous citizenry. New generations of students sought to acquire credentials that signaled their merit within the labor market, more explicitly seeing education as a means of accumulating human capital and thereby opening up opportunities for individual advancement within the economic order. The measurement of academic merit itself became more systematized and scientific, and standardized tests became a ubiquitous method of vetting applicants. As in previous times, though, the definitions of “merit” largely favored elites, and when they did not—such as whenever an influx of formerly marginalized groups like Jewish and Asian American students threatened to upend the customary cultural balance on campus—the criteria used to judge “merit” were expanded to encompass more amorphous notions of character and personality (Karabel, 2005).

By the end of the twentieth century, the science of measuring intelligence had flourished across domains, reconceptualizing merit to be less about the possession of qualitative virtues and more about the expression of quantitative aptitudes. Measures of IQ (held to be more or less fixed for each individual) were used to argue that differences across subgroups within the population were innately determined, and that policy interventions to address any resulting inequalities in life outcomes were fruitless (Herrnstein & Murray, 1996)—yet another example of how prevailing understandings of merit could have profound consequences for how a society structures its economy and distributes market rewards (see *Bell Curve controversy* entry).

## Tensions in Meritocracy

In recent years, scholars and policymakers have grown more concerned about the rise in economic inequality within many societies and what role, if any, particular practices and cultures relating to meritocracy play in exacerbating these trends (Piketty, 2014). Giving individuals the freedom to reach their potential necessarily entails some growth in inequality, as the talented outstrip the untalented within the social order. However,

proponents of meritocratic morality have long pointed out that social mobility makes this inequality mostly harmless: people who start at the bottom can, through their efforts, rise to the top, which means the problem of inequality can be short-lived for those unfortunate to be born into poverty. Not only is this arrangement just, its advocates argue, but it avoids the harm to individual rights posed by efforts to equalize outcomes—as seen in the brutal human rights records of communist countries.

Nevertheless, throughout the global North in recent decades, populist movements have gained widespread support—and, in some countries, even control of the government—by channeling working-class rage against a lack of opportunity and relative economic decline. This anger is often targeted at immigrants thought to be taking away employment opportunities and straining social safety nets. In the United States—a society built upon ideologies of individual merit and advancement—levels of economic mobility in the United States are lower than in many European countries (Corak, 2013), and a notable 2017 analysis showed a steep decline in US intergenerational mobility over time, with children born in the 1980s much less likely than those born in the 1940s to earn more than their parents (Chetty et al., 2017). White working-class communities in the United States have experienced particularly steep drops in socioeconomic well-being, and some scholars have linked that backsliding to recent spikes in so-called deaths of despair—suicides, opioid overdoses, and alcohol-related diseases highly concentrated among those with less education (Case & Deaton, 2020). Communities hit hard by both economic decline and deaths of despair may be providing fertile ground for a populist backlash against establishment elites and the meritocratic arguments they use to justify their higher status (Chen & Bland, 2022; Monnat & Brown, 2017).

The fairness of how institutions evaluate merit has also faced fierce criticism. In the United States, this can be seen in public resentment about much-publicized inequalities in opportunity, such as the uproar over college cheating scandals implicating rich, well-connected parents

and controversies about how family ties lead to disproportionate success within many industries (like the criticism of “nepo babies” that lit up social media in the pandemic era). Recent research has underscored the extent of these problems: almost a third of workers under 30 have worked for their parent’s employer, with those connections improving later earnings (Staiger, 2025); children of poor households have the same chance of attending any college or university as those who are in the wealthiest 1% have to attend any Ivy League or other elite university (Chetty et al., 2017); and university faculty members are 25 times more likely than the average person to have parents with PhDs (Morgan et al., 2022). In turn, concerns have been raised about how institutions of higher learning are themselves evaluated, given reports of colleges and universities attempting to game ranking systems that have become controversial but inescapable measures of their academic excellence (Hartocollis, 2022).

If education is a good in itself—essential for both self-improvement and the molding of informed citizens—it can also reproduce existing inequalities. As the sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1979, p. 68) wrote about the French higher education system, using tests and other measures of merit to sort students into better or worse schools “merely transforms privilege into merit,” given that children from more affluent households typically have greater opportunities to gain the skills evaluated by these measures. As a result, merit-based systems allow the “influence of social origin” to continue to generate gross inequalities, but now through “more secret channels” than was the case when wealth and birth were the accepted criteria for sorting. In fact, entrance exams and similarly flawed gestures toward meritocracy provide ideological ammunition to defenders of the resulting inequality, Bourdieu and Passeron claimed: those who score high can now “legitimately argue” that everyone was given a fair shot. Meanwhile, the evaluation procedure itself has a sanitizing effect on any inequality that emerges from it. Those who test poorly have, by merely sitting for their examination, given their tacit acceptance of both the test’s authority and its unequal outcomes.

Michael Young, the sociologist who popularized the term “meritocracy,” anticipated some of these tensions in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958/2011). The dystopian meritocracy that Young envisioned would reproduce many of the same divisions that plagued aristocracies, he argued. Intelligence and hard work, rather than birth, would determine a person’s position within society, but a fundamental inequality would remain, and in one critical way, the situation would be worse: those lower down in the hierarchy would not resist it because they would see their lot as deserved—the just result of their individual failings. “No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that,” Young wrote (2001). This inward-looking moral stance of shame and self-blame would stymie class mobilization on behalf of greater equality (Appiah, 2018). The worldview of elites would change, too. When aristocrats were in power, the luck of their own birth was so obvious that they were inclined toward a sense of obligation to help the less fortunate. Yet when meritocratic elites were in power, Young argued, the game’s winners could legitimately argue they owed nothing to its losers, as their own talent and effort had brought success.

With particular prescience, Young also warned that those who found themselves at the very top of the meritocracy would not necessarily be willing to risk their hard-won status with another roll of the dice. They would inevitably work to consolidate power for themselves and guarantee success for their children, he argued, and under such pressures, the meritocratic system would eventually break down. Meritocrats, like aristocrats, would not long tolerate a democracy that did not keep them and their children at the top. In the end, Young’s meritocracy would be little different from an aristocracy: just as stratified—its elites merely shuffled around—and just as contemptuous of democracy.

The political theorist James Fishkin (1983) put forward an influential theory about the inevitable tradeoffs that occur when meritocracy is prioritized within a society. Fishkin described three principles that liberal societies champion. One is the principle of merit, which holds that there should be procedural fairness in the selection of

people for positions—that is, that people are judged solely based on their individual talents and efforts. Another is the principle of “equal life chances,” which holds that a person’s success in life should not be decisively shaped by characteristics they have no control over, such as gender and race. And the third is the principle of “family autonomy,” which holds that parents should be able to raise their children with all the support and enrichment they wish to provide. Fishkin argued that these three principles were in tension with one another (in a “trilemma”), so that choosing any two would subvert the third. His conclusion was that equal opportunity, which implies an equal starting point in any meritocratic competition, could not be sustained—even under ideal conditions—without violating family autonomy.

To illustrate how the principle of merit and principle of equal life chances both need to be realized in order to ensure equality of opportunity, Fishkin (1987) gives the example of a warrior society that decides to choose its leadership based on merit. A competition that tests fighting skills will determine who is part of the ruling warrior class. All members of the society, regardless of birth, can participate in this contest, and therefore the claim can be made that everyone has been given a “fair” shot at success. However, in any real sense, there is *not* equality of opportunity: contestants raised in the society’s higher-status households would have received better training and nourishment over the course of their lives. “Hence, in the warrior’s competition we might imagine three-hundred pound Sumo wrestlers vanquishing ninety pound weaklings,” Fishkin (1987, p. 37) writes. “While this competition is procedurally fair in that, we will assume, it really does select the best warriors, it does not embody an adequate ideal of equal opportunity.” In other words, even if a meritocratic system evaluates everyone’s merit perfectly, it would still fail to achieve equality of opportunity so long as the existing social and environmental factors that have given some competitors more opportunities to obtain that merit are left unaddressed.

The sociologist Victor Tan Chen (2015) connected these arguments to the political economy of modern capitalism, arguing that the

dominance of meritocratic morality had provided ideological cover for a wildly unequal and unfair social order. He described the labor market as a “stunted meritocracy,” whereby the affluent are still able to organize collectively to skew the rules in their favor, but the working classes are denied the natural power of their greater numbers, held to a standard of individual uplift without the support of government or labor unions. Building on Fishkin’s typology, Chen described a tension between meritocratic, egalitarian, and fraternal moral perspectives, with the latter viewpoint focused on the advancement of one’s chosen group. Inevitably, he argued, efforts to build society around meritocratic principles would be corrupted by fraternalism, the inclinations of advantaged groups to rearrange that system in their favor; the same, he argued, was the case for egalitarian principles, as seen in how elites within socialist states hoard power and thereby generate stark *political* inequalities even if economic inequalities are ostensibly curtailed.

Some have argued that collective approaches—such as the collective bargaining that labor unions pursue—are not necessarily antithetical to meritocratic principles of individual advancement, and that such group-based protections are in fact a necessary baseline for “individual dignity and participation” (Mosher, 1982, p. 216). Nevertheless, calls for greater personal responsibility are often used as a way to discourage political movements and community-driven solutions (Groeger, 2021; Markovits, 2020). Chen (2021) describes this approach as “predatory meritocracy”: elites weaponizing meritocratic beliefs to legitimize the inequality that their policies and practices generate and stave off any organized efforts to challenge them. Survey data provide some support for the view that meritocratic beliefs may mute public anger over inequality. In countries with large income disparities, individuals are more likely to explain success as the fruit of talent and hard work (Mijs, 2021), which may be connected to the wider gulf in these more separate-and-unequal societies between “winners” and “losers”—both in terms of limited opportunities to interact (due to class segregation)

and wild divergences in their lived experiences (due to yawning income and wealth divides).

As noted earlier, less educated workers in the United States and other Western democracies have seen their incomes decline sharply over recent decades, even as organized religion and social ties have frayed in many of their communities (Beinart, 2017). To the extent that a beleaguered and besieged white working class is reembracing ethnocentrism and nationalism, they may be doing so partly to rebel against the stunted meritocratic order in which they are perceived as losers, rubes, and the butt of jokes. Against the backdrop of a dismal economic landscape and crumbling cultural institutions, they may also be seeking meaning and purpose in exclusionary fraternal ties—which can serve as a source of belonging and existential rootedness, however problematic (Chen & Bland, 2022).

Chen (2016) has underscored the importance of a fourth moral perspective, the “morality of grace,” as a counterweight to the extremist positions of meritocracy and fraternalism alike that have been taken up in unequal societies like the United States. In his broader (and not necessarily religious) conceptualization of the term, grace is a perspective of acceptance, non-judgment, and forgiveness, one that is antithetical to the evaluative and calculative practices of the dominant meritocratic and technocratic worldview of advancement and progress. As seen across religious traditions, grace can promote a larger sense of spiritual connection and common good—arguably more so than an egalitarian ideology tethered to material conditions—while combating the claims of undeservingness propagated by predatory meritocracy, Chen argues. Michael Sandel (2020) has similarly drawn upon ideas of grace, seeing it as a way of balancing the “rhetoric of rising” that is used to justify market inequalities. These critics of meritocracy see possibilities in egalitarian policies infused with such notions, which could collectively create what Chen (2017) calls an “economy of grace”—from recognizing the importance of luck by turning college admissions partly into lotteries rather than assuming student merit is judged impartially, to shifting the social safety net toward universal policies like basic incomes and job guarantees that would be

available to all individuals without regard to their deservingness. While we recognize the problems that such policies can present, such as disincentivizing hard work and initiative (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2024), we believe that there is a need to push back on institutional assumptions that a pure meritocracy is achievable or even desirable.

Of course, this age-old debate over political values and ends is quickly being upturned by the disruptions and uncertainties unleashed by new artificial intelligence technologies. Will such advances, like large language models (LLMs), be open to public scrutiny and widely accessible? LLMs are capable of enriching and complementing human productivity, accelerating the pace of scientific discovery, and perhaps even helping humanity achieve a post-scarcity future where hefty basic incomes are available to all (Than et al., 2025). If such innovations are not redirected through inclusive and transparent processes toward socially beneficial ends, however, their use will likely be focused on perennial market goals of surveillance and labor-slashing automation (Acemoglu & Johnson, 2024). Such technologies also present risks of further disrupting and corrupting meritocratic sorting systems in education and hiring. The now-ubiquitous use of LLMs among students has frustrated instructors, who worry about its impact on their ability to compel and measure actual learning—even as some of them are utilizing LLMs to generate their own course materials. The technology’s use cases across industries are rapidly proliferating, too, often driven by entrepreneurial workers who are discovering by themselves myriad ways to save time and energy on the job, with or without the knowledge of management. This means that the ability to gauge effort plus talent—merit—becomes further complicated. Is the worker who uses an LLM to outperform their more traditionally qualified peers more meritorious? Is their skill at using the LLM (i.e., prompt engineering) itself to be prized? Perhaps the distinction is meaningless—what matters in the marketplace is productivity, however achieved—as the industrialists who replaced skilled artisans with assembly-line workers knew well. Nevertheless, the quasi-

human cognitive processing powers of LLMs raises questions about whether they are just a labor-saving tool like any other, and whether talent itself is becoming devalued and commodified by the introduction of such all-encompassing technologies. A provocative example of the social dilemma now emerging is the advent of so-called vibe coding, where even individuals with little coding knowledge use LLMs to generate sophisticated and marketable applications. If such creativity is within anyone's hands, what does that say about how much societies should recognize and esteem creativity more broadly?

A future scenario where industries rely heavily on LLMs for their work flows might also challenge foundational notions of equal opportunity that continue to undergird modern democracies. If these technologies are not universally shared—or, more likely, only some individuals or groups enjoy access to the most sophisticated and effective AI models—then the fundamental fairness of any relevant competition becomes harder to maintain, and background characteristics like socio-economic status may become more decisive, subverting meritocratic expectations. On the other hand, a sweeping dispersion of AI models could level a global playing field that, to some extent, past advances in telecommunications and trade have already succeeded in “flattening” (Friedman, 2005). In addition to its diffusion, there is the matter of AI’s ownership: will such technologies of automation be the property of communities or individuals? Will the wealth reaped by them be hoarded or recirculated widely? In a world where AI has denigrated the value of human genius, we might see meritocratic morality’s appeal wane, while calls mount for redistribution and collective ownership of these means of productivity. Similarly, highly advanced AIs could prompt a devaluation of human leadership. Instead of aspiring to form a more perfect meritocracy, societies might favor a technocracy—here, rule by experts using AI. Some might see this as the path to utopia, the ideal culmination of a philosophy of new public management that seeks out consummately rational and data-driven solutions to societal problems (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). Under AI’s

reign, inequalities built upon the leadership of those perceived to be the best and brightest might fade away. Alternatively, such a political shift could spell the death of democracy, willingly executed by a public that wants efficient AIs to run the trains on time. In spite of its flaws, after all, a Jeffersonian democracy ruled by a natural aristocracy implies a degree of moral reasoning (even noblesse oblige) and a semblance of equal opportunity. A tech-fueled technocracy may very well be ruled by oligarchs without any justification of intellectual or moral virtue, any pretense of the value of a layperson’s input—or anyone to fire when things go wrong. Which of these futures is conjured into being by ongoing technological change will undoubtedly be a central source of societal conflict in the decades ahead.

## Cross-References

- [Affirmative Action](#)
- [Bell Curve Controversy](#)
- [Cultural Capital](#)
- [Disadvantaged](#)
- [Egalitarianism](#)
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- [Social Stratification](#)

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