

# The illusion of meritocracy

Social Science Information

1–15

© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/05390184241230406

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ssi](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ssi)**Tong Zhang** 

BI Norwegian Business School, Norway

## Abstract

Meritocracy claims to reward the meritorious with more resources, thereby achieving social efficiency and justice in a level playground. This article argues that the rise of meritocracy in a society is the institutional consequence of adopting progressive humanism, an ideal-type worldview that advocates the harmonious co-realization of individual achievement and social contribution. However, meritocracy is a self-defeating illusion because, even in a level playground, it only rewards conspicuous and wasteful display of ‘merit’ rather than genuine contributions to society. Similar to the promise of an afterlife to Catholicism, the illusion of meritocracy constitutes an indispensable theodicy to progressive humanism. For societies holding such worldviews, meritocracy is a necessary illusion that cannot be dispelled by institutional reforms or political movements.

## Keywords

conspicuous waste, interpretivism, meritocracy, neoliberalism, theodicy, worldview

## Résumé

La méritocratie prétend récompenser les personnes méritantes en leur accordant davantage de ressources, ce qui permet d’atteindre l’efficacité et la justice sociales dans une aire de jeu aplanie. Cet article soutient que la montée de la méritocratie dans une société est la conséquence institutionnelle de l’adoption de l’humanisme progressiste, une vision du monde idéale qui prône la co-réalisation harmonieuse de l’accomplissement individuel et de la contribution sociale. Cependant, la méritocratie est une illusion qui s’autodétruit car, même dans une aire de jeu aplanie, elle ne fait que récompenser l’étalage ostentatoire du « mérite » plutôt que les véritables contributions à la société. Tout comme la promesse d’une vie après la mort pour le catholicisme, l’illusion de la méritocratie constitue une théodicée indispensable pour l’humanisme progressiste. Pour les sociétés qui défendent de telles visions du monde, la méritocratie est une illusion nécessaire qui ne peut être dissipée par des réformes institutionnelles ou des mouvements politiques.

---

## Corresponding author:

Tong Zhang, Department of Finance, BI Norwegian Business School, Nydalsveien 37, N-0484 Oslo, Norway.

Email: [tong.zhang@bi.no](mailto:tong.zhang@bi.no)

## Mots-clés

gaspillage ostentatoire, interprétativisme, méritocratie, néolibéralisme, théodicée, vision du monde

## Introduction

Meritocracy is perhaps the most universally shared institutional ideal today. Many people around the world may dispute the desirability of democracy, liberty, or pluralism, but few would fail to share a similar passion for meritocracy as expressed by Theresa May in her speech at the British Academy in 2016:

I want Britain to be the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow [. . .]. I want Britain to be a place where advantage is based on merit not privilege; where it's your talent and hard work that matter, not where you were born, who your parents are or what your accent sounds like. (May, 2016)

Meritocracy has been a foundational institutional principle of China since the 1st-century BC when Emperor Han Wudi decreed Confucianism as the official religion of ancient China and introduced the world's first civil examination system, the *chaju* (察举) system (Tan and Geng, 2005: 128). After the 8th century, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam followed the Chinese role model and established their own meritocracies (Liu, 2007: 495). From the mid-20th century, meritocracy has also risen to the foundational principle of the West and come to dominate public discourse and institution building (Young, 2011).

Meritocracy is a social institution in which the distribution of material rewards, including wealth, fame, and power, is determined by individuals' merit, which is intended as a measure of their realized or expected social contribution.<sup>1</sup> As an institutional ideal, its attractiveness comes from the apparent potential to realize the two most cherished objectives of social institutions: efficiency and justice. In a perfectly meritocratic society, the more able possess more resources, so they can make better use of them and make the society more efficient; since the more able contribute more to social efficiency, they are justly rewarded with more resources (Miller, 1996).

For the meritocratic ideal, two institutional ingredients are indispensable. The first ingredient is evaluation, in order to rank individual merit. The second ingredient is hierarchy, or equivalently, inequality, in order to differentiate the value of the material rewards received by individuals. The most common example of a meritocratic institution is college admission. Prospective students are ranked by test scores and other auxiliary evaluations, and those with higher rankings are admitted to better universities that are more likely to lead to successful careers.

Despite the apparent theoretical appeal of meritocracy, its real-world performance has increasingly come under scrutiny in recent decades (Goldthorpe, 2003; Littler, 2017; Markovits, 2020; McNamee and Miller, 2009; Sandel, 2020; Themelis, 2008). The belief in meritocracy has been argued to contribute to widening inequality, decreasing social mobility, indifference to poverty and suffering, and other social problems. However,

there is little consensus regarding (1) the cause of the sudden rise of meritocracy in the (formerly Protestant) West,<sup>2</sup> (2) why meritocracy has fallen short of delivering the predicted efficiency and justice, and (3) alternative institutional ideals to meritocracy and their social consequences.

This article contributes to the meritocracy debate by addressing the three questions raised above. First, it aims at a causal explanation of the rise of meritocracy. Such an explanation needs to answer to the following puzzling phenomenon in the history of meritocracy: why has meritocracy become the foundational principle of the West only from the mid-20th century, while it has been so for the East for more than two millennia, despite the West's perceived advancement over the East in the previous several centuries? Our answer is that the cause of meritocracy is an ideal-type worldview that asserts the harmony between individual realization and social progress. This type of worldview can be called *progressive humanism*. Both Confucianism and neoliberalism (also called humanist liberalism, secular humanism, or Hellenism), the dominant worldview in the West post-Second World War, belong to this ideal type.

Second, it provides a novel critique of the social consequences of meritocracy. While most of the existing literature attributes the adverse social consequences of meritocracy to the practical impossibility of a level playground, this article argues that even under perfectly fair competition, a meritocracy would fail to select the talented as the winners; instead, it would favor those who are the most efficient in the conspicuous and tangible display of merit, the pursuit of which only produces 'bootless waste' for society (Veblen, 2005: 99). As an institutional ideal, meritocracy is a self-defeating illusion because it can never select the truly meritorious.

Third, it discusses the connection between meritocracy and the sociological 'theodicy' problem (Weber, 1993: 138–150) to establish that social and institutional reforms cannot lead to an escape from meritocracy. This article argues that the theodicy problem is a social law that cannot be resolved by institutional arrangements, and meritocracy serves as an indispensable theodicy to progressive humanism. Consequently, as long as progressive humanism remains the dominant worldview of a society, meritocracy will persist despite efforts of social and institutional reforms. In the end, alternative worldviews to progressive humanism that can lead to an escape from meritocracy and their social consequences are discussed.

## **The worldview origin of meritocracy**

According to Weber, any human-made world order (Weber, 1993: ch. xiii), including political, economic, and academic institutions, must derive its legitimacy from an underlying worldview, which provides a coherent answer to ultimate questions: 'What is the meaning of life? What purpose does our existence serve? How do we best live our lives?' (Kalberg, 2004: 140). The reason is that a worldview makes meaningful an 'internally unified – or methodical-rational – way of life' (Kalberg, 2004: 143), which, if oppressed or denounced by the existing world order, generates enormous grievance that threatens to undermine, destabilize, or even overthrow the world order. Consequently, a worldview transition invariably leads to a fundamental revision of the organizing principles of a society, resulting in the metamorphosis of all social institutions.

### *Progressive humanism: The worldview foundation of meritocracy*

To trace the worldview origin of meritocracy, we first examine the way of life it approves and rewards. Since a meritocracy rewards individual merit, it favors those who cherish individual achievement and success. Meanwhile, embedded in the assumption of meritocracy is that social contribution is meritorious, so it favors those who have made or are expected to make contributions to society. Therefore, a meritocracy institutionalizes a dual life objective for its members, individual success and social contribution, the absence of either is considered a defect. For example, a person who dies prematurely due to political failures, such as Yue Fei (岳飞) and Fang Xiaoru (方孝孺), is not a perfect role model in Chinese culture, however great his social contribution is. In the modern United States, where individual success is highly praised, a drug lord billionaire is never admired by the majority of the population.

An individual is content with a meritocratic social regime only when he believes that the peaceful pursuit of individual success leads to social contribution, or vice versa. In other words, his worldview must stipulate the harmony between individual success and social contribution. This type of worldview can be called *progressive humanism* because, unlike generic humanism that unconditionally promotes human will as the sole basis for moral good, its advocacy of human will is conditional on the peaceful contribution to social efficiency or progress. Without progressive humanism as the dominant worldview, meritocracy cannot be sustained in a society; conversely, when a society is converted by progressive humanism, it has to turn meritocratic to prevent discontent and grievance.<sup>3</sup>

### *Confucianism and Eastern meritocracy*

Confucianism is the world's first progressive humanist worldview. One of the core doctrines of Confucianism, elaborated in *The Great Learning*, is that a Confucianist should endeavor toward 'a cultivated person, a harmonious family, a prosperous country, and a peaceful world' (修身、齊家、治國、平天下; 朱熹, 2012: 四). Immediately upon the ascendancy of Confucianism in the West Han dynasty (Littlejohn, 2010: 69–71), China introduced the world's first meritocratic institution, the *chaju* (察舉) system. The demise of the West Han dynasty was followed by a decline of Confucianism and the replacement of the *chaju* system by the aristocratic *menfa* (門閥) system in the Wei-Jin Dynasties (田余庆, 1989). A revival of Confucianism in the Sui-Tang Dynasties led to the establishment of the *keju* (科舉) system, or the imperial examination system, which lasted until 1905. As the successor to the imperial examination system, various entrance examinations still play a central role in the talent selection of modern Confucian countries.

### *Neoliberalism and Western meritocracy*

Meritocracy was largely absent in Western social institutions from the 15th century until the end of the 19th century. The reason is that, during that period, the prevailing Western worldview was Protestantism. Protestantism held the most radical doctrine of self-denial among the world's religions: 'the sum of the Christian life is denial of ourselves' (Calvin, 2008: 995). Human nature is 'radically corrupt' (Mill, 2012: 51) without any saving grace:

Man cannot claim a single particle of righteousness to himself, without at the same time detracting from the glory of divine righteousness. (Calvin, 2008: 499)

We, indeed, are perfectly conscious how poor and abject we are: in the presence of God we are miserable sinners, and in the sight of men most despised – we are (if you will) the mere dregs and offscourings of the world, or worse, if worse can be named. (Calvin, 2008: XXII)

Such a categorical denial of human will essentially reject the notion of merit as we understand it today:

There cannot be a doubt, that everything in our works which deserves praise is owing to divine grace, and that there is not a particle of it which we can properly ascribe to ourselves. If we truly and seriously acknowledge this, not only confidence, but every idea of merit vanishes. (Calvin, 2008: 518)

In fact, the ‘meritorious’ not only deserves no material compensation, but should embrace suffering and misfortune. ‘The more Christian a man is, the more evils, suffering, and deaths he must endure, as we see in the Christ the first-born prince himself, and in all his brethren, the saints’ (Luther, 2003: 26). As noted by Michael Sandel, Protestantism ‘was born as an argument against merit’ (Sandel, 2020: 31).

To usher in the era of meritocracy, it was necessary to dispense with Protestantism’s radical conception of original sin. This was achieved by the ‘Secular Revolution’ from ca. 1870 to 1950 (Smith, 2003b), led by intellectual giants such as Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud (Trueman, 2020). Among them, the pivotal figure was Friedrich Nietzsche, who denounced the ‘ascetic ideal’ as ‘a monstrous way of thinking hostile to life as it is’ and a morality for slaves (Nietzsche, 2013: 103–04). The liberation of human will from the Protestant moral order was a tumultuous process that was largely completed by the 1950s (Taylor, 2018: 485).

The central message of this newly arisen worldview, which can be called secular humanism, humanist liberalism, Hellenism, or neoliberalism,<sup>4</sup> is self-realization/development under the auspice of social progress (Biel, 1992). Signs of the Western transition to meritocracy were already visible shortly after the commencement of the Secular Revolution, the most telling example being the initialization of the Nobel Prize in 1901. Veblen (2005) and Weber (2004) both noted the spread of careerism and meritocratic tendencies in the early-20th century.<sup>5</sup> However, the ascendancy of meritocracy as the foundational ideal of institution building had to wait until the 1950s, after the conclusion of the Secular Revolution (Young, 2011). As pointed out by Turner (2019):

The period that followed the academic revolution of the 1950s and early 1960s was thus also a revolution in the concept of merit [. . .]. Weber had no illusions about the relation of academic status to merit. Now the two were coming to be seen as equivalent. It was claimed, by Merton and his followers during the 1950s and 1960s, that science (and by extension social science) was a meritocratic machine in which academic status and merit coincided. (p. 234)

From the 1960s onwards, meritocracy rapidly penetrated every aspect of Western society, including education, academics, politics, and the economy, as will be further explored in the following section.

## Meritocracy and conspicuous waste

The prevailing belief is that a meritocracy aligns individual reward and social contribution in a level playground, and its malfunction is due to the practical impossibility of the latter (Littler, 2017: 5). In this section, we argue that even in a level playground, a meritocracy rewards not true talents but individuals who can conspicuously demonstrate their ‘merit’. Consequently, a meritocracy is liable to a prevalence of conspicuous waste, which is individual activity that produces visible and conspicuous certificates of merit but contributes nothing to social efficiency.

### *The contradictions of meritocratic ranking*

There are two reasons why meritocracy is liable to conspicuous waste even in a level playground. The first reason is about the evaluation of achievements, or realized social contributions. While meritocratic evaluation relies on visible achievements, individual contributions to society are often unobservable. For example, honesty greatly enhances economic efficiency but it is impossible to directly observe the economic return to one person’s honesty. Likewise, creativity drives scientific progress, yet the failure rate of attempts at scientific breakthroughs is high, and the contributions of scientists who failed remain hidden. By rewarding visible achievements only, meritocracy forces individuals to prioritize pursuits with observable outcomes and neglect meritorious personal traits and efforts that may not yield visible outputs.

The second reason is about the evaluation of individual characteristics, or potential social contributions. Meritocratic ranking implies a hierarchy of worth in which those receiving a lower ranking are not only materially but also morally degraded (Sandel, 2020: 13). To assuage grievance and quench dissidence (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2021: 215), the ranking criteria need to be standardized and unambiguous, while meritorious personal traits are often difficult to measure. For example, virtue is the most cherished personal trait in Confucian classics. When Emperor Han Wudi introduced the *chaju* system, moral evaluation (孝廉, meaning filial piety and moral uprightness) was the core subject. However, this practice gradually disappeared in later *keju* systems due to the difficulty of evaluating morality. Similarly, the ability of critical thinking is arguably a crucial social good that can be cultivated through general education. However, school exams are predominantly about proficiency rather than critical understanding of the established knowledge. Through standardized and precise ranking, meritocracy encourages individuals to develop measurable personal traits while overlooking meritorious traits that are challenging to test.

### *Conspicuous waste in a meritocracy*

Due to the fundamental need of rankings to distribute social rewards, a meritocracy creates an ‘iron cage’ with ‘the character of sport’ (Weber, 2013: 109), in which its members are supposed to struggle relentlessly against each other to produce visible achievements and standardized indicators to prove their ‘merit’. However, since true merit is often unobservable and unmeasurable, the meritocratic iron cage encourages its members to engage in conspicuous waste rather than genuinely productive activities.

The best example of conspicuous waste in a meritocracy is found in the civil examination system of Imperial China. While being the world's first to establish a meritocracy to empower the intellectuals, China experienced a significant lag in intellectual achievements compared to the West after the 15th-century AD (Needham, 1969). To create standardized evaluation criteria, the civil examination had to adopt highly restricted content and extremely rigid formats.<sup>6</sup> To excel in the civil examination, Chinese scholars had to waste years to decades perfecting rhetoric, poetry, or calligraphy to conspicuously distinguish themselves and extracting non-existent novel insights from a limited amount of Confucian classics (Miyazaki, 1981). Even today, after the abolition of the Imperial Examination System, China's entrance examination system still exerts enormous pressure on its young people, making their life arguably the most miserable in the world (Yang, 2021), while failing to produce great intellectual talents.<sup>7</sup>

Since fully embracing the meritocratic ideal in the mid-20th century, the West has experienced a pervasive presence of conspicuous waste in every social domain, including education, science, politics, and the economy. In education, meritocratic evaluation takes the form of exam grades, which determine further educational and career opportunities. There are two problems with Western educational meritocracy. The first is shared with the Chinese imperial examination: the inherent restrictiveness of exams stifles intellectual creativity and critical thinking. The second is mainly present in college education and above, where students are free to choose their specializations and curricula. Influenced by the meritocratic ideal, 'the students prioritize what contemporary society regards as the most important facets of success in life, material wealth on completion of their studies', and 'all their study was related only to its perceived usefulness in securing particular employment' (Molesworth et al., 2010: 205, 206). The consequence is that the students' knowledge becomes overly specialized and fragmented for understanding the social world, and they engage excessively in career building activities unrelated to learning (Hedges, 2009: 89–99).

In academic research, scholars are compelled by meritocratic evaluations to continually produce visible outputs, such as publications, grants, and citations (Feldman and Sandoval, 2018; Hallonsten, 2021; Turner, 2019). However, due to the risky nature of attempts at scientific breakthroughs (Zhang, 2022a: 62–65), the obsession with visible outputs leads to a proliferation of 'normal science' during which the primary task of scientists is 'puzzle-solving' under the existing paradigm with little aim to 'produce major novelties, conceptual or phenomenal' (Kuhn, 2012: 35), and a lack of paradigm shifts or scientific revolutions (Kuklick, 1977; Smolin, 2006; Smith, 2014). Moreover, scholars are compelled to demonstrate their 'usefulness' not only to their academic peers but also to laypeople to attract funding and quench discontent,<sup>8</sup> so they turn to pedantic and overly specialized knowledge to guarantee 'the desired conviction of awe in the vulgar, who do not know the difference' between 'the specious appearance of scholarship' and genuine intellectual inquiry (Veblen, 2005: 23). Therefore, the academic meritocracy encourages scholars to engage in 'reputable but futile' conspicuous research rather than 'the quest of scientific knowledge' (Veblen, 2012: 235).

In politics, meritocratic evaluation relies on visible performance indicators such as votes, fundraising, and auditing results. Voting, as the central mechanism of democracy, is not inherently flawed. The problem arises when there is an exclusive focus on votes,



prompting competing parties to join a rat race of endorsing politicians who are the best at winning votes. In the contemporary West, public discourse is dominated by fragmented, graphic, and entertaining information provided by the electronic media (Postman, 2005). To accrue more votes, it is more efficient for a politician to improve their physical image, rhetorical skills, and public speaking than genuine political capabilities. Consequently, parties tend to endorse flamboyant politicians, who increasingly resemble entertainers rather than politicians (e.g. Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Donald Trump), to run for top government offices. The preoccupation with fundraising (Ferguson, 2011) has given rise to the ‘revolving door’ phenomenon (Blanes i Vidal et al., 2012) and the erosion of policymaking by corporate, especially Wall Street, interests (Johnson and Kwak, 2010: 92–104). At last, the ‘value for money’ auditing (Power, 1999: 42) prioritizes ‘the currency of measurable outputs’ (Pollitt, 1995: 135), causing local governments to neglect public investments with long-run and broader-scale benefits, such as infrastructure, public education, and social security.

In the economy, meritocratic evaluation is based on profit. Employers and employees are evaluated by profit-related visible indicators, including sales, market share, profit rate, customer satisfaction, and cost control. The economic meritocracy leads to conspicuous waste through at least three channels. First, it leads to the extensive production of wasteful goods and services that are ‘useless or detrimental to the community at large’ but ‘may be as gainful to the businessman and to the workmen whom he employs’ (Veblen, 2009: 29), examples being luxuries, cosmetics, and other forms of conspicuous goods and services. Second, it encourages dishonesty (Friedman et al., 2021) because honesty, although indispensable to the efficient functioning of a large-scale market economy, hinders the profit-maximization of individuals. Third, since business connections are crucial for performance, the economic meritocracy encourages the learning of social skills, investment in physical appearances, and excessive social activities, which are zero-sum in nature because their competitive edge is offset when everyone pursues them.

## **Meritocracy and theodicy**

Although meritocracy is a self-defeating illusion, it is a necessary illusion. In this section, we first discuss the sociological theodicy problem and its worldview significance, and then argue that meritocracy is an indispensable theodicy for progressive humanism.

### *Theodicy and its worldview significance*

The sociological theodicy problem arises when there is a mismatch between individuals’ social contributions and rewards: ‘evil consequences often will ensue from the actions of those who exactly follow the precepts of the moral law’ (Parsons, 1993: lvii), or ‘the righteous suffer’ (Lawson, 2005: 11). The theodicy problem can be illustrated using the example of cosmetics, one form of conspicuous consumption discussed by Veblen (2012). Cosmetics are socially wasteful – they are costly to produce, apply, and maintain, but they help the wearers find better marriage partners, land better jobs, and receive more chances of promotion (Zhang, 2022b: 52). In other words, if one refuses to waste time



and resources on cosmetics, he is the ‘righteous’ who contributes to social efficiency, but he will be socially punished for giving up the competitive edge provided by cosmetics.

All the examples of conspicuous waste discussed in the previous section can be viewed as illustrations of the theodicy problem: intelligent, critical students losing to conformist ‘exam machines’ and social climbers, genuine scholars losing to academic ‘corporate raiders’ (Paglia, 1991), capable politicians losing to TV show hosts and demagogues, and honest business people losing to fraudsters. The theodicy problem is ubiquitous in human society. Other than conspicuous waste, it also appears in crime, law enforcement, political persecution, war, and other situations.

Each worldview, as a methodical and rational answer to the meaning of life, ‘finds itself at some point in a state of tension with the irrationalities of the world’ (Weber, 1951: 227), which, if left unresolved, inflicts unbearable pain and distress on its disciples. The theodicy problem is arguably the most serious tension facing any worldview preaching individual virtue, that is, individual contribution to society. All the world’s major religions offer solutions to the theodicy problem (Weber, 1978: 518–529). For example, in Catholicism, the good go to Heaven and the evil go to Hell after death depending on their actions during life, rectifying the injustices in this life; in Buddhism, the good will be reincarnated into happy lives and the evil into miserable lives; in Calvinism, one has to do good works as calling without asking for returns because election is predetermined and cannot be changed by human actions.

### *Meritocracy as the indispensable theodicy of progressive humanism*

Unlike traditional religions, the progressive secular worldviews established during the Secular Revolution offer their solutions to the theodicy problem in the present life without resorting to ‘supernatural’ concepts.<sup>9</sup> For example, social Darwinism and Nazism claim that the winners are invariably the meritorious if the people are committed to genetic or racial struggle; Communism claims the solution to be class struggle; neoliberalism, the worldview foundation of Western meritocracy, claims that the theodicy problem will be resolved when there is fair and peaceful competition:

Competition has, therefore, a dual economic and moral aspect: it enhances the global efficiency of the economic system by allowing the best individuals to contribute the most to prosperity; it rewards individuals according to their merits, brings out the best in them and allows them to better themselves. (Amable, 2010: 5)

In the wake of the abysmal social experiments of the last century, social Darwinism, Nazism, and Communism have mostly fallen out of favor among Western elites. Neoliberalism remains the only secular worldview that continues to draw major intellectual interest in the West today (Moyn, 2012).

As argued in the previous section, meritocracy, as the institutional consequence of neoliberalism, is a self-defeating illusion because it can only reward conspicuous waste rather than genuine talent. This claim is corroborated by historical and contemporary evidence. In the last 2000 years, Confucian China failed to realize the meritocratic utopia depicted in *The Great Learning*, despite persistent efforts to redress the flaws of the

imperial examination system. Since the Second World War, the Western neoliberal meritocracy, developed independently of its Confucian counterpart, has engendered a similar pattern of conspicuous waste that has plagued Confucian civilization for two millennia. The existing human history strongly suggests that the theodicy problem is a social law rather than a solvable social problem.

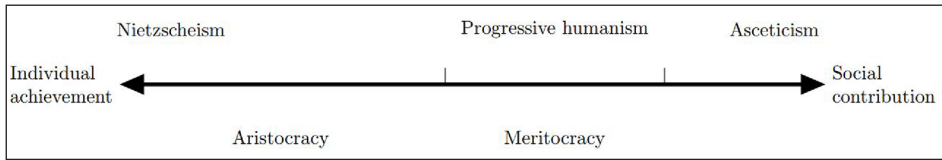
Nonetheless, meritocracy is a necessary illusion for the modern West as it is for Confucian civilization. Progressive humanists believe that a meaningful life hinges upon the dual realization of individual achievement and social contribution. The idea that individual achievement and social contribution cannot be peacefully aligned by secular arrangements constitutes an existential threat to their meaning of life. In a progressive humanist society, the belief in the theoretical existence of meritocracy stands as a first-order moral imperative, even if its practical implementability may be disputed. As long as progressive humanism remains the dominant worldview, people will cling to the illusion of meritocracy, the same as how the Catholics cling to the hope of an afterlife. No institutional efforts to abandon meritocracy will ever succeed, because the belief in meritocracy originates directly from worldviews, which are at a higher level 'in the hierarchy of social control' (Parsons, 1993: xlii) than institutions and norms.

### **The false dichotomy of meritocracy versus aristocracy**

Defenders of meritocracy often claim that its termination will leave us no choice but to revert to an aristocratic, favoritistic, and nepotistic social system that is inefficient and unfair. Therefore, despite the flaws of meritocracy, it is the best system for organizing the world (Wooldridge, 2021: 9). This is a typical example of a false dichotomy, a rhetorical strategy commonly employed in ideological, political, and religious propaganda. Other examples of false dichotomies include 'religion vs science', 'neoliberalism vs authoritarianism', and 'efficiency vs justice'. Now let us revisit the underlying worldview of meritocracy to see why aristocracy is not its only alternative.

The *raison d'être* for meritocracy is to institutionalize the progressive humanist ideal way of life: the harmonious co-realization of individual achievement and social contribution. Any worldview that can lead to an escape from meritocracy needs to acknowledge that individual achievement and social contribution are conflicted regardless of the secular arrangements, and an individual faces a tradeoff between them.<sup>10</sup> Let us call the (ideal-type) worldview that solely preaches for individual realization while disregarding its social consequences Nietzscheism, and the worldview that advocates absolute self-denial asceticism.<sup>11</sup> In between Nietzscheism and asceticism lies a continuum of worldviews differing in their relative emphasis of individual achievement over social contribution, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Each worldview legitimizes a different ideal of social institutions. As argued earlier, progressive humanism supports meritocracy because it advocates equally individual success and social contribution. If a worldview advocates individual realization more than progressive humanism, it normalizes socially detrimental methods for individual gains, thereby leading to aristocracy, favoritism, and nepotism. However, a dichotomy of meritocracy and aristocracy is untenable because there exist worldviews that advocate social contribution more than progressive humanism, which legitimizes a third type of social institution other than aristocracy and meritocracy.



**Figure 1.** Worldview and social institution.

What kind of institutional ideal does an ascetic worldview rationalize? Since asceticism rejects the legitimacy of self-realization, there is no need for a meritocratic hierarchy. Therefore, its social ideal is (ascetic) equality, which has two meanings: equality in duty, in the sense that everyone endeavors toward making the greatest social contribution given his talent, and equality in worth, in the sense that every individual is equally valuable as long as he devotes himself to the fulfillment of his duty, regardless of the actual achievement. This notion of equality is compatible with inequalities in individual rights or power, such as opportunity, wealth, or political power, which is efficient given that people are born with differential talents in managing resources.

Based on our theory, an ascetic society is equal, free from conspicuous waste, and efficient. Since ascetic Protestantism is close to the ascetic ideal, the Protestant West from the 15th century until the Secular Revolution should match these predictions more than the contemporary West. Indeed, Tocqueville observed that, during his time, ‘in the United States professions [. . .] are never either high or low: every honest calling is honorable’ (de Tocqueville, 1999: 96). Turner (2019: 235) notes that Western academia pre-Second World War was a ‘gentlemanly past’ of ‘scholarly egalitarianism’. Conspicuous waste was frowned upon, for example, William of Orange, a ruler of the Netherlands in the 17th century, ‘had a strong dislike for everything magnificent or pompous; he lived plainly, hated flattery, and took no pleasure in social conversation’ (Palmer et al., 2002: 152). In terms of efficiency, Weber shows that in denying the legitimacy of secular enjoyment and ambition, ascetic Protestantism fostered not nihilism but ‘the strongest possible motives for acting in accordance with God’s pattern’ (Weber, 1993: 203), that is, the fulfilling of one’s earthly work as ‘calling’ from God (Weber, 2013: 22). It was also during this period the West gave birth to the Industrial Revolution and the Scientific Revolution, the greatest efficiency advancements in human history.

Worldviews fundamentally determine institutions. If the West wants to escape from the trap of meritocracy to a more efficient social regime, it has to reject neoliberalism and adopt an ascetic worldview. Given the West’s hardline commitment to secularism, a revival of Protestantism appears unlikely, and the only hope is the construction of a new secularist ascetic worldview. However, constructing ascetic worldviews is a formidable task due to humans’ inherently selfish nature. Whether the West will find an escape from meritocracy or remain forever captivated by its illusion, only history can tell.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**ORCID iD**

Tong Zhang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1481-5521>

**Notes**

1. The notion of merit, as commonly understood in public discourse and academic debates, excludes abilities to enrich oneself or a particular group at the deliberate detriment of others, such as through violence or fraud (except for defensive or protective purposes, as in the army, police, or intelligence service). For example, Viking society possessed a well-defined hierarchical system based on achievements in raid, conquest, and plundering (Price, 2020: 308), yet it is generally not considered a meritocracy.
2. In this article, I focus on the formerly Protestant West because its worldview discontinuity from ca. 1870 to 1950 provides an excellent 'natural experiment' for understanding the cause of meritocracy. Whenever the West is mentioned, it refers to the part of the West that was formerly Protestant.
3. It is worth emphasizing that our focus is on explaining what leads to meritocracy becoming the foundational principle of institution building in society, rather than the emergence or existence of the idea of meritocracy in the history of thoughts. The idea of a meritocratic society, similar to the ideas of racism, anti-Semitism, and egalitarianism, has co-existed alongside numerous competing social thoughts throughout most of human history. However, the existence of an idea in the social thoughts, such as the idea of meritocracy in Adam Smith's works, racism in the time of the Atlantic slave trade, anti-Semitism during the Middle Ages, and egalitarianism in the French Revolution, does not equate to it ascending to the foundational principle of a society, such as meritocracy in the modern West, Nazism in 1930s Germany, and Communism in the early Soviet Union.
4. By neoliberalism, we refer to its worldview rather than its economic or political theory. Such a worldview is also called, by other authors, secular humanism (Smith, 2003a) or Hellenism (Toynbee, 1959). Although they all refer to the same worldview, each label captures certain aspects of it better than the others. Secular humanism emphasizes the humanist metaphysical foundation, Hellenism emphasizes the historical root, and neoliberalism highlights its progressivist and Darwinist origin.
5. 'In the nineteenth century philosophy was often the province of amateurs. By 1900 philosophy was the activity of the professor'. By 1930, the department of philosophy at Harvard had established 'the system of rewards and punishments, the stimulation of students and colleagues, a position that commands audience, and miscellaneous incentives driving men to produce good work that would win attention' (Kuklick, 1977: xxiv).
6. The exam contents consist primarily of interpretations of Confucian classics and discursive articles based on Confucian classics. From the Ming Dynasty onwards, the exam took the rigid form of the eight-legged essay (*bagu wen* 八股文) with a text limit of 550–700. The famous Chinese scholar Gu Yanwu (1613–1682) wrote that the eight-legged essay had done greater damage to intellectual progress than the burning of books and burying of Confucian scholars by the first emperor of Qin (Theobald, 2011).
7. According to Wikipedia (2021), the People's Republic of China only gave birth to one Nobel laureate in the fields of physics, chemistry, and physiology or medicine with one fifth of the world's population since its foundation in 1949. The caveat is that the Nobel Prize is also a meritocratic institution, so it cannot perfectly represent scientific contribution. However, compared with full-scale meritocratic institutions such as universal examination, it is a relatively accurate indication of intellectual merits (and does less damage to intellectual progress).
8. The need to attract funding is because academic research does not generate wealth or resources

- by itself. The need to quench discontent is because the scholars 'claim to know the ultimate significance of the practitioner's activity better than the practitioners themselves' (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 136).
9. It is worth pointing out that 'supernatural' is not a rigorously defined epistemological concept. Quine (1951: 41) shows that most commonly known scientific concepts, such as force, magnetism, and genes, are non-falsifiable 'cultural posit' to work 'a manageable structure into the flux of experience', and, epistemologically, differ from the Roman Gods 'only in degree and not in kind'.
  10. There is another type of worldview that encourages people to pursue neither individual achievement nor social contribution but sensual pleasure. This is the idea of hedonism. Due to its obvious inferior implication for social efficiency, we omit its discussion.
  11. Unlike Weber (1993), we do not make the distinction between inner-worldly and other-worldly asceticism, because whether the meaning of life is in this world or another world makes no sociological difference. The Viking warriors seeking glory in Valhalla glorified violence and established military hierarchies the same as the Nazis believing in *Mein Kampf* and *Übermensch* in this world; the Catholic clergy seeking redemption in Heaven established the same aristocracy as the feudal lords who believed in secular power. To qualify as asceticism, a worldview must deny individual realization in this world as well as any imaginary worlds.

## References

- Amable B (2010) Morals and politics in the ideology of neo-liberalism. *Socio-Economic Review* 9(1): 3–30.
- Berger PL, Luckmann T (1991) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Biel S (1992) *Independent Intellectuals in the United States, 1910–1945*. New York: NYU Press.
- Blanes i Vidal J, Draca M, Fons-Rosen C (2012) Revolving door lobbyists. *American Economic Review* 102(7): 3731–3748.
- Boltanski L, Thévenot L (2021) *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Calvin J (2008) *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.
- de Tocqueville A (1999) *Democracy in America*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions.
- Feldman Z, Sandoval M (2018) Metric power and the academic self: Neoliberalism, knowledge and resistance in the British university. *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 16: 214–233.
- Ferguson T (2011) *Golden Rule: The Investment Theory of Party Competition and the Logic of Money-Driven Political Systems*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Friedman S, O'Brien D, McDonald I (2021) Deflecting privilege: Class identity and the intergenerational Self. *Sociology* 55(4): 716–733.
- Goldthorpe J (2003) The myth of education-based meritocracy. *New Economy* 10(4): 234–239.
- Hallonsten O (2021) Stop evaluating science: A historical-sociological argument. *Social Science Information* 60(1): 7–26.
- Hedges C (2009) *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle*. New York: Bold Type Books.
- Johnson S, Kwak J (2010) *13 Bankers: The Wall Street Takeover and the Next Financial Meltdown*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Kalberg S (2004) The past and present influence of world views: Max Weber on a neglected sociological concept. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 4(2): 139–163.
- Kuhn T (2012) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

- Kuklick B (1977) *The Rise of American Philosophy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1860–1930*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lawson SJ (2005) *Holman Old Testament Commentary Volume 10 – Job*. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group.
- Littlejohn RL (2010) *Confucianism: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Littler J (2017) *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.
- Liu H (2007) Influence of China's imperial examinations on Japan, Korea and Vietnam. *Frontiers of History in China* 2(4): 493–512.
- Luther M (2003) *On Christian Liberty*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
- McNamee SJ, Miller RK (2009) *The Meritocracy Myth*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Markovits D (2020) *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. London: Penguin Publishing Group.
- May T (2016) Britain, the great meritocracy: Prime Minister's speech. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech/>
- Mill JS (2012) *On Liberty*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- Miller D (1996) Two cheers for meritocracy. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 4(4): 277–301.
- Miyazaki I (1981) *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Molesworth M, Scullion R, Nixon E (2010) How choice in higher education can create conservative learners. In: Molesworth M, Scullion R, Nixon E (eds) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, pp. 196–208.
- Moyn S (2012) *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Needham J (1969) *The Grand Titration: Science and Society in East and West*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.
- Nietzsche F (2013) *On the Genealogy of Morals*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Paglia A (1991) Junk bonds and corporate raiders: Academe in the hour of the wolf. *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 1(2): 139–212.
- Palmer RR, Colton J, Lloyd K (2002) *A History of the Modern World*. New York: Knopf.
- Parsons T (1993) Introduction. In: Weber M, Fischeff E (eds) *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, pp. xxix–lxxvii.
- Pollitt C (1995) Justification by works or by faith?: Evaluating the new public management. *Evaluation* 1(2): 133–154.
- Postman N (2005) *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group.
- Power M (1999) *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Price N (2020) *The Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings*. London: Penguin Books.
- Quine WVO (1951) Two dogmas of empiricism. *The Philosophical Review* 1(60): 20–42.
- Sandel M (2020) *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Penguin Books.
- Smith C (ed.) (2003a) *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Smith C (2003b) Introduction. In: Smith C (ed.) *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp.1–96.
- Smith C (2014) *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



- Smolin L (2006) *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, the Fall of a Science, and What Comes Next*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tan C, Geng Y (2005) *India and China: Twenty Centuries of Civilization Interaction and Vibrations*. New Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Taylor C (2018) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Themelis S (2008) Meritocracy through education and social mobility in post-war Britain: A critical examination. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 29(5): 427–438.
- Theobald U (2011) The Chinese imperial examination system. Available at: <http://www.china-knowledge.de/History/Terms/examination.html>
- Toynbee AJ (1959) *Hellenism: The History of a Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Trueman CR (2020) *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- Turner S (2019) The road from ‘vocation’: Weber and Veblen on the purposelessness of scholarship. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 19(3): 229–253.
- Veblen T (2005) *The Higher Learning in America*. New York: Cosimo Classics.
- Veblen T (2009) *The Theory of Business Enterprise*. Gloucester: Dodo Press.
- Veblen T (2012) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.
- Weber M (1951) *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*. Glencoe: The Free Press.
- Weber M (1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Weber M (1993) *The Sociology of Religion*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Weber M (2004) *The Vocation Lectures*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Weber M (2013) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Scotts Valley, CA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, Amazon.
- Wikipedia (2021) List of Nobel laureates by country. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Nobel\\_laureates\\_by\\_country/](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nobel_laureates_by_country/)
- Wooldridge A (2021) *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World*. London: Penguin Books Limited.
- Yang D (2021) Faster, higher, stronger: China’s kids pushed to breaking point. Available at: <https://www.thinkchina.sg/faster-higher-stronger-chinas-kids-pushed-breaking-point/>
- Young M (2011) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Zhang T (2022a) Reinterpreting science as a vocation. *Max Weber Studies* 22(1): 55–73.
- Zhang T (2022b) The logic of wasteful production. *Journal of Economics, Theology and Religion* 2(2): 51–66.
- 朱熹 (2012) *四書章句集注*. 北京: 中华书局.
- 田余庆 (1989) *东晋门阀政治*. 北京: 北京大学出版社.

## Author biography

Tong Zhang is Assistant Professor at BI Norwegian Business School. His research areas are sociology of religion, economic sociology, sociology of science, and philosophy of social science. His works have been appeared on *Max Weber Studies*, *Social Epistemology*, *Social Science Information*, and *Journal of Economics, Theology, and Religion*.