Delft University of Technology

Social Meritocracy and Unjust Social Hierarchies
Three Proposals to Limit Meritocracy's Erosion of Social Cooperation

Ziliotti, Elena

Important note
To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

ORIGINAL PAPER

Social Meritocracy and Unjust Social Hierarchies: Three Proposals to Limit Meritocracy's Erosion of Social Cooperation

Elena Ziliotti[1]

Abstract

A well-functioned society depends on its ability to nurture, attract, and deploy talents in critical sectors. However, the implementation of some meritocratic principles to allocate positions often leads to unjust social hierarchies. Is there, then, a solution to meritocracy's dysfunctional hierarchical effects? This paper attempts to answer this by drawing on the real-world cases of Singapore and the USA to investigate the relationship of toxic social hierarchies with meritocracy. It proposes three solutions to curb the unjustifiable social stratifications and the erosion of social cooperation often associated with social meritocracy. These reflections could help to shed light on the grounds for the ongoing debates on social hierarchies and provide valuable insights into how to weigh up existing socio-political structures.

Keywords Social meritocracy · Toxic social hierarchies · Singapore · Equality of opportunity · The Tyranny of Merit

1 Introduction

Just Hierarchy (2020) is a thought-provoking attempt to justify certain social hierarchies by going against the common view in contemporary political philosophy that any social hierarchy must be disallowed. The authors, Daniel Bell and Wang Pei, contend that some forms of social hierarchy are justified in modern societies if they can serve morally desirable goals.[1] Bell and Wang's stand has the potential to create

---

[1] Bell and Wang's view is in sharp contrast with Kolodny (2023), which contests the justifiability of any social hierarchy.

✉ Elena Ziliotti
  e.ziliotti@tudelft.nl

[1] Department of Values, Technology and Innovation, Ethics and Philosophy of Technology Section, Delft University of Technology (TU Delft), Jaffalaan 5, 2628 BX, Delft (Building 31), PO Box 5015, 2600 GA Delft, The Netherlands

🖄 Springer

new normative spaces: it can generate a novel conceptual distinction between 'just' and 'unjust' social hierarchies and pave the way for new investigations on the realisation of just social hierarchies in contemporary societies.

I have argued elsewhere against the possibility of 'just' social hierarchies (Ziliotti 2022). What makes me particularly sceptical about Bell and Wang's claim that some social hierarchies can serve morally desirable goals is the significant amount of empirical evidence indicating that social hierarchies have detrimental effects, especially on those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Leaving my scepticism on just hierarchies aside, the ongoing debate on social hierarchies in the modern world raises an intriguing question on the forms of social hierarchy that Bell and Wang condemn. Although I am not aware of any scholars defending what Bell and Wang call 'unjust' social hierarchies (that is, forms of social hierarchy that serve immorally desirable goals), it remains unclear how these toxic forms of social hierarchies can be checked or, at least, limited.

The issue of toxic social hierarchies has recently gained traction in debates on the consequences of meritocratic selection systems. The meritocratic ideal aspires to oppose unjustifiable social hierarchies by allocating positions based on individual qualities, but several scholars view meritocratic systems as intrinsically hierarchical. For example, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that "in a meritocratic system, status is achieved in ways that reflect relevant achievements or capacities" (2016: 29). In a similar vein, Michael Sandel claims in his latest book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, that in contemporary American society "today's meritocracy has hardened into a hereditary aristocracy" (2020: 32). This is because "the principle of merit can take a tyrannical turn, not only when societies fail to live up to it, but also—indeed especially—when they do" (2020: 42).

In focussing on dysfunctional social hierarchies, Sandel and Appiah raise a problem that should be of interest to both scholars who oppose social hierarchies of any sort and those supporting 'just' social hierarchies. How can we limit the effects of dysfunctional unjust social hierarchies on contemporary societies? Furthermore, the issue raised by Sandel and Appiah is not unique to Western societies. Heated debates on meritocracy's hierarchical effects have gained public attention in other East Asian societies, like the city-state of Singapore. Meritocratic ideologies have shaped Singapore's culture since 1965, the time of Singapore's independence from Malaysia. However, according to Singaporean political theorist Benjamin Wong, meritocratic ideology is now synonymous with social stratification and economic inequalities in Singapore (2013).

The undesirable implications of meritocracy pose a difficult conundrum to scholars of social hierarchies and meritocracy. On the one hand, unjust social hierarchies and dysfunctional competing social cultures must be opposed while on the other hand, some meritocratic allocation of positions are inevitable in key sectors of societies. After all, the well-functioning of societies depends on their ability to nurture, attract, and deploy talents in critical sectors. So, what is the solution to meritocracy's dysfunctional hierarchical effects? Drawing on the debate on equality of opportunity, I suggest reconceptualising the notions of meritocracy as a notion of substantive equality of opportunity to make meritocratic practises fairer. Furthermore, I recommend (a) delinking meritocratic selection in the private sector from

neo-liberal principles of reward allocation, (b) coupling meritocratic selection principles in the education sector with substantial diversity standards, (c) reconceptualising the idea of merit accepted in the public sphere.

The next section of the paper elucidates the relationship between meritocratic systems and toxic social hierarchies. Debates on the meritocracy's hierarchical effects are discussed in the context of contemporary Singapore and American society. Assuming that some forms of meritocracy are instrumental to contemporary societies, Section three advances three proposals to make meritocracy less hierarchical. Finally, Section four summarises the main argument of the paper and suggests future directions for academic debates.

2 Toxic Hierarchies and Social Meritocracy

The concept of 'social hierarchy' commonly refers to a social structure in which individuals have different social statuses. According to this definition, social hierarchies entail a distinction of rank or social status, where some persons are morally superior to others or are regarded differently. As Bell and Wang state in their recent book, a hierarchy is a relation that is characterised by (a) difference and (b) ranking according to some attribute. Social hierarchies tend to have a normative dimension: "They are social systems in which there is an implicit or explicit rank of individuals or groups with respect to a valued social dimension" (Bell and Pei 2020: 8).

A difference in social recognition or social status is a necessary condition for any form of social hierarchy. This claim is also supported by Ricardo Blaug. Drawing from Radner (1992) and Cloke and Goldsmith (2002), Blaug argues that "[a]s a way of organising human affairs, hierarchy is a set of arrangements bearing a strong family resemblance; all are structured as a 'ranked tree'. It signifies a stack of power asymmetries, each featuring differentiated levels of status and degrees of power; layered, as it were, one above the other" (2009: 87). Thus, unequal distribution of decisional power and responsibility is insufficient to establish a social hierarchy, unless accompanied by social stratification and unequal distribution of decisional power and responsibility.

Recently, some scholars have argued that instances of social meritocracy have led to reprehensible social hierarchies in contemporary societies (Markovits 2019; Sandel 2020). Meritocracy is usually understood as the idea that positions should be allocated according to an individual's relevant merits (e.g. individual qualities or abilities). Meritocracy maintains that (a) positions and posts should be open to all members of society, (b) applicants are assessed based on their merits, and (c) the posts must be assigned to applicants with relevant superior qualities. Meritocracy is practised in three dimensions: social meritocracy, economic meritocracy, and political meritocracy.

Social meritocracy concerns the distribution of positions in a given societal context. To this end, it is often advocated as a criterion to allocate positions in the private or educational sectors, such as scholarships or seats in prestigious educational institutions. Often, social meritocracy is practised together with a form of economic

meritocracy that distributes material resources according to the results of the meritocratic competition for positions.

Unlike social meritocracy, political meritocracy requires distributing political positions, or political power, among members of society according to their political expertise and moral virtues (Bai 2008, 2013, 2019; Bell 2006, 2015; Chan 2013a, b; Fan 2013; Jiang 2012).[2]

While political meritocracy has become a central topic of debate in contemporary Confucian political theory, most Western political philosophers are concerned with social meritocracy and economic meritocracy (Williams 1962/1997; Rawls 1971/1999; Sandel 2020; Appiah 2016). This paper focuses primarily on social meritocracy. Economic meritocracy will be discussed only in relation to social meritocracy. Such a view of meritocracy hinges on the principle of 'equality of opportunity', according to which "each must face an array of options that is equivalent to every other person in terms of the prospects for preference satisfaction" (Arneson 1989: 85). This idea reduces meritocracy to a form of *formal equality of opportunity*, which is popularly known as 'career open to talents'.

This idea of "career open to talents" sits well in well-functioning modern complex societies as such societies need to adopt some division of labour; social meritocracy is therefore, often considered an effective and fair way to ensure good outcomes. It aims to oppose unjust social hierarchical structures and ethnic and gender discrimination. While hierarchical social structures (like aristocracy) assign positions based on the implicit or explicit social ranks of individuals or groups that characterise the hierarchical structure, social meritocracy rejects this view by aiming to give individuals equal opportunities to compete for a position regardless of social status, religion, gender, or other aspects that are irrelevant to the job.

Despite its egalitarian and anti-hierarchical aim, social meritocracy ignores the fact that typically members of society have different starting points in the race for a position. In a society characterised by socio-economic inequalities, worse-off families have fewer means than better-off families to help their children develop the skills required to pass the meritocratic selection (Williams 1962/1997). Thus, if the socio-economic and political circumstances in which individuals live are paramount aspects associated with talents, social meritocracy risks justifying the perpetuation of old discredited hierarchies and social inequalities.[3]

Another problem is that because social meritocracy is often deployed in contemporary societies to distribute positions with significant social and economic advantages, meritocratic structures can also generate new social stratifications and mark out the members of society who have 'failed' the meritocratic test. Similar negative consequences are visible in societies like Singapore and the USA, where meritocratic ideologies have shaped the countries' cultures and served as the main

---

[2] Since these two forms of meritocracy apply to different position distributions, it is possible to advocate social meritocracy while rejecting political meritocracy. For instance, by defending a distribution of political power that follows democratic principles.

[3] Here, I am drawing from my analysis of the debate on equality of opportunity in Western literature in Ziliotti (2017).

ideological drive for their economic growth. For example, at the time of independence from Malaysia, Singapore's adoption of meritocracy as an ideology and policy was an obvious choice given the multicultural composition of the society and its geopolitical conditions. As Singaporean Sociologist Chua Beng Huat explains, Singapore needed "to demonstrate the absence of racial discrimination in the Malay dominant region, in contrast to Malaysia's insistence on policy supremacy and privileging of Malays as its indigenous people" (Chua 2017: 8). With a majority of Chinese-origin people and significant Indian, Eurasian and Malaysian minorities, meritocracy appeared to be the only 'neutral' ideology that could unite the people of that young country. Notably, in modern Singapore, meritocratic principles were implemented to reorganise the civil service. Under British rule, the civil service apparatus was quite dysfunctional and accessible only to the British (Ho et al. 2017: 93). In the 1960s, the government extended the recruitment to all Singaporeans of any race and religion.

Yet, meritocracy has become a dirty word in modern Singapore, and many Singaporeans now associate it with systemic economic inequalities and social injustice (Ong 2018). According to Wong, "[s]ince 1994, it has been used as a means to justify the market-based salaries of ministers and top civil servants, who are the highest paid in the world" (2013: 289). For example, after the 2011 salary review, the annual pay of entry-level ministers in Singapore is S$1.1 million (around US$850.000), whereas that of the Singaporean prime minister is S$2.2 million (approximately US$1.7 million). This, in turn, has contributed to creating a perception of a "great affective divide" between the political elite and the people (Wong 2013: 288).

In a similar vein, American philosopher Michael Sandel claims that "today's meritocracy has hardened into a hereditary aristocracy" in contemporary American society (2020: 32). Drawing from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Sandel maintains that the Protestant work ethics gave rise to the meritocratic ideology that characterises contemporary American society. Based on the Calvinist notion of predestination, protestant ethics began considering worldly success as "a good indicator of who is destined for salvation" (Sandel 2020: 49). Subsequently, "[w]orking and striving became imperatives of their own, detached from Calvinist notions of predestination and the anxious search for a sign of salvation (Sandel 2020: 51). According to Sandel, these beliefs have shaped the mindset of many contemporary Americans:

> Today's secular meritocratic order moralises success in ways that echo an earlier providential faith: Although the successful do not owe their power and wealth to divine intervention—they rise thanks to their own effort and hard work—their success reflects their superior virtue (Sandel 2020: 52).

For Sandel, this meritocratic logic has eroded American society's social cohesion and social capital. The rich believe that they 'are rich because they are more deserving than the poor', while the poor resent 'the winners' (Sandel 2020: 52). These common attitudes have influenced recent events in American politics. Commenting on Trump's victory of the 2016 US elections, Sandel claims that "the populist backlash was provoked, at least in part, by the galling sense that those who stood astride the hierarchy of merit looked down with disdain on those they considered

less accomplished than themselves. […] They embraced meritocracy, but believed it described the way things already worked. They did not see it as an unfinished project requiring further government action to dismantle barriers to achievement" (Sandel 2020: 85–86).

Wong's and Sandel's analyses indicate that social meritocracy can create social stratifications with pernicious effects. On the one hand, they foster frustration and resentment in those at the bottom of the hierarchy while on the other hand, they feed the sense of entitlement in those at the top of the social hierarchy, preventing them from developing compassion for fellow citizens. These effects are intolerable even for supporters of just hierarchies because the latter oppose social hierarchies that are detrimental to the moral and material well-being of society's members.

The negative implications of meritocracy pose a difficult conundrum. On the one hand, social hierarchies and a dysfunctional competing social culture must be opposed, and on the other hand, certain meritocratic allocation of positions seems to be inevitable in crucial sectors of societies. After all, there are compelling reasons why hospitals should hire their staff primarily based on their merits and expertise; airlines choose the most experienced pilots, and governments dealing with the covid-19 pandemic must seek the advice of the most competent virologists. So, what can be done? The following section explores a prominent solution to this problem.

3 Substantive Equality of Opportunity: Possibilities and Limits

One workable solution to the harmful implications of meritocracy proposes a reconceptualisation of meritocracy to make it more egalitarian. According to this view, the meaning of meritocracy must be revised to avoid some of the paradoxical consequences of meritocratic practises. For instance, if socio-economic inequalities are part of many societies and they create unfair chances in meritocratic selections, then, meritocracy should be understood as a form of *substantive equality of opportunity*, not formal equality of opportunity.[4] According to the principle of *substantive equality of opportunity*, achieving equality of opportunity requires a meritocratic selection system whereby a genuine chance to become qualified is presented to all members of society. In the egalitarian literature, this concept is known as *equality of access* (Mason 2001: 762). Following John Rawls (1971/1999), one could argue that equality of access is achieved only when members of society with the same native talents and the same ambition have equal prospects of success in relation to competitions for positions (Rawls 1971/1999: 63). Thus, to the extent that meritocracy concerns fairness, equality of access must be considered a constitutive part of meritocracy.

Rawls' conception of equality of access, or 'fair equality of opportunity', aims to correct formal equality of opportunity by requiring *equality of endowment*, that is, equal chances to the equally well-endowed members of societies regardless of parents' incomes and social contingencies (Freeman 2007: 98). It does so by requiring society to develop structural conditions to prevent inequalities from becoming

---

[4] I have advanced this proposal in Ziliotti (2017).

significant social inequalities. For example, "[f]ree market arrangements must be set within a framework of political and legal institutions which regulates the overall trends of economic events and preserves the social conditions necessary for fair equality of opportunity. […] So, the school system, whether public or private, should be designed to even out class barrier" (Rawls 1971/1999: 63).

As indicated in the last part of the above quote, achieving equality of access would require substantial restructuring of the educational system. Education is a paramount means through which an individual can acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in the meritocratic allocation of several social positions. This would require allowing as many students as possible equal opportunities for a competitive education. As Rawls suggests, in the American context, this can be achieved by narrowing the gap between the job opportunities of graduates from private and public schools.

Several critics have objected that equality of access requires significant intervention by the government in the citizens' private life. According to Houlgate (1980), Goldstein et al. (1986) and Fishkin (1983), if Rawls' idea of equality of access were implemented in education, it would violate the liberty of individual parents to influence considerably the development of their children's life, as "parents who failed to ensure such prerequisites for their children could justifiably be subject to state interference" (Fishkin 1983: 36). Therefore, according to Fishkin, Rawlsian equality of access does not only indicate how wealth should be redistributed among the members of society, but it can also constrain some parents to spend their money and time on their children in a specific way.

Fishkin's claim regarding the tension between liberty and equality is unfounded. Equality of access may impact the liberty of some parents to a certain extent. However, critiques have argued that Fishkin assumes without proving that, from a liberal perspective, parents have the right to liberty in general. In other words, it remains to be proved that they must have the full freedom to substantially affect their children's life as they see appropriate (Boxill 1984: 618).

Another objection to fair equality of opportunity comes from Brighouse and Swift (2008). They contest the radical application of fair equality of opportunity to all aspects of parent–child relationships. According to them, fair equality of opportunity should not and cannot apply to other parental behaviours, such as reading bedtime stories to children that are essential to achieving the particular values of parent–child relations that are made for the sake of the child (2008: 54). But, concerning the other kinds of choice, such as the parents' choice of sending their children to private schools, Brighouse and Swift argue that the state can try to discourage them by using taxes. In response to this objection, Segall (2011) maintains that luck egalitarianism would indeed requires neutralising parental partiality (such as reading bedtime stories to their child) if this gives these children an undue advantage later in life. However, this is a *pro tanto* reason that, in practise, can be overridden by other considerations. For instance, because the parents' activity of reading bed time stories to their children can contribute to the cultivation of good family relations in a unique way, the luck egalitarian parent has strong reason to engage in this practise, even though they are fully aware and regret that it could lead to unfair socio-economic advantages (Segall 2011: 29–20).

Sandel formulates one of the most compelling objections to the proposal of reconceptualising meritocracy as a form of substantive equality of opportunity. According to Sandel, revisiting the concept of equal opportunity is a non-starter to overcoming meritocracy's social stratification and erosion of commonality. For Sandel, one of the main problems of meritocratic practises is that those at the top feel entitled to their economic remuneration and status in virtue of their sacrifices, self-discipline, and so on. This leads them to look down on the rest and justify their worst-off positions. The problem with substantive equality of opportunity is that it may even increase this sense of entitlement: "[i]f opportunity are truly equal, then not only will people rise as far as their talents and hard work will take them; their success will be their own doing, and they will deserve the rewards that come their way" (Sandel 2020: 82).

Sandel is correct: substantive equal opportunity makes meritocracy fairer but does not diminish its hierarchical effects and erosion of commonality. However, this does not mean that the idea of social meritocracy has no room for further discussions. It simply suggests that substantive equality of opportunity is necessary but insufficient to reform social meritocracy. Other solutions can be formulated to solve the above issue. In the next section, I will propose three solutions to mitigate meritocracy's detrimental hierarchical effects.

4 Three Proposals to Make Social Meritocratic Practises Less Hierarchical

This section proposes three integrated solutions to contain the hierarchical effects of social meritocratic practises. I contend that it is crucial to (1) delink meritocratic selections from market-based compensation structures, (2) integrate meritocratic selection principles into a pluralistic-value selection system that promotes diversity, and (3) decouple 'merit' from the concept of 'desert'.

4.1 Delinking Meritocracy from Market-based Compensation Structures

To prevent meritocratic practises from contributing to the establishment of toxic social hierarchies, it is paramount to delink meritocracy from market-based compensation structures. Wong's discussion on meritocracy in Singapore and Sandel's analysis of meritocracy in the American context indicate that most contemporary debates focus not on the meritocratic ideal alone but on a neo-liberal version of meritocracy in which meritocratic selections parallel market-based compensation structures. The latter further intensifies meritocracy's social erosion because the creation of a fierce competition for the so-called 'top jobs' is often due to the social and economic advantages attached to these positions, not these positions in themselves. To understand this point, it is helpful to consider recent debates on the salaries of civil servants as well as politicians in Singapore.

Many Singaporeans do not question the need to select civil servants and politicians based on their specific merits or expertise. The need for skilled and capable

people in charge of policymaking is not a politically sensitive issue in Singapore. For many Singaporeans, the point of contention is the need to pay civil servants and politicians an extraordinary amount of money for their service. Singapore's government has responded to this criticism by pointing out that market-based pays are required to attract highflyers that otherwise would go into the private sector. In fact, the city-state of Singapore is a global business hub and many international companies have their regional headquarters in Singapore. However, many Singaporeans are unpersuaded by this argument because the paramount quality that civil servants and political leaders ought to have is a strong sense of civic duty, not greed (Wong 2013: 296).

I believe a similar problem is rooted in the American-style meritocratic job-market systems. From 2002 to 2007, the top 1% secured two-thirds of all gains from the growth in the USA economy. In particular, the "tech sector has created many wealthy entrepreneurs and investors" and "IT companies tend to pay their CEO more" (Brynjolfsson et al. 2015: 10). One of the reasons for this trend is that new technologies have amplified the effects of the CEO's decisions. For example, making copies of digital goods has almost zero costs, so who gets the right idea first on how to innovate the market is likely to acquire most of that market (Brynjolfsson et al. 2015: 9). This has created a new group of extremely wealthy persons because tech companies compete with each other to hire the best people (Brynjolfsson et al. 2015: 9). As in the Singapore case, selecting CEOs' based on their creativity and vision is not the leading cause of rising economic inequalities. What is problematic is their excessive compensations, especially if these are compared to the economic situation of the American low-skilled information workers who are losing their jobs due to the increasing automation of the work sector.

In other words, I agree with Sandel that "[m]orally, it is unclear why the talented deserve the outsize rewards that market-driven societies lavish on the successful" (2020: 32). However, Sandel is mistaken in thinking that meritocracy also entails a specific principle of market-based reward allocation. While the two have often gone together in practise, social meritocratic principles can be decoupled from neo-liberalism by putting caps on salaries in the key sectors.

Decoupling meritocracy from neo-liberalism could lead to a type of social meritocracy that is less objectionable. Reconsidering the economic rewards attached to prestigious positions may contribute to reducing the social pressure for competing for these positions, since winning the race will create less economic, and therefore also less social, empowerment. One limit of this proposal is that high performers can move to other tax jurisdictions if such caps are viewed as too heavy. Thus, the success of this proposal depends on the possibility of multiple tax jurisdictions to applying the same policy and also to calibrate the caps sensibly.[5]

Besides putting caps on salaries in key sectors, ensuring decent minimum wages may help control the winners' social power while fostering the dignity of the lower

---

[5] An alternative solution would be to impose high taxes on high earners, not capping salaries (I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggestion this point). But this proposal has similar limitations: high performers can move to other tax jurisdictions if such taxes are viewed as burdensome.

income groups. This can contribute to keeping the effects of meritocratic practises in check, but it requires a reckoning with neo-liberalist reform policies which are at the heart of both Singapore and American economic systems.

This is not to say that Singapore's use of neo-liberal reforms is similar to the one in the USA. On the contrary, the Singapore government practises what many call 'State capitalism' in which the government has the ultimate say on what sector of the economy should be liberalised (Chua 2017). However, if multiple reasons are behind the hierarchical effects of meritocracy in contemporary, establishing whether the problems lie in the meritocratic principle itself or its application in a specific socio-economic context can help formulate successful solutions.

4.2 Redefining the Justiciability of Meritocratic Practises

Besides delinking meritocratic selection in the private sector from neo-liberal principles of rewards allocation, it is paramount to clarify where and to what extent meritocratic practises are necessary. As I said, all well-functioning modern societies must nurture, attract, and deploy talents in critical sectors to ensure efficiency and fulfilment of societal needs. However, this does not mean that individual merits are the only criteria that matter for a well-formed society; other criteria should be considered in the selection mechanisms. This is crucial because opening the selection system to standards other than merit may lessen meritocracy's hierarchical effects.

Take, for example, the staff hiring mechanisms in the educational sector. Efficiency and competence are not the only selection standards that must matter because these selection systems aim to create communities of inquiry, where individuals can develop meaningful social relationships and mental and moral growth. For instance, gender balance and ethnic diversity are increasingly regarded as essential criteria for developing conducive educational communities and in the hiring of academic staff (Fradella 2018; Irby and Brown 2022: 45). Therefore, more selection criteria must be considered.

However, diversity remains undervalued in the educational sector. Globally, the percentage of women in academia has increased from 39.2% in 2001 to 43.1% in 2019 (Calderon 2022), but this trend is not uniform. For example, the proportion of women academics in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for just 24.3% of academics (Calderon 2022). Female Professors in UK Universities continue to remain underrepresented, as male professors outnumber females by three to one (Adams 2020). Furthermore, elite Universities remain "white spaces" both in the UK and the USA (Bohpal 2022). Black academics accounted for only 2% of all academic staff in the UK, with only 25 black women professors across all UK Universities (Adams 2020). In the USA, black academics are approximately 5.7% of all full-time faculty members at Colleges and Universities, while white academics make up 73.2% of the total (American Council of Education 2016).

It is open to question whether this data reflects racial and gender bias or whether many Universities are 'overusing' meritocratic selection principles. However, while qualifications and competence count, integrating academic merits in a pluralistic-value system, where more standards guide the selection of staff members can help

limit meritocracy's hierarchical effects. First, the inclusion of diversity principles in forming communities erodes the sense of entitlement in those at the top of the social hierarchy. As the hiring decisions do not depend exclusively on the candidate's talents and skills, it would be unreasonable for the latter to believe that "their success will be their own doing" (Sandel 2020: 82). Second, because affirmative action breaks social barriers and increases the opportunity of members of marginalised groups, it can diminish the frustrations and the resentment of the latter.

Some meritocrats would worry about the potential threat this affirmative action poses to the quality of staffing in the private sector. After all, the argument goes, private companies are not 'communities of inquiry' like educational institutions; their overall goal is profit. Thus, there are good reasons to believe meritocracy trumps diversity in the private sector. In response to this objection, it should be observed that studies have shown that a selection system in the private sector can yield more positive results if it is open to individuals with different skill sets and backgrounds. For example, the presence of qualified women on a company board can bring significant value because women tend to have different leadership skills than men. Female leaders tend to be more transformational (Eagly et al. 2003) and more attentive than men to the 'human side' of enterprise, meaning that female leaders tend to base judgments more on intuition and emotions than on rational assessments of the relationships between means and ends (Bass and Avolio 1994). Other studies found that women's decision-making styles tend to be more participatory than those typically adopted by men (e.g. Mertz and McNeely 1997: 8); female leaders are usually more collaborative than male leaders, and they also engage in more contingent reward behaviours (Eagly et al. 2003). This suggests that diversity can increase efficiency even in the private sector.

4.3 Decoupling the Notion of 'Merit' from 'Desert'

This brings me to my third and final point to prevent meritocratic practises from contributing to establishing toxic social hierarchies. Another way to lessen the entitlement of those who won the meritocratic race is to re-evaluate the concept of 'merit'. Part of the problem of meritocratic practises concerns a certain ambiguity in the everyday use of the concept of 'merit'. Since 'merit' and 'desert' are often used interchangeably in public speeches, some people may think that winning the meritocratic race for a particular position also entails deserving its economic condition and social status.

However, different linguistic uses suggest the possibility of partly decoupling the concept of 'merit' from 'desert'. For instance, we say that a naturally talented singer has the merit of singing well, but they do not deserve their ability since they did nothing to have it. After all, they were born with her talent. Similarly, a gifted financial mathematician may merit her job as a top executive at J.P. Morgan because they have all the necessary qualities to do an excellent job. However, it is possible that one of the candidates who did not get that job deserved it more because this person had always struggled with financial mathematics and spent double the number of

hours as the gifted financial mathematician to build up their knowledge in the subject and prepared for the interview.

In both cases discussed above, an element of desert is still likely to be needed because natural talent is insufficient for success. As in the case of the singer, usually it can take several years of practise and dedication.[6] However, my point is that these linguistic uses indicate that 'merit' does not always correspond to 'desert' in English. Merit can refer to the qualities (some may even say the 'virtues') that an individual possesses. In contrast, desert concerns the deeds an individual has performed to obtain a particular position or title. Therefore, according to this linguistic usage, a person can merit something without deserving it. The distinction between merit and desert entails that in a meritocratic society, it is false that winners "have earned their success through their talent and hard work" (Sandel 2020: 21) because (as we have seen in the case of mathematicians at J.P. Morgan) meritocratic selection principles track merit, not effort. In other words, in a meritocratic system, individuals are hired or promoted based on how well their profiles match the required qualifications. Because we are born with different natural inclinations, we must dedicate different efforts to cultivating the same talents even under substantive equality of opportunity.

If this distinction between merit and desert was emphasised and reiterated in a meritocratic society, it could bring a new perspective on what individuals owe to each other and help limit meritocracy's hierarchical effects. Decoupling merit from desert in public speeches can help the winners of the meritocratic lottery be more aware of the impact of luck in their lives instead of cultivating a sense of entitlement. They may merit their jobs, but it is questionable how much they deserve them. Thus, reviewing the meanings of meritocracy and merit is not just philosophically relevant; it can help limit the sense of entitlement of those who won the meritocratic race.

5 Conclusion

The meritocratic ideal has emerged in opposition to social hierarchy. It reflects the aspiration to create a functional society that efficiently uses the talents and skills of its members. However, meritocracy can generate unjustifiable social stratifications and erode social cooperation. This poses pressing questions for contemporary societies: to what extent should meritocracy be blamed for its adverse effects? Can modern societies do without meritocracy, and if so, how?

This paper has investigated the relationship of toxic social hierarchies with forms of social meritocracy. I have proposed a multipronged approach to curb the unjustifiable social stratifications and the erosion of social cooperation often associated with meritocracy. In addition to reconceptualising meritocracy as a form of substantive equality of opportunity, I have proposed (a) delinking meritocratic selection in the private sector from neo-liberal principles of reward allocation, (b) coupling meritocratic selection principles in the education sector with diversity standards, (c)

---

[6] I am grateful for an anonymous review for helping me see this point.

reconceptualising the concept of merit. While these proposals are not a fixed set of policy proposals, they can be a starting point for a conversation on how we can make meritocratic practises result in less toxic hierarchical relationships while promoting the socio-economic conditions required for social cooperation.

References

Adams, Richard. 2020. "Fewer than 1% of UK university professors are black, figures show". *The Guardian*, Accessed 27 Feb 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/feb/27/fewer-than-1-of-uk-university-professors-are-black-figures-show

American Council of Education. 2016. Race and Ethnicity of Higher Education Faculty. *U.S. Department of Education, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.* https://www.equityinhighered.org/indicators/postsecondary-faculty-and-staff/race-and-ethnicity-of-higher-education-faculty/

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2016. *Two Cheers for Equality?* Paper presented at Berggruen Workshop on Hierarchy and Equality, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Science, Stanford University, 13 March 2016.

Arneson, Richard. 1989. Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare. *Philosophical Studies* 56: 77–93.

Bai, Tongdong. 2008. A Mencian Version of Limited Democracy. *Res Publica* 14: 19–34.

Bai, Tongdong. 2013. "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior? In *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Bell and Chenyang Li, 55–87. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bai, Tongdong. 2019. *Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bass, Bernard, and Bruce Avolio. 1994. *Improving Organisational Effectiveness Through Transformational Leadership*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Bell, Daniel. 2006. *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bell, Daniel. 2015. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bell, Daniel, and Pei Wang. 2020. *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies matter in China and the Rest of the World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bhopal, Kalwant. 2022. Academics of Colour in Elite Universities in the UK and the USA: the 'Unspoken System of Exclusion'. *Studies in Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2021.2020746?scroll=top&needAccess=true.

Blaug, Ricardo. 2009. Why is there Hierarchy? Democracy and the Question of Organisational Form. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12 (1): 85–99.

Boxill, Bernard. 1984. Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family by James S. Fishkin. *The Philosophical Review* 93 (4): 618–620.

Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. 2008. Legitimate Parental Partiality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37: 43–80.

Brynjolfsson, Erik, Andrew McAfee, and Anand Raman. 2015. The Great Decoupling An Interview with Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee. *Harvard Business Review* 93 (6): 66–74.

Calderon, Angel. 2022. Proportion of Woman in Academic Leadership is on the Rise. *University World News,* 05 March 2022. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=2022030210450152#:~:text=The%20latest%20figures%20available%20from,East%20Asia%20and%20the%20Pacific.

Chan, Joseph. 2013a. *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Chan, Joseph. 2013b. Political Meritocracy and Meritorious Rule: A Confucian Perspective. In *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Bell and Chenyang Li, 31–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chua, BengHuat. 2017. *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.

Cloke, Kenneth, and Joan Goldsmith. 2002. *The End of Management and The Rise of Organizational Democracy*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Eagly, Alice, Mary Johannesen-Schmidt, and Marloes Van Engen. 2003. Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-faire Leadership Styles: A Meta-Analysis Comparing Women and Men. *Psychological Bulletin* 129 (4): 569–591.

Fan, Ruiping. 2013. Confucian Meritocracy for Contemporary China. In *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Bell and Chenyang Li, 87–115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fishkin, James. 1983. *Justice, Equal Opportunity, and the Family*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Fradella, Henry. 2018. Supporting Strategies for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Higher Education Faculty Hiring. In *Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education and Societal Contexts*, ed. S. Gertz, B. Huang, and L. Cyr. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Freeman, Samuel. 2007. *Rawls*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Goldstein, Joseph, Anna Freud, and Albert Solnit. 1986. *Before the Best Interests of the Child*. New York: Free Press.

Ho, Peter, Anuradha Shroff, Codey Tan, Hazel See, and Lena Leong. 2017. *Singapore Chronicles–Governance*. Singapore: Straits Times Press.

Houlgate, Laurence. 1980. *The Child and the State: A Normative Theory of Juvenile Rights*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Irby, Beverly, and Genevieve Brown. 2022. Women Leaders: Creating Inclusive School Environments. In *Defining and Redefining Gender Equity in Education*, ed. Janice Koch and Beverly Irby. Greenwich: IAP Publishing.

Jiang, Qing. 2012. *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Pass Can Shape its Political Future*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kolodny, Niko. 2023. *The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Markovits, Daniel. 2019. *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. New York City: Penguin Random House.

Mason, Andrew. 2001. Equality of Opportunity: Old and New. *Ethics* 111: 760–781.

Mertz, Norma. McNeely, Sonia. 1997. Exploring the Boundaries of Gender and Role in Administrative Decision-making. In *Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration*, Orlando, FL. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 412 656). https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED412656.

Neo, Boon Siong, and Geraldine Chen. 2007. *Dynamic Governance: Embedding Culture, Capabilities and Change in Singapore*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing.

Ong, Y. K. 2018. *Parliamentary motion: 'Education for our future'*. Response by Minister for Education, Ong Ye Kung. https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/speeches/20180711-parliamentary-motion-education-for-our-future-response-by-minister-for-education-mr-ong-ye-kung. Accessed 30 Aug 2023.

Radner, Roy. 1992. Hierarchy: The Economics of Managing. *Journal of Economic Literature* 30 (3): 1382–1415.

Rawls, John. 1971/1999. *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sandel, Michael. 2020. *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Segall, Shlomi. 2011. If You're a Luck-Egalitarian, How Come You Read Bedtime Stories to Your Children? *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 14 (1): 23–40.

Williams, Bernard. 1962/1997. The Ideal of Equality. In *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, ed. R.E. Goodin and P. Pettit, 451–461. Oxford: Blackwell.

Wong, Benjamin. 2013. Political Meritocracy in Singapore: Lessons from the PAP Government. In *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. D. Bell and C. Li, 288–313. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ziliotti, E. 2017. The Moral Basis of Political Meritocracy. *Philosophy and Public Issues* 7 (1): 246–270.

Ziliotti, E. 2022. Questions for Hierarchical Confucianism. *The Review of Politics* 84(3) 2022: 329–349. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034670522000304.

Elena Ziliotti is an Assistant Professor of Ethics and Political Philosophy at the Delft University of Technology. She works on Comparative political theory, focusing on debates in contemporary Confucian and Western political theory.