How Life Became an Endless, Terrible Competition

Meritocracy prizes achievement above all else, making everyone—even the rich—miserable. Maybe there's a way out.

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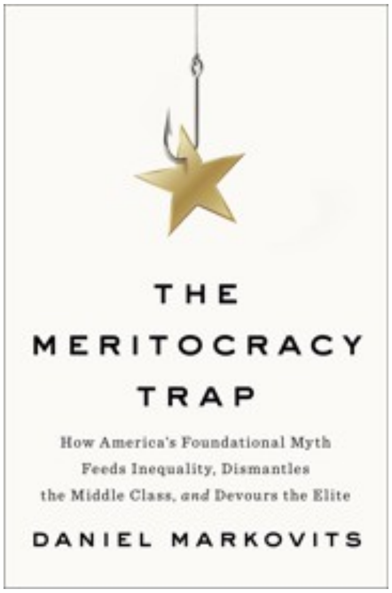
In the summer of 1987, I graduated from a public high school in Austin, Texas, and headed northeast to attend Yale. I then spent nearly 15 years studying at various universities—the London School of Economics, the University of Oxford, Harvard, and finally Yale Law School—picking up a string of degrees along the way. Today, I teach at Yale Law, where my students unnervingly resemble my younger self: They are, overwhelmingly, products of professional parents and high-class universities. I pass on to them the advantages that my own teachers bestowed on me. They, and I, owe our prosperity and our caste to meritocracy.

Two decades ago, when I started writing about economic inequality, meritocracy seemed more likely a cure than a cause. Meritocracy's early advocates championed social mobility. In the 1960s, for instance, Yale President Kingman Brewster brought meritocratic admissions to the university with the express aim of breaking a hereditary elite. Alumni had long believed that their sons had a birthright to follow them to Yale; now prospective students would gain admission based on achievement rather than breeding. Meritocracy—for a time—replaced complacent insiders with talented and hardworking outsiders.

Today's meritocrats still claim to get ahead through talent and effort, using means open to anyone. In practice, however, meritocracy now excludes everyone outside of a narrow elite. Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and Yale collectively enroll more students from households in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from households in the bottom 60 percent. Legacy preferences, nepotism, and outright fraud continue to give rich applicants corrupt advantages. But the dominant causes of this skew toward wealth can be traced to meritocracy. On average, children whose parents make more than



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$200,000 a year score about 250 points higher on the SAT than children whose parents make $40,000 to $60,000. Only about one in 200 children from the poorest third of households achieves SAT scores at Yale's median. Meanwhile, the top banks and law firms, along with other high-paying employers, recruit almost exclusively from a few elite colleges.

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Hardworking outsiders no longer enjoy genuine opportunity. According to one study, only one out of every 100 children born into the poorest fifth of households, and fewer than one out of every 50 children born into the middle fifth, will join the top 5 percent. Absolute economic mobility is also declining—the odds that a middle-class child will outearn his parents have fallen by more than half since mid-century—and the drop is greater among the middle class than among the poor. Meritocracy frames this exclusion as a failure to measure up, adding a moral insult to economic injury.

Public anger over economic inequality frequently targets meritocratic institutions. Nearly three-fifths of Republicans believe that colleges and universities are bad for America, according to the Pew Research Center. The intense and widespread fury generated by the college-admissions scandal early this year tapped into a deep and broad well of resentment. This anger is warranted but also distorting. Outrage at nepotism and other disgraceful forms of elite advantage-taking implicitly valorizes meritocratic ideals. Yet meritocracy itself is the bigger problem, and it is crippling the American dream. Meritocracy has created a competition that, even when everyone plays by the rules, only the rich can win.

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But what, exactly, have the rich won? Even meritocracy's beneficiaries now suffer on account of its demands. It ensnares the rich just as surely as it excludes the rest, as those who manage to claw their way to the top must work with crushing intensity, ruthlessly exploiting their expensive education in order to extract a return.

No one should weep for the wealthy. But the harms that meritocracy imposes on them are both real and important. Diagnosing how meritocracy hurts elites kindles hope for a cure. We are accustomed to thinking that reducing inequality requires burdening the rich. But because meritocratic inequality does not in fact serve *anyone* well, escaping meritocracy's trap would benefit virtually everyone.

Elites first confront meritocratic pressures in early childhood. Parents—sometimes reluctantly, but feeling that they have no alternative—sign their children up for an education dominated not by experiments and play but by the accumulation of the training and skills, or human capital, needed to be admitted to an elite college and, eventually, to secure an elite job. Rich parents in cities like New York, Boston, and San Francisco now commonly apply to 10 kindergartens, running a gantlet of essays, appraisals, and interviews—all designed to evaluate 4-year-olds. Applying to elite middle and high schools repeats the ordeal. Where aristocratic children once reveled in their privilege, meritocratic children now calculate their future—they plan and they scheme, through rituals of stage-managed self-presentation, in familiar rhythms of ambition, hope, and worry.

Schools encourage children to operate in this way. At one elite northeastern elementary school, for example, a teacher posted a "problem of the day," which students had to solve before going home, even though no time was set aside for working on it. The point of the exercise was to train fifth graders to snatch a few extra minutes of work time by multitasking or by sacrificing recess.

Such demands exact a toll. Elite middle and high schools now commonly require three to five hours of homework a night; epidemiologists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have warned of schoolwork-induced sleep deprivation. Wealthy students show higher rates of drug and alcohol abuse than poor students do. They also suffer depression and anxiety at rates as much as triple those of their age peers throughout the country. A recent study of a Silicon Valley high school found that 54 percent of students displayed moderate to severe symptoms of depression and 80 percent displayed moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety.

These students nevertheless have good reason to push themselves as they do. Elite universities that just a few decades ago accepted 30 percent of their applicants now accept less than 10 percent. The shift at certain institutions has been even more dramatic: The University of Chicago admitted 71 percent of its applicants as recently as 1995. In 2019 it admitted less than 6 percent.

The contest intensifies when meritocrats enter the workplace, where elite opportunity is exceeded only by the competitive effort required to grasp it. A person whose wealth and status depend on her human capital simply cannot afford to consult her own interests or passions in choosing her job. Instead, she must approach work as an opportunity to extract value from her human capital, especially if she wants an income sufficient to buy her children the type of schooling that secured her own eliteness. She must devote herself to a narrowly restricted class of high-paying jobs, concentrated in finance, management, law, and medicine. Whereas aristocrats once considered themselves a leisure class, meritocrats work with unprecedented intensity.

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In 1962, when many elite lawyers earned roughly a third of what they do today, the American Bar Association could confidently declare, "There are … approximately 1,300 fee-earning hours per year" available to the normal lawyer. In 2000, by contrast, a major law firm pronounced with equal confidence that a quota of 2,400 billable hours, "if properly managed," was "not unreasonable," which is a euphemism for "necessary for having a hope of making partner." Because not all the hours a lawyer works are billable, billing 2,400 hours could easily require working from 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. six days a week, every week of the year, without vacation or sick days. In finance, "bankers' hours"—originally named for the 10-to-3 business day fixed by banks from the 19th century through the mid-20th century and later used to refer more generally to any light work—have given way to the ironically named "banker 9-to-5," which begins at 9 a.m. on one day and runs through 5 a.m. on the next. Elite managers were once "organization men," cocooned by lifelong employment in a corporate hierarchy that rewarded seniority above performance. Today, the higher a person climbs on the org chart, the harder she is expected to work. Amazon's "leadership principles" call for managers to have "relentlessly high standards" and to "deliver results." The company tells managers that when they "hit the wall" at work, the only solution is to "climb the wall."

Americans who work more than 60 hours a week report that they would, on average, prefer 25 fewer weekly hours. They say this because work subjects them to a "time famine" that, a 2006 study found, interferes with their capacity to have strong relationships with their spouse and children, to maintain their home, and even to have a satisfying sex life. A respondent to a recent Harvard Business School survey of executives proudly insisted, "The 10 minutes that I give my kids at night is one million times greater than spending that 10 minutes at work." Ten minutes!

The capacity to bear these hours gracefully, or at least grimly, has become a criterion for meritocratic success. A top executive at a major firm, interviewed by the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild for her book *The Time Bind*, observed that aspiring managers who have demonstrated their skills and dedication face a "final elimination": "Some people flame out, get weird because they work all the time … The people at the top are very smart, work like crazy, and don't flame out. They're still able to maintain a good mental set, and keep their family life together. *They* win the race."

A person who extracts income and status from his own human capital places himself, quite literally, at the disposal of others—he uses himself up. Elite students desperately fear failure and crave the conventional markers of success, even as they see through and publicly deride mere "gold stars" and "shiny things." Elite workers, for their part, find it harder and harder to pursue genuine passions or gain meaning through their work. Meritocracy traps entire generations inside demeaning fears and inauthentic ambitions: always hungry but never finding, or even knowing, the right food.

The elite should not—they have no right to—expect sympathy from those who remain excluded from the privileges and benefits of high caste. But ignoring how oppressive meritocracy is for the rich is a mistake. The rich now dominate society not idly but effortfully. The familiar arguments that once defeated aristocratic inequality do not apply to an economic system based on rewarding effort and skill. The relentless work of the hundred-hour-a-week banker inoculates her against charges of unearned advantage. Better, then, to convince the rich that all their work isn't actually paying off.

They may need less convincing than you might think. As the meritocracy trap closes in around elites, the rich themselves are turning against the prevailing system. Plaintive calls for work/life balance ring ever louder. Roughly two-thirds of elite workers say that they would decline a promotion if the new job demanded yet more of their energy. When he was the dean of Stanford Law School, Larry Kramer warned graduates that lawyers at top firms are caught in a seemingly endless cycle: Higher salaries require more billable hours to support them, and longer hours require yet higher salaries to justify them. Whose interests, he lamented, does this system serve? Does anyone really want it?

Escaping the meritocracy trap will not be easy. Elites naturally resist policies that threaten to undermine their advantages. But it is simply not possible to get rich off your own human capital without exploiting yourself and impoverishing your inner life, and meritocrats who hope to have their cake and eat it too deceive themselves. Building a society in which a good education and good jobs are available to a broader swath of people—so that reaching the very highest rungs of the ladder is simply less important—is the only way to ease the strains that now drive the elite to cling to their status.

How can that be done? For one thing, education—whose benefits are concentrated in the extravagantly trained children of rich parents—must become open and inclusive. Private schools and universities should lose their tax-exempt status unless at least half of their students come from families in the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution. And public subsidies should encourage schools to meet this requirement by expanding enrollment.

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A parallel policy agenda must reform work, by favoring goods and services produced by workers who do not have elaborate training or fancy degrees. For example, the health-care system should emphasize public health, preventive care, and other measures that can be overseen primarily by nurse practitioners, rather than high-tech treatments that require specialist doctors. The legal system should deploy “legal technicians”—not all of whom would need to have a J.D.—to manage routine matters, such as real-estate transactions, simple wills, and even uncontested divorces. In finance, regulations that limit exotic financial engineering and favor small local and regional banks can shift jobs to mid-skilled workers. And management should embrace practices that distribute control beyond the C-suite, to empower everyone else in the firm.

The main obstacle to overcoming meritocratic inequality is not technical but political. Today's conditions induce discontent and widespread pessimism, verging on despair. In his book *Oligarchy*, the political scientist Jeffrey A. Winters surveys eras in human history from the classical period to the 20th century, and documents what becomes of societies that concentrate income and wealth in a narrow elite. In almost every instance, the dismantling of such inequality has been accompanied by societal collapse, such as military defeat (as in the Roman empire) or revolution (as in France and Russia).

Nevertheless, there are grounds for hope. History does present one clear-cut case of an orderly recovery from concentrated inequality: In the 1930s, the U.S. answered the Great Depression by adopting the New Deal framework that would eventually build the mid-century middle class. Crucially, government redistribution was not the primary engine of this process. The broadly shared prosperity that this regime established came, mostly, from an economy and a labor market that promoted economic equality over hierarchy—by dramatically expanding access to education, as under the GI Bill, and then placing mid-skilled, middle-class workers at the center of production.

An updated version of these arrangements remains available today; a renewed expansion of education and a renewed emphasis on middle-class jobs can reinforce each other. The elite can reclaim its leisure in exchange for a reduction of income and status that it can easily afford. At the same time, the middle class can regain its income and status and reclaim the center of

American life.

Rebuilding a democratic economic order will be difficult. But the benefits that economic democracy brings—to everyone—justify the effort. And the violent collapse that will likely follow from doing nothing leaves us with no good alternative but to try.

This article is adapted from Daniel Markovits's new book The Meritocracy Trap*. It appears in the September 2019 print edition with the headline "Meritocracy's Miserable Winners."*

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

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