

**PSCI/SOC 241
Meritocracy
Spring 2021**

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PSCI/SOC 241
Remote
MW 10.00-11.15am

Office Hrs.: Wednesday 11.30am-12.30pm, Friday 10.00-11.00am, and by appointment

Course Description

Although fewer than 1% of Americans have a degree from the country's top 30 colleges and universities, 39% of Fortune 500 CEOs, 41% of federal judges, 44% of the writing and editorial staff at the New York Times, 64% of Davos attendees, and 100% of Supreme Court justices do. Is this a positive sign that the United States is governed by its most talented and capable members who have risen through hard work and equal opportunity? Or a negative one pointing to the power of a corrupt and self-selecting elite?

This course explores the theme of meritocracy – rule by the intelligent – in comparative perspective. We will look at both old and new arguments regarding the proper role and definition of merit in political society as well as take the measure of meritocracy in present-day Singapore, France, and the United States. The course concludes with a focus on the current debate over American meritocracy and inequality.

Readings

This course is a seminar. You will be reading 50-70 pp. per class session (although sometimes more) and discussing those readings in depth together. The level and amount of reading may be challenging but certainly not beyond any student's capabilities. I expect all students to keep up with the readings during the semester and contribute constructively to class discussion.

These readings are contained in three books and a course reader in two (or three) parts. The books are:

1. Stuart Ritchie, Intelligence: All That Matters (2016)
2. Pierre Bourdieu, The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power (1996 [1989])
3. Peter Gumbel, France's Got Talent: The Woeful Consequences of French Elitism (2013)

You may pick up Part I of the reader at the Faculty House now. The Ritchie and Bourdieu books are available for purchase at the Williams Bookstore on Spring Street. Gumbel is only available in ebook format (unless you read French; it's available in paperback as *Élite academy: Enquête sur la France malade de ses grandes écoles*). If you would like to purchase Gumbel through the College, please let me know ASAP and I will make arrangements. Of course, you can buy all these books through your favorite on-line retailer as well. Ritchie and Bourdieu will also be available on electronic reserve at Sawyer Library.

Course expectations

Our course is a seminar, not a lecture. That means I expect everyone to participate in class discussion, which will occupy the bulk of our time together each day.

In order for all of us to get the most out of this course, I expect all students to faithfully keep up with the readings throughout the entire term. Readings assigned for a particular class session will be the topic for that day's discussion, and therefore you should complete them prior to class. Please come to each class prepared to discuss and to learn from one another.

Finally, regular attendance and participation is valued, expected, and essential for you to succeed both in this course and at Williams generally. Please notify me (preferably by email) if you will be missing class for any reason.

Course requirements

- **One long paper** — During the semester you will write one long (1700-2300 words excluding notes/bibliography) analytic paper responding to a prompt based on a large section of the course readings. Each student will write either the first assignment based on 'Introduction to meritocracy' or the second based on 'Meritocracy in comparative perspective'. I will distribute prompts about ten days before the paper is due. All papers must have a cover page with title and word count, 1-in. margins, double-spacing, and 11-pt. font minimum. Due dates are as follows:
 1. 'Introduction to meritocracy' paper, due Monday, March 29, 5.00pm
 2. 'Meritocracy in comparative perspective' paper, due Wednesday, May 19, 5.00pm
- **One short paper** — During the semester you will write one short (1200-1500 words excluding notes/bibliography) reflection paper based on one of five short collections of course readings. Each student must write this paper outside the large section of readings that are the foundation of his/her long paper. Thus if you write your long paper on the 'Introduction to meritocracy' section of the course, you must write your short paper on the 'Meritocracy in comparative perspective' section, and vice versa. I will distribute no prompts for the short paper. You will choose your own original theme that synthesizes the readings, drawing out

A NOTE ON DEADLINES

Papers are due on the days and times specified in the syllabus. Early papers are always welcome; **late papers will be penalized one partial letter grade per 24 hours late** (e.g. from A to A- for 1-24 hours late, A to A-/B+ for 25-48 hours late, etc.).

This is a very mild penalty. If you find that you are unable to make a deadline due to forces under your control—which includes work in other classes—**please do not ask for an extension**. Take the late penalty and use the extra time to write the best paper you can. A poor paper turned in on time is rarely better than an excellent paper a day or two late.

Sometimes being late is simply part of leading a busy life. You are all adults and can make adult choices about how to budget your time. Weighing costs and benefits in a finite world is very much part of being an adult. I attach no stigma at all to late papers. However, I do attach a late penalty.

and evaluating interesting arguments, claims, and/or conclusions from the authors. All papers must have a cover page with title and word count, 1-in. margins, double-spacing, and 11-pt. font minimum. Due dates are as follows:

Introduction to meritocracy

1. 'An aristocracy of talent,' due Monday, March 8, 5.00pm
2. 'An aristocracy of virtue,' due Monday, March 22, 5.00pm

Meritocracy in comparative perspective

3. 'Meritocracy in Singapore,' due Friday, April 9, 5.00pm
4. 'Meritocracy in France,' due Monday, April 26, 5.00pm
5. 'Meritocracy in America,' Friday, May 14, 5.00pm

- **Take-home final exam** – At the end of the semester you will write a final exam. This will be an open-book take-home format completed over a 24-hour period of your choosing during the week May 20-28. The exam will emphasize the final 'Meritocracy on the scales' section of the course but will also ask you to draw upon the previous sections as well.
- **Discussion questions** – A minimum of twelve (12) times during the semester you will submit one or two insightful and/or interesting questions for discussion based on the assigned reading(s) for that day. Possible questions might explore unclear passages in the readings, point out notable gaps in an author's discussion, or offer critiques of an author's argument. The best questions will be framed by a brief (< 300 words) discussion. I will use these questions to guide class discussion each day, including calling on you in class based on your remarks. Use our course Glow page to submit them. Questions are due by 8.30am the day of class. *Glow will lock automatically at that time and will not accept any questions submitted after the deadline.* If you are a late riser, submit your questions the night before. I will grade questions on a check-plus/check/check-minus scale.
- **Class participation** – Regular attendance and contributions to discussion are important, valued and expected. You are allowed two free passes for missing class without an excuse. Excused absences include personal illness, family emergencies, religious holidays, job interviews, and the like. Three or more unexcused absences will result in a reduction in your class participation grade.

Honor Code

While you may consult your friends, classmates, professors, and printed sources regarding the ideas discussed in this class, all written work must be yours and yours alone. **On papers, be scrupulous in avoiding plagiarism.** Be sure to use quote marks when quoting directly and cite appropriately. **On the take-home final exam, do not consult any sources not assigned for class (this includes the internet) and do not discuss your ideas or your written work with anyone.**

Grades

I will determine your final course grade according to the following formula:

Long paper	30%
Short paper	20%
Take-home final exam	25%
Discussion questions	15%
Class participation	10%

Course calendar

AN INTRODUCTION TO MERITOCRACY

- Friday
Feb. 19 **Introduction to the class**
- no readings
- Monday
Feb. 22 **The American meritocracy**
- Daniel Bell, "On meritocracy and equality," The Public Interest 29 (Fall 1972), 29-68.
 - Ross Douthat, seven columns, New York Times, 2013-20.
 - Jacob Siegel, "2020: The year elites failed upwards," Unherd, 31 December 2020.
- Wednesday
Feb. 24 **An aristocracy of talent I: Social mobility**
- Raj Chetty et al., "Where is the land of opportunity? The geography of intergenerational mobility in the United States," Quarterly Journal of Economics 129 (2014), 1553-1623. (*Read Sections I, II, IVA, IVC, & VII*)
 - Raj Chetty et al., "The fading American dream: Trends in absolute income mobility since 1940," Science 356 (6336) (28 April 2017), 398-406.
 - Scott Winship, "Economic mobility in America: A state-of-the-art primer," Archbridge Institute, March 2017. (*Read pp. 1-4, 9-19, 33-47*)
 - Scott Winship, "Economic mobility in America: A state-of-the-art primer – Part 2: The United States in comparative perspective," Archbridge Institute, December 2018. (*Read pp. 17-22, 24-34*)
- Monday
March 1 **An aristocracy of talent II: Social immobility**
- Gregory Clark, The Son Also Rises (2014), chs. 1-3 & 6.
 - Guglielmo Barone and Sauro Mocetti, "What's your (sur)name? Intergenerational mobility over six centuries," VoxEU, 17 May 2016.
 - "The landlords are back," The Economist, 19 September 2020.
- Wednesday
March 3 **An aristocracy of talent III: Intelligence**
- Stuart Ritchie, Intelligence: All That Matters.
 - Elliot M. Tucker-Drob et al., "Genetic and environmental influences on cognition across development and context," Current Directions in Psychological Science 22 (2013), 349–355.
- Monday
March 8 **An aristocracy of virtue I: Ancient Greece**
- Plato, The Republic (Cambridge UP, 2000), 50-64, 78, 92-95, 100-110.

Wednesday **An aristocracy of virtue II: Ancient China**
March 10

- Confucius, The Great Learning, trans. R. Eno.
- Confucius, The Analects (Penguin Books, 1979), Books 2, 12-14 & 16.
- Confucius, Book of Documents (Scribner's Sons, 1899), pp. 31-52.
- Mencius, Mencius (Penguin Books, 1970), Books 4A & 5A.

Monday **An aristocracy of virtue III: the American agrarian tradition**
March 15

- M. Andrew Holowchak, "Jefferson's moral agrarianism," Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics (2019), 1690-1695.
- Wes Jackson, Becoming Native to This Place (1994), 1-5.
- Wendell Berry, "The joy of sales resistance," in Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community (1993), xi-xviii.
- Wendell Berry, "Higher education and home defense," in Home Economics: Fourteen Essays (1987), 49-53.
- Wendell Berry, Life is a Miracle (2000), 55-72, 129-142.
- Wendell Berry, "Major in homecoming," Northern Kentucky University commencement speech, 2009.

Wednesday **Political meritocracy**
March 17

- Lester Cappon, ed., The Adams-Jefferson Letters (UNC Press, 1959), 387-92, 397-402.
- Mark Bovens and Anchrit Wille, Diploma Democracy (2017), ch. 7.
- Jan Rosset and Christian Stecker, "How well are citizens represented by their governments?" European Political Science Review 11 (2019), 145-160.
- Ernesto Dal Bó et al., "Who becomes a politician?" The Quarterly Journal of Economics 132 (2017), 1877-1914.

Monday *Reading period*
March 22

MERITOCRACY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Wednesday **Meritocracy in Singapore I**
March 24

- Yuri Pines, "Between merit and pedigree: Evolution of the concept of 'elevating the worthy' in pre-imperial China," in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., The East Asian Challenge for Democracy (2013), 161-202.
- Benjamin Elman, "A society in motion: Unexpected consequences of political meritocracy in late Imperial China, 1400-1900," in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., The East Asian Challenge for Democracy (2013), 203-31.

Monday
March 29

Meritocracy in Singapore II

- Benjamin Wong, "Political meritocracy in Singapore: Lessons from the PAP government," in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., The East Asian Challenge for Democracy (2013), 288-313.
- Kenneth Paul Tan, "Meritocracy and political liberalization in Singapore," in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li, eds., The East Asian Challenge for Democracy (2013), 314-39.
- M. Jae Moon and Changho Hwang, "The state of civil service systems in the Asia-Pacific region: A comparative perspective," Review of Public Personnel Administration 33 (2013), 121-139.
- Nigel Li, "A 'new mandate' for Singapore's government?" The Diplomat, 13 July 2020.

Wednesday
March 31

Meritocracy in Singapore III

- Goh Chor Boon and S. Gopinathan, "The development of education in Singapore since 1965," in Lee Sing Kong et al., Toward a Better Future: Education and Training for Economic Development in Singapore Since 1965 (2008), 12-38.
- Park Tee Ng, Learning From Singapore: The Power of Paradoxes (2017), ch. 4.
- OECD, "Singapore: Rapid improvement followed by strong performance," in Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education (2010), 159-176.
- OECD, "Singapore - Country Note - PISA 2018 Results" (2019).

Monday
April 5

Meritocracy in Singapore IV

- Dennis Kwek et al., "'Bridges and ladders': The paradox of equity in excellence in Singapore schools," in Siao See Teng et al., Equity in Excellence (2019), 87-108.
- Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbiš, Constructing Singapore (2008), chs. 6 & 9.
- Stefano Harney, "Meritocracy in Singapore," Educational Philosophy and Theory (2020).

Wednesday
April 7

Meritocracy in France I

- Pierre Bourdieu, The State Nobility, Prologue & Part I.

Monday
April 12

Meritocracy in France II

- Pierre Bourdieu, The State Nobility, Part II & Part III, ch. 1.

Wednesday
April 14

Meritocracy in France III

- Pierre Bourdieu, The State Nobility, Parts IV-V.

Monday
April 19

Meritocracy in France IV

- Muriel Darmon, "State Nobility revisited: Elite education in France today," [presentation], Columbia University, 3 November 2011. [see link on course *Glow page*]
- Peter Gumbel, France's Got Talent.

Wednesday
April 21

Break

Monday
April 26

Meritocracy in America I

- Meredith C. Frey, "What we know, are still getting wrong, and have yet to learn about the relationships among the SAT, intelligence and achievement," Journal of Intelligence 7, 26 (2019).
- Freddie deBoer, "The progressive case for the SAT," Jacobin, 30 March 2018.
- Lani Guinier, The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America (2015), ch. 2.
- Wayne Au, "The socialist case against the SAT," Jacobin, 14 April 2018.
- UC Office of the President, "University of California Board of Regents unanimously approved changes to standardized testing requirement for undergraduates," 21 May 2020.
- Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force, University of California, Report of the UC Academic Council Standardized Testing Task Force (STTF), January 2020, 8-88.

Wednesday
April 28

Meritocracy in America II

- Jeffrey Selinger, Who Gets In and Why (2020), ch. 3.
- "Brief of amici curiae American Council on Education and 36 other higher education organizations," *SFFA v. Harvard*, 30 July 2018, 13-21.
- Harvard College Office of Admissions and Financial Aid, "Interviewer Handbook 2014-15," 2-4, 9-12, 38-47.
- Delano R. Franklin et al., "What one student's marked-up Harvard application reveals about the admissions process," Harvard Crimson, 12 September 2018.
- Harvard College Office of Institutional Research, "Admissions and financial aid at Harvard College," February 2013.
- Harvard College Office of Institutional Research, "Harvard College admissions and low income students," 1 May 2013.
- Doug Lederman, "Recipe for success," Williams Alumni Review, September 2005.
- "How admissions works at Williams," EphBlog, 1 October 2018.

Monday
May 3

Meritocracy in America III

- Jonathan Wai, "Investigating America's elite: Cognitive ability, education, and sex differences," Intelligence 41 (2013), 203-211.
- Steven Brint et al., "Where ivy matters: The educational backgrounds of US cultural elites," Sociology of Education 93 (2020), 153-172.
- Lauren Rivera, "Ivies, extracurriculars, and exclusion: Elite employers' use of educational credentials," Research in Social Stratification and Mobility 29 (2011), 71-90.
- Lauren Rivera, "Hiring as cultural matching: The case of elite professional service firms," American Sociological Review 77 (2012), 999-1022.

Wednesday
May 5

Meritocracy in America IV

- Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, The Sum of Small Things (2017), ch. 4.
- Pew Research Center, "A wider ideological gap between more and less educated adults," April 2016, 1-8.
- Zach Goldberg, "America's white saviors," Tablet, 5 June 2019.
- Julius Krein, "The real class war," American Affairs 3 (4) (2019), 153-172.

Monday
May 10

Meritocracy in America V

- Anthony P. Carnevale et al., The Merit Myth (2020), ch. 8.
- Fredrik deBoer, The Cult of Smart (2020), ch. 8.
- Michael Lind, The New Class War (2020), ch. 8.

MERITOCRACY ON THE SCALES

Wednesday
May 12

For meritocracy

- Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise (2017), ch. 1 & conclusion.
- Joel Stein, "How I learned to stop worrying and love the elite," Washingtonian, November 2019.
- Helen Andrews, "The new ruling class," Hedgehog Review 18 (2) (Summer 2016).

Monday
May 17

Against meritocracy

- Christopher Lasch, “The revolt of the elites” in The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy (1995), 25-49.
- Patrick Deneen, “The ignoble lie,” First Things, April 2018.
- Robert Plomin, Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are (2018), ch. 9.

Wednesday
May 19

Against higher education

- Bryan Caplan, The Case Against Education (2018), ch. 10.
- Oren Cass, The Once and Future Worker (2018), ch. 6.
- Cameron Sage, “I am not a blank page,” Quillette, 25 November 2018.