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Book review: The aristocracy of talent: How meritocracy made the modern world, by A. Wooldridge

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Wooldridge, A. (2023). The aristocracy of talent: How meritocracy made the modern world.

Penguin, 2023, 482 pp., \$28.39 (paperback).

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The Aristocracy of Talent has been so relevant to my reflections about education that I have wondered where it has been all my reading life. Thankfully, in the early 1970s, I was introduced to Plato in educational philosophy classes and I also read Jackson and Marsden's *Education and the Working Class* in educational sociology. In very bald terms, these thinkers sum up the long journey of the meritocratic ideal. In the beginning, there was Plato's conception of the philosopher kings who were chosen young and then studiously prepared for their future roles. Two millennia later, two sociologists investigated the social and psychological dimensions of a highly selective education system. Interestingly, while the British authors offered poignant accounts of the personal effects of strict selection and differentiated schooling, they also confirmed the power that Plato ascribed to education as a truly transformative force for individual students. In the present work, Wooldridge provides a scholarly and entertaining overview of Western history and philosophy, and a more specific account of China and the Confucian state, to argue that meritocracy is a superordinate theme of the past that greatly impacts on present-day thinking and language. However, countries across the Western world continue to dispute the relevance and justice of the meritocratic project, while China and other Asian nations are enthusiastically re-embracing it, and these different paths may be responsible for global changes in relative prosperity, prestige, and political power.

The author's historical exposition shows that whenever and wherever they occur, meritocracies are committed to strong assessment and examination structures, and these often have symbolic as well as practical purposes. China's mass examination system had a 2,500-year-old history, and its primary function was the selection and supply of Mandarin scholars and other public servants. When there is an obsession with examinations, a reverence for learning tends to follow. There were also other gains for China, such as unifying a linguistically, ethnically, and regionally diverse country, and the exporting of its civilisation to other parts of Asia. An allusion has already been made to the fact that after the Second World War children in the UK were tested at eleven-plus years for either a grammar school or secondary modern education. What was attempted here was the assessment of capacity for learning rather than



acquired attainments, which is an approach that is probably regarded now as arbitrary and discriminatory. Nevertheless, ability testing does live on in some highly competitive settings, such as medical school entry here in New Zealand (UCAT), and scholastic aptitude testing for college entry in the US. In Wooldridge's opinion, the post-war cohort was "one of the luckiest generations in British history" (p. 248). His historian's view of universal IQ testing is that it represented a radical assault on the vested interests of class, and such failings that it possessed "are the faults (if so they be) of mobility rather than immobility and revolutionary change rather than defence of the status quo" (p. 233).

Book listings for Amazon online show that contemporary criticisms of the meritocracy constitute a small genre, and Wooldridge has his own explanation of its problems in recent times. As the means of social mobility and success have been stripped away, society has become two groups: a powerful and self-perpetuating elite and an alienated and embittered working class whose only recourse is to populist politics. The elite arose in the carnival of capitalism of the 1980s and 1990s when merit and money saw the advantages of cohabitation, and subsequently it has insulated and isolated itself from much of what the rest of society is thinking and feeling. However, their remorseless march through all of society's institutions, along with knowing what is best for other people, has its own costs. In the cosmopolitan elite's game of life, the snakes can be unexpectedly sudden and sharp, and the ladders are often arduous and dispiriting to climb. Meanwhile, much of the working classes in the UK have lost the social connections, and the social capital, of previous times. These were exemplified in Young and Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London*, which is also referred to by the author and was another of my set texts. According to Wooldridge, if today's technocrats and professionals were actually interested, it could be surprising for them to learn that most waitresses now working in London are not particularly concerned that another woman has just broken through the glass ceiling and is now on the board of a *Fortune 500* company.

The Aristocracy of Talent contends that the meritocratic mission of history was prematurely foreclosed in the West, and it now needs to be re-energised by developing a more efficient "capacity-catching machine" and by establishing different sorts of schools for students with different abilities. There is a lot more suggested besides, including free university education with bonding and a system of fully funded national scholarships. The author's principal justification for these provisions is a moral one: the possession of talent places an obligation on the state to provide educational opportunities and appropriate instruction. As it happens, Wooldridge's rationale has a notable similarity to Peter Fraser's declaration (Minister of Education, 1939) that every citizen has a right to a free education of a sort to which they are best fitted and to the fullest extent of their powers (McLaren, 1974). Nonetheless, Wooldridge also sees human capacity as a fundamental economic resource, and sovereign nations may not be able to afford to ignore what is happening in the international market place. The author concludes that if his historical analysis is correct, and a relatively unfettered meritocracy was pivotal to the development of modernity, then "the future is now being forged in the East rather than the West" (p. 366). Ultimately, perhaps, the questions for us in New Zealand are whether it matters that we could be falling behind and whether we would be prepared to put in place the sorts of measures that Wooldridge is advocating, like ability testing, differentiated secondary schooling, a high stakes public examination system, and a lot more competition in education at all levels.

References

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