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## Goodhart's Law and The Meritocratic Illusion

Luigi Bosco<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Siena, Italy; bosco@unisi.it.

**ORCID iD:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8325-5487>

### Address for Correspondence:

Luigi Bosco, Department of Economics and Statistics  
University of Siena, Italy. (Email: bosco@unisi.it)

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**Abstract** Talking about merit and meritocracy is not simple and it is intellectually risky. The reason is clear. If we stay at a superficial level of analysis, the issue seems clear and indisputable. However, limiting oneself to observing the surface of phenomena is never a good intellectual practice. If there was the courage and willingness to go beyond mere common sense and bar chatter, one would realize that the issue of merit and meritocracy is much more complex and ambiguous than one might think and requires in-depth analysis, qualifications, and distinctions. Once the superficial layer is broken, one realizes how complicated, obscure, and controversial the issue is, finally understanding how debatable it is to make meritocracy the main ally of the policymaker, both in ethical and efficiency terms.

**Keywords** Merit, Meritocracy, inequality, incentive, performance

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### Reviewers

Dr. Leonardo Andriola, University of Salento (I), Italy. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8300-0414>. Email: leonardo.andriola@unisalento.it

Mohamed Sayed Hassan, Professor, Ain Shams University, El-Abaseya, Egypt. Email: m\_sayed\_hassan@hotmail.com, mohamed.s.hassan@ejust.edu.eg

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## 1. Introduction

Discussing merit and meritocracy is far from simple; indeed, it presents significant intellectual risks. The reason is clear. At a superficial level of analysis, the topic appears self-evident and uncontroversial—akin to stating that water is wet.

Who would not want to be treated by the most skilled cardiothoracic surgeon available, and thus support the idea that doctors should be selected solely based on their competence and ability?

Who would oppose the principle that individuals should receive what they deserve in life?

Who would reject a society that recognizes and rewards merit—and only merit—as a mechanism for ensuring equality of opportunity, a value ostensibly shared across the political spectrum?

Framed in these terms, the meritocratic ideal seems so obviously right that any critique is easily dismissed as a defence of nepotism, clientelism, or mediocrity.

However, limiting ourselves to the surface of such phenomena is never good intellectual practice. A more nuanced and critical analysis reveals that merit and meritocracy are far more complex and ambiguous than common sense might suggest. The deeper one delves, the clearer it becomes that relying on meritocracy as a primary tool of policy—both ethically and in terms of efficiency—is highly questionable. Moreover, this deeper reflection exposes the potentially anti-democratic implications of turning meritocracy into a political dogma.

Needless to say, a critical stance toward meritocratic ideology—such as the one taken here—does not entail endorsing arbitrary appointments to key positions, nor advocating for systems where career progression depends solely on seniority. To critique meritocracy is not to deny the existence or importance of individual talent and competence. Not all doctors, teachers, or bartenders are equally capable, nor are they all equally committed to excellence in their work.

What is being criticized is the ideological, absolutist interpretation of merit: the transformation of merit and its rewards into a cultural fetish, an unquestioned and overriding principle to which all social and political decisions must defer. This critique targets the meritocratic cultural imperialism that demands everything be ranked, ordered, and quantified—from schools to restaurants, from universities to postal services—often with the aim of using such rankings to guide public policy, under the neoliberal assumption that rewarding the "best" will, by some trickle-down mechanism, lift the rest.

This notion is not only simplistic—it is socially harmful. Yet it has been embraced even by political actors on the left. In this regard, one cannot help but recall [Don Milani's prophetic critique in \*Lettera a una professoressa\* \(1967\)](#): a school that fails to prioritize the needs of the weakest students, dedicating more resources to them than to the most successful, is akin to "a hospital that treats the healthy and rejects the sick—it becomes an instrument of increasingly irreparable differentiation."

The aim of these reflections is to assess whether three widely accepted meritocratic assertions still hold when subjected to deeper scrutiny. One of the first insights gained from such scrutiny is the fallacy of treating merit as an objective, value-neutral quantity, independent of historical, institutional, or social context—and equally, of sheer luck.

In practice, merit is deeply shaped by contingency and politics—that is, by the social rules and structures within which individuals operate. As a result, meritocracy can often end up rewarding the fortunate, rather than the truly deserving. Understanding what someone "deserves" outside of meritocratic rhetoric proves to be a deeply complex task. Recognizing that merit often includes unearned advantages allows us to adopt a more sober, critical stance, and encourages skepticism toward distributive logics that justify inequality on meritocratic grounds.

## 2. On the Epistemological and Normative Limits of Measuring Merit

One of the first things we realize when digging deeper is that the idea of merit as an unbiased, measurable value—independent of context, judgment, or luck—is deeply flawed. In reality, merit is shaped by chance and politics—where "politics" refers to the rules, structures, and systems that shape opportunity.

The push for meritocracy often ends up rewarding not the most deserving, but the most fortunate. Truly understanding what someone "deserves" is far more complex than meritocratic rhetoric suggests. Acknowledging how often merit is *undeserved*—in the sense of not being purely the result of individual effort—helps us both

demystify the concept and engage with it more critically. This awareness also invites healthy skepticism toward distributive systems that use merit as a rational justification for stark economic inequality.

For example, if the difference in talent and outcomes between a company's CEO and one of its workers is largely due to random factors—differences in innate abilities, family background, and socioeconomic context—then the fact that the CEO earns 400 times more than the worker becomes not only ethically questionable, but also economically irrational <sup>1</sup>.

A second crucial insight in the analysis of meritocracy is that merit is neither directly observable nor objectively measurable. Unlike physical attributes such as height or quantifiable economic indicators such as bank balance, merit does not manifest in a straightforward or unambiguous form. This raises a fundamental concern: we are placing at the core of social organization a concept that resists precise and neutral definition.

In light of this, any attempt to operationalize merit necessitates approximation through observable and measurable proxies. One common proxy is individual performance or outcomes. For example, we may not be able to assess a fisher's skill directly, but we can measure how many kilograms of fish they catch in an hour. The domain of sport offers a particularly clear case: here, performance metrics (such as race times, goals scored, or points won) generate meritocratic rankings that appear immediate and unambiguous.

However, equating outcomes with merit is fraught with complications and often leads to reductive or distorted evaluations. First, performance is frequently multidimensional and context-dependent. In the case of the fisherman, not all fish are equal in value or difficulty to catch, and fishing in more challenging environments may require higher levels of skill. Similarly, evaluating an employee solely on the basis of completed tasks overlooks the qualitative dimension of performance. Judging a teacher, for instance, using only quantitative indicators—such as student test scores—ignores the complexity and depth of pedagogical effectiveness.

Second, many outcomes are not the result of individual effort alone, but rather emerge from collaborative or interdependent processes. The success of an individual may rely heavily on the support, skills, or decisions of colleagues, subordinates, or superiors. For instance, a forward playing for a low-ranked football team is statistically likely to score fewer goals than a counterpart in a top-tier team. This discrepancy, however, may reflect team dynamics more than individual ability.

Third, a meritocratic assessment based on absolute outcomes neglects the value of incremental improvement or contextual difficulty. Consider the case of two teachers: one working in an under-resourced school who, through dedication and innovation, raises a class average from an E to a C; the other, teaching in a prestigious institution, maintains an average grade of B with little effort. In such a scenario, the former might arguably display a higher degree of professional merit, yet a purely outcome-based assessment might fail to capture this.

To further illuminate the complexity of the issue, we may revisit a common intuition: the desire to be operated on by "the best" heart surgeon. But who, precisely, is the best? Even among medical experts, opinions may diverge. One colleague may endorse a surgeon with a conservative yet reliable approach, while another might recommend someone known for technical innovation but with a less consistent track record. The choice between them depends not only on differing definitions of "best," but also on epistemic uncertainty—a full understanding of the patient's needs is often available only post hoc, once the operation has already taken place.

More broadly, the competencies of a heart surgeon—or of any professional—are inherently multidimensional. Technical skill, adaptability, communication, decision-making under pressure, and patient rapport are all relevant, and it is unlikely that any single individual will excel uniformly across all dimensions. The standard response to this multidimensionality is to construct composite indicators—a weighted index designed to synthesize various competencies into a single metric. But such synthesis requires an algorithmic framework, which inherently involves value-laden decisions about how different dimensions of merit are to be weighted.

This leads to two fundamental problems. First, the ranking produced by any merit algorithm is highly contingent upon the specific weights and parameters it employs. Whether Surgeon A outranks Surgeon B depends on how much emphasis the algorithm places on technical reliability versus innovative capacity. Thus, far from being neutral or

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<sup>1</sup> The ratio between the earning of low-skilled workers and CEOs has dramatically increased from the 1970s to the present day, rising from 20 to 400 (according to US data, see [Bivens & Kandra, 2022](#)). The enormous widening of this difference is also the result of an ideological use of the concept of merit and meritocracy.

objective, the measurement of merit is deeply political, as it requires normative judgments about what competencies matter most, and in what proportion.

Second, for such algorithms to be transparent, accountable, and publicly contestable, their structure must be disclosed and subject to critical scrutiny. Otherwise, meritocratic systems risk operating as black boxes, reinforcing social hierarchies under the guise of objectivity while concealing the discretionary choices embedded in their design.

In sum, the ideal of a neutral, technocratic meritocracy collapses upon closer inspection. Merit is not a natural quantity awaiting discovery, but a constructed and contested category, shaped by institutional contexts, socio-political norms, and contingent judgments. Recognizing this is essential if we are to engage in a more critical and reflexive analysis of the role that merit should—or should not—play in shaping contemporary social and policy decisions.

### 3. Merit, Measurement, and the Distortions of Algorithmic Incentives: Revisiting Goodhart's Law

A further critical consideration in the meritocratic framework concerns the consequences of transparency in algorithmic evaluation. When the internal structure of an algorithm is made fully known to participants in a system—whether employees, students, or institutions—this transparency can lead to a fundamental distortion of behavior. Individuals no longer orient their efforts toward genuinely fulfilling the responsibilities of their role, but rather toward optimizing the specific variables that the algorithm uses to define and reward “merit.” This phenomenon is widely recognized in the literature as Goodhart's Law, which states: “When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure” (Goodhart, 1984).

To illustrate the implications of Goodhart's Law, consider a hypothetical scenario drawn from the domain of professional football. One might propose that tied matches represent a failure of meritocratic resolution, given that one team often exhibits superior performance—e.g., hitting the goalpost more frequently, gaining more corner kicks, or maintaining longer ball possession. An algorithm could, in principle, integrate these metrics to determine which team was “more deserving” of victory. While initially plausible, such an approach would likely produce a dramatic shift in gameplay dynamics. Teams would begin to treat each individual metric—such as corner kicks—as strategic objectives in themselves, rather than means to scoring goals. Coaches might design tactics aimed at maximizing these indicators, while algorithm analysts stationed on the sidelines could adjust gameplay in real time to optimize algorithmic outcomes. The quality and spontaneity of the sport would inevitably decline. Thus, paradoxically, a commitment to maximizing meritocratic fairness in outcomes could undermine the very essence of the sport's appeal. In this case, less meritocracy may actually produce greater overall value.

The consequences of Goodhart's Law are not confined to theoretical or anecdotal domains; empirical research underscores its relevance in a variety of fields. In the medical sector, for example, Jarral et al. (2016) report that the introduction of public performance rankings in the UK has led surgeons to avoid complex procedures for fear of compromising their success rates. In education, Jennings and Bearak (2014) observe that standardized testing regimes incentivize “teaching to the test,” narrowing curricular breadth and undermining holistic student development. Au (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 49 studies and found that standardized testing led to curriculum narrowing and an emphasis on rote learning. This undermines critical thinking, creativity, and deeper conceptual understanding. Koretz (2008) and Koretz et al. (2001) studied test score inflation in states like Texas and Kentucky. They found that while scores on state assessments rose significantly, performance on independent national assessments (e.g., NAEP) showed much smaller gains. This discrepancy illustrates the degradation of test validity when scores are used as targets.

Similarly, the pervasive use of bibliometric indicators in academic evaluation has contributed to increases in self-citation and citation cartels, as demonstrated by Fire and Guestrin (2019) and Seeber et al. (2019).

These findings point to a broader conclusion: the aspiration to measure merit objectively and quantitatively is, in many contexts, illusory. This is not to deny that qualitative distinctions in competence exist—some surgeons, teachers, and researchers are indisputably more effective than others. The challenge lies in translating these qualitative assessments into algorithmic metrics that are treated as objective and neutral, yet are inevitably partial, constructed, and prone to manipulation. The potential costs and behavioural distortions introduced by rigid meritocratic systems may ultimately outweigh their intended benefits.

It is worth noting, however, that in certain domains—especially manual or routine tasks—the link between effort and outcome is more direct, and thus merit can be proxied more reliably. Consider algorithmic systems used by

delivery platforms to allocate orders to riders. These typically reward those who are fastest, most consistently available, and most responsive during peak hours. Here, we observe a functional meritocracy based on measurable performance. Yet, this raises normative concerns: is such a meritocracy desirable? Far from embodying the ideals of fairness or opportunity often associated with meritocratic theory, such systems may serve to consolidate employer power, reintroducing forms of piecework that intensify labor exploitation while maximizing corporate profit.

Ultimately, if merit is—on one hand—difficult to observe and quantify, and—on the other—deeply shaped by luck and political-institutional context, then a principle that once appeared self-evident—"everyone should get what they deserve"—becomes much more problematic. While normatively appealing in theory, the operationalization of this principle in real-world systems introduces biases, inequities, and unintended consequences. When the distribution of rewards and penalties is conditioned by systemic randomness or institutional asymmetries, the claim to neutrality, fairness, and justice becomes deeply contestable.

Here is a revised and polished version of your text, refined for clarity, coherence, and academic tone, making it suitable for submission to a scientific publication. The structure has been tightened, and the language adjusted to align with scholarly conventions while preserving your original meaning.

#### 4. Merit and Equality of Opportunity

The final claim introduced at the outset remains to be examined: that a strongly meritocratic society fosters greater social mobility and greater equality of opportunity. While intuitively compelling, this proposition relies on a critical precondition—that the playing field is level before merit is assessed. That is, individuals must begin from comparable starting points. If some start the race one hundred meters ahead and others a kilometre behind, claiming that only the outcome matters are not only unjust but also deeply misleading. In a truly fair contest, the winner might not have prevailed had the competition been equal.

Moreover, individuals who find themselves significantly disadvantaged from the outset may not even attempt to compete. Discouraged by structural barriers and convinced that their efforts are futile, they may refrain from investing in their own potential. As a result, final outcomes merely reinforce pre-existing inequalities, while giving them the appearance of legitimacy under the guise of merit. In such cases, meritocracy functions as a mechanism of *fairwashing*—a rhetorical device that masks systemic inequality with the veneer of fairness, akin to the instrumental and often hypocritical practices observed in the corporate world. Of course, occasionally an exceptionally gifted individual who starts from the back may succeed. But such exceptions do not prove the rule. A system is only truly fair when *ordinary* individuals who start from disadvantaged positions have the same opportunity to succeed as their equally ordinary counterparts who begin with structural advantages.

In conclusion, if merit is significantly shaped by the familial and social environments in which individuals are embedded, then an uncorrected and rigid meritocracy is likely to exacerbate rather than reduce existing inequalities. This outcome, as Don Milani insightfully noted, directly contradicts the egalitarian aspirations typically associated with meritocratic ideals.

The relationship between inequality, merit, and social mobility has long divided political ideologies. Traditionally, the political left has emphasized reducing inequality of outcomes, whereas the right has focused on promoting equality of opportunity. The liberal-right position is straightforward: it is not inherently unjust that some individuals are wealthy and others are not—what is unjust is that not everyone has the *same opportunity* to achieve wealth. While the left prioritizes redistributing a finite economic "cake," sometimes at the risk of dampening incentives, the right champions policies that stimulate economic growth by rewarding initiative and risk-taking. In this view, even those who do not succeed directly benefit from a larger "cake." However, to sustain such a model, a ruthless and uncompromising meritocracy is often seen as necessary.

Ironically, and somewhat tragically, the political left—or at least those factions identifying as such—has, in recent decades, increasingly adopted this meritocratic rhetoric at precisely the moment when empirical research has begun to undermine its foundational assumptions. Two findings, in particular, are noteworthy:

- a) The relationship between economic inequality and growth is nonlinear. While a perfectly egalitarian society (a hypothetical construct) might eliminate the incentives for risk-taking and innovation, highly unequal societies—like many today—are empirically shown to hinder economic growth. A growing body of literature demonstrates that rising inequality is not a necessary evil but rather an impediment to prosperity, one that damages both the social fabric and economic dynamism. Inequality, long regarded as an

unpleasant but necessary condition for growth, now appears more as a systemic pathology than a trade-off<sup>2</sup>.

- b) The supposed trade-off between equality of opportunity and equality of outcomes is largely a myth. In fact, empirical evidence indicates a positive correlation between economic equality and social mobility. Countries with lower levels of income inequality—such as Norway, Denmark, and Finland—also exhibit higher levels of social mobility, meaning they provide more equal opportunities<sup>3</sup>. This relationship is captured by what has been termed the *Great Gatsby Curve*, named after F. Scott Fitzgerald's fictional character who famously climbs the social ladder. Contrary to neoliberal assumptions, greater equality of outcomes today is associated with greater equality of opportunity tomorrow.

These findings suggest a policy orientation that directly contradicts the dominant narrative: the best way to foster a socially mobile and genuinely meritocratic society is to reduce economic inequality now. Rather than impeding growth or undermining fairness, policies that address inequality may in fact be *prerequisites* for meaningful meritocracy.

To better grasp the implications of the Great Gatsby Curve, consider a hypothetical scenario: at age twelve, all children are required to take a standardized test to determine their academic aptitude. Those with the highest scores attend elite schools and universities, and later access high-status professions. In this system, an individual's future hinges on a measure of merit. At first glance, this seems ideal. But is it truly fair?

Even assuming the improbable—that a single test could objectively and comprehensively capture academic merit—such a system would still be deeply flawed if children do not begin from equivalent starting conditions. In reality, parental investment—in time, resources, and educational support—plays a substantial role in shaping test performance<sup>4</sup>. The higher the stakes of the test, the more likely affluent families will intensify their investment in preparing their children. Thus, the test becomes not a measure of inherent merit, but of socioeconomic advantage. It is naïve to assume that children from low-income families have the same chances of success as their wealthier peers, even when their intrinsic capabilities are equivalent.

## 5. Conclusion

What, then, is the most effective path to achieving greater equality of opportunity? It is certainly *not* through intensifying the meritocratic weight of adolescent testing, which risks merely reinforcing existing family-based advantages. If the objective is to foster more equitable opportunities, a more effective strategy would involve reducing disparities in family income and increasing public investment in education. It is not coincidental that Northern European countries—characterized by lower levels of economic inequality and substantial investment in public education—consistently exhibit higher levels of social mobility than countries like Italy or the United States, where initial income disparities are pronounced and public funding for schools and universities is increasingly constrained.

A frequent counterargument heard is that, given the scarcity of public resources for education, these should be concentrated—following a meritocratic rationale—on the most deserving students. While this is a politically legitimate stance, it must be acknowledged that such an approach does not promote a *healthy* form of meritocracy. Rather, it tends to entrench and institutionalize existing social disparities, effectively curbing social mobility. Even assuming good faith, this reveals a fundamental incoherence between means and ends: a policy ostensibly aimed at promoting meritocracy may, in practice, discourage those from disadvantaged backgrounds from investing in their own human capital, knowing that individual effort alone is unlikely to overcome the structural advantages of wealthier peers.

<sup>2</sup> Sociological research shows that certain social issues (mental health, drug abuse, educational inequality, violence and crime, obesity, level of social trust) are significantly more severe when economic inequality is higher (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The degree of social mobility is measured by analyzing how much children's income depends on that of their parents. If the correlation is high, it means that the children of the wealthy will be wealthy and the children of the poor will be poor, whereas if it is low, it means that children's income is not particularly influenced by family income, indicating greater social mobility and equality of opportunity.

<sup>4</sup> There is strong evidence that this already happens in countries where such tests are important. New professional figures have emerged, for example, in the United States: college admission consultants are professionals paid to help families in the university admission process. The best, the most effective ones, are obviously more expensive than the less effective ones. The admissions scandal described in the book by Michael Sandel is an example of how the system can degenerate in favour of those most willing to pay (Sandel, 2020).



In other words, amplifying meritocratic mechanisms without first addressing the underlying inequalities risks transforming meritocracy into a vehicle for social reproduction rather than mobility. As Don Milani insightfully noted, such a system becomes an “increasingly irreversible tool of differentiation.”

Therefore, meritocracy—particularly in its narrow, test-based form—does not appear to be the most effective strategy for enhancing social mobility or fostering genuine equality of opportunity. Instead, reducing economic inequality and ensuring equal and universal access to essential services, such as education and healthcare, offer a more promising route. These measures provide the necessary foundation for a truly inclusive and functional meritocracy—one in which individuals’ achievements reflect their talents and efforts, rather than the circumstances of their birth.

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### Author Biography

Luigi Bosco is a researcher in the Department of Economics and Statistics at the University of Siena, Italy. He holds a PhD from the European University Institute, Florence, an MA in Economics from the University of Warwick, UK, and a BA in Economics from the University of Siena. His research interests focus on behavioral economics and international trade.

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8325-5487>

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