The Supreme Court has announced that it will hear two cases bearing on affirmative action – and hence on the understanding of “merit” in higher education -- one involving Harvard and the other the University of North Carolina. Meanwhile, Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel, author of a recent critique of “the tyranny of merit,” advised German Social Democratic chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz to use the campaign theme of “respect” that helped him get elected. Meanwhile, controversies have arisen over the criteria for admission into several selective public high schools around the country. What is “meritocracy” and where did it come from? Is it a good way to organize society? What does its future look like? We will explore the meaning of “meritocracy” comparatively and historically in an effort to answer these questions.

Possible Readings

- Aristotle, Politics, selections
- Weber on China
- Thorstein Veblen, Theory of the Leisure Class, selections
- “Special Provisions of the Constitution of India for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes” (1950)
- Michael Young, The Rise of the Meritocracy
- Talcott Parsons, “The Pattern Variables”
- Ralph H. Turner, “Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System”
- Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, The Academic Revolution
- Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society, selections
- Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, The Inheritors: French Students and their Relation to Culture
- Nicholas Lemann, The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy
- Robert Fogel on inequalities and pre-natal and early childhood care
- James Heckman on early childhood (dis)advantages
- Ron Ferguson on The Achievement Gap
- Jerome Karabel, The Chosen (or the article on antisemitism at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton)
- Jens Beckert, Inherited Wealth
- Natasha Warikoo, The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities
- Michael Sandel, The Tyranny of Merit
- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz and his campaign for “respect”
- Matt Feeney, “The Pointless End of Legacy Admissions”
- Nathan Heller, “What Happens When an Elite Public School Becomes Open to All?” March 7, 2022
- John McWhorter, “It’s Time to End Race-Based Affirmative Action”
- Steven Brint, “What Comes After Meritocracy?”