CHAPTER ONE

Meritocracy and Its Discontents

Even Americans unfamiliar with the word embrace *meritocracy* as if it were a birthright. We believe in the essential goodness of the idea that people should be able to achieve in school and at work to the full extent of their natural abilities and drive. Being rewarded for what one does, rather than whom one is, and being able to rise or fall on one's merits is part of what defines the American dream of individual freedom and personal accomplishment.[1] Our national ethos of self-determination may be a delusion, but its appeal persists, even internationally. A female graduate student, speaking for French youths frustrated by a culture of limited opportunities, lamented to a *New York Times* reporter, "We are never taught the idea of the American dream," the concept of "the self-made man."[2]

For many Americans, schools and colleges are the vessels of our meritocratic aspirations; they provide our primary experience with an institution that evaluates individual performance. Reliable surveys tell us that most adults think of merit in school or college as academic accomplishments; we

believe entry to college should be based on grades and test scores alone.[3] Youths applying to college count on the basic fairness of the admissions process, and when it does not appear to be that way, a rejection letter may bring on litigation. If all else is equal between two candidates, is it fair for the applicant whose father went to Harvard, for example, to be admitted there over someone whose parents did not? Should religion, gender, or race matter to one's prospects? Some of the ambivalence that many feel about affirmative action is because it seems unconstitutional that anything other than individual academic merit should count for college admissions.

America has, according to international scholars, seventeen of the top twenty universities in the world.[4] Most of our best universities, as ranked by *Barron's*, the *Princeton Review*, or *U.S. News and World Report*, are private. We take great national pride in our premier universities and like to believe that their academic excellences are matched by a fair admissions process that selects the best brains for their classrooms. Our belief in America as a society where opportunities are open to talent is sustained, in part, by our confidence that our most prestigious universities operate according to the best possible standards of academic meritocracy. One should get into a top university because of one's achievements, not because of accidents of birth.

What would it mean, however, if Harvard and Yale and their peers had a history of excluding applicants based on gender, religion, race, income, and personality? The facts are that colleges like Yale kept a limit on their Jewish students until the early 1960s,[5] females were barred entirely through the late 1960s, Blacks were eliminated from the competition by poverty and inadequate schools until the 1970s, and right up to the contemporary period, one's personality and family income still matter. If those ivied universities pursued, not only in the recent past but at present, admissions policies aimed at capturing youths from families at the top of the income pyramid, and those universities selected students more for personal qualities than for academic accomplishments, would that require us to reevaluate the way we think of educational opportunity and individual merit? What sort of academic meritocracy would we have if one's chances of being in it were substantially determined by extracurricular performance and family wealth?

It is ironic that those top colleges who distance themselves from the pre-professional practices of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) provide the greatest boost to athletes in their admissions process.

Neither racial minorities nor alumni offspring receive the preferential treatment given to athletes in top-tier admissions. The academic entry hurdle in the Ivy League is lowest for athletes, a majority of whom are White and from affluent families.[6] And athletes are in a stronger position to influence campus life in ivied colleges than in NCAA state universities because they are a larger percentage of the undergraduate population in the former. Male athletes are just 3 percent of the men at the University of Michigan, for example, although they are 22 percent of Princeton's men.[7] The emphasis placed by American elite colleges on athleticism is a national anomaly. Youths with undistinguished academic records cannot get into England's Oxford University or to France's *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* just for playing soccer. Why should sports matter so much in the Ivy League?

Separate from the significant athletic boost in admissions, there is the benefit of standing on stacks of money. Lawrence Summers, as president of Harvard, expressed dismay with the grip of wealthy families on elite colleges. He reported that at America's most prestigious colleges, approximately 74 percent of undergraduates came from families in the top income quartile, and only 9 percent of undergraduates came from the bottom 50 percent of America's families ranked by income.[8] Is the overlap of economic class and academic prestige merely an unfortunate yet inescapable coincidence? Or are admissions in the Ivy League governed by a logic that rewards socioeconomic status but disguises it as merit? Summers proclaims, "There is no more important mission for Harvard and higher education than promoting equality of opportunity for all."[9] Yet, as his statistics show, unless one believes that only rich people can be smart, we have a staggering distance to travel to achieve a fair opportunity for all to reach every level of our educational system.

President Summers's disclosure on the economic composition of top-tier colleges draws attention to another American irony. America, which we like to think of "as the very embodiment of meritocracy,"[10] is a place where economic class origins largely determine one's educational destiny. Class background influences whether or not one completes a college degree. If one is born into a family in the bottom-income quartile, one's odds of finishing college are nine out of one hundred, whereas the odds for a top income quartile youth are seventy-five out of one hundred.[11] And class origin affects, as Summers noted, whether one attends a top-tier or an unselective college.

For an overview of the national situation, consider the raw percentages of students by their social origin in each college tier. If one divides American colleges into seven prestige tiers and U.S. families into four socioeconomic status (SES) quartiles, the composition of tier 7 is without serious disparities. In tier 7, where colleges have non-competitive admissions, 22 percent of students are from the top SES quartile; 25 percent are from the second SES quartile; 27 percent are from the third SES quartile; and 25 percent are from the bottom quartile. The social composition of the other tiers is not, however, as egalitarian (see Table 1.1).

The least equitable outcomes are in the first tier where 79 percent of the students are from the top SES quartile and 2 percent are from the bottom. Whether one uses Summers's percentages, or these numbers derived from Department of Education data, there is a symmetry between social class and college tier.

Many things beyond brand-name prestige are at stake in attending a top-tier college. The consensus among economists is that college tier corresponds to income; the higher the tier, the higher the lifetime payoff.[12] College graduates earn over their working lives on average one million dollars more than high-school graduates, but tier-one college graduates accumulate an equally impressive one-million-dollar premium over the average earnings of alumni from the bottom tier.[13] The bottom tier enrolls the greatest cluster, 35 percent of all college students, whereas tier 1, where Yale and Harvard reside, includes just 4 percent of America's undergraduates.

TABLE 1.1

Percent of Each Higher Education Tier Occupied by Each SES Quartile.

	% of Tier 1	*% of Tier 2*	*% of Tier 3*	*% of Tier 4*	*% of Tier 5*	*% of Tier 6*	*% of Tier 7*
SES quartiles:							
Top	79	64	51	37	23	36	22
Upper Middle	16	19	24	27	28	21	25
Lower Middle	3	9	14	23	28	24	27
Bottom	2	7	10	13	20	19	25

SOURCE: National Educational Longitudinal Survey, 1988–2000. U.S. Department of Education. Restricted Access Data License Control Number: 06011044.

Students enter the top tier from wealthy families and leave it for the best-paying jobs. How have we gotten to a place where we profess meritocracy but apparently condone the reproduction of class privileges?

Yale's Story

This book explores these questions through a history of admissions at Yale. Why is Yale's story relevant to the whole nation? How does it illuminate the social-class dilemmas of our entire higher educational system?

Yale is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in America. Its role in our society, from colonial times to the present, has been extraordinary. Founded in 1701 by Puritans who thought Harvard, established in 1636, had gotten lax, Yale's original purpose was the same as its rival, to provide a supply of educated clergy to Calvinist Congregationalists in New England. By the time of the American Revolution, however, Yale was already producing more lawyers than ministers, and careers in industry, trade, and banking took off after the Civil War.[14] Throughout our history, Yale has provided prominent lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and politicians, and perhaps it is for the latter that Yale is best known today.

Yale graduates play an exceptional role in the political life of our nation. First, and most visibly, there is Yale's eminence in presidential politics. When George W. Bush, a fifth-generation Yalie, completes his second term in office and steps down in 2009, a Yale man will have been sitting at the president's desk for twenty years. And the last time there was a presidential election without a Yale man on the ticket for either of the two major parties was in 1968.[15] Since 1974, when Richard Nixon resigned and was replaced by Gerald Ford, we have had only Jimmy Carter's administration when a Yalie was not either the president or vice-president of the country; by 2009, that unbroken occupancy of the White House will have lasted twenty-eight years.[16] Commenting on Yale's presidential record during the Bush/Kerry contest, an author wrote in the *Yale Alumni Magazine*, "The fundamental and clearest presidential pattern at Yale is the extraordinary power of privilege: the intense web of connections knitting together America's upper classes through family ties, business relationships, philanthropic and civic activities, social and recreational life, and of course, education."[17]

The incongruity between Yale's public meritocratic image and the author's reflections on its upper-class networks did not elicit any critical comments from readers of the publication.[18] Apparently, insiders are not surprised by blunt statements on Yale's class composition.

Moving from the White House to the Supreme Court, Yale's record is second only to Harvard's. Yale's two graduates on John Robert's court are outnumbered by Harvard's five (counting Ruth Bader Ginsburg's unhappy time at Harvard, John P. Stevens is the only Supreme Court justice without any student days at Harvard or Yale).

In other branches of government, in the recent past there have been four state governors with Yale degrees.[19] And in 2004, there were thirteen Yalies in the House of Representative and seven in the Senate.[20]

Although Yale's image may be enhanced by its association with those who walk the corridors of power, it cannot take direct credit or blame for the actions of alumni in political or judicial office. Its impact on the world of higher education, however, is another matter. For centuries, Yale has consciously attempted to be a leader to the whole of higher education, and it has enjoyed considerable success in that endeavor. When Yale's president in 1967, Kingman Brewster, Jr., spoke to an alumni officers' convocation on higher education, he expressed the traditional view on Yale's leading role. Mixing terms from the cloister and the boardroom, he told the alumni assembled,

> I think it's fair to say, without being too officious or self-congratulatory, and I hope not smug, that it has been and is the ancient privilege of endowed free universities of this country, particularly in the northeast, . . . [to be] the yardstick, not only for the independent rivals in the Ivy League and elsewhere, but the yardstick for the fast growing and very rapidly improving state institutions in the west and far west. This is an industry in which the yardstick is the independent and the private institution even though quantitatively, it acts for a smaller and smaller share of the total market. . . . Yale University is . . . one of the fortunate few whose tradition and endowed strength has permitted it to have a really discernible impact upon the standards of universities everywhere.[21]

Smug or not, Brewster was right. Many aspects of American colleges, ranging from a liberal-arts curriculum to the use of financial-needs-blind admissions, have derived their legitimacy from Yale. Without Yale, the Scholastic

Assessment Test (SAT) would not have come into such prominence in college admissions across the entire country. There are many educational practices in the United States for which, unlike presidential policies, one can place praise or censure on Yale's shoulders.

The final reason why Yale is the right place for this story is that it has been one of the two colleges, the other being Harvard, featured in histories on the rise of America's meritocracy. No other colleges have been singled out as being as crucial to the abolition of family privilege and to the introduction of academic merit as those two.

Meritocratic Controversies

For decades, Yale and its elder sibling Harvard have taken center stage in tales on the fabled downfall of the old Protestant Establishment.[22] Once, the story goes, America had an inbred upper class. It resided in brownstone townhouses and country estates in the northeast, attended Protestant, frequently Episcopalian, churches, and sent its sons to ivied colleges. Both church and college consecrated, within faux-medieval gothic walls, a stuffy deference to Anglophile tradition. It hired John Singer Sargent to paint scenes of its domestic bliss, and politely objected to unflattering depictions of its clannish customs in novels written by Edith Wharton, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. It built yacht clubs, museums of fine arts and symphony halls, and listened to its panegyric in Cole Porter's (Yale class of 1913) Hollywood musical *High Society.* For a time, stretching from just after the Civil War until the late 1950s, America's best colleges and top professions were dominated by old-money Protestant families, WASPs,[23] who cared more about one's listing in the *Social Register* than about one's intellectual competence. Then, according to historians and journalists, meritocratic subversives got into control of admissions at Harvard and Yale, and the world of the WASP was undone.

The tale is told of how Harvard and Yale became meritocratic in the 1950s, admitting the best brains as judged by the SAT without regard to social pedigree; this allegedly produced, as the *Economist* calls it, "an academic and social revolution,"[24] first in the Ivy League and later in America's most powerful and high-paying occupations. Intellectually gifted newcomers

elbowed aside the old-money Protestant gentlemen, making their way up in life through educational and corporate institutions rather than by family networks or wealth. Family privilege was dethroned, and self-made meritocrats were now in command. As David Brooks, the newspaper opinion journalist, puts it in his book on the new elite, "Admissions officers wrecked the WASP establishment."[25]

Although skepticism about the historical veracity of the preceding seems in order, accounts of the triumph of meritocracy are too numerous and influential to be ignored. The most recent in-depth version of this story is told by Nicholas Lemann, dean of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, in *The Big Test.* Lemann provides a dramatic narrative, featuring Yale University, on the supplanting of WASPs or, emphasizing its Episcopalian affinities, what Lemann calls "the Episcopacy . . . [by] a new elite chosen democratically on the basis of its scholastic brilliance."[26] By the early 1960s, Lemann argues, the meritocrats had won.

Furthermore, Lemann presents a very strong case for the interpretation that meritocracy came about through the conscious efforts of WASP-insider subversives. Lemann's cabal of class traitors included James Bryant Conant, president of Harvard; Henry Chauncey, Harvard's freshman scholarship dean and founding president of the Educational Testing Service (ETS); Henry "Sam" Chauncey, Jr., Henry's son and special assistant to the president of Yale; Kingman Brewster, Yale's debonair president; and R. Inslee "Inky" Clark, Jr., Yale's young dean of admissions. They all, as Sam Chauncey told the *New York Times*, "believed in meritocracy."[27] Harvard's and Yale's presidents, their admissions deans, and the father-son Chauncey team that bridged Harvard, ETS, and Yale, were meritocracy's midwives. What Lemann said of Henry Chauncey in his *New York Times* obituary may also be attributed to the group as a whole: "Henry was [a] creature of the old elite. . . . There's some irony in the fact that he . . . work[ed] ceaselessly to replace the elite he grew up in with a new elite that he probably wouldn't have been in."[28]

Lemann's history has respectable company. Venerable sociologists, such as E. Digby Baltzell, S. M. Lipset, and David Riesman,[29] were among the first to identify the meritocratic tide, and contemporary economists and sociologists, including the editor of the *American Journal of Sociology*, continue to frame research questions with reference to meritocracy's alleged accomplishments.[30] The quality press, such as the *New York Times*[31] and the

Economist, hardly miss an opportunity to use filler from the meritocratic narrative in a range of articles, not just in those on admissions or standardized tests.[32] Major historians of higher education, such as Roger Geiger, concur on the timing and trajectory of meritocracy's ascent.[33] Even the authors of the controversial *Bell Curve* provided a brief historical sketch[34] on the victory of meritocracy that, unlike their claims on race and I.Q., was not disputed.[35] The triumph of the test-takers is part of the conventional wisdom of our age.

It is fair to say that there is a widespread consensus on the timing (the decade of the 1950s), point of origin (Harvard and Yale), and significance (the shift from social to academic selection) of higher education's meritocratic makeover. The only issue in dispute among those who subscribe to the meritocratic narrative is whether the change in the nature of admissions produced a minor or major change in the social composition of elite colleges. There are two schools of thought on the social effects of meritocratic admissions.

Those most optimistic about meritocracy, including Lemann and Brooks, believe that the Ivy League and kindred colleges were the venue where old socially selected elites were displaced by a new academically selected one in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The shift from "character" to "intellect" by the gatekeepers of academia produced a social revolution. The struggle over merit was not a sibling rivalry fought out within WASP families in which affable but dim-witted brothers in WASP families were left behind by their egghead siblings; rather, it was a conflict between families on different sides of a social divide. Meritocracy allegedly cancelled the "Episcopacy" supremacy.

There are, however, those who find this tale too optimistic. Those cautious about the impact of meritocracy, and their ranks would include Geiger and Riesman, acknowledge that all is not bright and new in the land of merit. These cautious authors offer a historically nuanced argument that places the emphasis on changes in the mechanics of elite selection. Their account may be summarized as this: the admissions process changed in the 1950s from being one determined by particularistic social connections to one driven by universalistic academic criteria. WASP families may have continued to have gotten a disproportionate number of their youths into elite colleges, but they did so thanks to the benefits of an affluent and cultured

home environment and the best preparatory schooling that money could buy, whether as housing in the right neighborhood or tuition at a private school. The mechanism of selection effectively changed, from social pedigree to academic profile, and that was as far as any reasonable person could expect things to go. Children of privilege may still be winning the competition, but the rules of the race were rewritten in the 1950s and the academic contest is now essentially fair.

Meritocracy, however, also has its discontents who judge both the optimistic and the cautious versions of the story to be more myth than historical fact. A school of thought that originated with the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) finds both versions of the rise of meritocracy tale naive. Bourdieu articulated a type of symbolic competition theory of society, using baroque statistics and opaque communication skills. As Brooks pithily puts it, Bourdieu had mostly "his atrocious prose style" to blame for not being known "as the Adam Smith of the symbolic economy."[36] Bourdieu does, nonetheless, offer a sophisticated explanation as to how both families and colleges at the top manage to remain there, generation after generation.

Bourdieu's departure point is the post–Second World War expansion of higher education and the ensuing importance of educational credentials to occupations. Privileged social groups, in particular managerial and professional career families, strive to stay ahead by equipping their young with educational credentials that are more elite than those widely attained by middle- and working-class youths. The best insurance the professional/managerial strata have that their investments in education will pay off is their patronage of a distinctly elite sector in the educational system.

Bourdieu sees every modern educational system as having a separate elite sector, whether formalized, as in France, or informal, as in the United States. At the level of higher education, in France they have the *grandes ecoles*,[37] but in the United States we have the Ivy League and its kindred private universities and liberal arts colleges. In both countries, the elite tier enrolls exactly the same relative amount, just 4 percent, of the student population. And naturally, the requirements of an elite sector presuppose the existence of a distinct non-elite sector for the unprivileged.

Bourdieu finds that prestigious colleges will protect their elite status by differentiating themselves as much as possible from their non-elite rivals. Elite colleges have a market niche and brand name to defend; in the course

of doing so, they will place a different emphasis than non-elite universities on admissions criteria, the curriculum, and the extracurricular experience. If state universities, such as Michigan, have historically admitted students based on their subject-specific competence, to study mostly in the sciences while living either at home or in beehive dorms, elite private colleges, such as Yale, have selected students using aptitude tests, to study the liberal arts in residential country-club like surroundings.

Students from families with different economic and cultural resources are, according to Bourdieu, everywhere systematically sorted into elite and non-elite educational institutions. Although it was for Bourdieu a simplification, nevertheless, one could say, "students generally tend to choose the institution . . . that requires and inculcates the (aesthetic, ethical, and political) dispositions that are most similar to those inculcated by their family."[38] There is a structured harmony of student aspirations and institutional selection. For example, in the ostensibly open, yet highly stratified system of higher education in the United States, approximately 74 percent of all undergraduates attend their first-choice, and 20 percent their second-choice college—leaving minor difficulties with matching individual preference and institutional choice to a mere 6 percent.[39] It is not an exaggeration to say that college-bound youths in the United States know where they belong. And our youth's sense of place is, according to Bourdieu, determined by their inheritance of what he calls "cultural capital."

Professional/managerial strata families have the cultural capital to instill in their children the capacity and drive to succeed in schools. By cultural capital, Bourdieu means a familiarity with highbrow-cosmopolitan culture and the possession of a personal style and aspirations that resonate with teachers and admissions officers as signaling sophistication, talent, and intellectual promise. Cultural capital has been shown to enhance one's academic performance,[40] and to increase the likelihood that one will apply to, and attend, an elite school.[41]

With the benefit of Bourdieu's intellectual framework and research findings, one would not expect that either the logic of Ivy admissions or the composition of elite colleges would have changed significantly during or after the 1950s. Bourdieu would anticipate that the overriding imperative of elite admissions would be to maintain the market position of top-tier colleges by sustaining their intimate relation to upper-class families. Elite

private colleges are like luxury goods firms that must sell status intangibles to a clientele rich enough to purchase the indulgence. The ultra-quality of the good and the exquisite sensibilities of the consumer are interdependent; the transaction validates both the academic excellence of the seller and the best-of-the-brightest status of the buyer. Although the cosmetic composition of students in the top tier may alter to disguise the continuity at its core, top colleges will never divest themselves of their traditional clientele. Nothing—not SAT scores, or the admission of Jews, women, or Blacks—will get in the way of the exchange between elite colleges and wealthy families.

In sum, Bourdieu would see a harmony between the market needs of elite colleges and the class interests of their clientele. The criteria used in admissions will match the qualities that privileged groups carry with them, and the result of this mutual recognition will be social reproduction disguised as a fair and meritorious academic competition. Bourdieu gives us a third way of thinking about the history of elite admissions in the United States.

In the rest of this book, we will weigh the evidence in light of these three perspectives: the optimistic, cautious, and critical visions of meritocracy. Perhaps none of them has gotten the history and sociology right, but they ask the right questions. Did the admissions' criteria or the application of it change in the 1950s or subsequently? What was the impact of the SAT on admissions? Whether or not the rules for admissions changed, were the WASPish ranks of the upper-class reduced or eliminated in elite colleges? Did alumni offspring lose their privileges? And if anything changed, was that because of internal subversives or because of external trends that elite colleges had little control over? In sum, how much inherited privilege or equal opportunity has there been in elite admissions? How responsible are elite colleges for their own performance records on privilege and opportunity? And what is the social role of America's top college tier today?