

What's Really Wrong with America

John Staddon



Accepted: 15 July 2020
© The National Association of Scholars 2020

People are not equal. Get over it!

America is in trouble. Logic has fled. Facts have little or no effect. What is the source of this mess? Race.

“Generally peaceful” riots destroy the centers of several of America’s most liberal cities. Many see the disturbances as a legitimate response to the scourge of racism: looting is “reparations.” “Antiracism” infects every college and every major media outlet. At the same time black Americans occupy more legislative seats, comprise a goodly number of executive branch office holders (including recently, the Office of President of the United States), dominate professional sports as the highest paid players, increasingly own sports teams, head Fortune 500 companies, run more legal offices, hold more teaching and educational leadership positions, lead more nonprofits, and control or lead more media and entertainment companies than ever before. Never mind! Racism, invariably undefined, is a growing threat.

Racial disparities—of wealth, health and family arrangements—cause alarm (well, the first two, at any rate). A *New York Times* headline proclaimed, “When I See Racial Disparities, I See Racism,” which is either stupid or dishonest.¹ Stupid, because disparities may have many causes

¹*New York Times*, March 14, 2018.

John Staddon is a psychobiologist and James B. Duke Professor Emeritus, Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University; jers@duke.edu. He last appeared in these pages in fall, 2020 with his article “Variation and Diversity: A Tribute to Freeman Dyson.”

other than racism; dishonest if the speaker—in this case a professor called Ibram X. Kendi²— knows this but blames “racism” anyway. Kendi and his fellow bestseller author Robin DiAngelo flourish despite their illogic: “White fragility”? “White hostility”? “White Fatigue”? “White predicate calculus”? (well, the last one was made up. But note that a Brooklyn College professor, Laurie Rubel, argued in summer 2020 on Twitter that the mathematical equation $2+2=4$ “reeks of white supremacist patriarchy.” Rubel’s tweet was retweeted and promoted by several academics at universities and colleges around the nation.)³ How ridiculous can you get? Are we now, in a secular, faithless world, seeing the results of some unplumbed human instinct, some need to believe in the literally incredible, to give voice to obvious nonsense?

What Does *Equal* Really Mean?

Well, maybe. But I think there is a simpler explanation. Americans are obsessed with equality but don’t agree on what it means. Is it just “equal before the law,” or are people—should people—really *be* equal in all respects? The first is correct, it is the law; but the second is obviously false. People are not equally strong, equally beautiful, equally conscientious, or equally smart, and no amount of training/conditioning/(re)education will make them so. And these differences have consequences. A look at individual biographies shows that a person’s station in life can usually be traced to a combination of talent and luck. Luck in the form of “events, dear boy, events,” and cultural and economic inheritance; talent in the form of energy, application and ability.⁴ “Are not all students capable of success if given equal opportunity?”⁵ comments a recent college admissions report. Succeed? Yes, at something—but not at anything. You can’t have *liberté* without some *inégalité*.

Most will accept the reality of individual differences. But many refuse to accept that individual differences rarely arrange themselves evenly across groups. Red-haired people tend to be taller than people with straight black hair; women tend to be physically weaker than men; some black people are better

²né Ibram Henry Rogers. His work is described in Kelefa Sanneh, “The Color of Injustice,” *New Yorker* August 12, 2019.

³*White Methods: Racism and Methodology* by Zuberi, and Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Ben Zeisloft, “Math education prof: $2+2 = 4$ ‘trope’ ‘reeks of white supremacy patriarchy,’” *Campus Reform*, August 9, 2020.

⁴Attributed to Harold Macmillan, British Prime Minister.

⁵Scott Jaschik, “Thinking Twice About Testing,” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 24, 2020.

long-distance runners than any whites; black people on average score lower on some psychological tests than whites. For almost any trait or ability, some groups have more of it than others.

So people, and groups, are not the same, not equal in every respect. Yet the antiracism agenda seems to assume that they are, and that in a fair world, all would be equally successful. Inequality would vanish, “equality of outcomes” would be the norm.

In a failure of logic, some even claim that since in a fair world all would be equal, then by enforcing equality of outcomes we will arrive at a fair world.⁶ Which again is nonsense, because

The assumption of universal equality is false.

Even if it were true, even in a fair world, an equal, “flat” society would not result because some degree of hierarchy seems to be necessary to any complex society.⁷

Equality of outcomes can only be achieved through tyranny, which would eventually, inevitably, lead to a very unequal world indeed.

Caste

Recently, another analysis of race differences has come to prominence. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, a 2020 book by *New York Times* reporter Isabel Wilkerson, has made it to Oprah's Book Club and to rave reviews from the likes of the *New Yorker* and *New York Times*. Wilkerson likens American society to two other “caste” societies: India and Nazi Germany. England was not included although it also discriminated (and to some extent still does discriminate) by a kind of caste defined by accent, education, and ancestry: the cut-glass of the aristocracy versus the regional and cockney of the proles. The cockneys were not as badly off as the Dalits, though, because posh schools were available (to the richer low-caste members) or scholarships (to their brighter children) and elocution teachers provided a kind of phonetic cleansing at modest cost.

The point is that castes—*hierarchy* is a less tendentious term—are universal in human society, ranging from the rigid and highly codified, like India (although it is changing, of course) to the milder, less formal English version.

Ms. Wilkerson hints at a solution to the hierarchy problem:

⁶As is being proposed in California, via the repeal of Prop. 209.

⁷J. Peder Zane, “Physics, Biology and Economic Inequality,” *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 1, 2019.

Before 1965 . . . the United States was neither a democracy nor a meritocracy, because the majority of its population [women and African-Americans, presumably] was excluded from competition in most aspects of American life. . . . Anyone who truly believes in a meritocracy would not want to be in a caste system in which certain groups of people are excluded or disqualified by long-standing deprivations.

Meritocracy may be an acceptable solution to the evils of caste, then—though not to everyone. There is elite hostility to the whole idea. A well-publicized book on the topic by a Yale law professor ends with a chapter titled *The Myth of Merit*,⁸ which is an extraordinary denial of something basic to human society, namely the idea of virtue. It is a denial made necessary by the author's unwillingness to take seriously another idea: that people are not equal.

The idea of virtue is in fact a very old one. Wilkerson somehow omitted China from her caste list, which is unfortunate because China, until the Maoist revolution, had been a highly aristocratic, hierarchical, society; and because Confucian philosophy offers a meritocratic solution to hierarchic inequality that worked in China for a thousand years and in Britain from 1853 until the evaporation of the British Empire: selection of leaders through competitive examinations.

Daniel Bell is a Canadian political scientist who lives and works in mainland China. He is currently Dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University and professor at Tsinghua University. He has written an entire book in praise of Chinese meritocracy—being reintroduced in mainland China and already implemented in some form in Taiwan and Singapore.⁹

The point of Confucian meritocracy is to select the best leaders, with no respect to birth or wealth. Confucius took for granted that men (China was a patriarchy, alas) differ in their merit. He also knew, like Ms. Wilkerson, that merit was not restricted to the aristocratic class. Unlike Wilkerson, Confucius' aim was not to abolish the ruling class but to ensure that it was made up of the best people. This would ensure harmony in the country, and harmony is surely something of which we are now much in need.

Virtue is what Confucius was after. Ms. Wilkerson may have trouble with caste, but virtue may be something she can applaud. So, how can virtue be assessed? Bell writes:

⁸Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (Penguin Press, 2019); see also Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2020).

⁹Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).

To assess a person, [Confucius] says, we must carefully observe his actions and motives: “The Master said: ‘See what a man does; watch his motives; examine what he is at ease with. How can a man conceal his character? How can a man conceal his character?’”

Which gives us some idea of what Confucius, a good behaviorist apparently, had in mind.

University Admissions

Bell’s book traces many implications of Confucian meritocracy for the Western democratic system. But I will just end with some comments on universities. Two things from Bell’s book are relevant: First, people are not equal; Confucius knew it, we all know it, really. Second, it is a university’s business to select the applicants that can best profit from the “best that has been thought and said,” or the “higher learning.”

Of course, all private, and many public universities have selfish considerations.¹⁰ They must sometimes take account of other factors. We don’t know whether all four of Vice-President Al Gore’s children would have gained entrance to Harvard if their father had been less influential—a certain amount of bias is inevitable to sustain a private school (does this count as “diversity”?).

But above all, a college should not admit people who are unable or unwilling to handle its courses. A freshman class selected for merit will do well and will happily accept the ethos of the institution to which they have gained admission. Such a class will likely show some disparities: all racial groups will not be equally or proportionally represented. But if the selection process is truly aimed at some academically oriented version of Confucius’ virtue, no one should be either surprised or concerned.

Conversely, selection aimed at “diversity” will pick people for a characteristic completely unrelated to academic merit. Inevitably, many of the students selected in this way will find themselves alienated and unable to cope in an honest college with rigorous, traditional courses.¹¹ “Best abolish the courses or make them easier or more ‘relevant,’” will be a natural response.

¹⁰John Staddon, “The Self-Destruction of the Academy,” Heterodox Blog, May 26, 2020, <https://heterodoxacademy.org/teaching-ivory-tower-self-destruction/>

¹¹John Staddon, “Duke Divinity School’s Race to the Bottom,” James G. Martin Center, April 16, 2018, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2018/04/duke-divinity-schools-race-to-the-bottom/>

“Your Students Will Be Different This Fall,” writes an “assistant professor of English and of gender, women’s, and sexuality studies” at the University of Iowa.¹² He proposes some student control over the curriculum, aka “equitable teaching practices.” “Let your syllabus be driven by learning goals, rather than coverage.” Will the students demand fewer equations and more stories? He seems to be o.k. with that. Unless taught in this new way, students will be unhappy, says the author. But I’m not sure they will be any more unhappy than usual, given the means by which they have been chosen. Putting the cart of diversity before the horse of merit is a major source of our current obsession with equality of racial outcomes.

An astonishing result of U.S. inability to deal with human differences is the widespread fawning by university presidents and other administrators over the antiracism movement.¹³ Since they cannot attribute racial disparities to the obvious—differences in interests or ability—they must invoke the phantasm of “systemic racism”¹⁴ to account for the failure and discomfort of some racial minorities.¹⁵

Universities should select as much as possible by merit. It is their failure to do so in recent years, not an imaginary systemic racism, that is the chief source of the “antiracism” deluge we all now confront. The Confucius Institutes are out, apparently, but perhaps Confucius should be back in?

¹²*Chronicle of Higher Education*. August 17, 2020.

¹³John Staddon, “An Open Letter to Duke President Price about Anti-Racism,” James G. Martin Center, Aug 11, 2020, <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/2020/08/an-open-letter-to-duke-president-price-about-anti-racism/>

¹⁴John Staddon, “How Real Is Systemic Racism Today?,” *Quillette*, January 25, 2019, <https://quillette.com/2019/01/25/how-real-is-systemic-racism-today/>

¹⁵Heather Mac Donald, “Conformity to a Lie,” *City Journal*, Summer 2020.