

“Natural Hierarchies”

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the socioeconomics of status hierarchies: how they respond to external demands, and how, in terms of institutional structure, they make themselves socially usable and durable. It asks whether there are, in some sense, “natural hierarchies”—hierarchies that will almost always emerge in sophisticated societies, regardless of sociopolitical or economic conditions. It highlights *adaptability* as the central functional feature that makes status rankings durable, and employs this measure to identify two kinds of “natural hierarchies”: wealth and seniority. Between the two, the former has drawn the lion’s share of political and intellectual attention, but the latter possesses similar functional advantages, and is likely just as pervasive across human societies, historical and modern. Like wealth hierarchies, seniority hierarchies also serve as generally useful proxies for most attributes that societies commonly value, are also relatively easy to use, and avoid direct normative conflict with most sociopolitical value systems even more adeptly than wealth hierarchies do. The term “natural hierarchy” is employed here in a purely descriptive sense, without any normative connotations whatsoever.

INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2006, I took an intellectually formative class on the Western legal tradition taught by James Q. Whitman. Among other things, it taught me how to seriously engage with the ideas of Max Weber, who Whitman matter-of-factly introduced to the class as “the greatest scholar of all time.” Eventually, I found myself sitting in the professor’s office on a chilly late March afternoon, discussing models of sociopolitical behavior. After about a quarter of an hour, evidently tiring of my futile attempts to make analytical sense, he leaned over, and stated in his most authoritative voice: “look, in the end, all human beings want two things—they want wealth, and they want status.”

Perhaps more than anything else I learned in law school, that distinctly

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Weberian statement has stayed with me in the years since. It speaks powerfully to two fundamental human urges: we desire material comfort, but beyond that, we also desire the recognition of others. The reduction of complex human behavior down to a small set of analytical dimensions is, of course, one of the primary drivers of social science research since the field's 19th Century origins, but the binary of wealth and status is an unusually attractive way to do so.¹ By incorporating status, it avoids the unidimensional oversimplicity of most modern economics. At the same time, status is also not such a capacious and ambiguous concept that it easily permits the analytical imprecision that has traditionally plagued cultural anthropological approaches.²

A deeper implication of the wealth/status binary is that the pursuit of wealth is rarely dependent on the pursuit of status. In other words, regardless of how a society constructs its status hierarchies, most members of that society will nonetheless still pursue wealth. As a result, they will almost always rank themselves according to their relative success in doing so. This suggests that wealth-based status hierarchies will almost always be a part of any given social fabric. On the other hand, status can also depend on factors other than wealth: some status is wealth-dependent in most human societies, but in almost no society is status entirely reducible to wealth. The correlation between wealth and power or influence is never perfect. For all these reasons, Weber, among others, saw "class" as ultimately a separate sociological concept from "status"—existing parallel to status hierarchies, and never wholly subsumed by them.³

Following this logic, social hierarchies defined more broadly seem to fall along a spectrum from "natural hierarchies" to "optional hierarchies": almost all human societies tend to reward individual wealth or seniority with some degree of higher status.⁴ Most value intelligence to some degree. Some, but not all, place a premium on physical strength, musicality, artistic talent, or family background. Historically, many also allocated status based on measures of religious or spiritual piety, but fewer societies do so in the modern world. Some hierarchies seem to have broader appeal and

1. For one somewhat broad-ranging survey of nineteenth century sociological thinking on these issues, see, for example, Reinhard Bendix, "Inequality and Social Structure: A Comparison of Marx and Weber," *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 2 (1974): 149-61.

2. See, e.g., Paul B. Roscoe, "The Perils of 'Positivism' in Cultural Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 97 (1995): 492.

3. Max Weber, "Class, Status, Party," in *The Inequality Reader* (Routledge, 2018), 56-67; Nicholas Gane, "Max Weber as Social Theorist: 'Class, Status, Party'," *European Journal of Social Theory* 8, no. 2 (2005): 211-26.

4. On seniority hierarchies, see, for example, Paul M. Baker and G. Gray Eaton, "Seniority Versus Age as Causes of Dominance in Social Groups: Macaques and Men," *Small Group Research* 23, no. 3 (1992): 322-43; Ronald Fischer, "Rewarding Seniority: Exploring Cultural and Organizational Predictors of Seniority Allocations," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 148, no. 2 (2008): 167-86. More generally, see Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality* (1998); Murray Milner Jr., *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture* (1994).

applicability than others. What, then, explains the relative universality or narrowness of a status hierarchy’s sociopolitical appeal?

The obvious answer is, as many have argued, that some human needs are simply more fundamental and universal than others: all human beings desire material comfort, health, and longevity. Nearly everyone desires intelligence in modern societies. Not everyone cares about physical strength, art, music, or religious piety. As a result, some hierarchies are more “natural” than others. It all comes down to inherent demand.

The vulnerability of this line of reasoning is that it may assume too much of “inherent” demand, and perhaps too little of the malleability of human preferences. No one would deny that almost all human beings desire wealth, but whether this translates into a socially salient hierarchy depends on the existence or absence of certain legitimating mechanisms: whether that desire is recognized as morally or sociopolitically legitimate, and whether it contradicts other measures of subjectively legitimate sociopolitical prestige. Certainly, rankings of wealth seem to matter less in some societies than others—here again, Weber would have much to say⁵—and may not matter much at all in some closely-knit societies. Hierarchies are ultimately subjective: they rely on perceptions of material fact, rather than those facts themselves.

Placing too much emphasis on inherent demand also overlooks the enormous structural differences between various kinds of hierarchies: wealth is a relatively salient thing, easy to measure and therefore easy to use as a ranking criteria, whereas ranking by, say, “virtue” or “intellectual quality” is often much more difficult and contentious,⁶ even though societal demand for those qualities is arguably just as “natural,” powerful, and sticky as societal demand for wealth. Do those kinds of supply-side differences make some hierarchies more popular than others?

Picking up on these strands of thought, this essay inquiries more deeply into the socioeconomics of hierarchies: how they respond to external demands, and how they make themselves socially usable and durable. It asks whether there are, in some sense, “natural hierarchies”—hierarchies that will almost always emerge in sophisticated societies, regardless of sociopolitical or economic conditions.

The term “natural” here, I should immediately clarify, is not employed in any normative or pejorative sense, but merely as a description of positive universality or near-universality. Many scholars will immediately recoil against the idea that there are “natural hierarchies” in either a normative or

5. Weber’s tendency to connect rationalization and class would seem to limit the latter’s usefulness in at least some social contexts. See, e.g., Erik Olin Wright, “The Shadow of Exploitation in Weber’s Class Analysis,” *American Sociological Review* (2002): 832–53.

6. See, e.g., Raymond Case Kelly, *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue Among the Etoro* (University of Michigan Press, 1993).

a descriptive sense, and would instead prefer to discuss how best to dismantle hierarchies. While it is easy to sympathize with the normative discomfort, the basic facts are that all societies in human history have been organized around some collection of sociopolitical hierarchies, that some kinds of hierarchies are much more prevalent and powerful than others, and that a completely non-hierarchical society seems nowhere on the horizon of human possibility. It is therefore still important to ask, as a matter of normatively neutral social scientific inquiry, whether some hierarchies are inherently more sociopolitically appealing than others—and why.

These questions manifest in both more specific and more general variations: are some hierarchies, given certain external conditions, more sociopolitically salient or powerful than others? More generally, are some hierarchies, almost regardless of external context, more durable and functionally usable than others? Ultimately, how do societies choose between different kinds of hierarchies—if they really have a choice at all?

The core argument here is that, while wealth hierarchies are indeed more “natural” than most other kinds of hierarchies, they are hardly the only kind of “natural hierarchy.” At least one other kind of hierarchy—gerontocracies, which rank individuals by age and seniority—possesses nearly all of the functional advantages of ranking by wealth, and is likely just as pervasive across human societies, historical and modern. Like wealth hierarchies, seniority hierarchies also serve as generally useful proxies for most attributes that societies commonly value, are also relatively easy to use, and avoid direct normative conflict with most sociopolitical value systems even more adeptly than wealth hierarchies do.

There is a considerable amount of preexisting academic writing on these issues, particularly by sociologists,⁷ but the theorizing attempted here is qualitatively different in several ways: whereas most previous work begins by categorizing various hierarchies and tracing their historical prevalence, this essay proceeds by laying out the mechanisms of demand and supply that hierarchies respond to. It is therefore a more abstract and functionally generalizable exercise. Second, it also pays considerably greater attention to the institutional structures of hierarchies, and therefore places greater emphasis on the supply-side differences between them. Third, rather than seeing hierarchies only as vessels of social dominance, it also highlights their more positive, indeed indispensable, contributions as organizational structures that make long-term collective action possible. Finally, it highlights, perhaps uniquely, *adaptability* as the central functional feature

7. See, e.g., Tilly, *supra* note 4; Milner, *supra* note 4; Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984); Roger V. Gould, “The Origins of Status Hierarchies: A Formal Theory and Empirical Test,” *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 5 (2002): 1143-78.

of “natural” hierarchies.

The remainder of the essay is organized as follows: Part One looks at the demand side—what kinds of socioeconomic conditions are likely to produce demand for what kinds of hierarchies. Part Two looks at the supply side—the organizational structures and conceptual characteristics of specific kinds of hierarchies. Part Three takes a closer look at wealth hierarchies. Part Four extends the analysis to gerontocracies. A short conclusion follows.

PART ONE: DEMAND

To some social scientists, even to some economists, speaking of “demand for social hierarchies” is inherently problematic, because hierarchies can easily precede any social perception of demand or supply.⁸ That is, we know what we want only because our deeply ingrained sense of sociopolitical ranking allows us to generate downstream rankings of material or psychological preferences. Just like some would argue that “politics cannot be separated from economics,”⁹ or “the state precedes the economy,”¹⁰ it is tempting to believe that hierarchies precede normal economics to the point where we cannot speak of external demand for them.

There is undoubtedly some truth to this, at least in the sense that many socioeconomic demands are produced by deeper sociopolitical beliefs about hierarchy and ranking. For example, some cultures may be conditioned to demand academic achievement because their sociopolitical hierarchies allocate higher status to those with higher academic performance. Imperial China after the rise of the National Examination System might be the most powerful historical example of this. Others—ranging from Ancient Greek societies to modern American ones—might demand athletic performance simply because their sociopolitical hierarchies value physical excellence.

Nonetheless, the causal arrow also goes in the other direction. External conditions—economic, geopolitical, technological—might make some hierarchies so attractive that no amount of institutional or cultural path dependency can truly resist their allure. Countries that previously valued martial valor or aristocratic birth over academic accomplishment might be forced to readjust after major innovations make it necessary to quickly learn the new technologies. Any number of Non-Western countries seemed to undergo some adjustment of this nature in the nineteenth and twentieth

8. See, for example, some of the literature summarized in Ann Jennings and William Waller, “Constructions of Social Hierarchy: The Family, Gender, and Power,” *Journal of Economic Issues* 24, no. 2 (1990): 623-31.

9. Ellen Meiksins Wood, ““The Separation of the Economic and Political in Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 127 (1981): 66.

10. David Grewal, *The Invention of the Economy* (forthcoming).

centuries.¹¹ Alternatively, countries that traditionally eschewed martial prowess might be forced to value it more if they are placed into hostile geopolitical circumstances. Within the Chinese context, various segments of Song history offer particularly compelling examples, in which an aristocratic bureaucracy that vocally distrusted its military agents was periodically forced to give them higher political status in light of military setbacks and crises.¹² It is ultimately hard to deny that any give hierarchy will function better under some external conditions than others, and for that reason alone it makes sense to speak of “demand for (certain kinds of) social hierarchies.”

Societal demand for hierarchies comes along two dimensions. The first is demand for hierarchies *in general*: for the most part, no sustained collective action can emerge among even several dozen people without the existence of at least some kind of hierarchy. As economists and sociologists have argued for many decades, sustained collective action usually requires some sort of governance structure, which by definition requires some sort of hierarchy—and some sort of social superstructure that can produce that hierarchy.¹³ Purely egalitarian collective decision-making, democratic or otherwise, tends to be enormously costly when sustained for more than a few rounds.

Beyond that general need for social coordination and organization, the demand for *specific* kinds of hierarchies varies enormously from society to society, and tends to be multi-dimensional. The remainder of this Part attempts to break such demand down into three different analytical categories: functionality, clarity, and acceptability/legitimacy. There is, needless to say, conceptual overlap between these qualities, but they are also substantially different from each other.

First and foremost, given that hierarchies are, in part, solutions to collective action and social coordination problems, they need to be able to produce somewhat reasonable decision-making—at least, they cannot impede it too severely, and should ideally facilitate it. Granting higher status to those who are incapable of intelligent decision-making will almost always lead a society into ruin. For example, allocating status primarily on the basis of musical talent will probably produce disastrous political

11. Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (2017); Adrian Wooldridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent* (2021).

12. Cheng-Hua Fang, *Power Structures and Cultural Identities in Imperial China: Civil and Military Power from Late Tang to Early Song Dynasties (AD 875–1063)* (Brown University, 2001); Peter Lorge, “Military Institutions as a Defining Feature of the Song Dynasty,” *Journal of Chinese History* 1, no. 2 (2017): 269–95.

13. Mancur Olson, *Theory of Collective Action* (1965); Brent Simpson, Robb Willer, and Cecilia L. Ridgeway, “Status hierarchies and the organization of collective action,” *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 3 (2012): 149–66; Harold Demsetz, “The Theory of the Firm Revisited,” *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 4, no. 1 (1988): 141–61.

decision-making in times of geopolitical or economic crisis. There is simply a baseline of purely functional rationality that any social hierarchy should—and in most cases, must—abide by: the kinds of sociopolitical elites any social hierarchy produces must be reasonably adept at dealing with the primary sociopolitical challenges that society faces. Insofar as hierarchies are a means of social ordering and power allocation, and insofar the goal of such ordering and allocation is reasonable decision-making, the means must meet the ends, at least to some extent.

Second, good hierarchies must be relatively easy to identify and communicate. Figuring out where one stands in the hierarchy should be a relatively cheap and easy task, especially if that position can shift on a somewhat regular basis. Unless the goal is to inflict anxiety, confusion, anger, and perhaps fear, “hiding the ball” on hierarchical status is very rarely useful. Instead, the basis for status allocation within the hierarchy should ideally be easy to measure and apply, both externally to others and internally to oneself. For example, allocating status on the basis of, say, arm strength is usually easier to implement than allocating status on the basis of “virtue”: the former could be achieved simply by asking everyone in a community to lift weights, then comparing the outcomes, whereas the latter requires complex discussions on what virtue entails, and how to measure it.

That said, allocating status on the basis of arm strength will often—but not always—strike people as ridiculous and offensive, regardless of its relative clarity and ease of implementation. This leads to the third primary criteria, which is that the hierarchy needs to be socially accepted, if not outright perceived as legitimate, then at least accepted as a matter of subconscious habit. The costs of implementing and enforcing hierarchies through coercive force alone are almost always exorbitant, usually enough to render the hierarchy entirely unusable in practice.

The process of gaining social acceptance is, needless to say, enormously complex and multifaceted. While force of habit alone may in some cases suffice, it is usually necessary to conform to some kind of deeply held mainstream moral norm, which in turn begs the question of “how are mainstream moral norms formed.” Here, one can either believe, as a good Marxist presumably would, that moral norms are, over time, an inevitable product of material conditions, or that, as other strands of sociological theories would urge, they are at least partially contingent products of genuine, human choice and ideological/cultural construction.

Within the former paradigm, social acceptance of any given hierarchy likely depends on how it functions in a materialistic sense—and here we go back to the first criteria discussed above—unless some group of individuals are blinded by “false consciousness” and cannot properly realize their true

material interests.¹⁴ Within the second paradigm, “false consciousness” is an inevitable part of any collective conscious, and simply refers to the nearly universal phenomenon of human reasoning through shared cognitive shortcuts, symbols, and assumptions, in other words, through shared culture and ideology.¹⁵

In either theoretical paradigm, external circumstances—or cultural/ideological perceptions of external circumstances—will inevitably change over time and space, which means that hierarchies that conform to some set of societal norms may become obsolete once those norms evolve into something else, either in reaction to external shocks or because of internal reconstruction. Societies that valorize martial prowess may choose to allocate status primarily on the basis of military performance, but may then want to abandon that hierarchy once peace arrives in sustainable fashion. Political norms in democratic societies can lurch from one moral focal point to another in even less predictable fashion, as some people seek to benefit from becoming iconoclasts, or as the lower rungs of any given social hierarchy begin to rebel against it in the absence of salient upwards mobility.¹⁶ In many cases, mainstream societal norms simply mutually contradict, and as a result, hierarchies that conform closely to one set of norms may violate another set.

The most durable hierarchies therefore tend to be those that can plausibly agree with a wide variety of social mores and external conditions. In some cases, this might be because the criteria they valorize carry significant functional value in most conceivable contexts—hierarchies of natural intelligence, for example, almost always exist in some form for this reason. In other cases, as in the case of wealth, virtue, or seniority hierarchies, it is because the criteria are normatively malleable; they can be interpreted or justified along a multitude of normative dimensions, and are therefore compatible with many different understanding of social value.

Some scholars might argue that there are additional demand-side conditions that have not been mentioned above: for example, good hierarchies need to provide for relatively smooth power transitions, perhaps they should also allow for some amount of upwards mobility. To a considerable extent, these conditions are simply manifestations or combination of the previous three conditions: the need for smooth power transitions, for example, simply refers to the need for socially accepted selection and ranking criteria that are clear and easy to administer—a combination of conditions two and three. If there are indeed such criteria in any given society, power transitions will generally be smooth.

14. These issues are discussed in some detail in Taisu Zhang, *The Ideological Foundations of Qing Taxation*, at ch. 7 (2023).

15. *Id.*

16. See, e.g., Paul Taggart, *Populism and ‘Unpolitics’* (2018).

The demand for upward mobility, on the other hand, does not appear to be truly universal—at least, not as a descriptive matter, even if it is always normatively desirable. Rigid caste systems or aristocracies that allow for very little upward mobility have, across human history, persisted in large societies over multiple centuries.¹⁷ Depending on their internal structure and the external social conditions they operate under, they are sometimes able to both supply adequate decision-making and acquire high levels of social acceptance—and if they are able to do both, there is no obvious reason why they cannot be socially successful. Historical experience suggests otherwise, regardless of how morally repugnant that may seem to modern sensibilities. Nonetheless, under the moral norms of many societies, perhaps most of them, some level of upward mobility is necessary for social acceptance.

In summary, durable and successful hierarchies will likely possess some combination of functionality, clarity, and acceptability/legitimacy. The argument is not that these are necessarily the *subjective* reasons why human societies produce hierarchies—there can be many materially self-interested or psychological reasons for doing so—but rather that successful hierarchies need to provide at least a reasonable amount of these qualities. Hierarchies that are severely dysfunctional in a materialistic sense will almost certainly die out over the long run, no matter their immediate subjective appeal to the current population. Similarly, hierarchies that have inherently ambiguous criteria—but nonetheless purport to separate people into higher or lower rank—will tend to trigger unrest and eventual revolt over time, even if there are vested interests who currently support them.

How, then, are these qualities actually supplied? We could say, of course, that hierarchies supply functionality by elevating individuals whose talents and endowments are well-suited to external circumstances, or that they supply acceptance by conforming to mainstream social mores, but those are essentially tautological answers. Part Two attempts to provide better ones.

PART TWO: SUPPLY

The ability of any particular hierarchy to supply reasonable decision-making, comprehensible rankings, or social acceptance depends heavily on the hierarchy’s structural and conceptual characteristics. Hierarchies operate along two different dimensions: first, they offer what we might call a “hierarchical concept”: a set of criteria by which to rank people, such as wealth, age, gender, intelligence, strength, and so on. Beyond that, they manifest in specific sociopolitical circumstances as concrete institutional structures: a system of government that only allocates positions of authority

17. Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (1980); William Doyle, *Aristocracy: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP Oxford, 2010).

to the relatively wealthy, a system of kinship organization that ranks all kinsmen first by generation, and then by age, a system of bureaucratic selection that makes promotion into the officialdom conditional upon superior examination performance, and so on.

The conceptual logic of any given hierarchy will almost always guide and constrain its institutional manifestation, but institutional structures can also exert, in the opposite direction, certain conceptual pressures. For example, an intelligence hierarchy that manifests as an examination structure may, over time, reshape its understanding of “intelligence” based on the institutional inertia of that structure, seeking to justify institutional realities by adjusting conceptual criteria.¹⁸

The institutional and conceptual characteristics of hierarchies are as infinitely variable as the institutional and conceptual characteristics of governments and social networks, given that both usually embody some form of hierarchy. Nonetheless, some useful categorization is possible. Depending on how easily measurable their criteria are, hierarchies vary dramatically in the amount of institutionalized administration they generate. Generally speaking, the amount of institutional support a hierarchy requires is negatively correlated with its conceptual clarity and simplicity. Age and seniority hierarchies, for example, require relatively little administration, because it is very often easy to tell, just from appearances, whether an individual is older or younger than someone else. Even the more complex kinds of seniority hierarchies, such as those based on generation rather than just age, only require simple record keeping to function well.

Compare that with, for example, intellectual merit hierarchies, which can only exist on the back of complex institutional infrastructure. Because intellectual merit is such a malleable category, an intellectual merit hierarchy cannot function without a much more precise definition of what merit entails. Once that definition has been produced, often through considerable social conflict and negotiation, some institutional framework must then be constructed to measure intelligence and allocate rewards: examinations—entrance examinations for bureaucracies, schools, organizations, and so on—are the most common mechanism, and they impose large administrative costs, especially when done at scale. The more nuanced and complicated the definition of intellectual merit—for example, “the ability to understand Confucian classics,” as opposed to “the ability to do college-level calculus”—the more complex the measurement institutions need to be.¹⁹

18. See, e.g., Hilde De Weerdt, *Competition Over Content: Negotiating Standards for the Civil Service Examinations in Imperial China (1127–1279)* (Brill, 2020).

19. See, e.g., Benjamin A. Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (University of California Press, 2000); Ssu-yü Teng, “Chinese Influence on the Western Examination System: I. Introduction,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7, no. 4 (1943): 267–312.

Whether this kind of multi-layered institutional infrastructure can be successfully constructed depends on the both the sociopolitical coherence of the underlying society and the material resources available to it. Sociopolitical coherence can be supplied either through closely-knit social ties or, when such ties are absent, through some sort of authoritative state-like governance structure. The tighter social bonds are (or the stronger the authoritative entity is), the greater the ability of that society to sustain institutionally complex hierarchies.

Hierarchies can, of course, produce sociopolitical coherence themselves, but at time zero—when the seeds of a hierarchy are first sown in any given society—they can only rely on preexisting social capital. One can easily imagine, therefore, a loosely-connected society with weak top-down governance initially running on simple hierarchies such as age or physical strength, if indeed they have stable hierarchies at all. At a later time, taking advantage of the sociopolitical coherence that the simpler hierarchies provide, they evolve into more complex hierarchies such as intellectual merit or religious piety.²⁰

A second way to categorize the structure of hierarchies is to look at the actual sociopolitical inequalities they produce: how fine-grained are they? What is their demographic distribution? Different hierarchies produce sharply different levels of social differentiation. For example, gender hierarchies are perhaps one of the coarsest hierarchies one could envision: historically, they tend to separate societies into only two groups, a usually male upper class, and a usually female underclass. Within each gender group, the gender hierarchy itself provides no differentiation whatsoever. Racial hierarchies are often comparably coarse, even under more sophisticated racial oppression regimes like Jim Crow America or Nazi Germany.²¹ Compare that with, say, strict age hierarchies, which can produce a nearly complete ranking of individuals in any given society, limited only by the coarseness of measurements of time, or with wealth hierarchies, which can at least produce a much finer social ranking than gender or race.

If the core social justification for having hierarchies at all stems largely from their ability to support effective collective action, then coarser hierarchies would seem to provide less of that ability. Gender and race hierarchies may exclude a significant portion of the population from high-level decision-making, but they provide no further guidance on who has authority over whom within the still voluminous group of racially and gender-wise privileged persons. As a result, in larger societies with greater

20. Paul H. Rubin, “Hierarchy,” *Human Nature* 11 (2000): 259-79; Benoît Dubreuil, *Human Evolution and the Origins of Hierarchies: The State of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

21. The two have a complex interactive history. See James Q. Whitman, *Hitler’s American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

collective action problems and needs, they always need to be reinforced or supplemented with hierarchies that provide more fine-grained social differentiation—whereas the reverse is not necessarily true. As a result, it is much easier, especially in this day and age, to imagine a race or gender equal society that nonetheless employs finer social hierarchies such as wealth or seniority, than to imagine a society that has discarded all finer hierarchies, but continues to recognize race and gender inequality.

Finally, there are also major differences in the sociopolitical adaptability of hierarchical status allocation criteria: can the hierarchy be sociopolitically functional—in the very basic sense discussed in Part One—across a wide range of external contexts, or is it only appealing under fairly narrow circumstances? The key conceptual characteristic here is the adaptability of the selection criteria, and whether it potentially synergizes with a wide range of human attributes. For example, a hierarchy based on physical strength has very little synergy with any human attribute beyond strength—it only rewards investment in strength. In contrast, wealth hierarchies potentially reward, depending on social circumstances, investment in strength, health, agility, just about any kind of intelligence, and a wide range of emotional characteristics. This is because wealth is a socially constructed proxy measure that potentially responds to any human characteristic that society values: assuming sufficiently high amounts of social demand, one can become wealthy by being strong, athletic, charismatic, smart, knowledgeable, creative, well-connected, et cetera.

This means that wealth hierarchies are functionally viable under a much wider range of external conditions than physical strength hierarchies: the latter will simply make no sense in societies where the highest value labor is intellectual in nature, rather than physical. In contrast, the former can adapt to any number of social, economic, or political conditions: societies that value physical strength above all else can nonetheless tolerate wealth hierarchies because their physically strong members will likely be able to amass considerable wealth. Societies that value other traits—certain kinds of intelligence, charisma, or inherited privilege perhaps—can also tolerate wealth hierarchies, insofar as wealth can be a proxy for nearly any combination of socially desirable traits. After all, wealth is simply a measure of how well one can accumulate scarce resources within a social context. It is an *inherently* adaptable concept.

One functional downside—among many potential downsides—of using something like wealth as a proxy for other qualities is that wealth is never a *perfect* proxy for any of them. It likely correlates to intelligence, but not perfectly so; it likely correlates to charisma, but not perfectly so, and so on. If a society knew for sure what kind of personal quality it valued most highly, it would almost certainly benefit more from a hierarchy based directly on that quality than from a wealth hierarchy. The problem, of

course, is that almost no society is ever fully committed to a single human quality. Instead, societies are complex entities in which different qualities vary in desirability across space, time, and social context, which partially explains why highly adaptable hierarchies like wealth tend to be much more stable, and therefore common, across human history than hierarchies that directly commit to a single human trait.

To some extent, the stability of hierarchies is itself a socially desirable characteristic: changing from one hierarchy to a substantially different one necessarily produces a changing of the guard among the sociopolitical elite, which is never a painless process. Turmoil, strife, and even outright civil warfare, are common outcomes of elite reconstruction. Society as a whole may or may not have a powerful interest in avoiding these costs—under some circumstances, the costs of change, however large, are simply outweighed by the costs of stagnation—but the preexisting body of elites will almost always prefer to keep their status, thereby creating powerful social demand for adaptable hierarchies that allow them to sustain their privileges.

One might imagine that adaptable hierarchies tend to be less easily measured than substantively narrower hierarchies, but this is not necessarily the case: in modern societies, wealth is as easily measured as physical strength, and arguably more easily measured than intelligence or political charisma. The adaptability of the former lies in the connection it has with substantive human qualities, not in the opaqueness of its primary ranking criteria.

PART THREE: WEALTH AS A “NATURAL HIERARCHY”

By this point, the considerable sociopolitical advantages of wealth hierarchies—social systems that *allocate status on the basis of wealth*, which is conceptually and functionally distinct from systems that *allocate wealth to people of higher status*—should be relatively obvious. First, they provide a fairly robust range of functionality: not only do they supply a fine-grained ranking of persons that can provide structure to most kinds of collective action, but they also do so in a highly adaptable fashion, insofar as the determinants of wealth can respond to major changes in external socioeconomic or political conditions. Second, wealth hierarchies are relatively easy to measure and require relatively little institutionalized administration. At the very least, their social existence does not require much administrative machinery, and wealth is one of the most publicly salient personal characteristics. Third, given their functional adaptability, wealth hierarchies also tend to be normatively malleable, potentially agreeing with a wide range of social mores, and therefore potentially retaining—at least as a matter of positive social fact—a significant measure of moral legitimacy across a wide range of sociopolitical conditions.

All three of these points have been flagged in the preceding discussion, but they also require some additional elaboration here. First, insofar as the social functionality of hierarchies stems largely from their ability to support somewhat intelligent collective action, wealth hierarchies are unlikely to crash and burn in many, perhaps most, socioeconomic circumstances. Assuming social acceptance of the hierarchy, they can offer some amount of at least moderately sensible social ordering in nearly any context, within nearly any collection of individuals, and therefore can facilitate collective action in nearly any context. Given the ability of wealth to channel just about any kind of socially valuable trait, wealth hierarchies also have an unusually elastic capacity to provide non-ridiculous decision-making under most socioeconomic conditions.

The problem with wealth hierarchies is, of course, their tendency to self-reproduce, and therefore entrench inequality and escalate social tension. That said, historically, wealth hierarchies have not always led to serious status ossification. Quite the opposite, for much of the early modern and modern era, *nouveau riche* commercial classes upending the status quo of landed privilege was a fairly common theme across Eurasia.²² Moreover, even if wealth hierarchies can produce ossification, the fluidity of market economies generally means that, in the short term, they always seem to offer at least some opportunities for upward mobility.

That said, the more fundamental, and perhaps unsavory, observation is that status ossification does not necessarily lead to poor functionality. It may well lead to less social acceptance of the hierarchy—more on this below—which can damage the hierarchy's ability to coordinate collective action, but there is no obvious reason why low levels of social mobility necessarily produces poor collective decision-making *per se*. There seems to be at least a somewhat substantial possibility that specializing in sociopolitical leadership might, in at least some cases, actually produce superior decision-making.²³

Second, wealth tends to be one of the more externally observable personal characteristics, especially in commercialized economies. We all know of billionaires who attempt to be socially inconspicuous, but—leaving aside the social conspicuousness of that very act in many cases—the fact remains that it is usually fairly easy to observe, even casually, whether someone is rich or poor based on their consumption habits. Moreover, when push really comes to shove, when the rich really want to make themselves known, it is usually not terribly difficult, in most cases, to verify whether they actually are as wealthy as they claim, especially in the internet age. Information

22. See, e.g., William D. Rubinstein, "New Men of Wealth and the Purchase of Land in Nineteenth-Century Britain," *Past & Present* 92 (1981): 125-47.

23. But see Magali Sarfatti Larson, "The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis," *Class: The Anthology* (2017): 263-86.

about personal wealth, compared to information about many other socially valued traits such as intelligence or knowledge, tends to be fairly precise, externally salient, and not terribly costly to produce. For example, in most early modern societies, land registries sufficed to provide a largely accurate measure of personal wealth.²⁴ In modern societies, a combination of tax disclosures and land records can provide a similar function, but there are also numerous, relatively accurate, private data sources on the very rich.²⁵

In fact, wealth hierarchies historically tend to thrive in the *absence* of powerful administrative bureaucracies or closely-knit social communities: in medieval England, for example, wealth-based sociopolitical hierarchies became more prominent after the Black Death ravaged the closely-knit manorial communities that had previously structured rural society, and also after the aristocracy decentralized power from the crown in the 15th Century.²⁶ More recently, in 19th and 20th Century Eurasia, wealth hierarchies tended to step into the vacuum left by deteriorating moral economies, but then often had a somewhat antagonistic relationship with powerful welfare states or socialist regimes.²⁷ This seems to further reinforce the idea that wealth hierarchies are especially attractive when societies otherwise lack authoritative structure. This speaks, at least partially, to their low administrative and informational costs.

The cheapness of wealth information also stems from the fact that most people in most societies are usually willing to display at least some markers of wealth: named donations, board memberships, houses, cars, attire, accessories, and so forth. This was usually true even in medieval societies where public displays of wealth were sometimes morally or religiously condemned. In fact, one has to look to twentieth century communist regimes to find large societies in which public displays of wealth were seriously detrimental to one's safety or social standing—and even then only for wealthy individuals who were not simultaneously politically powerful.²⁸

The deeper point here is that wealth hierarchies have usually been socially acceptable—to some significant extent—in most human societies in documented history, which brings us to the third basic requirement discussed above: that the hierarchy be perceived as sociopolitically

24. See e.g., R.R.A. Walker, “The Genesis of Land Registration in England,” *Law Quarterly Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1939): 547.

25. Some of these databases are discussed and utilized in, for example, Stephen M. Horan ed. *Private Wealth: Wealth Management in Practice* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

26. See e.g., Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* (Simon and Schuster, 2001).

27. See, e.g., James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 315 (Yale University Press, 1977); Elizabeth Fox Genovese, “The Many Faces of Moral Economy: A Contribution to a Debate,” *Past & Present*, no. 58 (1973): 161-68; Edward P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past & Present* 50 (1971): 76-136.

28. Wayne Sandholtz and Rein Taagepera, “Corruption, Culture, and Communism,” *International Review of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 109-31.

legitimate. This seems to be a somewhat tricky proposition, given that contemporary leftist politics often see wealth hierarchies as the primary social evil that they aim to eradicate.²⁹ That said, why is this the case? Is it not because two centuries of liberal and progressive politics have already leveled, or have made major progress in leveling, most other major forms of social hierarchy that permeated human society in, say, 1780—but wealth hierarchies remain stubbornly prevalent and socially tolerated? Aristocratic privileges, caste systems, religious hierarchies, express racial hierarchies, express gender hierarchies—in most countries that have now elevated wealth hierarchies to the center of their contentious politics, these other forms of status allocation have already suffered severe, in some cases fatal, damage.³⁰ In other words, wealth hierarchies have already proven to be more durable than most other forms of social ranking.

The reason for this may be as simple as “everyone wants wealth.” As noted at the very beginning of this essay, the human desire for material comfort and pleasure—and therefore for wealth—does not depend on any connection between wealth and status. As Whitman suggested to me all those years ago, it simply exists independently. What this means, therefore, is that most societies will find some way to ideologically, culturally, or morally justify the pursuit of wealth, and that any society that attempts to fundamentally vilify it, to the point where there are *no* status benefits to wealth, will have considerable difficulty doing so. The latter may be possible in short bursts, or in highly socially homogenous, closely-knit communities,³¹ but it will likely be impossible to sustain over the long run across any kind of large, somewhat diverse society. The history of communism across Eurasia seems to support this as strongly as any other stretch of human history.³²

The liquidity of wealth in a privatized economy is another reason why wealth hierarchies tend to be at least somewhat socially acceptable. Although the possibility of upwards status mobility need not be, as discussed above, an immutable prerequisite for social acceptance of any given hierarchy, hierarchies that offer some subjectively appreciable possibility of upward mobility are almost certainly more likely to gain acceptance across a larger range of sociopolitical contexts. The fact that few

29. See, e.g., Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (Harvard University Press, 2020); Gerald Doppelt, “Rawls’ System of Justice: A Critique from the Left,” *Nous* (1981): 259-307.

30. See *supra* note 11; see also Ellis Wasson, *Aristocracy and the Modern World* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

31. Anthropologists are fond of identifying such examples. See, e.g., Barbara Yngvesson, “Leadership and Consensus: Decision-making in an Egalitarian Community,” *Ethnos* 43, no. 1-2 (1978): 73-90; James Woodburn, “Egalitarian Societies Revisited,” *Property and Equality* 1 (2005): 18-31.

32. Richard Pipes, “Human Nature and the Fall of Communism,” *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 49, no. 4 (1996): 38-53; Simon Kemp, *Was Communism Doomed?: Human Nature, Psychology and the Communist Economy* (Springer, 2016).

wealth hierarchies are completely ossified—and when they are, it is usually because they are merged with other kinds of more rigid political hierarchies—likely contributes to their sociopolitical adaptability. Even today, when upward wealth mobility is much more difficult in major economies like the United States and China than it was a couple of decades ago, it would still be inaccurate to say that such mobility has completely vanished as a significant socioeconomic phenomenon.³³

Combined, these characteristics offer some insight into why wealth hierarchies are so pervasive across human history, almost regardless of time or geographical location. It is, in fact, hard to think of any large society—anything that extends beyond the boundaries of a few closely-knit communities—that allocated *no* status benefits on the basis of wealth. Many societies, ranging from any number of medieval European societies to late imperial Chinese society, morally condemned wealth accumulation, but then provided numerous ways for the wealthy to convert their riches into explicit sociopolitical status anyway.³⁴

Here again, it is worth emphasizing that allocating status on the basis of wealth is not the same as allocating wealth on the basis of status. It is emphatically not the case that wealth hierarchies are the only way for societies to marshal their material resources for large-scale collective projects: they can, for example, accomplish the latter simply by concentrating wealth in the hands of the sociopolitical powerful, whether as their private property, or as state-owned assets placed within their discretionary management. In fact, one could even argue that wealth hierarchies make large scale governmental spending more difficult, at least insofar as they tend to link private wealth accumulation and political power in largely irreversible ways. It is therefore not the case that wealth hierarchies are functionally necessary for large scale human development. Their nearly-universal appeal probably does not stem from material necessity, but rather from their inherent sociopolitical malleability and adaptability. Wealth can capture almost any socially desirable human trait, and this allows wealth hierarchies to adapt to almost any kind of external circumstance.

PART FOUR: SENIORITY AS ANOTHER “NATURAL HIERARCHY”

Wealth hierarchies possess a number of functional advantages that contribute to their sociopolitical ubiquitousness, but they are not the only kind of hierarchy that possess these characteristics. Seniority hierarchies—gerontocracies, in some form—qualitatively provide many of the same

33. Scott Winship, “Economic Mobility in America,” *INQUIRY* (2018); Suoyi Tan et al., “Mobility in China, 2020: A Tale of Four Phases,” *National Science Review* 8, no. 11 (2021): nwab148.

34. Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Cornell University Press, 1983); Taisu Zhang, *The Laws and Economics of Confucianism* (2017), ch. 4.

functional advantages, and in some important dimensions possess quantitatively more of them.

Modern intellectual discourse often scoffs at seniority hierarchies as ossified remnants of premodern times, or perhaps, with no small amount of orientalist bias, as one of the “backwards” features of Eastern cultures.³⁵ In the postcolonial era, many Eastern intellectual discourses have similarly adopted a fairly hostile attitude towards ranking by seniority, seeing it as a major obstacle to “modern” meritocracy and sociopolitical “progress.”³⁶

Despite all this, seniority hierarchies retain an enormous amount of influence in almost every modern society, just as they featured prominently in most premodern ones. Compensation and rank in many workspaces, ranging from the largest Anglo-American law firms to almost any Japanese companies, to most academic departments and government jobs in nearly any country, depend very heavily on seniority, as opposed to more direct measures of job performance.³⁷ Socially, status within almost any kinship network, as small as a handful of people or as large as a couple hundred, depends at least partially on generational seniority.³⁸ Implicit seniority hierarchies—the idea that “some people are too young for some jobs”—permeate even the most capitalist and individualist of modern socioeconomies.

The most obvious reason for the widespread popularity of seniority hierarchies is simply that, objectively speaking, they are functionally sensible under a wide swath of sociopolitical circumstances: to a significant extent, human intellectual ability and social competence increase with age. As a result, well-run societies and organizations are rarely run by the young, and often by the old. Just as wealth is often a reasonable proxy for socially valued traits like intelligence, charisma, or connectivity, many of these traits also positively correlate with age and seniority.

There are several correlational mechanisms at work here: on the one hand, individuals tend to accumulate knowledge, technical or social, over time. They also accumulate sociopolitical connections and, in many cases, wealth. Intellectual sharpness may peak around middle age, but even there the correlation with age is positive for at least the first half of most individual lifetimes, and often more than that. On the other hand, in societies with relatively low life expectancies—which describes the vast majority of human societies across history—advanced age also tends to

35. For a more negative take on this discourse, see, for example, Kyong-Dong Kim, *Confucianism and Modernization in East Asia: Critical Reflections* (Springer, 2017).

36. *Id.*

37. Ronald Fischer, “Rewarding Seniority: Exploring Cultural and Organizational Predictors of Seniority Allocations,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* 148, no. 2 (2008): 167-86.

38. For a theoretical treatment of kinship networks, see, for example, Douglas R. White and Paul Jorion, “Kinship Networks and Discrete Structure Theory: Applications and Implications,” *Social Networks* 18, no. 3 (1996): 267-314.

select for socially valued traits, in the sense that those who possess such traits are much more likely to live longer, not least because they are probably better at accumulating material wealth.

In that sense, seniority, like wealth, is a sort of compound proxy for multiple kinds of positive human traits. Like wealth, seniority hierarchies offer societies the ability to weather multiple kinds of external circumstances—each of which might demand a different functional trait—through the same sociopolitical structure. It therefore supplies, like wealth, a relatively large amount of functional flexibility and adaptability, in the sense that gerontocratic societies are able to produce functionally adequate leadership across diverse material or geopolitical terrain.

It should be acknowledged that, as socioeconomically adaptable as seniority hierarchies tend to be, they are probably somewhat less adaptable than wealth hierarchies. Wealth is almost infinitely adaptable, capable of channeling almost any positive social trait—except, perhaps, for certain kinds of cultural-religious virtues that explicitly denounce wealth accumulation. In contrast, seniority is perhaps a decent proxy for wisdom, experience, sociopolitical connections, and certain kinds of gravitas-based charisma, but it is not a decent proxy for physical strength and fitness, or even for certain kinds of intellectual power, particularly those related to mathematics or most forms of creativity.³⁹ As a result, the total set of external circumstances in which wealth hierarchies are adequately functional are almost certainly larger than those in which seniority hierarchies are functional. Nonetheless, the latter is still capacious enough to include arguably most kinds of stable economic conditions in which mental and emotional capacities are more important than physical ones.

Seniority hierarchies compensate for their relative lack of functional adaptability by outperforming wealth hierarchies in the other two criteria identified above: clarity and social acceptance. Wealth is often socially salient, but it can, of course, be hidden through some effort, whether legal, financial, or behavioral. In contrast, age is almost impossible to fully hide, even in the modern world, and certainly in the premodern one. Other than gender, it is one of the most externally salient features an individual can have.

If more precise measurements of age and generational seniority are desired, then all that is needed are birth registries of some kind. This is a vastly cheaper measurement technology than those needed to measure wealth: wealth measurements, such as property records, tax returns, and so on, need to be constantly updated for accuracy, but seniority measurements need only be recorded once—at birth—to be fully accurate for perpetuity. Generally speaking, the latter have historically been one of the cheapest and

39. On intelligence and aging, see, for example, Nathan Brody, “What is Intelligence?,” *International Review of Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (1999): 19-25.

most widely available kinds of personal information that governments or social groups collected and disseminated on a large scale.⁴⁰

There are, of course, reasons why individuals would like to hide their demographic information, especially from a state that taxes on the basis of population, but such reasons tend to apply much more strongly to wealth. For obvious reasons—land is immobile, whereas people move around—most large pre-modern states tended to prefer land taxes to head taxes, which gave private parties greater incentives to hide wealth than demographic information. By the 1600s, most Eurasian states had moved away from taxing population altogether in favor of land taxes or commercial taxes. In modern societies, demographic information is more often used for welfare dissemination than for fiscal extraction, whereas wealth and income still tend to be the primary basis for taxation. As a result, the supply of birth information has become largely voluntary and costless, whereas the collection of wealth information still needs to be reinforced by coercive force, sometimes at significant cost.

In terms of social acceptance, seniority hierarchies also have significant advantages over wealth hierarchies. If the social acceptability of wealth hierarchies stems at least partially from the fact that there everyone desires material wealth (or at least enough wealth to supply material comfort), then it is no less true that almost everyone wants to live long,⁴¹ which gives seniority hierarchies a similar kind of intuitive appeal. In most societies, even in liberal democratic ones, they are arguably one of the least controversial types of social hierarchies. At least one subtype—the general social dominance of adults over children—is almost entirely uncontroversial, almost anywhere in the world.⁴² For other subtypes, the general complaint is that they are sometimes inefficient, concentrating power in the hands of people who may have lost a step intellectually and physically, or who have shorter time horizons,⁴³ as opposed to “unjust,” “unfair,” or “exploitative,” which are the most common accusations lodged against wealth hierarchies. It is not hard to see which of those accusations tends to arouse stronger sociopolitical passions.

40. On the use of birth records in premodern history, see, for example, Fabian Drixler, *Mabiki: Infanticide and Population Growth in Eastern Japan, 1660-1950* (2013); and Constance A. Cook and Xinhui Luo, *Birth in Ancient China: A Study of Metaphor and Cultural Identity in Pre-Imperial China* (2017).

41. *Star Trek* fans might be reminded here of Spock’s customary greeting: “live long, and prosper.” While there can be significant ambiguity in the meaning of “prosper”—particularly over its connection to material prosperity—there is no ambiguity in the meaning of “live long.”

42. For a recent take on how parent-child relations should change in light of increased longevity, see, for example, Naomi Cahn, Clare Huntington, and Elizabeth Scott, “Family Law for the One-hundred-year Life,” *Yale Law Journal* 132 (2022): 1691.

43. Nonetheless, even in liberal democracies, the political power of seniors remains very high. Raul Magni-Berton and Sophie Panel, “Gerontocracy in a Comparative Perspective: Explaining Why Political Leaders are (Almost Always) Older than Their Constituents,” *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 1 (2021): e12841.

In fact, many social fairness arguments work in favor of gerontocracies: almost by definition, older people have, collectively, worked longer than younger generations, which means that, under most “just desserts” theories, they are morally entitled to more wealth and status. They have also provided care, nourishment, and education to younger generations, without which those generations would have perished or underdeveloped, and are therefore, under most relational moral theories, entitled to the latter’s gratitude, respect, and some significant amount of deference. This idea is as natural to a Catholic as it is to a Confucian, and permeates most human societies.

Moreover, seniority hierarchies tend to be *relatively equitable*, at least over an entire life cycle. Everyone ages, and while the rich and powerful tend to live longer on average, their advantage is almost never large enough to deny the less materially fortunate a substantial share of high status positions.⁴⁴ In societies where access to healthcare is relatively equal, seniority hierarchies are arguably one of the most effective ways to level the sociopolitical status playing field, in that they create micro-level command structures that support at least some forms of collective action, but also do so in ways that gives the vast majority of individuals a somewhat equal treatment across their entire lifetimes. Compared to the wealth-based hierarchies we observe in most contemporary human societies, gerontocracies would clearly produce a far more equitable social ordering, giving the poor far greater voice in social and political affairs.

The main problems with seniority hierarchies are twofold: as noted above, if pushed too far, they would concentrate decision-making power in the hands of people who are well past their intellectual peak—as societies age, this concern becomes increasingly serious. Second, it seems unjust to concentrate power in the hands of those who have shorter time-horizons: seniors might favor short-term returns over long-term investments, much to the detriment of younger populations. We see this latter effect, for example, in the pension politics of many countries, or in the politics of environmental policy.⁴⁵

These are indeed serious defects, but they do not argue against the basic existence of seniority hierarchies so much as they caution against its overuse and overextension: the first issue is common addressed—reasonably successfully—through institutional rules such as mandatory retirement ages or minimum capacity requirements for certain jobs. The latter issue has historically been minimized through religious and moral

44. An example of how these dynamics work out can be found in Zhang (2017), *supra* note 34.

45. See, e.g., Hans-Werner Sinn and Silke Uebelmesser, “Pensions and the Path to Gerontocracy in Germany,” *European Journal of Political Economy* 19, no. 1 (2003): 153-58; Markus Tepe and Pieter Vanhuyse, “Are Aging OECD Welfare States on the Path to Gerontocracy?: Evidence from 18 Democracies, 1980–2002,” *Journal of Public Policy* 29, no. 1 (2009): 1-28.

systems that encourage individuals to internalize the interests of their offspring.⁴⁶ While recent social trends towards individualism and low birth rates in high income countries dampen the effectiveness of these systems, they remain quite powerful in most parts of the world, and may well deserve to be revived elsewhere.

No social hierarchy, operating on its own, is without some kind of serious defect—wealth hierarchies, too, produce sociopolitical tensions and inequities that we are all too familiar with, as does nearly any kind of meritocracy. The real issue is whether its defects can be remedied or minimized at reasonable cost, at least to the point where the hierarchy becomes socially acceptable. From that perspective, seniority hierarchies again have quite a lot going for them: in most societies, retirement rules are not that costly to maintain, while parental altruism towards their own offspring hardly needs to be encouraged. Compare that to what societies often need to do to reduce the sociopolitical tensions created by wealth hierarchies: vast social welfare states, backed with enormous amounts of taxation and human capital.

All in all, seniority hierarchies seem to possess many of the traits that made wealth hierarchies “naturally” pervasive: they, too, are highly adaptable across a wide range of socioeconomic and political terrain; they are relatively cheap and easy to administer; and they tend to be socially acceptable. Compared to wealth hierarchies, whatever seniority hierarchies lack in the adaptability compartment, they likely more than make up in the clarity and social acceptability dimensions. This makes them especially powerful in times of sociopolitical turmoil, during which societies cannot afford to spend many resources on the administration of social hierarchies, and therefore tend to move away from high-maintenance hierarchies like academic meritocracies towards simpler and lower cost criteria, such as wealth and seniority, but especially the latter. Indeed, the common observation in Asian history that extended kinship networks, usually organized around principles of seniority, become more powerful during times of chaos and disorder may well stem from this exact mechanism.

For all these reasons, seniority hierarchies are very likely just as prevalent across human history as wealth hierarchies, if not even more so. Certainly there are numerous major societies that expressly condemn giving status on the basis of wealth, but few that condemn respecting one’s elders.

CONCLUSION

Modern societies may find the very idea of a “natural hierarchy”

46. On the behavioral aspects of parental altruism, see, for example, Joseph G. Altonji, Fumio Hayashi, and Laurence J. Kotlikoff, “Parental Altruism and *Inter vivos* Transfers: Theory and Evidence,” *Journal of Political Economy* 105, no. 6 (1997): 1121-66.

repugnant, committed as they usually are to nominal ideals of egalitarianism and individual equality. The only kind of generalized hierarchy they seem to openly endorse is a meritocracy, in which status is given to those of demonstrated superior ability. The very idea of a “meritocracy,” however, is empty unless we know the criteria by which “merit” is evaluated—and here there is often no social consensus. In the United States, for example, liberals seem to value academic achievement, but conservatives much less so, to the point where this has become a point of political tension in recent years.⁴⁷ There is less open hostility to the idea of intellectual meritocracy in most parts of East Asia, but even there its specific contours are hard to pinpoint across time: for example, the dominant idea of political performance—and therefore political “merit”—in China was, for most of the past 4 decades, the speed of GDP growth, but that has recently been replaced with a much more ambiguous basket of indicators.⁴⁸ After centuries, in some cases millennia, of debating the idea of “merit,” it remains amorphous and variable across most societies.

That kind of variability is, as this paper has argued, exactly the reason why substantively adaptable “proxy hierarchies” like wealth and seniority tend to enjoy an almost universal presence in complex human societies: if the specific human qualities that a society desires inevitably change and vary over time and space, but some socio-institutional continuity of social order is nonetheless desirable—at least to those in power—then very often the only way of accommodating both of those realities is to adopt status criteria that can adapt to the change and variation. Wealth and seniority hierarchies arguably do so more effectively than any other kind of status hierarchy. For better or worse, they are “natural hierarchies” that will likely be with us as long as human society remains messy, complicated, and ever-changing.

To fully capture this reality, we might make the following revision to Whitman’s succinct summary of human incentive structures: “in the end, all human beings want *three* things—they want wealth, they want to live long, and they want status.” Because of their inherent adaptability, the first two items in that trinity exert outsized influence on how the third is socially produced.

47. See, e.g., Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (Taylor & Francis, 2017); Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* (Penguin UK, 2019).

48. See, e.g., Hongxing Yang and Dingxin Zhao, “Performance Legitimacy, State Autonomy and China’s Economic Miracle,” in *Debating Regime Legitimacy in Contemporary China* (Routledge, 2018), 174–92; Taisu Zhang, “Xi’s Law-and-Order Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 27, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/xis-law-and-order-strategy>.