

# Introduction



## What the book is about

This book is a collection of several previously published academic papers, a book review, a lecture, many newspaper and magazine articles, a few previously unpublished pieces and some material that until now had only appeared online in web publications. What is included here errs towards material published in more recent times, concerning very recent events and, in a few cases, a short extract from a longer piece is included to ensure that the whole book is easier to read because all the parts are easily digestible. In some cases I have included some additional material not previously published alongside the original piece. Usually this has been done to provide more sources than the original publication format allowed. Newspapers tend not to allow footnotes. The whole text has also been lightly edited to bring it all to a similar style, and to standardize formatting and referencing. There is a foreword on page xi, very kindly written by Mary O'Hara, someone a little more detached than I am from this work.

The book is arranged in nine sections into which the fifty-two chapters have been ordered. The sections range from writing on social mobility and educational immobility, to ideas over injustices in general, and the ideologies which prolong them. There is a common theme of the tenacity of unfairness in most of the material and also of how it matters where you live and move to in terms of what happens to you and yours. The title of the book comes from playing around with various ideas about fairness. The sections divide the material roughly by subject, telling a story that begins with talking about the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and ending with what we can do about it. None of these articles was originally written to be placed with the others, but they have been ordered to try to tell a series of stories, and each section, each set of stories, is introduced with a very short story explaining the thinking across each particular set of papers.

The chapter titles are taken from the original titles of each paper or a shorter subsection of those original titles. Many of the chapters were jointly authored and some have been reprinted before, so a footnote is usually given at the start of each chapter detailing who was involved in the writing and where else it might have appeared. Editorial notes have also been inserted to update information to include details from 2011 in various places.

### **Who the book is for**

The idea of this book is that it should be something you can easily hold in your hand, something you might want to read from start to end, which is why it is 120,000 words in length, with an index for looking up issues of interest and to allow cross-referencing. It is arranged as a book for people who want a book to read, not a reference work, so each chapter has been included because it is short and hopefully readable. As a consequence most papers I have published in medical journals are excluded, as are longer and sometimes stodgy pieces in more worthy journals and almost all book chapters I have written in recent years (they are too long). I have also left out a great many papers on mapping world distributions which are very similar to each other (each looking at a different topic by using maps of the same style from the website [www.worldmapper.org](http://www.worldmapper.org) that my colleagues and I have been working on during most of the last decade). Another mechanism used to cut down the selection is to ensure that most of the articles here are quite recent, and to be included they have had to have been on a topic that could be grouped in sections worth reading together.

The book is for students in the social sciences, both undergraduate and postgraduate, who are interested in how arguments can be made that range across a wide variety of fields, across a variety of print media and of subjects. *Fair play*<sup>1</sup> is also targeted at that small group of the general public interested in topics like this and so aims, in title and choice of subjects, to be popular and accessible. The book had been put together with journalists and political commentators in mind as well. This is partly why the vast majority of the material here comes from work published mostly in the last five years, if not in the last two years. It is also collated here to save other academics time. If you want to know what I *think* I think – read this collection.

Most academics in elite universities and many university students do have access to most of the material reprinted here through their online library subscriptions to journals, but by including only a small section of papers here (and by taking extracts from a few more) I am, in effect, saying “if you

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<sup>1</sup> The book was originally to be titled *Playing fair*. “Fair play” sounds a little more posh, but it means the same thing. If the book were aimed at younger adults, or a less select group of adults, it would be titled differently.

were going to read anything of what I've done, if I were you I would read this." Finally it is far cheaper and easier for someone to buy and read this book than it is for them to print out even a section of this work from the web; it is far more enjoyable to read it on paper than on a computer screen (or even on a hand-held Kindle although you might dispute that depending on how you are reading this right now!). Put in book form here, you can remember where it is you read it, and can use the index to find something you only half remember. The book ends with a half page bibliography showing what is included and excluded and where there is access on the web for those who wish to read the full versions of any truncated articles, or for those who wish to grab graphics from anything shown here, put their own copy in Endnote, some other library software, or do whatever they may wish with it. The book also has an accompanying website where many of the figures are made freely available including the data from which they were derived. At [www.shef.ac.uk/sasi](http://www.shef.ac.uk/sasi) a link can be found to that website.

### **Why was the book put together?**

*Fair play* concerns contesting the need to live in an increasingly unfair world, and beginning that contestation locally by illustrating just how unfair life in Britain is. Britain is a place where many people like to pride themselves on 'sticking to the rules', but where we recently discovered that large numbers of our representatives in parliament often broke their own rules on expense claims. Our MPs felt themselves to be above the rest of us. In Britain our governing parties often appear not to have the majority of the population's interests at heart, despite needing that majority to place them in power.

*Fair play*, as the titles of the sections of the book reveals, is about issues of inequality and poverty; about injustice and ideology; race and identity; education and hierarchy; elitism and geneticism; mobility and employment; bricks and mortar; wellbeing and misery; advocacy and action. However, in the remainder of this introduction this book begins not with Britain, but with a story of Nobel Laureates sitting around a lunch bench on a college campus in the United States of America. This story is required to explain why we need to be so vigilant to ensure that others really do have our best interests at heart, to ensure that they do not look down on us.

The key question underlying *Fair play* is the question of equality. Just how inherently equal are people? If people are created, conceived, even born, pretty much equal, then they do not deserve to be treated as differently as they are. The outcomes described in this book would, in this case, be grossly unjust. However, if there are great differences in different people's capabilities to learn, to understand, to create and to command, then much of the outcomes of the ways in which we organise society can be justified,

and we are ‘playing fair’. It would be fine then to look down on some people and up to others.

Ideologically our world is currently dominated by men who believe that they are particularly smart and that, although they might care for others, others can never quite be like them. Until very recently all women were part of that excluded group. Most people on the planet remain similarly excluded, the majority of them still women, but now excluded more through their poverty than their gender. The argument that we are all quite equal, all just as capable of being stupid as we are capable of being smart, begins with a story of five men – Joe, Karl, Ken, Paul and Larry – and a discussion two of them had over smartness.

### **Is he smart like us?**

Academia, understandably, is full of people who think that they are very clever. From the most downtrodden of lecturers in the most obscure institutions tucked away in the back of beyond, to those at the very peaks of recognition, almost all of them men, sitting in great seats of learning in the most eminent of learned institutions, there tends to be a common arrogance and conceit. This is hardly surprising to find in places where the stock-in-trade is the setting and passing of examinations. Places where collegiality is professed but comparison and constant competition is practised. The result has been termed ‘smartism’ and smartism can lead to a failure to play fair. Smartism makes us all more stupid.

In economics, until Elinor Ostrom was awarded a prize “for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons” along with Oliver E. Williamson “for his analysis of economic governance, especially the boundaries of the firm”, not a single woman had been awarded the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences (in Memory of Alfred Nobel) despite a prize having been awarded to one or more people every year since 1969.<sup>2</sup> The way debate in universities still tends to play out is a very masculine way, even in the social sciences where far more women work than in science or even the more human of humanities.

Before 2009 the most radical the Nobel Committee could be was to award a prize to someone like Joe Stiglitz. Joe is described as one of the few non-neoliberals to have been awarded the prize, and as being almost on “the side of the angels”,<sup>3</sup> so he is picked here for showing how widespread

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<sup>2</sup> Dorling, D. (2010) ‘Putting men on a pedestal: Nobel prizes as superhuman myths?’, *Significance*, vol 7, no 3, pp 142–4.

<sup>3</sup> George, S. (2008) *Hijacking America: How the religious and secular right changed what Americans think*, Cambridge: Polity Press (page 20, footnote for details on Joe and the prize, the angels comment coming from page 37 and being a little unspecific as to who is on-side or off-side with great precision when it comes to the angel team).

‘smartism’ is. It is necessary to name all these luminaries here as, if they were not named and the sources to these statements not referenced, then you may not believe that such conversations take place amongst the male intelligentsia (and no doubt amongst some women too). “But is he smart like us?” is a comment attributed to Nobel Laureate Joe, overheard as he was talking to Carl Shapiro.<sup>4</sup> It was revealed by Ken Rogoff later when he was having an argument with Joe.<sup>5</sup> The comment was said to have been made over a meal at Princeton University, one of the most eminent of learned institutions in the world.

## How to identify smartness

Joe was asking Carl, at lunch in Princeton, whether a man called Paul Volcker was ‘smart’. Paul Volcker has been described as the cigar-stomping chair of the Federal Reserve who raised interest rates in America in 1979, to reduce what he saw as the great evil of inflation. Incidentally, that inflation began, if you are looking for the immediate cause, with oil price rises as Iranian workers went on strike. For the causes behind the cause you need to know why they went on strike and why oil prices had been so low before they did. In response, in the United States, Paul apparently raised interest rates in the “full knowledge that a deepened recession would result.”<sup>6</sup> But it was not that which concerned Joe or Carl over lunch. What they wanted to know was whether Paul was ‘one of them’, one of the ‘smart ones’.

To answer Joe’s question in the round, we now know that whether you think someone else is ‘smart like you’ depends on the extent to which you like them. In experiments of the assessment of a fictional Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score, it was found by psychologists that for someone to ascribe a high score to someone else “required much more evidence when the person was an unbearable pain in the ass than when the person was funny, kind and friendly.”<sup>7</sup> Carl’s reply is not recorded, but the ‘clever’ reply would be, ‘if you like him, then he’s smart like us’.

If you do a little detective work you will find that the man Carl and Joe were discussing, Paul Volcker, despite the stomping, is often described as one of the more likeable of well known economists. Whether that is damning him with faint praise, or whether that gave him an advantage that day when his ears should have been burning, I leave to your imagination. Often economists appear not to want to be liked. Paul is blamed for bringing the

<sup>4</sup> Rogoff, K. (2002) ‘An open letter to Joseph Stiglitz’, 2007, from [www.imf.org/external/np/vc/2002/070202.htm](http://www.imf.org/external/np/vc/2002/070202.htm)

<sup>5</sup> Kay, J. (2004) (2nd edn) *The truth about markets: Why some nations are rich but most remain poor*, London: Penguin, p 381.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, N. (2005) *The endgame of globalization*, Abingdon: Routledge, p 132.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert, D. (2006) *Stumbling on happiness*, London: Harper Collins, p 170.

United States economy to a halt to squeeze inflation, and consequently being responsible for raising unemployment greatly. This was when he was running the Central Bank of the United States.<sup>8</sup> I don't want to add to the casting of aspersions here, what I want to do is to highlight what kind of discussions occur at the very apex of power in the social sciences and amongst policy-makers. These are just those discussions for which there is documentation.

I don't know whether Paul ever got the job or prize that Joe wondered if he was smart enough for. There is no record of why they were discussing his smartness. But whether he did or *not* will have probably depended as much on whether those judging him *really* thought him smart, not on any great actual differentiation by smartness but, as new research is beginning to teach us, on whether they found him likeable.<sup>9</sup> These men were playing a game no more or less sophisticated than that played by millions of children in school yards worldwide. They were deciding whether to include Paul in their gang or not. Their gang happened to be a very exclusive gang, but it was a gang nevertheless. The question was, were they playing fair?

### **From the politics of the playground to world stage politics**

Maybe because of, maybe regardless of, what Joe and Carl thought of Paul, by November 24th 2009 Paul was heading Barak Obama's Economic Recovery Advisory Board along with another fourteen men (and one woman: Laura D'Andrea Tyson). When heading the board Paul clashed with a man called Larry Summers, who was then director of the White House National Economic Council and another character in this short story. It was because of Larry that we now know all about that conversation over lunch in Princeton, but it is a tangled story. Playground politics can be as complex as the real thing because often the real thing is as much about the playground in which the elite have fun and get hurt, as it is about some mythical place high on a hill where our betters organise our futures for the common good.

Joe's comment was made public by a third man at that lunch table, Ken Rogoff,<sup>10</sup> reportedly in retaliation for Joe's lack of respect for Ken's mate Larry (Joe had 'dissed' Larry). Larry, then also known as United States Deputy

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<sup>8</sup> Irvin, G. (2008) *Super rich: The rise of inequality in Britain and the United States*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p 75.

<sup>9</sup> For some strange reason whether he is apparently likeable or not alternates on different days as opposing forces on the internet edit his biography. His Wikipedia entry by 8 May 2008 no longer described him as 'a lovely man', but this former chairman of the Federal Reserve was awarded that title on the same web page a day earlier.

<sup>10</sup> Later (and now former) chief economist at the International Monetary Fund (*Guardian* newspaper, 20 August 2008, page 22, described as 'the nutty professor' himself on page 23).

Secretary, Lawrence Summers, was a man who had described building free capital markets into the basic architecture of the world economy as "...our [the USA's] most crucial international priority".<sup>11</sup> Larry advocated being able to buy, sell, run and ruin the services which other nations were reliant on through building those free capital markets into the global economic architecture. Joe had had the audacity to describe actions such as Larry's as "...a curious blend of ideology and bad economics, dogma that sometimes seemed to be thinly veiling special interests".<sup>12</sup>

Joe was roundly lauded by those more aligned towards the political left as being correct to be suspicious of Larry's ideas and other propositions more commonly associated with the right. It remains the case, though, that just as Joe appears to believe that only a few people are as smart as he is, so too he imagines that economic theory provides a good lens through which to view the human world, but particularly his kind of economics. Moreover, since Joe's criticism of the World Bank, "...the Bank has become increasingly insistent, even strident, although it has made serious attempts to moderate its language, soften its image and mollify its critics".<sup>13</sup> And so Joe's intervention helped the World bank repackage its image.

While these men argue with one another they are also engaged in what can be seen as a common task: justifying various inequalities while arguing against others. Some want a more equal world, others think greater inequalities are inevitable, almost all believe they are much smarter than most of us.

Between his posts as Deputy Secretary and then Whitehouse Economic Council director, Larry Summers went on to become president of Harvard University, and was sacked for saying "...that innate differences between men and women might be one reason fewer women succeed in science and math careers".<sup>14</sup> Shortly after that Larry became a key advisor to President Obama, he is best remembered for having fallen asleep as the president was talking.<sup>15</sup> By 2011 he had been replaced and *The Economist* magazine was running stories entitled "Did Larry Summers ruin everything?".<sup>16</sup> These were stories concerning the advice he gave Barack Obama. If we put people on pedestals which none of us are (so able as to be) able to balance atop

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<sup>11</sup> Ball, S.J. (2008) *The education debate*, Bristol: The Policy Press, p 33, quoting Lawrence Summers' words of 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 33, quoting Joe Stiglitz from 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p 33, quoting Philip Jones writing in 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Bombardieri, M. (2005) 'Summers' remarks on women draw fire', *Boston Globe*, 17 January, [www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2005/01/17/summers\\_remarks\\_on\\_women\\_draw\\_fire/](http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2005/01/17/summers_remarks_on_women_draw_fire/)

<sup>15</sup> Ward, J. (2009) 'Larry Summers falls asleep while Obama talks', *The Washington Times*, 23 April, [www.washingtontimes.com/weblogs/potus-notes/2009/apr/23/larry-summers-falls-asleep-while-obama-talks/](http://www.washingtontimes.com/weblogs/potus-notes/2009/apr/23/larry-summers-falls-asleep-while-obama-talks/)

<sup>16</sup> *The Economist* (2010) 'Did Larry Summers ruin everything?', blog, 20 January, [www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2011/01/economic\\_policy](http://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2011/01/economic_policy)



we should not be surprised to see the great and the good so often fall off. Just two years before his fall from grace, the *New York Times* had quoted one ‘top economist’ saying of another: “Larry Summers is one of the world’s most brilliant economists.”<sup>17</sup>

## The antidote to playground politics

We need an antidote to talk of people being the “most brilliant” in one breath and then being labelled as idiotic in another. We need a way of not becoming obsessed with whether others are “smart like us” or much “smarter than us” or “not as smart as us”. We need ways of thinking which help others not suggest so often that just a few are at the forefront of humanity. What the examples above illustrate is that we need “...a change in social ethos, a change in the attitudes people sustain towards each other in the thick of daily life, [this] is necessary for producing equality...”<sup>18</sup>

Elitism is everywhere, clearly a core tenant of belief among the right-wing, but widespread even among supposedly progressive economists in the United States, and also readily found across almost the whole gamut of British politics. In Britain elitism is part of “... the Fabian tradition, [which] to some extent reproduces the mandarin fantasy of a public domain administered by a benign, disinterested, patrician elite”.<sup>19</sup> The left-wing mandarin fantasy, with its nuances of (and pretence towards) elite Chinese meritocracy, is that a few should be specially selected by examination to rule over the multitudes.

I do not believe that only some of you are “smart like us”. I do not believe that we, those who get to write books, are that smart – any of us. I do not believe that what we produce is the product of much more than the teaching we have received, our collaboration with others, hard work, the hard work of all those whose work we read, what we hear on radio and in lectures, what we see on TV, careful editing (by others), careful further checking (usually by others), all of which ends up having just a few people’s names within any book being acknowledged, and even fewer in collections such as this.

Literally hundreds of different people have edited the texts printed below; family, friends, colleagues, editors, sub-editors, copy-editors and many

<sup>17</sup> Calmes, J. (2009) ‘Obama’s economic circle keeps tensions high’, *New York Times*, 7 June, [www.nytimes.com/2009/06/08/us/politics/08team.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/08/us/politics/08team.html?_r=1), full quote: ‘Larry Summers is one of the world’s most brilliant economists’, said Mr. Orszag, who along with Mr. Geithner, successfully resisted Mr. Summers’s attempts early on to control their access to Mr. Obama. ‘He enriches any discussion he participates in, which is particularly valuable given the complexity and importance of the challenges currently facing us’.

<sup>18</sup> Cohen, G.A. (2002) *If you’re an egalitarian how come you’re so rich*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p 3.

<sup>19</sup> Gilbert, J. (2007) ‘Social democracy and anti-capitalist theory’, *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy*, vol 15, no 4, 38–45. (page 42).



professional proof-readers. Dozens and dozens of people have been involved in deciding what is included and what is not: referees, commissioning editors, publishers of all kinds. I rarely disagree with them, after all, who am I to disagree? But if they are lucky they get inadequate acknowledgements, usually anonymous. We are not very good at fair play. That is why we invent rules to structure the games we play, to try to increase fairness, to try to make us behave better than we otherwise might. It is when we see other people not playing by the rules of humanity that we need to work harder to ensure fair play.