

RACE, MERITOCRACY AND INSTITUTIONAL LEGITIMACY

An Interdisciplinary Analysis of the Public Discourse Surrounding Jason Arday

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Abstract

This paper examines the public controversy surrounding the late Professor Jason Arday as a case through which to analyse the relationship between academic integrity, race, meritocracy, representation and institutional legitimacy in British higher education. The paper begins from a necessary distinction: allegations of academic misconduct require rigorous investigation, but the existence of legitimate scrutiny does not make the racial and political meanings attached to that scrutiny analytically irrelevant. Drawing on cultural studies, organisational sociology, critical race scholarship, theories of capital and meritocracy, postcolonial analysis and political psychology, the paper develops two related concepts. The first, the aesthetics of institutional legitimacy, describes the culturally inherited expectations through which certain bodies, biographies and forms of self-presentation appear more or less congruent with elite authority before formal evaluation is complete. The second, representational surplus, describes the additional collective meaning imposed upon highly visible members of underrepresented groups, whose achievements and failures are more readily interpreted as evidence about the legitimacy of the group itself. The analysis uses a critical-interpretive synthesis of published scholarship, official higher-education data and contemporary public reporting available up to 18 August 2026. It does not adjudicate disputed allegations against Arday and is not a systematic content analysis of media coverage. Instead, it asks how an individual academic controversy became a proxy dispute about diversity, meritocracy and Black authority. The paper argues that equality and academic standards are not competing principles: institutional credibility depends upon applying demanding standards consistently while resisting the conversion of an individual case into a general indictment of racial inclusion. It concludes with implications for university governance, senior appointments, institutional communication, duty of care and the leadership of diversity in high-status organisations.

Keywords: race; meritocracy; institutional legitimacy; higher education; academic integrity; Black academics; representation; racialised organisations; institutional authority; Jason Arday

Research status and scope. This is an independent critical research essay based on published literature, public institutional material and contemporary reporting. It has not undergone external peer review. No primary human participants were recruited and no private personal data were collected. Because the underlying public controversy remained active at the date of this version, contemporary factual statements are time-bounded to 18 August 2026.

1. Introduction: from allegation to institutional meaning

Public controversies often begin with a question that appears narrower than the social conflict they eventually reveal. In the case of Jason Arday, the immediate question concerned academic integrity: whether parts of his doctoral and published work met the standards expected of a senior scholar, whether representations of his academic and personal record were accurate, and whether the institutions that appointed and promoted him had exercised appropriate due diligence. Those questions are legitimate. Universities depend upon attribution, evidence, procedural fairness and trust, and no serious argument for racial equality can require exemption from the standards on which scholarly authority rests.

Yet the controversy did not remain confined to those questions. By August 2026 it had widened into a national argument about diversity, meritocracy, the credibility of elite universities, the treatment of Black academics and the conduct of the media. Reuters described Arday as having become a focal point for polarised commentary about race, academic rigour, police involvement and media intrusion (Reuters, 2026b). Cambridge itself acknowledged that the case had generated anger and anxiety while warning that it should not be used to cast doubt upon the legitimacy of staff of colour (Adams, 2026). The analytical problem, therefore, is not whether scrutiny was permissible, but how scrutiny of one individual acquired a representational reach far beyond the individual.

Arday had been appointed to Cambridge as Professor of Sociology of Education, taking up the post in March 2023. Cambridge publicly presented the appointment as historically significant because, at the age of 37, he became the youngest Black person appointed to a professorship in the University's history (University of Cambridge, 2023). His work and public biography were closely associated with race, inequality, neurodiversity and widening participation. That institutional framing matters. It helped make the appointment symbolically legible as evidence of progress, but symbolic appointments are structurally vulnerable: when the individual later becomes controversial, the symbolism can reverse direction, allowing the same person to be mobilised as evidence that inclusion has displaced standards.

During July and August 2026, renewed allegations concerning plagiarism in Arday's PhD and questions about aspects of his wider record received extensive public attention. Arday denied plagiarism and acknowledged that he had made mistakes. Reporting also noted that Liverpool John Moores University, where the doctorate had been awarded, had previously reviewed concerns and found no plagiarism, while other academics continued to argue that there was a case to answer (Bakare, 2026). Cambridge announced on 12 August that an independent investigation would examine the circumstances of his appointment and his time at the University (Adams, 2026). Arday was found dead in London on 14 August at the age of 41; police said the death was unexpected but not believed to be suspicious (Reuters, 2026a). The circumstances intensified an already charged public debate and made questions of

proportionality, institutional responsibility and human consequence impossible to separate from questions of evidence.

The strongest polemical interpretation of the episode claims that it exposes an unresolved Western hostility towards Black authority, rooted in slavery, colonialism and the refusal to confront their continuing cultural consequences. That provocation should not be dismissed, but neither should it be converted into a totalising psychological diagnosis of entire societies. The more defensible scholarly question is whether postcolonial institutions retain inherited structures of recognition that make some forms of authority appear natural and others exceptional, conditional or suspect. This paper approaches the controversy through that question.

2. Research problem and questions

The problem addressed here is the movement from individual accountability to collective inference. An allegation against one academic can be evaluated as a proposition about that academic. A different intellectual operation occurs when the same allegation becomes evidence about diversity policy, Black advancement, the decline of merit or the competence of a broader racial group. The latter move is not logically entailed by the former. It requires a representational mechanism through which the individual is made to stand for a category.

The paper therefore asks three questions. First, how can public scrutiny of an individual academic acquire a racialised meaning without making racism the sole explanation for the scrutiny itself? Second, how do elite institutions shape perceptions of who appears congruent with intellectual authority, particularly where historically underrepresented groups remain numerically scarce? Third, what governance and leadership implications follow if institutions are expected to uphold academic standards while also preventing individual controversies from being generalised into arguments against equality?

These questions locate the paper at the intersection of cultural studies, organisational sociology, critical race scholarship and institutional governance. The aim is conceptual rather than adjudicative. The paper neither determines whether every allegation concerning Arday was true nor assigns a single motive to his critics, supporters, journalists or employers. Instead, it analyses the conditions under which a contested case can become a proxy struggle over legitimacy.

3. Methodological note and evidential boundaries

This paper uses a critical-interpretive method. It brings published theory into conversation with contemporary public material in order to clarify concepts, distinguish levels of analysis and identify governance implications. The contemporary evidence base comprises official University of Cambridge

material, Higher Education Statistics Agency data and reporting from sources including Reuters and The Guardian. The theoretical literature includes work on representation, racialised organisations, cultural and social capital, meritocracy, postcolonial memory, racialisation and political status threat.

This is not a systematic media-content analysis. No fixed corpus was sampled, no coding frame was applied and no claim is made that the cited reporting represents the totality of British commentary. The paper therefore does not quantify racial bias in coverage. Its claims are narrower: that race and diversity were explicitly present in the public discourse; that Arday's appointment had been institutionally framed as historically significant; that Black professors remain substantially underrepresented in UK higher education; and that established scholarship provides plausible mechanisms through which symbolic inclusion, cultural fit and racialised organisational processes can influence judgments of legitimacy.

A further evidential boundary concerns motive. It is possible for an allegation to be factually well founded and politically instrumentalised at the same time. It is also possible for a person to hold controversial racial views while identifying evidence that merits independent examination. The source of a claim therefore cannot substitute for examination of the claim itself. Conversely, the validity of a particular allegation does not validate every ideological conclusion subsequently drawn from it. Maintaining this separation between evidence, interpretation and political use is central to the argument.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Representation and the aesthetics of legitimacy

Stuart Hall's account of representation provides the first element of the framework. Representation does not merely reflect a social world that already possesses fixed meanings; it participates in producing the categories through which people and institutions become intelligible (Hall, 1997). Authority is therefore not encountered only through formal credentials. It is also encountered through language, image, biography, accent, comportment, architecture and inherited institutional narratives. These representational forms help create expectations about what a professor, judge, executive or political leader ordinarily looks and sounds like.

I use the term aesthetics of institutional legitimacy to describe this pre-reflective cultural organisation of authority. The word aesthetics is not used here as a synonym for beauty. It refers to the perceptual and symbolic conditions through which particular bodies and forms of presentation appear congruent or incongruent with inherited expectations of elite status. Cambridge provides an unusually clear example because its authority is materially and visually encoded in architecture, portraiture, gowns, colleges, ceremonial language, ancient offices and a long historical narrative. These elements carry no single racial meaning, yet the institution developed across centuries in which access to its

highest positions was overwhelmingly restricted to white men. Familiarity can consequently acquire the appearance of neutrality.

The concept does not imply that observers consciously reject anyone who looks different from an inherited stereotype, nor does it claim that appearance explains criticism of Arday. Its purpose is more modest. It identifies a background condition: where authority has been repeatedly represented through a narrow social type, a visibly different occupant can become unusually legible as a symbol. Formal inclusion may therefore precede cultural normalisation.

4.2 Racialised organisations and differential legitimacy

Victor Ray's theory of racialised organisations strengthens this analysis by challenging the assumption that organisations are race-neutral bureaucratic structures onto which race is merely added from outside. Ray argues that racial processes can be constitutive of organisational hierarchies, rules and resource distributions, including the ways formal equality becomes decoupled from practice (Ray, 2019). From this perspective, the question is not simply whether an institution possesses an equality policy, but how recognition, discretion, credibility and opportunity are distributed through everyday organisational processes.

Sara Ahmed's work on diversity in universities reaches a related conclusion from a different direction. Diversity can become institutional language, performance and evidence of good intention without necessarily transforming the conditions that make some people feel or appear out of place (Ahmed, 2012). The institution can therefore celebrate an appointment as proof of progress while leaving the appointee exposed to the exceptional visibility produced by scarcity. This is one reason symbolic inclusion and structural inclusion should not be treated as equivalent.

4.3 Meritocracy, capital and cultural matching

Meritocracy is indispensable to the public language of universities because academic legitimacy depends upon competence, evidence and achievement. The difficulty lies not in the idea that relevant merit should matter, but in the tendency to imagine merit as though it were produced independently of social conditions. Bourdieu's account of cultural, social and economic capital demonstrates that institutional success is shaped by resources that extend beyond formal ability (Bourdieu, 1986). Elite settings reward familiarity with institutional codes as well as technical competence.

Empirical organisational research shows how this operates in selection. Rivera's study of elite professional-service firms found that employers evaluated cultural similarity and self-presentation alongside competence, sometimes allowing perceived fit to outweigh more direct indicators of productivity (Rivera, 2012). Castilla and Benard's experiments demonstrated a related paradox:

organisations that strongly present themselves as meritocratic can, under some conditions, produce more biased reward decisions because decision-makers become more confident that their judgments are objective (Castilla and Benard, 2010). Littler's critique of meritocracy similarly shows how the language of talent and effort can legitimate unequal outcomes when the social organisation of opportunity is excluded from analysis (Littler, 2018).

These arguments do not show that any particular academic appointment resulted from bias or lowered standards. They show why the neutral-starting-point model is sociologically weak. If pathways into elite positions are shaped by accumulated capital, networks, cultural familiarity, mentoring, schooling and institutional recognition, then a serious defence of merit must examine the entire process through which merit becomes visible. Scrutinising diversity interventions while treating inherited advantage as background rather than intervention produces an incomplete account of institutional selection.

4.4 Postcolonial memory and historical disavowal

The original public argument that inspired this paper placed slavery and colonialism at the centre of the controversy. That connection requires care. Contemporary white individuals are not personally responsible for historical systems simply by virtue of racial classification, and collective guilt is a poor basis for institutional analysis. Nevertheless, colonial history is not external to the development of British institutions. Empire shaped wealth, knowledge production, classification, governance and the cultural distinction between the civilised centre and the governed periphery.

Paul Gilroy's account of postcolonial melancholia is useful because it examines the difficulty of integrating imperial history into contemporary national identity without either nostalgic idealisation or defensive denial (Gilroy, 2004). The analytical point is not that Britain is secretly governed by a single repressed emotion. It is that public cultures can maintain preferred narratives of fairness, achievement and tolerance while struggling to incorporate histories that complicate those narratives. When historical criticism is heard primarily as an accusation against present-day identity, debate readily shifts from examination to defence.

Du Bois and Fanon remain relevant to this discussion because both recognised that racialisation affects the social conditions of visibility. Du Bois's double consciousness described the strain of being required to encounter oneself through a social gaze already structured by racial hierarchy (Du Bois, 1903). Fanon examined the embodied consequences of becoming an object of racial meaning within a world that claimed universality while distributing recognition unequally (Fanon, 1952/2008). Their contexts differ substantially from twenty-first-century Cambridge, but the underlying insight remains

valuable: entry into an institution does not automatically erase the meanings historically attached to bodies within it.

5. Jason Arday and representational escalation

5.1 From an individual case to a proxy argument

The Arday controversy illustrates what may be called representational escalation: the process through which a dispute about one person becomes evidence in a broader ideological argument. The initial scholarly issue concerned textual attribution and the reliability of elements of an academic record. As coverage developed, however, the case became entangled with claims about diversity policy, institutional decline and whether universities had compromised merit in the pursuit of representation. That movement was explicit enough for Cambridge's Vice-Chancellor to warn that the case should not be used to question the abilities or legitimacy of staff of colour (Adams, 2026).

The political context surrounding some of the criticism reinforced this shift. The Guardian reported that Nathan Cofnas, one of the academics who publicised plagiarism allegations, had previously argued that a genuinely meritocratic Harvard would contain almost no Black professors and had become a controversial figure in debates about race and academic freedom (Bakare, 2026). That context does not invalidate evidence presented by Cofnas. It does, however, make it analytically reasonable to distinguish the evidential question - whether text was improperly reproduced - from the ideological proposition into which the evidence might be inserted - whether Black academic representation is itself evidence of compromised merit.

The distinction is fundamental. If an allegation is substantiated, it establishes something about the conduct of the person concerned and, depending on the circumstances, about the quality of institutional processes. It does not logically establish that equality initiatives generally lower standards, that Black professors are overrepresented, or that racial inequality has ceased to be an institutional concern. Those propositions require separate evidence.

5.2 Scarcity, hypervisibility and representational surplus

The structural context makes this problem sharper. HESA reported that 26,110 academic staff held professorial-level contracts in UK higher education in 2024/25, of whom 270 were Black. The proportion of professors who were Black therefore remained at approximately 1 per cent (HESA, 2026). Whatever interpretation one gives to the causes of that disparity, it establishes that Black professorial authority remains numerically uncommon.

Scarcity changes the social meaning of visibility. Where a category is institutionally ordinary, the misconduct of one individual can more readily remain attached to that individual. Where a category remains comparatively rare and its presence has been publicly framed as historically significant, the individual is more easily made representative of a wider group or institutional project. For the purposes of this analysis, I use the term “representational surplus” to describe the additional collective meaning imposed upon highly visible members of underrepresented groups, whereby individual achievements, failures and perceived shortcomings become disproportionately available as evidence about the legitimacy, capability or social standing of the wider group to which the individual is assigned, rather than being interpreted primarily in relation to the individual concerned.

Representational surplus can operate positively or negatively. Institutions may celebrate a highly visible appointment as evidence of progress, thereby increasing the symbolic weight carried by the appointee. Critics can later reverse that symbolism and use the same person as evidence that the project of inclusion was misguided. The individual becomes proof in both directions. The deeper problem is not that institutions recognise historic firsts, but that they may celebrate representation without adequately managing the risks created when symbolic visibility exceeds structural normalisation.

5.3 The aesthetics of the professorial role

The public image associated with Arday also disrupted conventional expectations of elite academic presentation. He was relatively young for a high-profile professorial appointment, Black, wore dreadlocks and had a public biography framed around disability, social disadvantage and an unconventional educational trajectory. None of these features bears on the validity of a citation, the quality of an argument or the accuracy of a curriculum vitae. Their significance lies elsewhere: together they made him highly legible as someone who did not reproduce the historically familiar image of Cambridge authority.

It would be an evidential error to infer from this difference that every criticism of Arday was motivated by discomfort with his appearance or identity. The point is structural rather than accusatory. Institutions possess visual grammars. When a new occupant departs sharply from the historically repeated image associated with a role, observers may become more conscious of the occupant's identity than they would be in the case of someone who fits inherited expectations. The individual can therefore be simultaneously celebrated for difference and scrutinised through difference.

This is the central claim of the aesthetics-of-legitimacy framework. Authority is formally allocated through titles, selection procedures and credentials, but it is socially stabilised through recognition. Where formal authority and inherited recognition do not align, additional interpretive work is demanded from the person, the institution and the audience. The result can be admiration, scepticism, fascination,

resentment or some combination of these responses. The framework does not predict which response will occur; it explains why some appointments become more symbolically charged than others.

6. Academic integrity and racial equality are not competing standards

The strongest version of an anti-racist argument in this case must resist the temptation to minimise academic integrity. If plagiarism occurred, it matters. If published work contained material that required correction, that matters. If an institution failed to conduct adequate due diligence for a senior appointment, that matters. Standards cannot become racially conditional without reproducing a paternalistic hierarchy in which some scholars are treated as needing protection from the expectations applied to others.

This point is particularly important because concerns about Arday were not confined to commentators hostile to diversity. Bakare (2026) reported that academics of colour also considered aspects of the allegations serious and worried that failures could damage the credibility of race scholarship. Such responses complicate any simple division between racist critics and anti-racist defenders. They show that academic integrity can be defended from within a commitment to racial equality rather than against it.

The corresponding obligation is universality. If institutions invoke merit, merit must apply to inherited routes of advantage as well as to diversity initiatives. If due diligence is strengthened after a controversial minority appointment, equivalent diligence should become a general governance standard rather than a special surveillance regime for minority candidates. If individual misconduct is treated as evidence of institutional failure, comparable misconduct by members of historically dominant groups should trigger the same willingness to examine selection, sponsorship and informal networks.

Equality therefore does not mean equal immunity from scrutiny. It means equal exposure to principled scrutiny and equal protection from category-level inference. A Black academic should be capable of being investigated as an academic without the investigation becoming a referendum on whether Black academics belong.

7. Comparative political lens: Obama, racialisation and status anxiety

A broader comparative lens helps clarify the difference between formal inclusion and cultural normalisation. Barack Obama's election in 2008 was widely interpreted as a possible transition towards a post-racial United States. Michael Tesler's subsequent work challenged that interpretation, arguing that racial considerations became more strongly associated with political judgments during the Obama era rather than receding from them (Tesler, 2016). The significance of this research is not that the

presence of a Black president created racial prejudice. It is that unprecedented Black authority made race politically salient within a society whose political history was already racialised.

This comparison should not be pushed into a direct equivalence with Cambridge. The presidency and a professorial appointment operate on different scales and within different institutions. The analytical parallel concerns symbolic authority. A historically unusual occupant can alter what is publicly visible before the underlying hierarchy has become culturally ordinary. The resulting visibility may be experienced as progress by some and as displacement or status loss by others.

Mutz (2018) offered an influential account of the 2016 United States presidential election in which perceived threats to the relative status of traditionally dominant groups were more important than personal economic decline in explaining changes in support for Donald Trump. Morgan (2018) subsequently reanalysed the evidence and argued that Mutz had overstated the ability of the data to separate status threat from material interests. That disagreement is important. It prevents the concept of status threat from becoming a catch-all psychological explanation and underscores the need to retain economic, institutional and political complexity.

For the present paper, the literature supports a narrower proposition: changes in who visibly occupies high-status roles can become politically meaningful because representation affects perceptions of relative group position. This does not make every opponent of diversity anxious about racial status, and it does not reduce political disagreement to unconscious prejudice. It does show why symbolic change can generate responses that exceed the formal policy at issue.

8. Britain, empire and the politics of historical integration

The British context requires its own historical analysis. Slavery and colonialism are often discussed as completed historical episodes, yet their relevance to contemporary institutional life lies less in inherited personal guilt than in the persistence of structures, resources and narratives formed under unequal conditions. Universities participated in the production and circulation of knowledge that classified populations, ranked civilisations and helped make European authority appear universal. They also became sites in which those intellectual traditions were contested and transformed. The institutional inheritance is therefore contradictory rather than morally singular.

A useful distinction can be made between guilt and historical integration. Guilt asks whether contemporary individuals should experience personal blame for events they did not commit. Historical integration asks whether institutions can understand how inherited arrangements were produced, which effects persist, and what responsibilities follow from that understanding. The second question is both more demanding and more useful.

Gilroy's postcolonial analysis helps explain why this can become politically difficult. National narratives often rely upon selective memory. Britain can reasonably value parliamentary traditions, scientific achievement, cultural production and legal institutions while also recognising that empire involved coercion, racial hierarchy and extraction. Difficulty arises when the recognition of one side is treated as cancellation of the other. Under those conditions, historical examination is recoded as hostility to national identity, and defensiveness replaces analysis.

The same dynamic can appear inside elite institutions. A university that understands itself through excellence may experience evidence of exclusion as an accusation that excellence was fraudulent. That is a false choice. Institutions can produce genuine achievement while also distributing access unequally. Recognising the latter does not invalidate the former; it makes the history of achievement more accurate.

9. Conceptual propositions

The preceding analysis can be condensed into three propositions that are offered for further empirical testing rather than presented as established causal findings.

- 1. Institutional legitimacy is partly aesthetic.** Formal credentials and procedures are necessary but not sufficient for social recognition. Elite authority is also mediated by inherited images, narratives and expectations about who appears to belong. The greater the distance between an occupant and the historically familiar image of a role, the greater the probability that identity itself becomes salient in evaluation.
- 2. Underrepresentation produces representational surplus.** Where a social group remains scarce in a high-status role, individual members are more readily treated as representatives. Their success may be celebrated as proof of institutional progress, while their failure may be generalised into evidence against the group or the policy associated with their inclusion. Structural normalisation reduces this surplus by making diversity ordinary rather than exceptional.
- 3. Evidence and ideological use must be analytically separated.** A factual allegation can be valid even when it is advanced within an ideological project, and a politically motivated source can still identify evidence that merits investigation. Conversely, substantiation of an individual allegation does not validate broader claims about race, diversity or meritocracy. Institutional governance requires procedures capable of preserving this separation under conditions of intense public pressure.

These propositions provide a way to analyse controversies without collapsing them into either of two inadequate positions: that racism explains every criticism, or that the existence of legitimate criticism makes racism analytically irrelevant. The aim is to preserve the possibility of simultaneous truths at different levels of analysis.

10. Institutional and executive implications

10.1 Separate due diligence from diversity symbolism

Senior appointments should be governed by demonstrably consistent standards of verification regardless of the candidate's identity or the strategic narrative attached to the appointment. Where an appointment is likely to be publicly celebrated as a historic first, leaders have an additional reason to ensure that routine due diligence is robust before symbolic communication begins. The objective is not to apply greater suspicion to minority candidates. It is to prevent communications activity from outrunning governance.

Boards, appointment committees and vice-chancellors should therefore be able to evidence the same verification architecture across comparable appointments: qualification checks, publication review where relevant, conflict-of-interest controls, reference validation and clear records of decision criteria. Diversity should influence the breadth and fairness of access to the candidate pool, not the reliability threshold applied after candidates enter the process.

10.2 Do not make individuals carry the institution's diversity narrative

Institutions create risk when they turn individual employees into proof of organisational virtue. Historic appointments can be acknowledged without constructing the individual as a corporate emblem. Communications should recognise achievement while avoiding narratives that make a person responsible for validating an entire equality strategy. This is especially important where a biography is unusually compelling and therefore attractive to media and fundraising functions.

A more mature approach treats representation as an organisational condition rather than a heroic exception. The strategic objective is not to produce a small number of highly visible symbols but to alter recruitment, progression, sponsorship and culture sufficiently that difference no longer requires exceptional explanation.

10.3 Preserve procedural fairness during public controversy

When allegations become public, institutional leaders face pressure to choose immediately between defence and condemnation. Both can be premature. A defensible response should distinguish what is known, what is disputed, which body has jurisdiction, what process will determine the matter and when an update can reasonably be expected. Strong statements about motive should not replace investigation, and reputational anxiety should not dictate evidential conclusions.

This discipline matters for both the accused and the institution. Early over-defence can later make a legitimate inquiry appear like a reversal forced by public pressure. Early condemnation can prejudice

facts and damage procedural fairness. The leadership task is to hold institutional values and evidential uncertainty at the same time.

10.4 Build proportionality and duty of care into crisis governance

Academic accountability does not eliminate an employer's duty of care. High-profile allegations can produce intense exposure across news media, social platforms, professional networks and family life. Institutions should therefore have crisis protocols that separate investigative functions from safeguarding and welfare functions. Support must not depend upon a presumption of innocence or guilt; it should be available because the human consequences of public scrutiny can be severe regardless of the eventual finding.

Proportionality is equally relevant to communication. Universities cannot control external journalism, but they can avoid contributing unnecessarily to spectacle. Leaders should consider whether each public statement advances accountability, protects due process or merely satisfies a demand for immediacy. The ethical quality of an investigation is shaped not only by its conclusion but by the conditions under which it is conducted.

10.5 Treat meritocracy as a governance system, not a slogan

Executives who invoke meritocracy should be able to specify how merit is defined, evidenced and protected from informal distortion. That requires attention to cultural fit, sponsorship, network effects, inherited prestige and decision-maker discretion as well as to formal criteria. The organisational research reviewed here suggests that a strong belief in one's own meritocratic neutrality can itself reduce vigilance against bias.

A credible merit system therefore contains mechanisms for challenge: transparent criteria, diverse decision panels, documented reasons, independent review where stakes are high, and periodic analysis of outcomes. Equality and merit are better understood as mutually corrective governance principles than as ideological opponents.

11. Limitations

This paper is deliberately interpretive and should not be read as an empirical determination of the motives behind individual journalists, academics, university leaders or members of the public. It does not provide a systematic comparison of the volume or tone of coverage received by Black and white academics accused of misconduct. Such a study would require a defined sample, coding protocol, comparator cases and, ideally, mixed methods capable of distinguishing media attention generated by rank, novelty, institutional status and race.

The paper also relies partly on a rapidly developing public record. Details concerning institutional reviews, contested claims and the consequences of Arday's death may change after 18 August 2026. Later versions should therefore update the factual chronology rather than treating this version as a final historical account.

Finally, the concepts of the aesthetics of institutional legitimacy and representational surplus are proposed as analytical tools, not validated measures. Their value will depend upon future research capable of operationalising them and testing whether they explain variation in institutional evaluation across race, gender, class, disability and other forms of visible or narrated difference.

12. Conclusion

The controversy surrounding Jason Arday cannot be reduced responsibly to a choice between academic integrity and racial equality. Academic standards matter precisely because universities claim authority through evidence, attribution and intellectual trust. At the same time, the social meaning of scrutiny cannot be understood solely by inspecting the allegation that initiated it. Once an individual case becomes evidence in a larger argument about whether a social group belongs in elite institutions, the problem has moved from misconduct into representation.

The Arday case became unusually powerful because several conditions converged. His appointment had been publicly narrated as historic; Black professors remain rare in UK higher education; his appearance and biography departed from inherited stereotypes of Cambridge authority; the allegations entered an existing ideological dispute about diversity and meritocracy; and the media environment converted academic questions into a wider examination of biography, identity and institutional judgment. None of these conditions proves that any individual critic was racially motivated. Together, however, they make race an unavoidable part of the institutional analysis.

The concept of the aesthetics of institutional legitimacy helps explain why formal inclusion does not automatically produce ordinary belonging. Institutions distribute titles through procedures, but societies recognise authority through cultural expectations as well as rules. Where those expectations have been historically narrow, a different occupant can become visible as difference before being encountered simply as an occupant. Representational surplus then magnifies the consequences: the individual is asked, implicitly or explicitly, to carry the credibility of a wider group.

The appropriate response is not lower scrutiny. It is better scrutiny: evidentially rigorous, procedurally fair, proportionate, consistent across groups and resistant to ideological generalisation. Universities should investigate academic misconduct wherever credible concerns arise. They should also refuse the inference that the shortcomings of one Black academic establish the illegitimacy of Black

academic advancement. Both commitments are required if merit and equality are to mean more than competing political slogans.

For institutional leaders, the practical lesson is equally clear. Diversity cannot be sustained through symbolic appointments alone, and merit cannot be protected by repeatedly asserting that an institution is meritocratic. Both require governance: reliable due diligence, transparent criteria, awareness of cultural matching, careful communication, duty of care and an organisational culture in which historically underrepresented people can eventually become ordinary participants rather than permanent symbols.

The deeper issue exposed by the controversy is therefore one of recognition. A mature institution should be able to hold a Black professor accountable as a professor, without making his racial identity either a defence against evidence or evidence against the legitimacy of others. When that becomes routine, the distance between formal equality and cultural normalisation will have narrowed. Until then, individual controversies will continue to reveal more than the conduct of the individuals at their centre.

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