

Introduction: Meritocracy in Perspective. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* 60 Years On

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Abstract

Sixty years after its publication, Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* remains one of the most important texts for understanding the changing intellectual politics of postwar Britain. Young's fictional vision of a meritocratic society explores the consequences of a society where each citizen is judged according to the formula 'I.Q. + Effort = Merit'. The successful meritocrats hoard ever-greater rewards for themselves, crystallising into a rigid and repressive elite who rule over an increasingly powerless and depressed underclass. While the concept has evolved and adapted, the language of meritocracy is one of the great survivors of postwar British politics. In an age characterised by the rise of populist leaders and movements, as well as a backlash against educated 'liberal elites', revisiting, reinterpreting and re-evaluating Young's influential satire and the central place the concept of meritocracy occupies in the history of postwar Britain has never been more important.

Keywords: meritocracy, postwar Britain, inequality, populism, New Labour, Michael Young

THE YEAR IS 2034. Riots have broken out and the Ministry of Education has been ransacked, the Chairman of the Trade Union Congress has dodged an assassination attempt, and strikes, led by transport workers and domestic servants, engulf Britain. The Prime Minister, in his statement to the House of Lords, blames administrative failure, but the country appears on the brink of collapse. And so begins Michael Young's satirical, dystopian novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.¹ Published in 1958, and introducing the word 'meritocracy' into our social, cultural and political lexicon, Young's text explores the consequences of a society in which each citizen's role and status is determined by the formula 'I.Q. + Effort = Merit'. The winners, believing they have earned their position amongst the elite, hoard greater status, power and rewards for themselves, crystallising into a rigid, repressive and distant ruling caste; the losers, labelled as 'stupid', are condemned to a life of drudgery, working as street cleaners or domestic servants for the elite. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* would go on to become one of postwar Britain's most influential, yet widely misunderstood, political texts. Explaining how

Young's nightmarish vision of the nation's future became the organising principle through which social democrats and conservatives alike sought to escape the confines of class politics in postwar Britain remains salient work for historians, sociologists and political scientists.

Young's work has been a consistent point of reference in debates about inequality and education. In December 2006, *The Political Quarterly* published a special issue entitled 'The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy'. With contributions by David Willetts, Richard Sennett and Hilary Land, the issue explored the central role meritocracy had come to occupy in New Labour's Britain. In his introduction, the social scientist Geoff Dench criticised Blair and his allies for encouraging social polarisation by 'stage-managing meritocracy', cutting links with the working class and their interests, and placing too great an emphasis on social mobility. If New Labour continued to spurn 'fraternalist values', Dench argued, another party 'such as the BNP' could end up taking on the role occupied by the populists in Michael Young's dystopian satire.²

While the British National Party has been confined to the outer fringes of British

politics, in the nearly decade-and-a-half since Dench issued his warning, the issues he discussed have become increasingly urgent. At a moment when our politics is characterised by the rise of populist leaders and movements, and a backlash against 'liberal elites', revisiting and reinterpreting *The Rise of the Meritocracy* has never been more important. Though interest in exploring the concept of meritocracy—and with analysing Young's classic text—has reached fever pitch in recent years, there is an urgent need to bring together diverse perspectives and approaches in one volume.³ Sixty years since *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was published, this special issue analyses the origins of Young's enigmatic text, explores the concept's often perplexing postwar history, and debates the benefits and costs of meritocratic policies.

The Rise of the Meritocracy

Michael Young is often characterised as a polymath, skipping between diverse projects and leaving a significant imprint on the social institutions of modern Britain. Yet, he will be best remembered as a pioneering sociologist. After a brief stint at the think tank Political and Economic Planning (PEP), Young became Head of the Labour Party Research Department. He was to resign in 1951 and establish the Institute of Community Studies (now the Young Foundation) in an attempt to infuse British policy making with sociological evidence and expertise. His sociology, best encapsulated in *Family and Kinship in East London*, was anthropological, empirical, and full of fascinating characters and rich description.⁴ Young's resignation from his post at the Labour Party, and the work of the Institute, all formed part of his faith in the traditional working class—a community he valued for its egalitarian social relations, organic support networks and the emphasis its members placed on the values of solidarity, kinship and, above all, community flourishing.⁵

This emphasis on kinship and community also lay at the heart of *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young had spent over a decade considering the central premise of his satire and in the years before its publication in 1958, had hawked the book from one publisher to another. Chatto & Windus were interested in

certain elements of the dystopian world he constructed, but wanted him to convert the book into a more conventional science fiction novel in a similar vein to *Brave New World*. He spent an uncomfortable year doing so before it was rejected by the editor, Leonard Woolf. In another revealing rejection, Longman's misunderstood the fictional thesis narrative device and informed Young they could not publish a postgraduate PhD manuscript.⁶ It was only as a consequence of holidaying on a beach in North Wales, when Young bumped into the founder of Thames & Hudson, Walter Neurath, that *The Rise of the Meritocracy* saw the light of day.

Neurath's decision was certainly a risk. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is an unconventional and enigmatic text, exploring the utopian and dystopian visions of meritocracy which were prevalent in postwar Britain. While his conception of meritocracy is largely a static one, Young's fictional author highlights how the concept became hegemonic, with the tacit agreement of both conservatives and socialists. Young embraced ambiguity, and the book highlighted both the desirability of removing hereditary privilege while simultaneously alerting readers to the danger of taking this too far, smothering the values of decency and fraternity which he held dear and solidifying a self-perpetuating, closed, and intolerant elite. For Young, the rising meritocrats threatened to destroy his idealised vision of the stable, ordered working class family and community. In many ways, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* can be read as a celebration of certain 'feminine values', it being a story where its author imagined 'women winning the day'. These women triumph, however, precisely because they remain untied to the productive system. Young's vision of liberation, as many feminist scholars have highlighted, was an incredibly narrow one.⁷

If, for some, Young's alternative to a meritocratic social order was equally unpalatable, for others his message was too obscure. By retreating behind a fictional, staunchly pro-meritocratic author, and deploying a deliberately satirical format, Young was hardly encouraging clarity. While he was later to lament meritocracy's hegemonic position in the political vocabulary of postwar Britain, a glance at how *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was

received—even by those with a similar ideological outlook—should have served as a suitable warning that the term was bound to be misunderstood.⁸ The cultural critic, Richard Hoggart, spent most of his review in *The Observer* criticising Young's style, while Raymond Williams contrasted it unfavourably with Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*. Swift, Williams claimed, 'could count on a degree of general recognition by his readers that his scheme was open to certain objections. I wish I could be sure Dr. Young is equally fortunate.'⁹ In many ways meritocracy's remarkable trajectory, from its dystopian origins to its positive connotations under political leaders as diverse as Harold Wilson, Tony Blair and Theresa May, obscures an important distinction between the word and the concept. While Young may have coined the word, his vision of the concept was only one among many. By 1958, the *concept* of meritocracy had already been embraced by social democrats and conservatives alike.

The genealogy of a concept

While the impact of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* on postwar British politics has been enormous, an even more significant result of Young's satire was the fact that it coined a word to describe a concept whose history goes back much further than 1958.¹⁰ The *concept* of meritocracy has a history all of its own. Meritocracy's long global history has been traced back to the examination system in imperial China, the recruitment policy of Napoleon's armies and the Northcote–Trevelyan civil service reforms of 1854.¹¹ In many ways, therefore, historians of meritocracy must look for the concept before the creation of the word. That said, there was a reason Young's book was published in 1958. It was in the decades after the Second World War that the vision of a meritocratic social order became the organising principle animating Britain's intellectual politics. In a seemingly post-aristocratic age, meritocracy offered a rationale for the role of elites in a liberal democracy, and a means to reconcile the tension between equality and liberty for social democrats and conservatives. In spite of Young's dystopia, the late 1950s and early 1960s can be characterised as a meritocratic

golden age—a period in which politicians and public intellectuals imagined a future meritocracy, where white, educated men, imbued with a professional, rationalist ethic, would rise up the social ladder to selflessly serve the collective in the cause of efficiency, growth, and justice.

By the end of the 1960s, the shared vision of a meritocratic future was assailed on all sides. The 1968 generation challenged the meritocracy to deliver on its promises, to offer equality of opportunity to women and people of colour. The teleological faith in economic growth disappeared, and with it the notion that distributive questions could be resolved painlessly. Rather than sharing the proceeds of a growing pie, a static or shrinking one proved impossible to share without someone getting cut. As the miners brought down the Heath government in 1974, the vision of a classless meritocratic future appeared a distant memory. As Guy Ortolano has argued, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s 'the market displaced merit as the liberal polity's preferred explanation for persistent inequalities'.¹² The politics of Thatcherism emphasised those values—hard work, thrift, ambition, and so on—which would find reward in the market, and it was the market which would now determine the worth of each citizen. While the rhetoric of meritocracy returned with a vengeance under Tony Blair, forming an important part of New Labour's 'third way', the word had become little more than a synonym for equality of opportunity. Albeit one might be given a better chance to compete in the global marketplace, it was still to be the social outcomes generated by the market which determined your worth. The idea that the reward and status owed to each individual could be rationally assessed and distributed—an idea at the heart of the postwar consensus—vanished, and these decisions were pushed onto an abstract, impersonal and, it was claimed, fairer market.

Yet, while the concept may have evolved and adapted, the language of meritocracy is one of the great survivors of postwar British politics. This language continues to infuse a diverse range of social, cultural and political institutions, from the work of the Social Mobility Commission to the Arts Council England's *Next Ten Years Strategy*, to the

Conservative Party's 2017 general election manifesto.¹³ Meritocracy consistently resurfaces at moments of crisis and uncertainty, appearing as a seemingly neutral concept which offers a path to a more consensual, stable politics. As Young highlighted, however, a meritocracy can be a profoundly unequal, unstable and unhappy society in which to live. The likes of David Goodhart have utilised Young's dystopia to show that at the heart of the 'anywhere-somewhere' divide, and the anti-elitist, populist challenge which characterises the contemporary political moment, lies the perception that the meritocracy is out of touch, self-serving and irresponsible.¹⁴ This existential challenge, alongside meritocracy's complex history, makes it imperative that we revisit and reinterpret this most cryptic of concepts.

The contributors

The debate 'Meritocracy in Perspective', held in October 2018 at the University of Nottingham, served to interrogate these questions and led directly to this special issue of *The Political Quarterly*. While 2018 marked the sixtieth anniversary of *The Rise of the Meritocracy's* publication, it also came a year after a tumultuous general election campaign. While Labour's programme appeared explicitly to reject meritocratic logic in favour of a broader conception of equality, the Conservatives promised to transform Britain into a 'great meritocracy'. The failure of either party to win a majority highlights the concept's polarising potential in contemporary Britain. In the wake of this result, the contributors to 'Meritocracy in Perspective'—journalist, Toby Young; former Downing Street Chief of Staff, Nick Timothy; CEO of the Young Foundation, Helen Goulden; and the Director of the CLASS think tank, Faiza Shaheen—each evaluated the state of meritocracy in contemporary Britain. While Young and Timothy argued that the concept could be rehabilitated and play a central role in bringing together a divided nation, Goulden and Shaheen implored policy makers and politicians to embrace a different conceptual language which placed community flourishing at its centre.

As 'Meritocracy in Perspective' highlighted, the concept of meritocracy still

appeals and repels in equal measure—for some, a way to heal a divided Britain, while for others, the cause of this division itself. In order to navigate this debate, this special issue brings together four different perspectives on the concept of meritocracy in post-war Britain. To begin, and in order to explore how meritocracy has evolved over the course of the late twentieth century, we need to understand the concept historically. Rather than approaching meritocracy in its ideal form, Stephen Meredith highlights the importance of analysing how the concept was actually deployed by political agents in postwar Britain. In doing so he unsettles the popular belief that meritocracy served as a synonym for an idealised vision of a classless society. It was only after what he describes as the 'meritocratic turn' of the 1970s that the concept was popularly embraced as a means to social mobility, an inversion of Young's stark message of 1958. Meredith's article is thus a rich conceptual history—one that underlines the contingency of our contemporary conceptual circumstances. By examining meritocracy's usage in the past, Meredith serves to excavate how the concept was used historically and to reveal its capacity to appeal to a diverse range of ideological traditions. This appeal, however, appears increasingly diminished in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, and as low or stagnant levels of social mobility serve to threaten Britain's meritocratic credentials.

Marshalling data from behavioural genetics, and highlighting the over-emphasis on nurture in contemporary understandings of social mobility, Toby Young argues that Britain remains a 'mature meritocracy'. Writing as a 'classical liberal', and in direct contrast to his father, Young's article makes a direct case for meritocracy because of its capacity to secure consent to the inevitable socio-economic inequalities generated by a free society.

This consent is explored in greater detail by Jonathan Mijs and Mike Savage. They interrogate the British public's perceptions of inequality and the role played by meritocracy in this process. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, Savage and Mijs highlight a growing sense of class consciousness which has resulted from widening inequality in contemporary Britain: as the rich and poor come to lead increasingly

separate lives, advantages and disadvantages are normalised, and the nature of the structures that bolster those inequalities ignored. The problem with meritocracy, therefore, is that the belief that social mobility should be determined by talent has crowded out a broader egalitarianism and stifled criticism of inequality.

In Brexit Britain, the notion that the concept of meritocracy serves to obscure the structural nature of certain inequalities, and stifles attempts to forge and popularise a broader conception of equality, is widely shared across the political spectrum. Diane Reay argues that any version of a post-Brexit Britain needs to recognise the variety of ways in which individuals can lead meaningful lives. Reay eschews a narrow, academic understanding of education and, via a series of fascinating interviews with school children, bemoans both how academic failure is all too often perceived as the responsibility of the individual alone (and not that of society more broadly) and how rhetoric in support of meritocracy masks the great extent to which privileges (many of them hereditary) are preserved. In Reay's own words, meritocracy elides 'educational success with occupational outcomes'. In short, her message is clear: modern Britain is all too similar to the country depicted in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

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Notes

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- 10 While the earliest recorded example of meritocracy in print comes from 1956 in articles by the industrial sociologist Alan Fox and economist P. Lamartine Yates in the revisionist journal *Socialist Commentary*, Young can still be credited with coining the word. He served on the editorial board of the journal and describes in the Transaction edition of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* fusing Latin and Greek words together to create 'meritocracy'. See: M. Young, 'Introduction', in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, London, Transaction edition, 1994, p. xii.
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