

Meritocracy

1. Michael Young's **The Rise of the Meritocracy**

In 1958, the British sociologist Michael Young published a remarkable small book, **The Rise of the Meritocracy**.¹ It told the story of the development of a meritocracy in Britain, and of a subsequent populist revolt against it. Young discussed historical and social developments up to the time at which he was writing, grafting onto these a fictional account of how things were supposed to have then developed up to the 2030s.

Young's story builds on meritocratic elements in British history – notably the opening of senior public service positions to competition from the mid 1850s.² Such positions had previously been a matter of patronage. He also discussed the development of a measure of promotion by merit in the armed forces. Young then blends factual developments into fiction, by suggesting that in place of a system in which the institutions which had been in the hands of a traditional elite became increasingly open to the talented, there was a move towards the removal of the untalented but wealthy or well-connected – e.g. from entry into the older, prestigious universities. There was then, in his fictional story, a massive investment by government in schools for the talented. And there was a replacement, within companies, of promotion on the basis of seniority by promotion strictly by merit. Young takes this further and envisages downward mobility as a regular feature to be expected in the lives of people as they become older and their skills decline. They are out-performed by more able young people, and have to take less important jobs.

Young's book itself is told as a narrative about the development of a meritocratic society, and then of a revolt against this meritocracy by populists, led by renegade members of the meritocracy. The book is written from the perspective of an avowed meritocrat. But this is not to be confused with Young's own view, as he wrote the book as a **critique** of meritocracy. Reading it today in Britain is an interesting experience, just because of the extent to which the kind of revolt that Young depicts is reminiscent of some factors operative in politics in Britain in recent years. The book itself is interesting just because Young's work was

written as a critique of the ideal of a meritocracy, when the term – which he did a lot to popularize – has subsequently been championed as an ideal, for example in Tony Blair’s re-invention of the Labour Party as ‘New Labour’.

As Adrian Wooldridge describes in his recent **The Aristocracy of Talent**, Young’s work was not well-received among a good number of his fellow intellectuals associated with the Labour Party. For they typically took a key task as being the overcoming of features of an older social order which depended on patronage and inherited wealth, and the opening of society up, instead, to those with talent. Young’s own perspective was an egalitarian one, which was in some important ways at odds with their more meritocratic ideals. Young initially had some difficulty in getting his work published.

Today, there is now a further and growing body of literature which criticises the idea of meritocracy.³ However, while it raises many interesting points, it tends to engage with meritocracy not as an ideal, but instead as if it was claimed that, as a matter of fact, countries such as Britain or the United States are now meritocracies. It is not clear to me who in their right mind would think that anywhere is a meritocracy, and as a result, this discussion seems in some ways pointless. It is perfectly true that some of those who hold leading positions within such societies think of themselves as meritocrats, and also think that they deserve their often-handsome rewards because of their talents and hard work. But it is also clear – as these critics (and also Wooldridge who is broadly speaking a defender of meritocracy) point out – that entry into leading schools and ‘elite’ universities is still very much something in which a person’s family background, and their wealth, play an important role.

If anyone doubts that such arrangements are at odds with the ideal of a meritocracy, it is worth bearing in mind the degree to which Young, and Plato before him, whose **Republic** is of key importance in this discussion,⁴ were led to develop ideas which sharply **contrasted** with then-current social arrangements and ideas, in their descriptions of what was needed for the institution of a meritocracy.

2. Issues from Young

Young's book seems to me striking, just because it brings out some important complexities about the idea of a meritocracy. To simplify slightly, he introduces three different **competing** social visions: nepotism, meritocracy and egalitarianism.

His nepotism, operates within existing (inherited) social structures. People, within these, are keen to preserve – and to better – their own situation, but also that of their family, friends and relatives. This is an important point. Not only is there a lot of anecdotal, historical and sociological evidence in its favour. But nepotism has received interesting support from work in sociobiology.⁵ Young, I think correctly, identifies this as being at odds with the two other ideals which he discusses, and to which I will turn shortly. He also discusses the manner in which, in Britain, older social formations – e.g. that of a landed aristocracy, sustained on this first basis – were in tension with both meritocratic and egalitarian ideals.

The second of Young's ideals, is meritocracy. This goes back at the very least to certain aspects of Plato's **Republic**. (Young, without making too much of the issue, is able to document the meritocratic ideals that he is describing, as things to be found in the work of some of the British Fabian socialists – notably Beatrice Webb, and also H. G. Wells, on whom Plato was an explicit influence.) Meritocracy is concerned with the idea that a good society would be one in which political power is in the hands of a meritocratic elite. In part, this is a matter of having the best people for different jobs, an idea which can be made in utilitarian terms. In part, this is a matter of recognising that there are different kinds of expert knowledge (which, pace Plato, can be understood as fallible), of which some but not all of us can achieve an understanding⁶).

The advocates of meritocracy tend to assume that their elite could be expected to operate in the interest of the whole of society. This, however, poses the problem: why would such an elite function in this way? This question faces the advocate of meritocracy with problems of institutional design (and, of course, the further problem of why the institutional designers can be expected to operate in the public interest,

and of how they would be in a position to impose their ideal institutions onto everyone else).

Plato himself thought that what is good itself motivates those who understand it,⁷ and in his view, philosophers, who would prefer to be spending their time contemplating the Form of the Good, would, instead, be led by a kind of moral duty, which they acquire as a result of their knowledge of what is good, back to concerns with the well-being of their fellow citizens. Despite this, two particular problems were thought by Plato to be liable to distract them. These were wealth, and the dangers of nepotism. Against the first of these Plato makes provision, by having his 'guardians' live in something like an army officers' mess, rather than owning private property. Their children – the breeding of which is supervised by the guardians rather than being a matter of parental choice – are brought up by the community, rather than by their parents. In Young's account, nepotism is taken to be controlled by way of government spending on first-rate public education, open to anyone who can show – at any point in their lives – the appropriate abilities.

It is important to note, here, that the thrust of the meritocrat's argument is not about 'desert' in the sense of personal benefits. For there is no reason why the guardians should enjoy any particular level of material benefits (although it would seem appropriate and practical that they should enjoy reasonably attractive conditions⁸). While a meritocratic approach would be perfectly compatible with someone taking view for which John Rawls has argued, that we should appreciate that we do not deserve our talents. In the light of this, meritocracy could be viewed in utilitarian terms.⁹

The third ideal is egalitarianism. The idea here is that education, power, and social benefits should be the same for all. What is striking, is that there is an obvious clash between this and not only the first group of values, but also the second. For that aspect of the case for meritocracy which stresses the utilitarian benefits that can be expected to flow from having the most able people undertaking tasks for which they are best suited, and the idea that the most able should be educated for this purpose, is clearly at odds with the idea of, say, equality in educational provision, or that resources should be directed to those in greatest need.

These are obviously not the only issues which should be raised in the discussion of the idea of a meritocracy. But they are important, and it seems to me that Young is to be congratulated for setting the tensions between them out so clearly. Issues about egalitarianism are very important; but the topic calls for treatment at length in a subsequent essay.

3. An Excursion into Hayek

One problem about Young's account, is that he poses his problems in terms of bureaucracy and administration. These obviously play an important role in respect of our organised institutions, charitable, governmental and commercial. But it seems to me that, in looking at these issues, we should also pay attention to two key points that come out of Hayek's work. (I should perhaps stress that, in raising these issues, I am not engaged in wider arguments about the pros and cons of actually existing 'neoliberalism'.¹⁰)

The first issue, is Hayek's argument that a key feature of our economic and political arrangements, are institutions the operations of which depend on market-based arrangements. These, as he has argued, enable people in large-scale societies to make use of socially scattered information, including various kinds of tacit knowledge, and to which it is not clear that we can have recourse by alternative means.¹¹ But Hayek has argued that, if such institutions are to be able to function effectively, prices for goods and services will need to respond to issues of supply and demand.

The second – which clearly follows from the first – is that there is no reason whatever why such prices will track merit, or why those who work hard, or make the best use of their talents, will do well. Public taste is fickle. There may simply be no interest on the part of other people, in what any particular one of us can do well. While – as anyone who follows social fashion (or who watches old movies) can easily document – all kinds of people may obtain huge premiums for their looks, physical attributes, or skills at some point in time, which would have given them nothing significant at other times. It is luck and the performance of a broadly utilitarian social function which is getting rewarded, not people's merits.

Three further points are worth noting about all this.

The first is that Hayek is discussing an idealized case, from which actual institutional arrangements as we experience them are sometimes far removed. Not only – and obviously – does one stand in need of appropriate institutions, including legal systems, for all this to function well (institutions which, for other reasons, it is difficult for us to achieve and maintain in place). But Hayek's discussion is idealized in the sense that he treats markets as if they were populated by individual traders, rather than by companies and complex bureaucratic organizations. He is concerned that those within such organizations will operate – and can be remunerated – on a basis very different from that for the merits of which he has argued (and for the problems posed by which, he does not seem to me to have offered a solution). But the wider setting within which these organizations operate, if they are commercial – and to the degree to which they are effective – will impress upon the broader organization some of the characteristics to which Hayek referred.

Second, just because rewards have little to do with merit, there is no reason for people to feel superior, just because they receive a significant reward for the exercise of their skills and talents, and for their hard work. There are – Hayek has argued – good social reasons for things working this way, not least because what they command attracts others to compete with them in the provision of such services. In addition, there is an inter-relationship between people's persons and property, such that it would be problematic if what they had obtained as a product of their efforts, and agreements with other people, should simply be expropriated. But there is no reason whatever why they should be protected, in terms of what they can obtain at any particular time; and they certainly should not be enabled to exclude others from competition with them.

Third, it is worth emphasising that Hayek has argued for the significance of forms of extra-market social provision, to assist those who can't make adequate provision for themselves and for those for whom are responsible, by means of selling their goods and services in the market. One most interesting discussion of this, relates to the way in which one of the effects of markets, is to undermine older forms of social relationships (e.g. clans or extended families) which in the past took care of these things.¹² The cost of this would obviously be carried by means of taxation. Hayek's reaction seems to me very important, and

to be compatible with recently-discussed ideas about a 'social income'. At the same time, it obviously also poses problems, not just by way of how, technically, such things would need to be organized,¹³ but also in terms of who qualifies for such benefits, and on what basis.¹⁴ A significant issue, here, is that it is no longer the case that economies are national in their character, and there are also high rates of immigration.

4. Some Further Issues from Young

But there is more. For Young also explores the way in which the ready availability of educational opportunities served to undermine older working-class organizations. When it was relatively difficult for able people from poor backgrounds to obtain an education, it was understandable that able people who, say, became involved in socialist parties and trades unions would be able to make a mark on society by way of the roles that they could play in such settings.¹⁵ They could provide effective and highly intelligent leadership to organizations of working people. And in that setting, concern simply for the material well-being of ordinary people would be fuelled by the obvious point that those who were running things, and who were in positions of privilege, were in many cases manifestly less able than were the working people under their direction.

Young envisaged a situation, in his idealized picture of a meritocracy, in which there would be regular re-testing of people's abilities, and the provision for education and upward mobility. But in his account periodic testing of everyone would also give rise to and downward mobility, where it was appropriate.

This, it seems to me, leads to three problems, two of which Young recognises, the third of which he does not. The first, concerns the way in which working class people will be left in a poor situation, to the degree to which it is much less likely that there will be able people among them. For it is not then clear who will play a role in organizing things, or in giving them effective representation.

While I am not wishing to claim that the United States is a meritocracy, I have come across this problem, as a real-world phenomenon there. The 'social organizer' Saul Alinsky¹⁶ typically argued that those people who wished to assist working people to organise – e.g. to find ways in which locally-based problems might be overcome – should, if they came to a

new area, identify and work with existing organizations. But in some areas of the U.S. a combination of physical mobility on the part of the more able, and more opportunities for educational advancement being open to those who could take advantage of them, had grim consequences. I recall an Alinsky-style organizer reporting, at a conference, on his attempts to organize in some areas of Baltimore. He said, sadly, that in the areas which he had considered, there was nothing by way of organization other than small stores selling alcohol, and store-front Pentecostal-style missions.

The second problem, was that in a non-meritocratic society, if people found themselves in unattractive, low-skilled jobs, they might reflect that society was unfair: that they did not deserve to be in such a situation. But to the degree to which a society becomes a meritocracy, and anyone with socially useful skills has the opportunity to develop them, those in lowly positions are likely to have to face a sad truth: that in one sense they may, indeed, deserve to be where they are.¹⁷

At the same time, another important issue from Hayek might be brought in, to qualify all this. For there is a risk that, in some ways strangely tracking Plato and the lessons that Young draws from the introduction of meritocratic competition into the British public service, education has been taken as a marker of merit. There is an important sense in which, recently, an aspect of this – relating to mathematics and computing – does as a matter of fact currently look important. But it is also the case that in a market-based society, sheer entrepreneurial activity which does not depend on technical knowledge, can play a key role. (The British entrepreneur Alan Sugar is a wonderful example.¹⁸) Provided that what is needed, technically, to enter into trading relations is kept simple, and is not unduly restricted by sclerotic regulations, it may be possible for anyone enterprising who has good ideas, to be able to make money and to benefit society by so doing.

The third problem is posed by issues to do with downward mobility, and more generally for most of us when we realise that what we can offer is not well-rewarded in our society. It must be a particular source of continuing concern for parents who are affluent and able, if they have children who are much more mediocre in their talents. Young recognises that, in the past, such parents were typically able to make use of their wealth and contacts to find social niches in which their

offspring might be able to do reasonably well for themselves. But as Young also notes, to the degree to which a society becomes the more meritocratic, such opportunities will disappear. The problem that Young does not tackle – from the perspective of his narrator, who favours meritocracy – is: how is one to handle the problems of downward mobility?

It is here worth bearing in mind that, in our own society, mathematical and associated skills are regularly becoming more and more important, and better-rewarded. There has also been a tendency – discussed by Wooldridge, but also documented in sociological work by Robert Putnam and by Charles Murray, of the highly educated and affluent marrying one another, and living in areas physically removed from those inhabited by poorer people. But mathematical and computing skills are areas in which there seems to be broad confirmation of the idea that creativity declines with age.¹⁹ But how are even these people's lives – and self-understanding – to be shaped, in order to cope with this?

5. Two Concluding Problems

The issues that I have discussed here are wide-ranging. There is, in broad terms, a case for a meritocracy, just because it would seem to be to the advantage of us all if people's skills could be used to benefit society. It is also desirable if individuals with a particular talent the products of which are valued by others, can make use of it. The trouble is that Plato put his finger on two key problems for a meritocracy. That the inter-relation between concerns for wealth, and nepotism, are liable to work against any meritocratic structures which are put in place.

It is true that, on the one side, market relations, as such, can be a great leveller. On the other, intelligence testing, of various kinds, can – as in Young's picture of a meritocratic society – provide another bases on which merit may triumph over patronage and nepotism. But intelligence and ability are not all we need to operate successfully. While the kinds of dramatic upward and downward mobility that can take place in market-based societies, may pose problems for how people can flourish. These – as well as the challenge to all these ideas by egalitarianism, pose questions which I will address in subsequent pieces.

¹ London: Thames and Hudson, 1958; I will cite it in the Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin edition of 1961. An interesting collection which discusses a wide range of aspects of Young's book is Geoff Dench (ed.) **The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy**, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

² There is a useful discussion in Adrian Wooldridge's **The Aristocracy of Talent**, London: Allen Lane, 2021

³ See, for example, Jo Littler, **Against Meritocracy**, London: Routledge, 2018; Daniel Markovits, **The Meritocracy Trap**, London: Allen Lane, 2019, and David Goodhart, **Head and Hand**, London: Allen Lane, 2020. See also Michael Sandel, **The Tyranny of Merit**, New York: Frank, Straus and Geroux, 2020. I cannot do justice to the many interesting issues raised in these studies, in the present short piece.

⁴ Wooldridge claims, p. 49: 'all thinking about meritocracy is a series of footnotes to Plato'. He refers to Alfred North Whitehead, but Whitehead wrote (**Process and Reality**, New York: Free Press, 1978, p. 39, 'of the European philosophical tradition [as consisting] of a series of footnotes to Plato'. Wooldridge, however, is right, in that not only does Plato's **Republic** offer a striking treatment of a meritocracy, but the differences between his idealized account and our current arrangements, bring out the degree to which what might be called a meritocracy falls far short of being one.

⁵ See for an interesting introduction, Robert Wright, **The Moral Animal**, New York: Pantheon, 1994

⁶ I should stress, lest I be misunderstood, that I write this in the light of my own knowledge of my deficiencies in respect, for example, of mathematical ability (a subject which I studied up to first year at university), and of foreign languages, as well as my almost comprehensive inabilities at anything mechanical. The lesson from this, I would suggest, is to recognise the diversity of expert talents – to which I would add the significance of the point, stressed by John Stuart Mill and Karl Popper, of the fallibility of all forms of expert knowledge.

⁷ The merits of this idea, which seem to me considerable, have typically been overshadowed by Humean ideas about motivation: one might put my point in terms of saying that, provided we are receptive to them, ethical, aesthetic and other values might be described as sucking us towards them.

⁸ In part because they would be giving up the benefits which would otherwise follow from the use of their talents in, say, commercial

activity. In part, because corruption might be difficult to control, if they lived in penury.

⁹ I am, emphatically, not a Rawlsian. (See???) But over and above the issues that I have discussed there, it would seem to me that a sensible approach to social policy would be concerned as much with overall social well-being as with the situation of the least well-off.

¹⁰ A major problem about the literature on which, is that it tends to systematically confuse the day-to-day activities of politicians, with the work of various political theorists, whose recommendations are, typically, far from what has been undertaken by the politicians (not least because they have been subject to electoral and interest-based influences, and are operating in political and international systems far removed from what would be favoured by the theorists). I.e. even if the politicians subscribed in any systematic way to the ideas of the theorists, they would have been unable to implement those ideas. While the academic discourse about 'neoliberalism' is, intellectually, pretty much on a par with that of 'cold warriors' who treated the Soviet Union as if it was a systematic implementation of Marx's views.

¹¹ I should stress that Hayek's view does not depend on ideas about 'perfect competition' – an approach of which he has been a resolute critic. (See, on this, his **Law, Legislation and Liberty**.)

¹² There is an interesting parallel here between Hayek's discussion of this in his **Law, Legislation and Liberty**, and Hegel's discussion in his **Philosophy of Right**.

¹³ An important issue, which I cannot treat here.

¹⁴ An additional issue, is how this inter-relates to the basis on which ordinary, hard-working citizens operate. See, for an interesting discussion of this, Joan C. Williams, **White Working Class**, Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2017.

¹⁵ In Britain, it is striking that important figures in the British Labour Party such as Herbert Morrison and Ernest Bevin, were able to make a huge impact on local government and on the trades unions, and subsequently played an important role in national government, even though they had had little formal education.

¹⁶ See, for example, Sanford D. Horwitt, **Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky: His Life and Legacy**, New York: Vintage, 1992.

¹⁷ As Hayek – who thought that there was no particular connection between market rewards and merit – pointed out in his **Constitution of Liberty**, the situation of those in lowly positions is made worse if one thinks that there is such a link, had been recognised by the British

socialist writer, Antony Crosland, in his **The Future of Socialism**. See, on this also Michael Sandel's **The Tyranny of Merit**, p. 135.

¹⁸ See Alan Sugar, **What You See is What You Get**, London: Pan, 2011, and David Thomas, **Alan Sugar: The Amstrad Story**, London: Ebury Press, 1990.

¹⁹ See for a brief note about this, Dean Keith Simonton, 'Does Creativity Decline With Age?', <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/does-creativity-decline-with-age/>