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A 'society ... divisible into the blessed and the unblessed': Michael Young and Meritocracy in Postwar Britain

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Abstract

'Meritocracy' continues to unfold as both core conceptual framework and political ideal of the language of social mobility. In recent decades, politicians of various hues have declared it a *sine qua non* of the so-called 'classless society'. The longer trajectory of postwar discourses of equality reveal a more chequered conceptual past. Its origins in the forums of revisionist social democracy of the 1950s, and subsequently popularised in the writings of social democratic polymath, Michael Young, are much more circumspect. The article considers pivotal contributions and developments of this conceptual history and trajectory. It considers the origins and emergence of meritocracy as a dimension of discourses of equality in the 1950s, and the formative contribution of Michael Young, reaction and responses on the left to his 1958 seminal work, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, and the subsequent 'meritocratic turn'. In spite of its satirical origins and warnings of dire social consequences, meritocracy presently enjoys a confirmatory position as a concept of opportunity and social mobility, as an embedded ideal of social organisation and means of allocating differential rewards.

Keywords: Michael Young, meritocracy, opportunity, social mobility, equality, social democracy

Introduction

DEBATES CONCERNING the centrality of meritocracy to contemporary discourses and policies of social mobility have been reheated recently by Theresa May's (since diluted) plans to reconsider an embargo on new grammar schools. Her announcement in September 2016 suggested that it was part of an ambitious prospectus for Britain to become the 'world's great meritocracy'. The emphasis on access to selective grammar schools and their provision of opportunity and potentially greater social mobility is a means by which to 'build a country that truly works for everyone, not just the privileged few'.¹ Likewise, Sajid Javid recently described his ideal 'Toryism' as one which challenges establishments, 'radical' and 'meritocratic'. Directly referencing Michael Young's incongruously paradigmatic meritocratic formula, he believes that in a changing Britain from the 1980s 'new opportunities awaited bright people who worked hard'; it enabled his own trajectory from purportedly

Britain's 'most dangerous street' to Home Secretary. The primary role of his party should be to revive and consolidate the key message of this narrative, and herein lies something of the debate over egalitarian ethics and means, locked within and determined by narrow contours of 'meritocracy'.²

Debates and arguments of meritocracy have been a recurrent theme of postwar British politics. Meritocracy as favoured model of social organisation and economic and technological progress has enjoyed enhanced contemporary status. Notably (and problematically for Young himself), it was a conceptual staple of Tony Blair's New Labour governments as both object and tool of policy, but has been a consistent, often tacit, conceptual dimension of arguments against attempts to reform the selective component of the postwar educational framework. Campaigning against Labour's comprehensive reorganisation from the mid-1960s, former Conservative one-nation group founder and future Thatcherite 'convert', Angus Maude, for instance,

agonised over reform of selective education and grammar schools (as engines of meritocracy). While willing to concede reform of 'over-rigid 11-plus selection', removal of 'all selection' in favour of 'strait-jacket uniformity' would make it impossible to identify the 'special talents and abilities of every child' and to deliver educational needs accordingly. Lack of pluralism in educational opportunities would threaten standards and the 'quality of ... education, and the whole future of our economy and technology'.³

Numerous critics, building on Young's original dystopian vision, alternatively emphasise the limitations and potential disharmony of a model of organisation and 'equality' based on narrow, selective opportunities and routes to mobility. Recent studies show that, apart from the USA, Britain has some of the lowest levels of social mobility in the developed world, producing generational stasis, as well as problems of unfulfilled talent and a socially detached and disinterested elite.⁴ Critics of the meritocratic platform underline its propensity to create and consolidate (new) 'elites' and entrench (new) social divisions based on narrow selection and allocation of rewards. An inevitable by-product of meritocratic competition is that those disadvantaged by its restrictive criteria face social inequality, as those able to navigate obligatory 'intelligence' and 'effort' tests are rewarded. Without embedded justifications for 'failure' of a system skewed in favour of inherited status, meritocracy reproduces social divisions of an even more exclusionary and unforgiving form.

The political status of meritocracy has undergone significant postwar revision—from its pejorative roots in Young's original satirical depiction, to an embedded contemporary ideal of social organisation and determinant of individual social and economic mobility and status. For advocates, it offers an alternative, less select and more dynamic and competitive approach to opportunity and mobility than traditionally elitist, class-based patterns of social organisation and relationships. For critics, opposed to both its focus on a narrow set of 'academic' attributes and implications or preference for particular forms of organisation, its ascendancy reinforces elitist and individualistic

assumptions of neoliberal hegemony. It imposes equally divisive social patterns rather than the prospect of genuine and inclusive opportunity and mobility for all. The article considers something of the conceptual history of meritocracy in postwar Britain. It addresses the formative contribution of Michael Young to the origins and emergence of meritocracy as a dimension of egalitarian discourse, and reaction and responses to his 1958 seminal work, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In spite of his original warning and satirical intent, meritocracy has enjoyed a chequered career as a concept of social mobility and equality and, to Young's apparent dismay, its interpretation has shifted often indiscriminately to represent an embedded ideal of social organisation and means of allocating differential rewards.

The origins of a concept: Michael Young and his contemporaries

Although Young is generally credited with introducing the term to popular discourse, discussions of meritocracy as both concept and dilemma of social equality appear to have evolved in a wider intellectual milieu from the mid-1950s. The concept itself appears to have formally surfaced in the pages of the primarily social democratic journal, *Socialist Commentary*, in a May 1956 article by industrial sociologist and industrial relations expert, Alan Fox, and emerges very largely as a form of social organisation to be avoided at the risk of significant social costs. Its egalitarian credentials, argued Fox, were limited and potentially counter-productive. Effectively, it would do little to reduce 'stratification' based on 'occupational status'. Indisputable natural 'law' would determine disproportionate reward of the talented at the expense of those ostensibly less gifted. It would result in a division of the 'blessed and the unblessed—those who get the best and most of everything, and those who get the poorest and the least. This way lies the "meritocracy"'. Meritocratic attempts to merely devise bigger and better 'sieves' to achieve wider forms of 'opportunity' would not resolve 'extremes of occupational status' and ancillary social divisions they produce and sustain. As such,

it offered little more than the 'vision of a certain brand of New Conservatism' rather than a 'vision of socialism'.⁵

The extent to which a society organised on such a basis supported wider objectives of economic and technical 'progress' remained an equally moot point. The 'economic' dimension of meritocracy produced dominant views of 'big rewards for enterprise, big incentives and differentials to stimulate effort and initiative' and 'greatly superior status' for these groups. Alternatively, it was not inconceivable that economic progress is constrained by meritocratic social organisation and divisions and potentially 'obstructive attitudes' they produce. Potentially different forms of social organisation held out the prospect of more 'positive co-operation' of workers in productivity and technical change. Notwithstanding, they offered the prospect of more equitable distribution of resources and better quality of life and happier society for all compatible with the 'ethical' basis of British socialism. It was not incontrovertible that an 'aristocracy ... of personal endowment' was ethically superior to an 'aristocracy ... of birth'.⁶

German-American political philosopher and theorist, Hannah Arendt, similarly gestated and presented a critique of meritocracy at the point of first publication of Young's *opus* in 1958. In a celebrated critique of both traditional and 'progressive' pedagogies, which appears to have begun life as a 1954 lecture and essay and formally published in 1958, she primarily intended an examination of perspectives of the allegedly declining standards of American education, but also explored something of its comparative context and development. While she argued that secondary education in the US was often inadequate preparation for further study, this was not necessarily or inevitably a result of mass education and she was equally critical of the new narrowly selective system of its British counterpart. The 'dreaded' 11-plus examination, as filter of the 'ten per cent' of grammar school entrants and those destined for 'higher education', was the engine of a 'meritocracy' (and impossible to introduce at the time in America in such a 'rigorous' manner). It reflected 'once more the establishment of an oligarchy', this time 'not of wealth or birth but of talent'. Under its

regime, Britain will continue to be governed in all circumstances 'neither as ... monarchy nor as ... democracy but as ... oligarchy or aristocracy' of the 'most gifted'. The trend to institutionalised meritocracy legitimises comparatively 'intolerable' and 'almost physical division of ... children into gifted and ungifted' according to narrowly selective measures of ability. As such, it 'contradicts ... principle[s] of equality [and] equalitarian democracy no less than any other oligarchy'. As the new 'oligarchy' of the future, the 'meritocracy not the democracy'—or a new, 'legitimate' aristocracy of genuine 'talent' and 'merit', self-belief and virtue—influence key decisions in their own image and to their own further reward.⁷

The concept and argument against meritocracy received wider circulation and currency with the publication of Michael Young's tract on the dangers of a prospectively hardened meritocracy. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Young imagined a fictional future society characterised by the emergence of a new class, fuelled through the meritocratic thrust of educational reform and its intrinsic early competitive selection process. He counselled against the social consequences of a society developed and ordered on narrow meritocratic principles. Rather than remove elitism and barriers to attainment, the resulting 'meritocracy' would simply transform the pattern of inequalities, arguably more pervasive, pernicious and divisive than those grounded in differences of class alone. Echoing Fox's concerns, more profound principles of cooperation, community and equality would remain neglected and unfulfilled.

Young's own ethical vision of social organisation, later reflected in much of his own 'social entrepreneurship', embraced more inclusive and cooperative philosophy. Echoing concerns of inevitable stratification of those such as Fox, he offered a manifesto of the genuinely pluralistic 'classless society' (subsequently critiqued in a review by Fox himself as inattentive to the meritocratic appeal of value in particular skill-sets in the market). Here, people are evaluated 'not only according to their intelligence and their education, their occupations and their power, but according to their kindness and their courage, their imagination and

sensitivity, their sympathy and their generosity'. Who would say that the 'scientist was superior to the porter ... the civil servant to the lorry-driver with unusual skills', the academic to the carer or nurse? A 'pluralistic society' would be tolerant, diverse and non-conformist, in which 'individual differences were actively encouraged ... Every human being would then have equal opportunity, not to rise up in the world in the light of any mathematical measure, but to develop his or her own special capacities for leading a full life'.⁸

Young's satirical and pessimistic portrayal of meritocracy—as thin and contracted and defensive 'opportunity'—was founded on both the nature of his own conceptual thought, which privileged an ethical socialism of fellowship and cooperation, and engagement with emerging social research themes of family, community and mutualism. His vision of 'egalitarian' social change grounded in narrowly defined and accessible 'merit' disappointed his broader communitarian philosophy. He departed from the broader revisionist social democratic emphasis on narrowly defined 'equality', pursued through largely statist means, in favour of a 'smaller-scale politics-of-cooperation' and fuller interpretation of 'opportunity' in a plural society. While not fundamentally opposed to the revisionist dictum of equality as the centrepiece of Labour's story, questions of what it means and how to get there were far less clear. Young was acutely aware of the dangers of an unmediated meritocratic 'equality of opportunity', as his famous satire demonstrates.

Anthony Crosland had already signalled his own qualified concern over the 'unfairness' of narrowly meritocratic distribution of rewards (no doubt from discussions with Young, whose views were broadly similar) in his major 1956 revisionist text, *The Future of Socialism*. He conceded that an 'aristocracy of talent' improved on 'hereditary aristocracy' as a concept of 'social justice', and that some degree of 'differential' reward for those of 'greater ability' had practical purpose. Nonetheless, if 'privileges' were so large 'as to create a distinct elite, differently educated and socially select, it must be regarded as an unpleasant concession to economic efficiency'. To reward intelligence disproportionately

over other attributes of human experience, as the basis of (re)creating conditions of 'extreme inequality', appeared to contradict principles of a 'just society' as the 'fundamental ethical case against any elite or aristocracy'.⁹

While both Crosland and Young identified meritocratic principles as an entrenchment of 'formal equality of opportunity' grounded in narrow and exclusive criteria, and a potential source of new 'social discrimination', Young was more explicit in his belief that socialism was as much about 'fraternity'. Without fraternity, it was more likely that the new tendency to equality of opportunity would 'end up creating a heartless meritocracy without a trace of *noblesse oblige* and dismissive of the needs and claims of those who failed to make the grade'. Without a fraternal critique of meritocracy, postwar society would succeed only in substituting elites.¹⁰ Young popularised both the concept and embodiment of the consequences of pursuit of an unsentimental 'equality of opportunity', which had been a recent subject of critical discussion within the wider salons of revisionist social democracy. He echoed the emphasis on 'fellowship' of the revisionist and communitarian Socialist Union to which he was closely linked, and which reflected an emerging distinction of social democracy between those focussed on simple distributive objectives and those who favoured a more cooperative model and organisation. The latter's 1956 group publication, *Twentieth Century Socialism*, addressed limitations of a 'liberal conception of equality' and 'opportunity' interpreted merely as an 'equal start'. If it is not concerned with the 'whole bundle of opportunities which society distributes through a lifetime' and responsive to 'different capacities and needs', selective and preferential characteristics or abilities favour some over others in a 'race left to the swiftest'.¹¹ Young designated this the 'meritocracy'.

***The Rise of the Meritocracy:* reception and critique**

Young's paradigmatic text was essentially a diagnostic contribution to wider debates of social democracy in the 1950s over the

interpretation and operation of its newly promoted organising principle. It disputed the notion that an arrangement grounded in narrow opportunity was sufficient. It would serve only to focus finite resources and attendant status in the hands of the 'meritocracy', a fortunate minority equipped with saleable abilities in the 'public market', and confer additional rewards on those already endowed. Following initial publication, the book induced a range of critical notices and responses and wider discussion of the relative value of 'merit' as a tool of social equality and likely trajectory and impact of contemporary developments in education and social change.

Reaction to *The Rise of the Meritocracy* acknowledged its essential egalitarian message. Describing it as 'harsh and pessimistic' in the dimensions of its nightmare, Labour researcher and future Cabinet minister, Peter Shore, also recognised its potential for misinterpretation. It was, he concluded, 'certainly not implausible' and represented a 'reasonable projection of Mr Butler's Opportunity State'. He saw it not as an unadulterated 'argument against the selection of talent, still less a defence of inherited privilege', but a plea that 'equality be more than opportunity'. It should also embrace 'power, education and income', and 'should be made the ruling principle of social order', as the means to a 'better society ... not just a more efficient one'.¹²

Alan Fox, again writing in *Socialist Commentary*, this time as commentator rather than progenitor, cited the text in a long line of dystopian fiction and social commentary—including Huxley, Koestler, Orwell and James Burnham's chronicle of the relentless rise of a managerial class—which served society's seemingly pathological need of frequent nightmare projections of itself. In Young's case, it exhorted the further 'spectre' of meritocracy, and this time we should sit up and take notice. He identifies common preoccupation with the dangers of a society in which unmediated meritocracy, masked as 'equality of opportunity' and uncritically cultivated by a complicit Labour Party, offers mobility, status and reward to a 'scientifically' selected and segregated few of productive 'intelligence'. By contrast, an 'unproductive' class is marginalised in a

system of rigid stratification, determined by narrow merit-based 'opportunity', and more acutely aware than ever of its 'own demonstrable inferiority'.¹³

Fox was, however, less sanguine about Young's ostensibly less radical prescriptions, based on an alternative social philosophy of 'plural values'. While it was no doubt laudable that the 'Manifesto' of the 'classless society' should imbibe broader markers of social value—not just 'intelligence and ... education' and 'occupation and ... power', but 'kindliness and courage', 'imagination and ... generosity', the lorry driver and rose grower, as well as the scientist—it would do little to downgrade inevitable meritocratic appeal. While Young's 'plural values' may go some way to determining the 'worth of a society', they 'do not fetch much' in its public marketplace. Inevitably, a 'clever-boy's paradise' remains so long as it is deemed a precondition of economic or technological development, and its terms are replicated and embedded in society. Corresponding forms of social stratification are inevitable, and the essential challenge remains to 'minimise the gaps and maximise the links between the strata'. As such, it was unlikely that manipulation of outcomes through the education system could be brokered against vested interests in a society forced by economic imperatives to confront and submit to the precepts of meritocracy. It was also unlikely that educational reform alone could take the strain if extremes of income and ownership persisted and as the socioeconomic effects of incipient meritocracy hardened.

Nonetheless, with its potential (mis)application to the new political rhetoric of 'equality of opportunity' and the 'classless society', a language identified by Young through his narrator, with 'opportunity ... coupled with equality' the Holy Grail of recent social invention, it offered both political apologue and cautionary tale. The so-called 'Opportunity State' had become the 'politicians' equivalent to chastity. All of them are in favour ... from Mr. Bevan to Mr. Butler ... They disagree only about the shortest cut'. This is what the country now wanted. Or was it? Conservative critics, such as Charles Curran in *Encounter* magazine, wondered if Young's allegorical message was

exaggerated. Why would those excluded from the meritocracy 'by I.Q. alone' tolerate their own exclusion, and would they not rise in revolt far earlier than predicted in Young's 'fable of 2034'? Young's imagined society in which full equality of opportunity becomes institutionalised was a 'philoprogenitive' impossibility, given the centrality and protective capacity of the family unit. Far from seeking a hard meritocracy, historically, socially and increasingly demographically people wanted a 'society that protects and cares for the untalented many', and in which the 'ungifted majority can survive and flourish'. Young's was a 'gross oversimplification' of the uncontested arena of meritocracy, and involved selective use of 'tendencies in contemporary Britain' in a 'sociological sleight-of-hand'. Insulated by embedded characteristics of British society, the British 'lower classes need not start advertising for a Spartacus just yet'.¹⁴

While arguably a reasoned criticism of Young on publication in 1958, ostensible 'neoliberal' developments of a later meritocratic turn appeared to remove some of the compound sociological barriers to attainment of meritocracy. As David Kynaston suggests, even if their early numbers and initial potency were exaggerated, Young was offering more than 'construction of a meritocratic straw man'. By virtue of 'their own endeavours ... as opposed to socio-economic background and connection', in a system of intelligence testing and selection for societal roles, the new meritocrats 'were on the march' from the 1950s. Young's analysis was 'tapping into' very real social trends and, by utilising the terminology of meritocracy, provided a useful conceptual lens through which these developments could be viewed and appraised.¹⁵

Young's 'neologism' raised the spectre of the emergence of an 'IQ elite' of postwar British society and economy or, as sociologist and cultural critic, Richard Hoggart, termed it, a new 'aristocracy of brains' or talent.¹⁶ Even Curran was forced to concede the contemporary relevance and impression of Young's intervention. By 'calling his end-of-rainbow State a "*meritocracy*", he ... coined a valuable new word', and provided a 'shibboleth to test the tongue of every aspirant to power' in modern Britain.¹⁷ It prompted

reviewers and commentators to consider questions of whether something akin to meritocracy had already emerged, the extent to which it was or would become embedded, and whether such a form of social organisation was desirable, necessary or could be avoided. Like Arendt, they deliberated the balance to be achieved between imperatives of economic and technological competition and efficiency, and potentially 'anti-democratic' impulses of meritocracy.

While Curran identified traditional sociological cleavages and barriers to the consolidation of meritocracy to the exclusion of existing social patterns and dispositions, Welsh Marxist theorist and critic, Raymond Williams, was similarly unconvinced by the reach of the new meritocracy. While a large number of professional roles were increasingly allocated on 'educational merit', this did not unduly disrupt existing patterns of political power. He saw little evidence in contemporary Britain of 'power being more closely connected with merit, in any definition'. Power remained 'largely elsewhere, and no damned merit about it'. The new meritocrats merely represented a type of 'upper servant' class, 'which may be as high as they can reasonably expect to travel'.¹⁸ From different perspectives, existing social structures and practices and processes of democracy would head off the rise and entrenchment of unmitigated meritocracy.

In contrast, much of the initial response to Young's representation of meritocracy predicted its inevitability, with more or less enthusiasm and very largely from the common position on grounds of economic efficiency, competition and growth. The *Economist* described the meritocracy as an 'odious place', in which 'mania for capital expansion' diminishes requirements of 'human welfare' and 'economic productivity rules the ends of human society', but in one form or another is on its way. Even the most rigid comprehensive education, as long as it does not flatten ability, is unlikely to 'keep that ability in the working class'. As such, the meritocracy represented an 'elite of top people, no longer encumbered with hereditary ... dumb-clucks' overseeing a 'new and paradoxically wide-open, caste system'.¹⁹ From the right, the inevitability and promise of meritocracy were more enthusiastically

embraced. The *Times* observed positively that ‘for the first time ... we are advancing ability wherever it is found’. If our ‘economic survival depends on discovering and promoting’ the best talent, there is ‘no getting away from the rise of the meritocracy in a scientific world’. Young’s conception of comprehensive schooling of a common curriculum for all children would not remove cleavages in society, as ‘such schools would still be selective instruments’. *The Spectator* urged that the text addressed the most fundamental of postwar developments and concerns, but that Young was ‘dilatory in shouldering his pole [for] the banner of Social Mobility’.²⁰ The competitive demands of economic growth, industrial, and technical development, required the production of the type of academic elite and subsequent meritocracy Young looked to proscribe.

From anti-meritocratic impulse to the meritocratic turn

Young’s was an attempt to offer an extrapolative account of credible developments and costs of postwar social trends which, through its core concept, has been widely influential, with both welcome and not so welcome political consequences. Its influence in educational reform and attempts to reduce the impact of social division fostered through narrow selection and segregated opportunities has not reduced its operative predictive capacity and frequent (mis)appropriation. In spite of some academic criticism of its method and style, it offered both insightful writing on the drivers of educational structures and policies and ‘sociological analysis in the form of ... satire’, the central concept of which has attained and retained civic currency and application (in both intended and unintended ways).

As a satirical, but full-frontal assault on the nascent meritocratic compulsion of postwar education and economic policy, it arguably had most practical influence in the 1960s and 1970s. It provided an ‘important intellectual propellant’ of the challenge to 11-plus streaming and consequently the dominant position of grammar schools. Influenced by Young, Anthony Crosland, as Labour’s Secretary of State for Education

and Science after 1964, famously declared to his wife following dinner with the ‘Joint 4’ teachers’ associations his desire to ‘destroy every fucking grammar school in England ... And Wales. And Northern Ireland’ (Scotland was beyond his charge). His government took comprehensive schooling beyond the preserve of local initiatives to a broader principle of policy to be rolled out nationally. Whatever views of its readiness, ambition or outcomes (and there are numerous criticisms of its relative quality, public support and propensity to ‘lock’ pupils into backgrounds as effectively as its predecessor), Young had implanted an ‘anti-meritocratic’ seed. In addition to helping to ‘abolish the 11-plus’, Young’s conceptual analysis ‘made the left think more carefully about equal opportunity and prompted more support for a pluralistic society’.²¹

Young projected his original concept of meritocracy almost as the antithesis of wider, inclusive, egalitarian reform and objectives. Paradoxically, it has come to represent both the desirable and functional model of socioeconomic organisation and reward, and key means of ‘progressive’ social change. This latter transformation of its meaning and application has served to underline both the prescience and durability of his analysis. Prior trends towards organisational standardisation have been reversed without notions of ‘unstreamed’, mixed-ability schools and classes having ever achieved full acceptance. Following the election of the ‘arch-meritocrat’, Margaret Thatcher, in 1979, a gradual ‘popular’ transition back to a principally meritocratic ethos (if it ever disappeared) and organisation occurred from the mid-1980s, and the bitter debate over the relative economic and social dimensions and priorities of meritocratic selection continues to this day. In the ‘ups and downs of ... meritocracy’, it appeared that by the end of the 1970s the ‘book’s political message had had its day. The task was complete: the meritocracy had been shafted’, but a politician or politics ‘in the grip of an idea’ can be a ‘dangerous’ thing.²²

Arguably, this does not justly acknowledge the wider circulation of ideas and applications of meritocracy which supported a broader meritocratic turn from the 1970s. As early as 1972, for instance, American

political sociologist, Daniel Bell, presented the 'logic' of a new 'post-industrial society' as that of meritocracy underpinning a shift to the new 'knowledge economy'. Under certain tempered conditions, this would constitute a 'meritocracy ... of the just'. Politicians of all shades have since drawn similar conclusions over potential 'conflicts with other social objectives' if meritocratic principles of differential rewards to stimulate 'productive wealth' are left untapped. These arguments of priorities appear to have neglected Bell's secondary or corresponding 'fairness principle', on which the differences are not converted into 'large, discrepant material and social advantages' and society remains genuinely open to the fullest possible extent.²³ Intellectually and politically, Young's originally dissonant concept has enjoyed a comeback, this time as a 'positive'—pervasive and persuasive—means by which to market the language of mobility and attendant financial and social rewards, differentials of which are increasingly and palpably visible.

Conclusion

Young intended his original satirical concept to presage the dangers of the rise of a new elitism based on a 'narrow band of values', a warning he believed has been lost on, or unheeded by, politicians who have not read his book. Reflecting on the evolution of his central concept at the beginning of the new millennium, he believed much of what he had predicted had come to pass. For Young, meritocracy had achieved new legitimacy and added potency through association with the recent politics of the centre-left and wider narratives and institutions of equality, which has served only to underwrite the shifting interpretive terrain of his concept as an indispensable 'means of breaking down established hierarchies of privilege'. He was disappointed to see it embraced as a positive egalitarian philosophy and guide to public policy by Tony Blair and New Labour.

While manifold political advocates continue to laud the 'fairness' of social organisation which rewards resources of intelligence and effort, its critics emphasise its essentially 'neoliberal' features of individualism and competition in the guise of 'opportunity for

all' and embodied in 'parables of progress'. They argue that opportunities for many are effectively closed down by defensive and protective tendencies of meritocracy, with a concomitant hardening of and desensitisation to social inequalities. Rather than disrupting pyramids of 'success' and status, meritocracy merely replaces and reproduces those hierarchies. Meritocratic social mobility for a narrowly 'talented' and subsequently self-serving elite does not offer an egalitarian panacea. Rather, it produces its own order in which those who succeed rehearse the claim that they have meritoriously applied their intelligence and effort to the exclusion of those deemed not to have made the grade and to the further strain of the social fabric. Unlike Conservative and New Labour representations of the so-called 'classless society', Young believed that meritocracy 'narrows potential rather than widens it; treats the less intelligent as inferior, rather than as individuals with their own [different] talents'. Contemporary narratives of meritocracy have enabled a society stratified by 'merit', in which the 'poor and disadvantaged' have been 'done down'. Branded at school 'according to education's narrow band of values', they become even 'more vulnerable for later unemployment'. They are 'easily ... demoralised by being looked down on so woundingly by [those] who have done well for themselves. It is hard ... in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that'.²⁴

Notes

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