Meritocracy As Plutocracy: The Marketising Of 'Equality' Under Neoliberalism

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Abstract *Meritocracy, in contemporary parlance, refers to the idea that whatever our social position at birth, society ought to facilitate the means for 'talent' to 'rise to the top'. This article argues that the ideology of 'meritocracy' has become a key means through which plutocracy is endorsed by stealth within contemporary neoliberal culture. The article attempts to analyse the term 'meritocracy', to open up understandings of its genealogy, and to comprehend its current use. It does so through three sections. The first section considers what might be wrong with the notion of meritocracy. The second traces some key points in the travels of the concept within and around academic social theory, moving from Alan Fox and Michael Young's initial, disparaging use of the term in the 1950s, to Daniel Bell's approving adoption of the concept in the 1970s, and on to its take-up by neoconservative think tanks in the 1980s. The third section analyses the use of meritocracy as a plank of neoliberal political rhetoric and public discourse. It focuses on the resonance of the term in relatively recent British culture, discussing how what it terms 'meritocratic feeling' has come to operate in David Cameron's 'Aspiration Nation'. This final section argues that meritocracy has become a potent blend of an essentialised and exclusionary notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and the need for social mobility. Today it is a discourse which predominantly works to marketise the very idea of equality.*

Keywords aspiration, equality, meritocracy, mobility, neoliberalism, plutocracy

OF LADDERS AND SNAKES

> We are building an Aspiration Nation. A country where it's not who you know, or where you're from; but who you are and where you're determined to go. My dream for Britain is that opportunity is not an accident of birth, but a birthright.
>
> David Cameron, Conservative Party Spring Conference, March 2013

The UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne have repeatedly evoked the image of Britain as an 'Aspiration Nation': as a country in which all people, no matter where they're from, have the opportunity to climb the ladder of social mobility.[1] This is the language of meritocracy: the idea that whatever our social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for 'talent' to combine with 'effort' in order to 'rise to the top'.

Meritocratic rhetoric is not confined to the UK. In the US, for instance, President Obama's 2013 inaugural address proclaimed that 'we are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else'.[2] Meritocracy has deep and varied historical lineages; in the UK, it can be connected back to

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the Victorian self-help tradition, and in the US to the emergence of the idea of aspirational consumerism as defining the 'American Dream' in the early twentieth century. Today, in many countries across the global North, the idea that we *should* live in a 'meritocracy' has become integral to contemporary structures of feeling: assumed by both right-wing and left-wing political parties, heavily promoted in educational discourse, and animating popular culture, meritocracy has become an idea as uncontroversial and as homely as 'motherhood and apple pie'.[3] Why should issue be taken with such an apparently innocuous concept, one whose potency lies in its investment in the conception of social mobility, pitted against 'older' forms of inherited privilege?

In this essay I argue that we should pay close attention to meritocracy because it has become a key ideological means by which plutocracy - or government by a wealthy elite - perpetuates itself through neoliberal culture. It is not, in other words, merely a coincidence that the common idea that we live, or should live, in a meritocratic age co-exists with a pronounced lack of social mobility and the continuation of vested hereditary economic interests.[4] Meritocratic discourse, as I show below, is currently being actively mobilised by members of a plutocracy to extend their own interests and power. Contemporary meritocracy operates to *marketise the very idea of equality* and can be understood in the light of Foucault's formulation of neoliberalism as a state in which competitive markets are not conceptualised as the 'natural' order of things (as they were under classical liberalism), but as entities that need to be *produced*.[5] This helps explain some of the tenacity of the power of meritocracy, despite its clear contradictions, and how it works as a mechanism to both perpetuate, and create, social and cultural inequality.

This essay explores this argument by sketching partial but hopefully nonetheless revealing genealogies of meritocratic discourse. Discussions of meritocracy have largely either taken place around education or have been empirical analyses of whether or not the meritocratic nature of existing social institutions can be verified.[6] Reflecting on the cultural politics of its genealogy can add to our understanding of meritocratic ideas and the worlds they have shaped. In this article I pursue this analysis through three sections. The first brief section of this paper considers what might be wrong with the notion of meritocracy. The second traces some key points in the travels of the concept within and around academic social theory, moving from Alan Fox and Michael Young's initial, disparaging use of the term in the 1950s, to Daniel Bell's approving adoption of the concept in the 1970s, and on to its take-up by neoconservative think tanks in the 1980s. The third section considers the use of meritocracy as a plank of neoliberal political rhetoric and public discourse. This focuses on the resonance of the term in relatively recent British culture, from a Thatcherite 'anti-establishment' version through to the explicit Blairite adoption of the concept, and on to its contemporary life in coalition discourse as part of David Cameron's putative project to build an 'Aspiration Nation'. For to understand how meritocracy is deployed by neoliberalism we need to comprehend it both in terms of its relationship to broader contexts and in terms of the specific ways in which it is being shaped at the present time.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH MERITOCRACY?

What *is* wrong with meritocracy? Given that the concept of meritocracy is today largely normalised as wholly beneficial, it is worth highlighting some of the problems with the concept

as it is generally understood in the present.

To begin with, the logic of meritocracy assumes that 'talent' or 'intelligence' is inborn from birth: it depends, in other words, on an essentialised conception of intellect and aptitude. It primarily assumes an ability which is inborn and either given the chance or not to 'succeed'. This notion of intelligence is singular and linear. It is in opposition to conceptions of intelligence as multiple and various, which can change and grow in numerous directions. Carried to its logical conclusion, such a hermetic conception of intelligence as a sealed and singular entity shares, as Young intimated in *The Rise of the Meritocracy,* the logic of eugenics.[7] This elitist 'myth of inherent difference' accelerated in intensity in affluent nations during the 1950s, and in Britain, as Danny Dorling points out, 'the state enthusiastically sponsored the division of children into types, with the amount spent per head on grammar school children being much higher than on those at the alternative secondary moderns'.[8] What Dorling terms 'apartheid schooling' was challenged in the 1960s and 1970s, but it was this 1950s rising tide of elitist stratification in both schools and society that in part prompted Michael Young's initial use of the term in 1958.

The second key problem with meritocracy is that it endorses a competitive, linear, hierarchical system in which by definition people must be left behind. The top cannot exist without the bottom. Not everyone can 'rise'. Unrealised talent is therefore both the necessary and structural condition of its existence. The forms taken by contemporary celebrity and the reality/talent shows have exemplified this structure,[9] publicly dramatising their assumptions while offering the basis for key forms of public entertainment. Meritocracy offers a 'ladder' system of social mobility, promoting a socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest which both legitimises inequality and damages community 'by requiring people to be in a permanent state of competition with each other'.[10] The classic meritocratic trope of the ladder was recently reinvigorated in the UK by David Cameron's 2013 Conservative Party Conference pledge to offer the 'ladder of opportunity for all to climb'. As Raymond Williams argued in 1963, the ladder is a perfect symbol of the bourgeois idea of society, because while it undoubtedly offers the opportunity to climb, it is a device which can only be used individually; you go up the ladder alone'. Such an 'alternative to solidarity', pointed out Williams, has dazzled many working-class leaders, and is objectionable in two respects: it weakens community and the task of common betterment and 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy' by offering growth through merit rather than money or birth, whilst retaining a commitment to the very notion of hierarchy itself.[11]

The third key problem with the ideology of meritocracy is in the hierarchical ranking of professions and status it endorses. Certain professions are positioned at the 'top', but *why* they are there - and whether they *should* be there - tends to be less discussed. Why do a singer or entrepreneur become roles to aspire to above those of a vet or a nurse? Why, as income disparity widens, are celebrity-based professions rising in ascribed status? Whilst one obvious answer is 'income', these questions are not ones that the contemporary neoliberal logic of meritocracy foregrounds. There is also a historical dimension to the answer, which relates to the shifting composition of social mobility. Academic research on social mobility usually differentiates between 'absolute' and 'relative' social mobility.[12] 'Absolute' social mobility refers to the movement in occupational classes from one generation to the next. In the UK there was a high level of movement between 1945 and the mid 1980s due to the growth in professional employment in the public sector (especially in education and health) and in

service sector employment, which drew disproportionately on the newly-educated children of manual workers: a phenomenon which has since reduced with the combined effects of public sector spending cuts since the 1980s and shrinkage in the service economy. Measuring 'relative' social mobility involves comparing rates at which those from 'lower down' move up, compared to how many 'higher up' fall down; and as Vikki Boliver and David Byrne recently argue, not only has there been 'little if any sign of [people] becoming any more equal over time' but with a crumbling middle class, 'upward mobility increasingly necessitates downward mobility'.[13] Such patterns help explain both the mid-century cultural validation of professional occupations and the expanding late twentieth-century focus on entrepreneurialism and celebrity. In a landscape of extreme poverty and wealth, entrepreneurialism and celebrity rags-to-riches tales become highlighted, or rendered 'luminous', to borrow Angela McRobbie's term;[14] they become publicly visible opportunities to 'escape' an otherwise entrenched position of social subordination.

The notion of 'escape', however, introduces the fourth, interconnected, problem: meritocracy's validation of upper-middle class values as norms to aspire to and it's rendering of working-class cultures as abject. The language of meritocracy is about moving 'upwards' in financial and class terms, but whilst this may entail, for example, being better fed, it does not mean existing in a 'better' or 'happier' culture. Middle-class suburbs are not usually better places for socialising or connecting with a range of people than housing estates, for instance.[15] Discourses of meritocracy, however, assume that all movement must happen upwards, and in the process contributes to the positioning of working-class cultures as the 'underclass', as abject zones and lives to flee from. As Imogen Tyler has shown powerfully in her recent book *Revolting Subjects*, this is a tendency that has exacerbated under neoliberalism.[16]

The fifth key problem with meritocracy, and the problem which moves us into the territory of considering why it has such currency and power, is that it functions as an ideological myth to *obscure* economic and social inequalities and the role it plays in curtailing social equality. Recent social science research mapping social mobility has gestured in this direction; McNamee and Miller for instance have argued that in America meritocracy is a description that is both inaccurate and harmful, and that its use legitimises inequalities of power and privilege through 'claims that are demonstrably false'.[17] As we will see later, one of the key components of this ideological myth is how 'effort' - which in a meritocratic system combines with 'talent' to produce merit - is over-valued, and social and economic location is not considered or ignored. The emphasis on 'effort' is the key element of meritocracy that has been expanded in recent years.

Meritocracy might therefore be broadly characterised as a potent blend of an essentialised and exclusionary notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and the need for social mobility. The following sections analyse this particular cultural cocktail, and consider how the claims of meritocracy have worked and circulated in terms of social theory, political narrative and public discourse.

1. THE GENEALOGY OF A CONCEPT: SOCIALIST ROOTS

In order to trace the way the concept has travelled, we can revisit the moment of its emergence; for although the discourses it mobilised have longer histories, this is one useful and significant starting point. Michael Young is widely regarded as coining the term 'meritocracy' in his 1958

book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which is the earliest citation of the word in the OED. Contrary to popular opinion, however, the term was in fact used two years earlier by Alan Fox in his article 'Class and Equality' in the journal *Socialist Commentary*, as the British historian David Kynaston recently notes in his book *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box*, 1957-59.[18] As Kynaston is not especially interested in meritocracy he devotes only a couple of sentences to his discovery, but in terms of the etymology of the word and its cultural currency, this is a significant and quite remarkable finding.

What is striking about Fox's article is that it is more extensively critical and politically radical use of the term than Michael Young's (which I discuss below). Alan Fox was to become an influential industrial sociologist whose radical perspective on industrial relations challenged the liberal orthodoxy of the discipline. In 1956 he was a researcher at Nuffield College Oxford, where he worked on a history of British trade unions and a history of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (ODNB 2013). The journal the article appeared in, *Socialist Commentary*, was the weekly publication of the Socialist Vanguard Group, a political group on the left of the Labour party. In 1955 Clement Atlee described *Socialist Commentary* as 'a useful corrective to the *New Statesman*' (a more mainstream UK left weekly magazine).[19]

Fox's article is a careful sociological summary of the policies, social apparatuses and ideologies that reproduce and legitimate social stratification. It considers the role of 'the four scales' - income, property, education and occupation - in solidifying inequality of position. It discusses how these factors are interconnected, with, for example, low incomes having made it impossible for workers 'to break out of the vicious circle which cramped their lives' (Class&Equality, p12). Fox tends to focus on industrial work. He suggests that we might understand social inequality by looking at extremes of occupational status and ways of categorising their social standing ('Is it dirty and laborious or the reverse of those things? Is it carried out under discipline and supervision, or under conditions permitting personal independence, initiative and discretion?'). Whilst he raises the hope that mechanisation and worker's demands on the shop floor will make blue collar lives better, he suggests that this is only part of the story. For even if mechanisation improves and unionisation succeeds, social stratification will remain. For Fox, inequality

> will remain as long as we assume it to be a law of nature that those of higher occupational status must not only enjoy markedly superior education as well but also, by right and of necessity, have a higher income into the bargain. As long as that assumption remains - as long as violations of it are regarded as grotesque paradoxes - then so long will our society be divisible into 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'; the society in which the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and the ruthless are carefully sifted out and helped towards their destined positions of dominance, where they proceed not only to enjoy the fulfilment of exercising their natural endowments but also to receive a fat bonus thrown in for good measure.
>
> This is not enough. Merely to devise bigger and better 'sieves' (equality of opportunity') to help the clever boys get to the top and then pile rewards on them when they get there is the vision of a certain brand of New Conservatism; it has never been the vision of socialism (Classs&Equality, p13).

I quote this at length because it is both a remarkable and remarkably unquoted passage. It indicates the radical origins of critiques of meritocracy - roots that have been obscured - alongside the extent to which it has travelled as a term. For Fox, 'meritocracy' is a term of abuse. It denotes a society in which 'the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and ruthless' not only reap the rewards for their (dubious or admirable) skills but receive *too much*: these 'fat bonus'[es], the rewards piled on them, are excessive and mean that others suffer. As a result of this analysis, he suggests 'cross-grading' as a route towards greater equality, which is conceptualised not only in financial terms, but also in terms of time, education and leisure. He offers pointers towards policies of redistribution; these

> might mean, perhaps, refusing to accept the idea that to prolong the education of secondary modern pupils beyond the age of fifteen is 'a waste of time'. It might mean that those who perform the dull and repetitive jobs in which our economy abounds receive substantially more leisure than the rest (Class&Equality, p13).

Fox's remarkable article, in which the earliest use of 'meritocracy' to be recorded to date appears, is therefore an explicitly socialist argument against the very logic of 'meritocracy'. These origins were forgotten, however, until 2013, in favour of consistent attention to Michael Young's playful, dystopian social satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

FROM YOUNG TO 'MATURE' MERITOCRACY

The Rise of the Meritocracy was published in 1958 and set in 2034. It is voiced by a pompous narrator who draws on the PhD thesis of the now-deceased social scientist 'Michael Young' - who (we learn at the end) died in a ferocious battle caused by the problems with the new social system of meritocracy. 'Meritocracy' here is understood as produced through the formula I + E = M, or 'Intelligence combined with Effort equals Merit'. The first half of the book depicts early twentieth-century Britain from the vantage point of a science-fiction future. It charts the demise of the old, class-bound, nepotistic order, in which kinship triumphs over skill and the rich bequeath their social worlds to their children, as a world overthrown by movements for greater social equality. The second half relates the ascendancy of the new system of merit, which turns out to lead not to an equal society, but rather to a new caste system in which IQ determines social station. In this world, the lower rungs of both ex-rich and ex-poor are dim-witted and, to borrow contemporary terminology, 'socially excluded'; careers tend to dip after people reach 40 or 50; and there is a roaring black-market trade in brainy babies. The book concludes by gesturing towards the 2034 'Battle of Peterloo' when an alliance of housewives and 'Populists' fight back on May Day against meritocracy. We learn that it was in this battle that 'Michael Young' died.

Rejected by a number of publishers, including one who wanted it refashioned into a novel in the style of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* - which Young did, although that particular version, intriguingly, never got published - *The Rise of the Meritocracy* eventually became a UK bestseller. This was in itself indicative of what Mike Savage has described as the unprecedented power of sociology in mid-twentieth century Britain.[20] The book portrays a hidebound, class-bound British society as grossly unfair, and registers the seismic post-war moves towards a

more egalitarian society and the redistribution of resources by the welfare state. But it is also, clearly, a book in which meritocracy is not depicted as a problem-free goal that such class-bound societies should strive for. On the contrary, it is presented as an ideology or organising principle that will become a problem by leading to new inequalities of power and forms of social stratification.

Through its satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was both questioning the way the social order was being re-made and connecting to older political-philosophical debates around merit. These debates included, for example, Emile Durkheim's vision of society providing 'free space to all merits'; those of the US structuralist-functionalists of the 1940s and 1950s, who sought to update his ideas; and the scepticism of British social democratic radicals of the interwar period like Tawney, Cole and Hobson, who argued that the production of 'merit' needed to be understood instead as a more egalitarian co-operative process.[21] Young's political-philosophical position was closer to the latter. As a key writer of the 1945 Labour Party manifesto *Let Us Face the Future* and Labour's Director of Research, Young wrote The *Rise of the Meritocracy* in part as a warning shot to his party against newly emergent forms of social division.[22] The book is critical of tendencies toward over-valorising innate ability and of expanding hierarchies in education. As Raymond Williams argued in a review of Young's book, '[w]e think of intelligence as absolute and limited because we have been told to think so, by this kind of society. It seems increasingly obvious, in practice, that our concepts of intelligence are peculiarly unintelligent'.[23]

'Meritocracy' came to shift away from this overtly satirical meaning so that notoriously, by the 1990s New Labour under Tony Blair had adopted a non-satirical idea of 'a meritocratic society' with gusto. Shortly before his death, Young wrote of how the term had been adopted by Blair and widely disseminated in the US, but not in the way he intended. It had been misunderstood, and so New Labour should stop using the term, he argued in an oft-quoted article for the *Guardian*. For Young, the unironic way 'meritocracy' was now deployed, which worked by 'sieving people according to education's narrow band of values […w]ith an amazing battery of certificates and degrees' meant that social stratifications had hardened, those demoted to the bottom of the social pile were deemed unworthy and demoralised; and that 'no underclass has ever been left as morally naked'.[24]

I will come to the issue of how meritocracy changed in meaning from the 1960s onward below, but it is worth considering how Young's book itself - or rather, the text and its author's paratextual framings of it - may have contributed, despite themselves, to such 'misreadings'.[25] For whilst *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is a text which is known for being disparaging of meritocracy, there is also a fair amount of ambiguity on this issue to both the text and itself and to Michael Young's comments on it. Its author claimed that *Rise* was 'intended to present two sides of the case - the case against as well as the case for a meritocracy' (*Rise of Meritocracy*, pxvii). In the book, whilst 'meritocracy' is valued for its ability to dismantle inherited privilege, it is also damned for its power to create new, unfair social divisions. The fictional 'Chelsea Manifesto' is the clearest expression of an alternative to both, with its often powerful arguments for equality, for valuing 'kindliness and courage, sympathy and generosity' over narrow conceptions of intelligence; and yet this alternative vision is truncated and cut off. Neither was the author's paratextual activity always consistent. For instance, Young stated that he supported the ideal of a classless society, yet when asked in the 2000s whether the book was arguing for resistance to the nascent elitism of the meritocracy by promoting 'the comprehensive idea', replied with

an unexpansive but unequivocal 'no'.[26]

Young, who was director of the Institute of Community Studies at the time of writing the book, later became a founder and co-founder of a variety of institutions key to post-war British life and progressive social education, including the Open University, The Consumer's Association and the University of the Third Age. He was deeply committed to formations which enabled innovative forms of participation and engagement with political and social structures. It is for this reason that his legacy is held in such high regard in the UK today. This is a political-conceptual lineage which connects Young's work with that of contemporary advocates of participatory democracy; the tentative conclusion of the book's story, in which the housewives and other populists rise up together, is symptomatic of this tendency.

Yet whilst arguing against 'the big organisation', Young's primary model or template for participation was the nuclear family. As Hilary Land makes clear in her essay about *Rise*, the book, whilst anticipating a feminist critique of 'merit', does not particularly challenge conventionally gendered divisions of labour;[27] nor, we can add, its heteronormativity, nor its singular means of conceptualising 'social closeness'. We can also note that Young's antipathy towards large organisations involved being decidedly ambivalent / hostile towards nationalised industries; at its most left wing, this involved promoting mutual aid and 'neighbourly socialism'; at its least, it involved joining the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and not making any explicit critique of capitalism. The emphasis on economic and cultural redistribution which is foregrounded in Fox's account is downplayed in Young's.

What this means is that whilst *Rise* clearly critiques an essentialised and individualised notion of *merit* and implicitly eugenicist approaches to intelligence, its relationship to comprehensive provision, and indeed to capitalism, is somewhat less clear. And whilst responsibility for what happens to any concept, book or term cannot obviously be laid at the feet, the brain or the typewriting fingers of the author, the persistence of such textual lacunae is a key factor in how the term later became deployed. The paradoxical nature of Young's historical position is also apparent in the tendency of commentators to describe him as the original 'social entrepreneur',[28] a phrase which has now become decidedly ambivalent: reflecting not only innovative brilliance at creating socially beneficial initiatives (at which Young excelled), but also what was to become a wider saturation of the field of social policy by neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

'JUST' MERITOCRACY?

In 1973, in his classic text, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Daniel Bell - American sociologist and friend of Michael Young - pronounced that 'the post-industrial society, in its logic, is a meritocracy'.[29] The impact of the 1960s movements and struggles by those disenfranchised by the worker hierarchies of the Fordist settlement - women, non-whites, gay people - entailed a hugely significant challenge to and partial rupture of the dominant lines of social stratification. For example, after the 1963 Equal Pay Act in the US, and the 1970 Equal Pay Act in the UK, it was no longer legal to pay men and women differently for doing the same job, even if the struggle over equal pay for work of equal value - and against cultural prejudices against what it is *possible* for a woman or man to do - remains necessary.

These challenges to social mobility were engendered through and alongside the shift to a 'post-industrial', post-Fordist society and culture. Post-Fordist culture and society has involved a

range of notable developments, including: the rapid growth in consumer-oriented production, branding and the service sector, the mobilisation of just-in-time ICTs in the service of 'the creative industries', industrial downsizing, manufacturing contracting-overseas, and the neoliberal erosion of worker's rights and the social provisions of the welfare state in favour of privatised solutions and social risk being borne by 'the individual'.[30]

In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Bell uses 'meritocracy' to refer primarily to the new forms of social mobility which are engendered within allegedly 'post-industrial' society. This is important: as use of the term 'meritocracy' in Bell's text works to neutralise and erase those more problematic (or 'dystopian') aspects of the term present in Young's work and powerfully critiqued in Fox's essay. Bell elaborates upon his ideas about meritocracy in a now more obscure text: a 1972 article 'On meritocracy and equality' in the journal *The Public Interest*. This article is fascinating as it forms a mid-point in the journey of meritocratic ideology from object of satirical scorn (in *Rise*) to central and explicit tenet of neoliberalism (as in the pamphlet which I consider in the next section from the Social Market Foundation). *The Public Interest* was a quarterly American public policy journal aimed at journalists, academics and policy makers founded by Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol in 1965. Irving Kristol, writer, journalist and publisher, was dubbed 'the godfather of neoconservatism' when he featured on the cover of *Esquire* magazine in 1979, a moniker he later adopted and adapted in his books including *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, *The Neoconservative Persuasion* and *Two Cheers for Capitalism*. Bell dropped his involvement with the journal from the late 1970s, as it lurched further to the right.[31]

Bell's interpretation of meritocracy was therefore a meeting point between Young's social-democratic version - Young explicitly refers to Bell as 'a friend' in the 1994 introduction to *The Rise of the Meritocracy* - and neoconservatism (*Rise of Meritocracy*, pxv). This is palpable in the article. It is a thorough, carefully written piece, in which Bell argues for a distinction between 'equality of opportunity' and 'equality of result'. There has been a conceptual confusion between these positions, the article argues, drawing on the work of John Rawls. Which do we want? Bell claims that 'equality of result' is a socialist ethic, whereas 'equality of opportunity' is a liberal one.[32] In the process, he questions the value of affirmative action programmes and comes, eventually, to argue for 'a just meritocracy' which is 'made up of those who have earned their authority', as opposed to an 'unjust' one which 'makes those distinctions invidious and demeans those below'.[33]

In this text the usage of 'meritocracy' comes to adopt the lineaments of the form we know today. It is an unambiguously positive and valorised term. It is also one which argues in favour of 'opportunity'. This is familiar territory to a contemporary readership. However, what distinguishes it from current usage are two important contextual points. First, the terrain on which meritocracy operates is one of high confidence in economic growth, as evidenced by virtue of Bell being able to debate whether or not 'we have reached the post-scarcity state of full abundance'. This is clearly a moment before either the 1970s recession or the later 'peak oil' crisis hit. Second, and related, the position from which Bell speaks is defined by a political context in which widespread support for the Keyesian consensus has not yet collapsed, a context that has resulted in 'a steady decrease in income disparity between persons'.[34] To put it bluntly: putting a competitive vision of meritocracy into play is not hugely conspicuous or controversial at a time when there is a strong social safety net.

From this position, in which the Fordist welfare settlement offset the worst extremes of capitalist division and its attendant social squalor, and from high confidence in expanding economic growth, meritocracy is, for Bell, to be conceived as a social system in which 'just' rewards and small gradations of privilege and position can be given to differential talent. From here, it might even be used as a motor for greater growth:

> And there is no reason why the principle of meritocracy should not obtain in business and government as well. One wants entrepreneurs and innovators who can expand the amount of productive wealth for society.[35]

And so the ambiguities of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* are resolved in favour of a specific usage which is quite different from Young's. For Bell, IQ is far less problematic than for Young. He is not so interested in the potential of local or participatory power or the extent of social levelling proposed by Fox. He is interested in achieving a social order in which the excesses of capitalism are curbed by the state, and hopes that meritocracy can be recalibrated in such a way as to avoid it solidifying into the new caste system imagined by Young, instead providing an incitement-engine for a dynamic yet just society. Here meritocracy starts to become posited as an engine of 'productive wealth'.

MERITOCRACY IN THE NEOLIBERAL LABORATORY

Bell's vision of meritocracy emerged from a historical situation characterised by the presence of a strong welfare state which could offset the most extreme effects of market-produced social inequality In this context, meritocracy could be imagined as a dynamic engine both of 'opportunity' for social mobility, shaking up an ossified class system, and for ambiguously imagined 'productive wealth' - a term vague enough to be used by actors across the political spectrum. By the 1990s, however, this ambiguity was being aggressively exploited by the right, as the concept of 'meritocracy' became mobilised in explicit opposition to social democracy. In Britain, a 1995 pamphlet by Adrian Wooldridge from the Social Market Foundation, *Meritocracy and the classless society*, argued for a vision of meritocracy which was explicitly pitted against comprehensive education, student grants, housing benefit, and any other kind of collective provision. Meritocracy is here opposed to what Wooldridge calls the 'niceness revolution' of the '60s and '70s. As part of this, it is explicitly opposed to 'community'[36] and to the welfare state, which is figured as 'an obstacle' to spreading meritocratic values'.[37] Meritocracy in Woolridge's version then is explicitly bound up with the logic of a capitalist market and with entrepreneurialism, and very much against the collective provision of social democracy and the welfare state. Here meritocracy fully embraces the liberal idea of 'equality of opportunity' and renders it synonymous with economic growth, capitalist competition and marketisation. Meritocracy is marketised and marketisation is good.

We can understand the development of this framework more capaciously by drawing on Michel Foucault's series of distinctions between liberalism and neo-liberalism in his prescient 1978-9 *College de France* lecture series (which forms the backdrop to his account of biopolitics, published in French in 2004 and English in 2008). Foucault is insistent on the need to grasp the distinctions between liberalism and neoliberalism, to grasp their singularity, to 'show you

precisely that neoliberalism is really something else' (*Birth of Biopolitics*, p130). For Foucault, the 'something else' neoliberalism became was a situation in which 'the overall exercise of political power can be modeled on the principles of a market economy' (*Birth of Biopolitics*, p131). In other words, it was not just that the market became dominant, but that, since the 1970s it has begun to structure the way political power itself works.

Foucault describes how, to create this regime, classical liberalism had to be subjected to a number of transformations. A key transformation is that whilst classical liberalism accepts monopolies, neo-liberalism doesn't: competition under neoliberalism is not considered natural, but structured (*Birth of Biopolitics*, pp134-137). Moreover, the only 'true' aims of social policy for neoliberalism can be economic growth and privatisation; thus the multiplication of the 'enterprise' form within the social body, Foucault states, is what is at stake in neoliberalism, and it is what comes to constitute the 'formative power of society' (*Birth of Biopolitics*, p148).

In Wooldridge's formulation, meritocracy becomes a means of actively intervening to multiply the enterprise form within the social body. For example, he sees danger both in the hereditary interests of the Lords, and in Thatcher's inability to 'undermine the comprehensive principle in state schools'.[38] The vision, in other words, is of a starkly stratified society, one in which people can travel according to their inborn 'merit'. It finds legitimate vast inequalities of wealth and poverty as long as the potential to travel through them for those savvy enough is maintained. The distaste for the masses, towards the 'all and sundry' model of comprehensive education, combines revulsion toward 'standardisation' and toward the masses who fall out of view when the socially mobile are focused upon. These terms are elided.

Interestingly, Woolridge's pamphlet was produced by the Social Market Foundation (SMF), a cross-political party think tank. The very name 'Social Market Foundation' bears out Foucault's claim that neoliberal rhetoric works to incite marketisation throughout the social body, while strongly echoing Michael Young's language of social entrepreneurialism: neoliberalism, as analysed by Foucault, and Young's own political discourse, here become almost wholly intertwined. In this influential pamphlet, a product of several decades of New Right thinking, 'meritocracy' is unambiguously posited as an engine of competition *against* supposedly debilitating forms of social collaboration.

2. MERITOCRATIC FEELING: THE MOVEMENT OF MERITOCRACY IN BRITISH POLITICAL RHETORIC

The meaning meritocracy was taking at this moment was then clearly being shaped by the public emergence of neoliberalism from the 1970s. What we might call 'meritocratic feeling' - drawing from Raymond Williams' idea of 'structures of feeling' alongside recent emphasis on affect - was shaped through political discourse, emotive appeals and cultural rhetoric.[39] In Britain neoliberal policies and ideas of meritocracy were profoundly shaped, from the late 1970s, by Thatcherism, which made a meritocratic appeal to social mobility whilst dismantling the welfare state's social safety net and initiating the long wave of privatisation with the sale of public utilities like gas, telecommunications and rail.[40] Thatcherism normalised the marketisation of public services as the only possible response to the supposed malaise of the Keynesian industrial economy and articulated it to a very specific and partial idea of social mobility.

It is worth re-visiting the specific terms in which meritocratic aspiration was expressed.

This form of meritocratic discourse linked a notion of achievement and merit towards successful consumption and away from intelligence. It habitually expressed distaste for ingrained privilege, particularly if it was in any way supported by the state. At the same time it was typically characterised by social conservatism in its attitudes to sexuality and gender: in particular attaching huge rhetorical importance to the heteronormative nuclear family and by repeatedly invoking imperialist white privilege.[41] Whilst Thatcherism worked in multiple ways to secure consent for its politics, one of the most important was its meritocratic appeal to consumerism as a general mode of participation in public life which invited people to identify with the notion of themselves as consumers rather than as workers or citizens in a range of public settings. The presentation of acquisitive consumerism as *the* route to empowerment in any social context was closely bound up with the implicit assumption that the accumulation of consumer goods was at once a sign of merit and its tangible reward. One of the most significant moments in her first term was precisely designed to re-position a population of public-resource users as private owner/consumers: when she gave municipal tenants the right to buy the housing they lived in for prices that were very far below market rates.[42] Crucially this government-subsidised housing stock wasn't replaced. With the removal of social housing from the market and the dismantling of rent controls and of legal protections for tenants, private landlords were free to raise rents astronomically, fuelling both the long-term housing boom which has had such deleterious effects on those social sectors unable to benefit from it, as well as massively increasing the public cost of subsidising the rents paid by welfare claimants to private landlords.[43]

Consumption became central to Thatcherism's iconography of 'getting ahead'. The new vanguard of conspicuous consumption were the businessmen and women, the stockbrokers and yuppies whose speedily-acquired lavish lifestyles were documented in Sunday supplements and glossy ads. The idea of money pouring through the social body was enshrined in Harry Enfield's comic TV character 'Loadasmoney!' (who had the cash, and flashed it; but he didn't know how to spend it, just waving it around in a wad, embodying the new class distinctions between those who knew how to dispose of their income and those who didn't). At the same time, income equality rose faster than in recorded history, child poverty doubled, unemployment rocketed, and the privatised utilities generated at least as many user complaints as the publicly-owned predecessors which they had been expected to outperform.

This, then, was a moment when people were imagined exclusively as individual consumers, as wholly bounded entities whose only significant sites of sociality were their families. As Thatcher said in an interview for the magazine *Women's Own*, 'there is no such thing as society. There are men and women and children and there are families'. This phenomenally atomised view of society was made to seem familiar and unthreatening by figuring Britain as a household, with Thatcher in charge, balancing the household budget. As Angela McRobbie discusses elsewhere in this issue, drawing on Foucault, such figurations of 'good housekeeping' have been a recurring motif of national neoliberal cultures.[44] While Thatcher was an arch anti-feminist, figuring the nation as a household with a consumer purse created a gendered appeal.[45] Thatcher always had low electoral popularity but she was very successful at winning over women, particularly lower middle-class and upper working class women. These were receptive constituencies both because they had traditionally been denied access to power and because one of the few zones in which traditionally women have had, though in circumscribed fashion, more power than

men, is consumption.[46] The use of consumerism as a means and an apparent visual index of greater social mobility was key to securing consent for Thatcherite neoliberalism.

Under Thatcherism, then, what I am calling 'meritocratic feeling' was shaped and encouraged through aspirational femininity in particular and a very bounded, individualised (and/or nuclear family-based) form of consumerism in general. Popular support for Thatcherism was an expression of some of the most significant iniquities and discontents which the Fordist settlement had generated through its reliance on a hierarchical system of class, race and gender. Resentment at ingrained class hierarchies and gendered subordination were - along with gay rights and anti-racism - what fuelled the fractures in this settlement and the rebellions of the late 1960s, those social movements which were rupturing and staking their claim in 1968. Thatcherism's deployment of a meritocratic popular consumerism addressed the gendered and classed components of this disgruntlement in particularly important ways. Its culture and rhetoric persuaded women, and especially lower-middle-class women, the people who voted for her most, that the pursuit of satisfaction as an individualised consumer in the private sphere was the route to empowerment and social mobility. Under Thatcherism meritocracy was thereby presented as a pragmatic and emancipatory social solution to the gendered inequalities and industrial ruptures of the Fordist welfare settlement.

BLAIRISM AND BEYOND

By the late 1990s, this marketised meaning of 'meritocracy' had become a key theme within New Labour policy discourse, which, whilst equally populist, was somewhat less anti-intellectual than Thatcherism. New Labour's use of meritocratic themes had in part been influenced by the work of yet another prominent sociologist, Anthony Giddens, who in *Where now for New Labour?* argued strongly that 'we should want a society that is more egalitarian than it is today, but which is meritocratic … a meritocratic approach to inequality is inevitable'.[47] As John Beck argues, when the 'm' word was not always apparent, it was there in its constellation of synonyms: social inclusion, poverty of aspiration, social justice, talent, empowered individuals.[48]

This dual embrace of the idea of retaining forms of social protection (which included, for example, the introduction of the minimum wage and paid paternity leave) alongside the erosion of social protection via neoliberal expansion (through, for example, the extended privatisations of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) , the introduction of academy schools, and the deregulation of the European labour market) structured and guided New Labour's time in power. This back-and-forth movement was memorably termed 'New Labour's double shuffle' by Stuart Hall.[49] However, as Jeremy Gilbert pointed out in his response to Hall's argument, the forms of protection being promoted were less consistent with social democratic egalitarianism than with neoliberal meritocracy which sought to provide 'equality of opportunity' on marketised and individualised terms.[50]

The idea of movement 'up' the social ladder also raises the question of what exactly is being reached *for*. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy* what is being reached toward is a blend of money and classed prestige. By the late 1990s both were being reconfigured in the wake of the Thatcherite challenge to the social order and New Labour's embrace of the financial sector, financialisation and of London as a centre for financial transactions and as the principle motor of the UK economy.[51] As New Labour's Trade and Industry Secretary Peter Mandelson famously put it in

1998, 'we are intensely relaxed about people becoming filthy rich'.[52] What was being positioned as 'the top' of the ladder was mutating, as CEO pay soared and 'the demotic turn' of reality TV shows popularised tempa-celebrities - or 'celetoids', to borrow Chris Rojek's definition.[53] What merit was, and how it was being ranked, was therefore changing to reflect New Labour's dual imperatives of corporate growth and populist access - a phenomenon Anthony Barnett astutely termed 'corporate populism'.[54] As John Beck caustically put it, in his wonderful analysis of New Labour's use of the term in relation to education, while even a brief dip into the history serves to highlight how meritocracy and measurement are perennially contested matters, this appears 'to have had remarkably little effect on politicians, particularly those of the centre Left or centre Right, in whose discourse and policies, meritocratic ideas remain persistently prominent'.[55]

But as the marketising effects of neoliberalism ripped through the forms of social protection built up in the mid-century, and the gap between rich and poor became increasingly graphic, more empirical and critical work emerged in and around social science in the 2000s on the limitations of 'social mobility' as a descriptive concept and a normative aim. In their 2009 book *The Meritocracy Myth,* for instance, American sociologists Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller examine the prevailing belief that 'people get out of the system what they put into it based on individual merit' through an extensive series of case studies. They conclude that, while US society has reduced some of its prejudicial inequalities structuring the opportunities for women and non-whites, 'the most important factor for determining where people end up economically is where they started in the first place', that 'the race is a relay race'.[56] 'The simple fact', they write, 'is that there is far more talent, intelligence, hard work, and ability in the population than there are people lucky enough to find themselves in a position to exploit them'.[57]

'ASPIRATION NATION' AND THE HYPOCRISY OF THE NEW ELITES

At present in Britain the powerful language of aspiration, social mobility and opportunity for all to rise through the social structure has not become muted, despite a double-dip recession, still-growing inequality, and a historically unprecedented drop in living standards for the working majority. On the contrary: it has escalated under the Conservative-LibDem coalition government, whose use of the idea of meritocracy represents a new stage in its 'development'. In this instance it has been deployed without the introduction of ameliorating initiatives or forms of collective provision (like the minimum wage), and in conjunction with specific policies aimed at cutting the incomes of the poor (like the Bedroom Tax). The coalition government has continued, and sped up, the implementation of neoliberal policies marketising the welfare state (such as the extension of internal markets and corporate involvement in prisons and in the health service) whilst using the alibi of the recession.[58] At the 2012 Conservative Party conference, David Cameron declared that under his leadership Britain is now an 'aspiration nation': 'we are the party of the want-to-be better-off'.

According to Cameron's stated worldview, the ability to 'believe in yourself', and by extension, your child, is primary. This is a discourse which vests not only power but also *moral virtue* in the very act of hope, in the mental and emotional capacity to believe and aspire. Hope and promise become more integral in an unequal society in which hard work alone

has less and less chance of reaping the prizes. Through this rhetorical mechanism, instead of addressing social inequality as a solvable problem, the act of addressing inequality becomes 'responsibilised' as an individual's moral meritocratic task. This process devolves onto the individual personal responsibility not just for their success in the meritocratic competition, but for the very will to compete and expectation of victory which are now figured as moral imperatives in themselves. Not investing in aspiration, in *expectation*, is aggressively positioned as an abdication of responsibility which condemns yourself - and even worse, your child - to the social scrapheap. To quote Cameron's 2012 Conservative Party conference speech:

> It's that toxic culture of low expectations - that lack of ambition for every child - which has held this country back.
> the Labour party theorists ... stand in the way of aspirational parents by excusing low expectations and blaming social disadvantage (*Guardian* 2012).

Here aspirational meritocracy works by positioning itself against - increasingly aggressively - any investment in collective provision as both a symptom and a cause of 'low expectation'. In his 2013 party conference speech, Cameron re-iterated the 'aspiration nation' theme, intensifying the rhetoric by describing himself as engaged in a battle against opponents whom he characterised explicitly as non-hard workers - 'smug, self-satisfied socialists'. 'That's who we're fighting against', he asserted; 'And we know who we're fighting for: for all those who work hard and want to get on'.[59]

Here, social disadvantage is only 'real' in that it is an obstacle over which pure mental will and aspiration - if they are expressed correctly by being combined with hard work - can triumph. These tropes and discursive elements generate an affective mode which Lauren Berlant aptly identifies as 'cruel optimism'. This is the affective state produced under neoliberal culture which is cruel because it encourages an optimistic attachment to the idea of a brighter future whilst such attachments are, simultaneously, 'actively impeded' by the harsh precarities and instabilities of neoliberalism.[60] If 'Aspiration Nation' is related to such 'cruel optimism', it also draws on the English trope of 'having a go', which involves a sort of non-competitive competitiveness, of being prepared to compete without any expectation of winning, out of a recognition that sporting competition is a mode of social participation; although the difference is that in the Aspiration Nation you can't just do your best: you have to *want to win*.

Even the psychosocial resources required to engage in aspiration are considerable and easier for some classes to obtain and deploy than others. There is a rich tradition in the cultural studies of education analysing how middle-class children are encouraged to aspire whilst working class children are - to cite the title of Paul Willis's classic book - *Learning to Labour*.[61] Valerie Gilles' recent analysis of aspirational language used - or not - by parents when talking about their child's behaviour at school is particularly instructive here. Her research showed how for working-class parents, the attributes most likely to be proudly described were children's ability to stay out of trouble, get on with others, and work hard, which inculcates the strength to struggle and to defend scant resources; whereas middle-class parents foster 'the right to be bright' and code problematic behaviour in the classroom in terms of intelligence and of needs the classroom should be able to accommodate, which helps reproduce middle-class success. Gilles criticises New Labour's education policy for encoding middle-class behaviour as morally

correct and blaming the poor 'with almost missionary zeal' for their own failure.[62]

Such tendencies have been continued and extended in politics and popular culture since 2005. There is now a widespread tendency to 'blame the parents' for any problems at the expense of any other social factor such as economic and social impoverishment. This tendency is conveyed, for instance, through the fixation on parenting styles 'over and above all other factors' in relation to children's behaviour and life chances;[63] foregrounded through framing of parental responsibility by TV programmes such as *Supernanny*[64] and in government and media responses to the London riots.[65] This tendency is tied up with how, as Angela McRobbie argues in this issue, the family is increasingly figured as a bounded entrepreneurial unit.[66]

'Aspiration Nation' as a rhetorical strategy, and as an expression of meritocratic feeling, connects self-belief and aspiration with the trope of hard work. It is striking how, again and again, 'hard work' combined with self-belief is employed by an unprecedentedly privileged cadre of politicians and millionaire elites to justify their position and success and to prescribe this as the route for others. 'Working hard and wanting to get on' is the way to progress. This trope has been repeatedly deployed by Conservative MP and Mayor of London Boris Johnson, who, in the words of the *Daily Mail*, 'hailed the Olympics for embodying the "Conservative lesson of life" that hard work leads to reward'[67] and more recently told Britons that they needed to work harder otherwise jobs would go to economic migrants.[68]

How does this rhetoric of 'hard work', such a feature of the contemporary meritocratic deal, work, given that there is a swathe of research proving that *inheriting opportunity* in the form of finance and social connections is by far more important a factor in the route to riches?[69] It is notable that plenty of millionaires who inherited their wealth, including Boris Johnson and David Cameron, conveniently promote hard work as the most influential factor in social mobility. Such discourse simultaneously helps to erase any image of over-privileged indolence from the speaker's persona whilst interpellating the listener as able to achieve a similar social status; a degree of social mobility which is in practice attainable only for a tiny minority. As MacNamee and Miller put it, 'meritocracy tends to be believed in more by the privileged'.[70] But the rhetoric of 'hard work' is crucial to today's meritocratic feeling. In research recently conducted in St Pauls, an elite North American fee-paying school, Khan and Jerolmack noted that typically these students were conscious of the idea of their privilege, and replaced a frame of entitlement with one based around merit by continually emphasising how hard they'd worked. The researchers argued that 'they generally do not work hard, although they are adept at performing a kind of busyness that looks and feels like hard work.' (Students that did regularly go to the library were conversely positioned as 'freaks'). As they put it, '"hard work" is mostly a form of talk - but important talk nonetheless. It is a rhetorical strategy deployed by students in a world of "new elites"'. These are elites 'saying meritocracy but doing the ease of privilege'.[71]

Similarly, the coalition's investment in 'hard work' is classed: it is coded as 'graft' even when it's being voiced by million/billionaires, celebrities and children at elite private fee-paying schools. This is not completely new: it was a key element in the rhetoric of Thatcherism as well as Blairism. Thatcher notably used a version of this rhetoric which was both structured through the decline of deference and classed through its rhetoric of rising up through the classes. As Peter Clarke and Tom Mills point out, the importance to her success of her husband's considerable wealth was barely acknowledged by Thatcher. She preferred to dwell on her humble roots as

a grocer's daughter and to imagine that her achievements were attributable to drudgery and self-discipline'.[72] Cameron and his cabinet, just like Boris Johnson, do not draw on such early moments in their self narrative to calibrate work as classed graft, mainly because they don't have them: their backgrounds are aristocratic or quasi-aristocratic. They do, however, borrow the classed rhetoric of 'hard work' - just like the privileged children interviewed by Khan and Jerolmack; and the very act of saying 'hard work' invites those who do work hard to identify with them and flatters the rest. Then 'hard work' is connected, rather than to a particular lower-class reflexive position, to *the necessity of having aspirations*: you can't have one without the other, in this worldview: to lack either is a moral failure.

In this way Cameron and Johnson do what Thatcher did but de-articulate the highly selective, reflexive class biographical detail and replace it with a generalised notion of aspiration. These actions are similar ones to those offered by Blairism, although the crucial difference is the Conservatives' dispensing with the concessions to equality of opportunity that Blair promoted - whilst pushing through neoliberal reforms - in favour of a much more dramatic cutting of the social safety net. This makes the distance aspiration needs to travel that much further and far less likely to be traversed.

STRIVERS V SKIVERS

Meritocracy is a word with a short etymological history - under 60 years - but during this time it has gradually and dramatically shifted in its meaning. It has moved from a disparaging reference to an embryonic system of state organisation creating problematic hierarchies through a dubious notion of 'merit', to a celebratory term connecting competitive individualism and an essentialised notion of 'talent' with a belief in the desirability and possibility of social mobility in a highly unequal society. It emerged as a word at the high point of the British welfare state both as a celebration of the greater degrees of social equality and social mobility that many - though not all - experienced at that time, and simultaneously as a critique of emergent hierarchies based on troublingly essentialised notions of aptitude and an ambiguous anxiety about the forms of inequality such notions were beginning to engender. It was initially mobilised as a term through a radical socialist discourse: an origin which until now has been lost and obscured in favour of Young's left-liberal stance.

As a discourse, meritocracy was mobilised gradually into, through and by neoliberalism, although this has happened in diverse, sometimes erratic ways. It has been and continues to be shaped as a discourse by diverse constituencies, agents and sites including popular culture, social theory and political rhetoric. As this essay has attempted to show, what I have termed 'meritocratic feeling' has taken different forms in neoliberal culture. In Britain, for instance, Thatcherism's elision of collective state welfare with the ingrained privileges of 'the great and the good', and its exploitation of the gendered weaknesses of the Fordist settlement were mobilised into an anti-intellectual acquisitive, consumerist form of meritocracy. The 'meritocratic feeling' promulgated by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government at present perpetuates - like the Labour government before it - a possessive individualist, consumerist notion of meritocracy; but it is a meritocratic feeling which moves further by vesting moral virtue in the act or affects of aspiration and hope; one which is, when combined with the trope of 'hard work', explicitly pitted against any form of collective provision or mutual forms

of social reproduction. 'Aspiration nation' defines itself against mutuality. You are a striver or a skiver: believing in the necessity of any kind of collective form of social reproduction is demarcated as simply a lazy excuse for not striving.

Through neoliberalism meritocracy has become an alibi for plutocracy, or government by a wealthy elite. It has become a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture in Britain. It has done so by seizing the idea, practice and discourse of greater social equality which emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and marketising it. Meritocracy, as a potent blend of an essentialised notion of 'talent', competitive individualism and belief in social mobility, is mobilised to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought through neoliberalism. However, at the same time, such discourse is neither inevitable nor consistent. It requires actively reinforcing and reproducing and can be augmented and shaped in a number of different places and spaces. The alternative to plutocracy-as-meritocracy is a more plural understanding of 'merit' - which considers 'merit' on a collective and not a purely individual basis - alongside mutual and co-operative forms of social reproduction which create greater parity in wealth, opportunity, care and provision.

Notes

1. Patrick Wintour, 'David Cameron presents himself as leader of an 'aspiration nation', *Guardian*, 10.10.2012. Isabel Hardman, 'Budget 2013: It's all about the "Aspiration Nation"', *Spectator*, 20.03.2013, http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/coffeehouse/2013/03/budget-2013-its-all-about-the-aspiration-nation/http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2012/oct/10/david-cameron-leader-aspiration-nation.

2. The White House, Inaugural address by President Barack Obama, 2013, accessed at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama.

3. Adrian Wooldridge, *Meritocracy and the 'Classless Society'*, London, Social Market Foundation, 1995, p7.

4. Danny Dorling, *Injustice: Why Social Inequality Exists*, Bristol, Policy Press, Kindle edition, 2011; Martin Marmot, *Status Syndrome: How social standing directly affects your health*, Bloombsbury, 2005; Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Myth of Meritocracy*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2009; Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, London, Penguin, 2010.

5. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France*, 1978-9, Graham Burchell (trans), Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, hereafter *Birth of Biopolitics*.

6. Ansgar Allen, 'Michael Young's The Rise of the Meritocracy: a Philosophical Critique', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59, 4, (2011): 367-382; Ansgar, 'Life without the 'X' factor - meritocracy past and present', *Power and Education*, 4, 1, (2012): 4-19; John Beck, *Meritocracy, Citizenship and Education: New Labour's Legacy*, London, Continuum, 2008; Valerie Gilles, 'Raising the meritocracy: parenting and the individualisation of social class', *Sociology*, 39, 5, (2005): 835-852; Shamus Khan and Colin Jerolmack, 'Saying Meritocracy and doing privilege', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 54, 1, (2013): 9-19.

7. Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, 2nd revised edition, London, Transaction Books, 2004, hereafter *Rise of Meritocracy*.

8. Dorling, *Injustice*, op. cit., p870.

9. Jo Littler, 'Celebrity and "meritocracy"', *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 26, (2004): 118-130; Nick Couldry and Jo Littler, 'Work, Power and Performance: Analysing the 'reality' game of The Apprentice', *Cultural Sociology*, 5, 2, (2011): 263-279.

10. Rebecca Hickman, *In Pursuit of Egalitarianism: and why social mobility cannot get us there*, London, Compass, 2009.

11. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, London, Hogarth Press, 1958, p331.

12. Hickman, op. cit., p11; John Goldthorpe with Catriona Llewellyn and Clive Payne, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*, London, Transaction, 1980.

13. Vikki Boliver and David Byrne, 'Social Mobility: The politics, the reality, the alternative', *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, forthcoming.

14. Angela McRobbie, 'Feminism, the family and the new "mediated" maternalism, *New Formations*, this issue, pp119-137.

15. As author Zadie Smith recently pointed out on *Start the Week*, Radio 4, 24.06.2013. Thanks to Doreen Massey for alerting me to this programme and discussing these issues with me.

16. Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*, London, Zed Books, 2013; see also Owen Jones, *Chavs: The demonization of the working class*, London, Verso, 2012, and Bev Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, London, Routledge, 2003.

17. McNamee and Miller, *The Myth of Meritocracy*, op. cit., p22.

18. David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box*, 1957-59, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, Kindle location 3666; Alan Fox, 'Class and Equality', *Socialist Commentary*, May (1956): 11-13.

19. R.M. Douglas, 'No Friend of Democracy: The Socialist Vanguard Group 1941-50', *Contemporary British History*, 16, 4, (2002): 51-86.

20. Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010. In this book, Young is simultaneously noted as influential whilst *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is absent from the discussion.

21. Beck, *Meritocracy*, op. cit.

22. Asa Briggs, 'The Labour Party as Crucible' in Geoff Dench (ed), *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006, 17-26.

23. Raymond Williams, 'Democracy or Meritocracy?', *Manchester Guardian*, 30.10.1958, p10.

24. Michael Young, 'Down with meritocracy', *Guardian*, 29.06.2001, accessed at http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2001/jun/29/comment.

25. Young stated in the introduction to the 1994 edition that 'the most influential books are always those which are not read' (Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Transaction Publishers, 1994, pxv) and later wrote that he didn't think that Blair had actually read his book (Young, 'Down with meritocracy', op. cit.). Claire Donovan has argued, somewhat tenuously, that many academics who have cited it haven't read it either (Donovan, 'The chequered career of a cryptic concept' in Geoff Dench, *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, op. cit.). Various reviewers have also argued that its style is problematic (e.g. Richard Hoggart, 'IQ plus Effort = Merit', *Observer*, 2.11.1958; Paul Barker, 'A tract for the times' in Geoff Dench, *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, op. cit.).

26. Geoff Dench (and Young), *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, op. cit., p74.

27. Hilary Land, 'We sat down at the table of privilege and complained about the food' in Geoff Dench, *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, op. cit., p59.

28. Asa Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur*, London, Palgrave, 2001.

29. Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p409.

30. Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalised Individualism and its political consequences*, London, Sage, 2001; Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space*, London, Sage, 1993; Zygmunt Bauman, *Individualisation*, Oxford, Polity, 2000; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London, Verso, 2007; Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Oxford, Polity, 2004.

31. Paul Buhle, 'Daniel Bell: Obituary', *Guardian*, 26.01.2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jan/26/daniel-bell-obituary.

32. Daniel Bell, 'On meritocracy and equality' in *The Public Interest*, 29, (Fall 1972): 48.

33. Bell, 'On meritocracy and equality' op. cit., p66

34. 'Traditionally, the market was the arbiter of differential reward, based on scarcity or on demand. But as economic decisions become politicized, and the market is replaced by social decisions, what us the principle of fair reward and fair difference?' Bell, 'On meritocracy and equality' op. cit., p63.

35. Bell, 'On meritocracy and equality' op. cit., p66

36. Wooldridge, *Meritocracy and the 'Classless Society*', op. cit., p45.

37. Ibid., p43.

38. Wooldridge, *Meritocracy and the 'Classless Society*', op. cit., p9.

39. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford Paperbacks, 1977; Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Reader*, Durham, Duke, 2012.

40. Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal*, London, Verso, 1988.

41. As Adam Curtis's film *The Attic* shows, the iconography of Victorian Britain was central to her imagery, at the same time as she waged war on a traditional 'great and the good'; see http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis/posts/MRS-THATCHER-THE-GHOST-IN-THE-HOUSE-OF-WONKS.

42. Thanks to Jeremy Gilbert and Nick Thoburn for conversations on this topic.

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