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The myth of meritocracy and the populist threat

Liberals love the idea of meritocracy. But while it promises equality of opportunity, it cannot create equality of condition

When Michael Young, a leading British sociologist, wrote *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in the 1950s, it was intended as a satire — and the meritocratic society he described as a dystopia.

Young's book, published in 1958, is written as if a sociological report. In a projected 2034, a concerned sociologist tries to understand the cause of a number of disturbing events: riots, terror attacks, a raid on the Ministry of Education.

How come people are not happy, now that society has become a perfect meritocracy? Why are the poor upset with the social order, when merit has finally triumphed over ancestry and intelligence has replaced class and connections as tickets to the elite?

In Young's 2034, society is a meticulously designed meritocracy. Intelligence tests are used to distil the most talented children, so that they can be given the best education and the most important positions in society. Talent is no longer wasted — and nothing is wasted on the non-talented.

Today, however, liberals both left and right read Young's novel as a guide rather than a warning, argues Petter Larsson. A columnist for Sweden's largest daily, *Aftonbladet*, Larsson is author (in Swedish) of *Rigged: How the Belief in Meritocracy Reduces the Chances of Class Mobility*, just published.

A starchy, morally-laden social

hierarchy

Liberals love the idea of meritocracy. But while meritocracy promises equality of opportunity, it cannot create equality of condition. Meritocracy is fundamentally the idea of organising society as if it were a race, where the best (the most talented, the most hard-working) win. But if there are to be (some) winners, there must also be (many more) losers. Meritocracy is not the end of class society — it presupposes its conservation.

To liberals who oppose redistributive policies, meritocracy is also the perfect excuse. If positions in society are earned strictly on merit, there is not only no need for redistribution but redistribution would be morally wrong — an unjust, and unjustifiable, feather-bedding of those who simply didn't try hard enough, sending all the wrong signals to those who do.

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Young was the author of the election manifesto, *Let us Face the Future*, on which the Labour Party won a landslide victory in Britain in 1945. The crowning achievement of the government of Clement Attlee was the founding of the National Health Service (NHS) — possibly the most powerful redistributive institution in the history of the United Kingdom.

Having coined the term meritocracy with his best-selling classic, Young was to be deeply disappointed by the positive connotation it acquired over subsequent decades.

'It is good sense to appoint individual people to jobs on their merit', he distinguished in an oft-quoted piece in the *Guardian* in 2001. But he went on: 'It is the opposite when those who are judged to have merit of a particular kind harden into a new social class without room in it for others.' In 'sharp contrast' to the post-1945 government, he wrote, Tony Blair's Labour cabinet was 'largely filled' with 'members of the meritocracy'.

The myth of meritocracy creates a starchy, morally-laden social hierarchy. At the top are those deemed (and deeming themselves) the most deserving. They are supposed to have earned their positions through intelligence, talent and — above all — hard work. They merit their social status as well as their high incomes.

Those at the other end of the social ladder are meanwhile deemed undeserving of anything but their fate. They are duly consigned to the lower end of the income scale and the lowest social prestige.

The importance of respect

The American philosopher Michael Sandel encapsulates it in his *Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*: 'In an unequal society, those who land on top want to believe their success is morally justified. In a meritocratic society, this means the winners must believe they have earned their success through their talent and hard work.'

This individualisation of success (and, correspondingly, failure) has however destructive consequences at *both* ends of the social hierarchy. At the top, it breeds arrogance; at the bottom, shame.

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Here is a potential missing piece in our understanding of right-wing populism. As the expert Cas Mudde reminds us, right-wing populist voters are not primarily working class — they come from all income segments. Instead, they tend to share another feature: those with low education are massively over-represented.

Maybe these voters are not so much the 'losers of globalisation' as the losers of a society built on the myth of meritocracy. In such a society, individuals with low education are taught to feel ashamed — of not being smart enough, of not having worked hard enough at school.

Showing them some respect is then key to winning them back. That was the *Leitmotif* of the campaign by Olaf Scholz, leading the German social democrats to success in the 2021 *Bundestag* elections.

Opposing this bourgeois view

Stefan Löfven, the former Swedish prime minister who is now president of the Party of European Socialists, embodies a personal story of class mobility. Born into poor circumstances, his mother had to give him away when he was a baby. Löfven grew up in a foster family in the north of Sweden.

A welder, he held a classic male working-class job. Thanks to the

confidence entrusted in him by his workmates, he climbed the social ladder.

First he was elected local representative of the Metal Workers' Union. Eventually he became president of the 300,000-strong union. In 2012 he was elected chair of the Social Democratic Party. In 2014, he became prime minister.

Yet Löfven has always rejected his representation as a role model — living proof that Sweden is a paradise of social mobility. 'Fundamentally, there is something wrong with that reasoning,' he said in his open-hearted farewell speech to the party congress in 2021.

His life journey, he explained, had been rendered possible thanks to the expansion of the welfare state. Yet those liberals who so fervently supported 'class journeys' such as his had consistently opposed such reform.

'But above all,' he said, 'I oppose this bourgeois view that the working class is something you should want to leave.' And he offered a non-meritocratic, progressive vision:

Being a worker shouldn't mean that you live in poverty, wear yourself out or have to be afraid of dying on your job. You should be able to live well, feel secure, have a job you want to go to, have the freedom and the power to shape your own life. We want to build a society that is just as good for the nanny as for the bank manager, for the truck driver as for the doctor. We want to build a society that is just as good for the welder as it is for the prime minister.

The late Michael Young would surely have applauded.

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Lisa Pelling

Uppsala

Dr Lisa Pelling is a political scientist and head of the Stockholm-based think tank Arena Idé. She regularly contributes to the daily digital newspaper Dagens Arena and has a background as a political adviser and speechwriter at the Swedish foreign ministry.