



The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870—2033 by Michael Young

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Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 115, No. 1 (July 2009), pp. 322-326

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.press.uchicago.edu)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/605763>

Accessed: 19/06/2011 17:54

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phone contacts may merely be a consequence of such relationships, while their causal contribution to further reinforcement remains in the dark. Far more rigorous research methods (including controlled variations in the usage of various communication channels) would be necessary for clarifying such questions.

As a whole, the book provides ample testimony to the author's profound knowledge of sociological ritual theories, on the one hand, and mobile phone research, on the other. But the marriage between these two strands has not succeeded. While trying to understand new phenomena in terms of old concepts is certainly a good starting point for analysis, an undivided identification with Durkheimian and Goffmanian concepts is evidently not very helpful for coping with the innovative world of digital communication.

The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033. By Michael Young. London: Thames & Hudson, 1958. Pp. 160. \$24.95.

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In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a sociologist in 2034 looks back on the preceding 160 years of education in Great Britain. The book's fictitious "future" (from its publication in 1958 onward) imagines the gradual triumph of the IQ-driven education system that had emerged in Great Britain during the war years. In this future, IQ testing continues throughout the life course, and work is allocated by strictly "meritocratic" standards—in fact, by current IQ. The history of this system is chronicled down to its fall, whose sources the bewildered author is trying to discover. A final footnote informs us of his death at the hands of rebels.

Published 90 years ago, this book raised all the issues of stratification by means of its unforgettable fantasy. But the actual history of "meritocracy" betrayed Young's vision. Scholars ignored the book, but the new word entered the language overnight. In the process, Young's sarcastic "meritocracy" was euphemized into a positive term for rewards to a putative "merit" of individuals. The optimistic sociology of the later 20th century believed this meritocracy to be not only possible, but also compatible with rigorous egalitarianism. Equal opportunity would lead to true meritocracy, which would be true egalitarianism, for—this was the hidden assumption—every person was in effect taken to have a "merit" proper only to herself.

Such a belief in the equal personal dignity of every human had long been a staple of universal religions. And it was distantly related to

* This unusual review arrived at *AJS* by snail mail, with a date stamp of 2048 in the postmark. I found it interesting and so decided to share it with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

Young's—and our own—notation that there are many different dimensions of merit, each with its own importance and its own difficulty of achievement. But in the late 20th and early 21st centuries scholars and policy makers alike avoided the challenge of interrelating and reconciling these conflicting ideals, instead employing simplistic assumptions and deliberate silences.

Both that thoughtless optimism and our own more recent anguished multidimensionality lay in the future when Michael Young stepped back from his studies of East London's working class and envisioned a society in which “merit” would be measured by intelligence tests administered continuously over the life course. By 50 years after Young's book, that society had become, if not a reality, then at least a simulacrum. From IQ test to SAT to LCAT, from *bachot* to *agrégation*, tests called the tune. To be sure, Young's prediction of lifelong testing—with consequent demotion when scores started to fall—did not become an explicit reality. But practice came close; the engineer's trajectory from school to practical engineering into administration was one example. The academic trudge from assistant professor to midcareer grandee to occasional commentator was another.

Culturally, “meritocracy” became so dominant an ideal that even those who opposed its interim results attacked only the “cultural bias” of the tests. They did not attack the ahistoricity of the meritocracy concept nor its ignoring of personal development. Nor did they, like Young's rebels, reject the whole enterprise in the name of multidimensional merit. Nor, last of all, did they—like Young—spend whole lives envisioning structures that would enable excluded people to find inclusion as well as to have happier, richer, more rewarding lives.

Yet Young's work is important not only for its ideas and its impact, but also for its ironic illustration of “meritocracy” in academia. The book had difficulty finding a publisher. No scholarly journal reviewed it. By 2010 it had been cited only about 300 times—a paltry number in the days before the present limitation of citations to 20 references per paper. Books were at that time reviewed only when they first appeared. This hasty and uninformed judgment then marked a book permanently, just as the meritocrats' IQ tests marked the student. Today, of course, we know that great work should be reread constantly, as it changes and grows. The particularities that made it timely and relevant slough off, revealing an inner core that sustains longer life. At the same time its author's later career makes a subtle commentary that enriches a work, as does the inevitable swirl of succeeding history.

In its time, *Meritocracy* was part of an intense polemic about British education. The 1944 Education Act had brought the eleven-plus exam, whose results dictated a tripartite division of students into academic, technical, and vocational tracks. Chief among Young's targets was a great apostle of that system—Eric James, headmaster of the famous Manchester Grammar School, which restricted nearly all its places to those who obtained high scores on the eleven-plus. James's book *Education and Lead-*

ership (Harrap, 1951) had argued that such an elitist approach opened the upper classes to any talented child. In *Meritocracy* James appears at every corner, sometimes damningly quoted, sometimes covertly mocked (the purported author of *Meritocracy* is a graduate of Manchester Grammar), sometimes curiously ventriloquized (the approving quote from T. S. Eliot in *Meritocracy*'s closing chapter is lifted from James's book.) Indeed, *Meritocracy* is almost an explicit parody of its predecessor.

Thus the book comes from a very particular moment. It also comes from a very particular place. Emphatically and peculiarly English is its overwhelming focus on class, which was the English way of perceiving those issues which elsewhere went under the names of status attainment, racism, syndicalism, and so on. Indeed, many of the supposed evils of meritocracy—not only the relentless testing but also student salaries, for example—were standard practice in France at the time Young wrote, and one cannot but suspect him of some anti-Gallicanism. Also very English—indeed, very English working class—is the strong faith (on the part of the real Young, not his protagonist) in the family and family virtues, as well as in the dignity and worth of the experience embodied in older people. From Young's adoptive family the Elmhirsts and their Dartington experiment comes another peculiarly English theme, the whiff of William Morris and his Arts and Crafts movement that pervades the book.

The Rise of the Meritocracy is a very particular book then, a book of its place and time. Yet the issues in it are timeless. In a way, this prescience is shown by the list of predictions that—whether he liked them or not and whether he intended them or not—Young got right. He foresaw the emergence of China as a world power. He foresaw women having equal rights in university and workplace. He foresaw the reemergence of domestic service. He foresaw the abolition of the House of Lords. He foresaw the renaming and upgrading of many occupations. He foresaw the metric system, IQ crammers, and obsession with economic growth. It is an impressive list. Just as striking, however, are the things he got wrong. Although defeated by the grammar school culture in *Meritocracy*, comprehensive schools in fact spread rapidly when Young's friend Anthony Crosland became secretary of state for education. Eric James's own Manchester Grammar School was driven into the private sector. By the early 2000s, most of the United Kingdom had comprehensive, state-funded schools, and the elite universities were down to 45% of admissions from the private sector. As for the labor force, Young (like everyone) missed the rapid shift to a service economy. Nor did he foresee the folding of clerical work back into the professions via the personal computer.

Culturally, he missed the rapid eclipse of the Shakespeare-and-Milton/Latin-and-Greek core of the grammar school tradition. By the late 20th century, the general culture even of the elite consisted of sports, situation comedies nostalgic, vulgar, or occasionally Victorian, and "popular" trends invented by advertising aimed at young consumers. The children of privilege proudly wore the clothes of and followed the music of the lower

classes. More important for his argument, however, Young failed to see that national boundaries would break down—in the book, international competition is the factor that justifies dystopic meritocracy—and that the highly planned, organized society that could have imposed such meritocracy would be energetically dismantled by neoliberal politicians in the 1980s.

As writing, the book is very strong: often witty and occasionally brilliant. A footnote on page 19 tells us that “the old aristocrats bred birds which they tenderly shot, studied their amorous habits with field glasses, and themselves developed the appearance of their quarry.” On page 38, we are told “Englishmen of the solid center never believed in equality. They assumed that some men were better than others and only waited to be told in what respect.” At times, the in-jokes get wearisome, if only because one has to know so much to get them; current readers won’t necessarily know that the Harvard Socialist Documents don’t exist, that the idea of Keir Hardie with a knighthood would have caused outrage down the pit, and that Lady Avocet’s name refers to a bird—once thought extinct—that resettled the British Isles in the 1950s. (Some of the jokes have lasted better—I particularly appreciated the triple entendre of “right-thinking people.”) Thus, for all its age, the book still reads easily and quickly. This is all the more important because later generations of sociologists often discussed these issues in ways less frank and certainly less interesting. In the 2000s, for example, sociologists discussed exactly the same issues as separated Young and James, but only through the most indirect of routes: making obscure criticisms of their opponents’ statistical mannerisms or assumptions, insisting that experiments were preferable to statistics, and so on. All this periphrasis was required by the then-conventional assumption that because sociology was “scientific” the answers to Young’s questions would be found by discovering, at last, the correct mathematics.

Fortunately, we are past those years. The modern practical theory of justice did not begin to emerge from stratification theory until sociologists took seriously Young’s plea for multidimensionality and asked about a truly multidimensional quality of life. Only then could we address the question of Young, Dewey, and even Marx about how on the one hand to allow each individual to become the best version of herself and on the other to create a just social structure, at the same time managing to preserve the virtues of family life without thereby reaping a continuous harvest of invidious privilege. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is thus an appropriate first reading for this year’s Annual Sociology List. As always, we have selected past works of varying type and provenance: important and unimportant, famous and unknown, theoretical and empirical (and in this case, even fictional). And as always, we preempt competition by choosing only the work of dead authors, as we preempt canonization by continually choosing new “old books.” By reading together a set of old work across the year, we sociologists reaffirm our faith in the discipline’s

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past and renew our allegiance to the tradition of critical inquiry into social life. We have in many ways progressed beyond our predecessors, but rereading them reveals at once the common heritage of questions and frameworks that lies behind our surface differences in data, methods, theories, and heroes. Enjoy reading *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.