Michael Young’s *The Rise of the Meritocracy*: A Philosophical Critique

Dr Ansgar Allen, University of Sheffield

ABSTRACT: This paper examines Michael Young’s 1958 dystopia, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In this book, the word ‘meritocracy’ was coined and used in a pejorative sense. Today, however, meritocracy represents a positive ideal against which we measure the justice of our institutions. This paper argues that, when read in the twenty-first century, Young’s dystopia does little to dislodge the implicit appeal of a meritocratic society. It examines the principles of education and administrative justice upon which meritocracy is based, suggesting that, since 1958 those principles have changed. Young’s warning no longer has any effect on us because the meritocratic system it warns us against has been transformed.

Keywords: meritocracy; Michael Young; justice, examination, competition, ambition.

Introduction

Michael Young coined the term ‘meritocracy’ in a satirical tale called *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033* (Young, 1958). This satire was intended to inspire reflection upon the folly of meritocratic life. Whilst it may have succeeded in this respect when first published, the book no longer has such potential. Indeed, Young’s neologism, ‘meritocracy’, has since been transformed from a pejorative term to a positive ideal, invoked by political leaders such as Tony Blair much to Young’s chagrin (Young, 1994/2006, 2001).

In *The Rise of the Meritocracy* Young argued that meritocracy would only perpetuate inequalities, and to some extent his predictions were correct. Today, British inequalities in earnings are stark, both in comparison to other similar countries and when viewed against the conditions prevailing in Britain thirty years ago. Young also predicted a gradual coalescence of classes along the lines of intelligence, and yet, by 2010 there remained ‘deep-seated and systematic differences in economic outcomes’ along lines of gender, ethnicity, social class and geographic location (National Equality Panel [NEP], 2010, p. 1). Nevertheless, as I argue below, the problem with Young’s 1958 prophecy is not simply one of inaccurate projections into the future. If Young made any error, it was to assume that meritocracy is a timeless and unalterable ideal. By contrast, this paper argues that the basic principles of meritocracy have since changed and that the system Young warned us against no longer exists.

Michael Young is not alone in assuming that meritocracy is a timeless concept. Research on meritocracy, addressing issues such as: ‘Does meritocracy exist?’ (Saunders, 1995; Breen, 2003; Breen &
Goldthorpe, 2001), ‘Can it be achieved?’ (Goldthorpe, 1997, 2003), and, more rarely, ‘Is it desirable?’ (Themelis, 2008), tends to adopt a relatively static conception of meritocracy itself. In the research literature, and in everyday discourse, meritocracy takes the form of an abstract ideal against which one can judge the present imperfection of a particular society. According to this universal viewpoint, a just society must be, amongst other things, a meritocratic one. And so, the discovery of systematic differences, such as those mentioned in the paragraph above, is said to violate ‘fundamental principles of social justice’ (NEP, 2010, p. 3). More than this, such unfairness is also viewed as a source of social ill health. As Harriet Harman, the former Minister for Women and Equality writes; we must challenge unfairness ‘for the sake of a strong and meritocratic economy and to achieve a peaceful and cohesive society’ (NEP, 2010, p. iii). Meritocracy as an abstract ideal is also a measure of progress, where more advanced societies are held to be those that are more meritocratic. They make fewer decisions based on prejudice and extend opportunity further. Meritocracy is sometimes used as a measure of corruption, where corrupt societies or corrupt institutions are thought to be those that disobey the formula: merit = ability + effort. Meritocratic societies are open and fair, non-meritocratic ones are obscure and underhand. Justice, social cohesion, progress, fairness and transparency, these are the timeless ideas upon which meritocracy is presumed to rest.

This paper aims to deconstruct such notions through a philosophical critique of the more historically specific principles upon which Young’s book was based. The aim is to take Young’s predictions seriously in order to measure the distance between then and now, to show that meritocracy operated according to a very different rationality in 1958. Young constructed the logical set of consequences as he saw them half a century ago. Accordingly, he predicted a slow reorganisation and then gradual solidification of classes, based increasingly on merit rather than descent. This would eventually bring about a rigidly stratified society, divided according to intelligence alone. Of course, this kind of highly administered society has not been achieved. Instead, individuals are encouraged to seek personal improvement rather than wait for the state to reward individual effort and assist in the reallocation of social position. The situation today is closer to the system implied by the rhetoric of Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, who demanded that the United Kingdom should work towards becoming an “aspiration nation” (House of Commons, 24 November 2010). This point is developed in the accompanying White Paper, which explains that as citizens we must administer ourselves so that we become the ‘authors of our own life stories’ (Department for Education, 2010, p. 6). The demand for administrative overview has been replaced by the demand for ambition, and, as I argue below, this is part of an overall transition that has changed the principles of meritocracy almost beyond recognition.

The Rise of the Meritocracy: a brief synopsis

From the distant perspective of 2033, Young’s narrator reflects back to the 1960s and 1970s and recalls the eventual defeat of those who supported comprehensive reform. This defeat was a victory for the
meritocrats who, according to Young, were quick to argue that ‘sentimental egalitarianism’ would only ever encourage ‘mediocrity’ (Young, 1958, pp. 32-3). In his account, stronger partitioning and greater compulsion followed the failure of comprehensive schooling. Able pupils were paid a maintenance allowance to keep them in education while less able pupils were encouraged to leave. Grammar schools were improved until they outclassed and replaced private schools. Most importantly, intelligence tests were developed and extended as the primary administrative machinery.

The continuity of psychometric science was secured through a direct appeal to the unique ability of this science to correlate high IQ with high performance in grammar school. This circumvented more thorny issues over whether intelligence actually exists or not as a general entity within the mind. The methods seemed to work, and this was all that mattered. Eventually the predictive potential of intelligence testing was perfected. From this technocratic perspective, comprehensive schooling was only appropriate in a more uncertain age when selection at eleven was less scientific. Under these conditions a certain amount of fluidity ‘actually did some good by making it easier for people to swim from one stream to another’ (Young, 1958, p. 59). From the late 1980s onwards, this sort of fluidity was no longer appropriate as a higher degree of precision in making allocations was now possible. Intelligence was measured every five years in order to check predictions and effect small corrections, and yet, with time even this procedure would be abandoned. Gradually, predictions made during childhood became so accurate that regular retesting throughout life was dropped (even though some argued it should be retained ‘if only to maintain the morale of low-I.Q. subjects who would otherwise be without hope’). ‘In 2000, the reliable age was 9; in 2015, the reliable age was 4; in 2020 it was 3’ (Young, 1958, p. 143). The entire course of education from nursery to university could be divided into a hierarchy of progression routes, each beginning in infancy. Segregation according to intelligence would now be complete.

The old institutional model of protracted and incremental workplace promotion - from floor cleaner to executive in twenty years - was also gradually abandoned. As industry began to recognise that recruits at 15 or 16 could no longer work their way up through the company (being now of a uniformly inferior intelligence), higher positions were recruited for directly from those attending higher education. Whilst, direct recruitment such as this was an advance on the old model of workplace promotion, it nevertheless resulted in hectic competition. Companies descended upon grammar schools and universities in order to scout for the best brains, siphoning them off before their education was complete with the promise of generous salaries. At this stage in meritocratic development, competition was at best a necessary evil, one that must remain subordinate to the well-planned distributive ideal. Eventually, highly administered societies obviate the need for competition: ‘Effective brain power planning is not only necessary to end one of the kinds of competition between employers that is wasteful, but gives the government strategic power to control the whole economy’ (Young, 1958, p. 67). Competition was only required in early meritocracy to motivate individuals so that they would work to redistribute themselves: ‘Before modern society could reach maturity, ambition had to be forced ever upwards’ (Young, 1958,
Once meritocratic society reached maturity, excessive (unreasonable) ambition became a dangerous condition.

Despite the gradual perfection of administrative machinery, there nevertheless existed seeds of social discontent within the explicit distributive justice of the new order. In previous times, individual economic and social fate could be blamed upon circumstance. ‘Educational injustice enabled people to preserve their illusions, inequality of opportunity fostered the myth of human equality’ (Young, 1958, p. 85). “If only my life had been different, I would have been rewarded, I would be in a different situation” was the old lament. In early meritocracy it was possible to blame circumstance and not oneself. This resulted in a strange sort of inner peace, a type of personal contentment that persisted alongside calls for greater equality. The old system was “unjust” because it was *unjustly unequal*.

In the new more advanced meritocracy, social position was the direct expression of ability + effort, a formula that was objectively defined and completely explicit. Individuals had to accommodate themselves to the fact that their social status was a direct expression of their intellectual worth. The system was now “just” because it was *justly unequal*. We are told that imaginations were still haunted by the narrative of Huxley’s gammas and Orwell’s proles. Yet, people began to realise that these horror-stories were the mere irrational outbursts of an earlier age. They were unreasonable attacks upon social conditioning, attacks that were written for a different era; these social critiques had no relevance in a well-administered meritocratic state. Meritocracy, Young’s narrator asserts, had become increasingly and unassailably just. ‘Enlightened modern methods have nothing in common with these brave new worlds [of Huxley and Orwell]’. To ‘square efficiency with justice, and order with humanity, was nothing less than a new stage in the ascent of man, brought within his reach by the early advances in the social sciences’ (Young, 1958, p. 92).

As the narrator’s account draws to a close we find that this new stage in the ascent of man is, nevertheless, under threat. Social unrest is on the increase, and as we are to discover, revolution is near. It seems that the ascent of man was destined to falter, for apparent justice is at times harder to bear than injustice, and this is a situation that, if left unchecked, will lead the less intelligent classes to revolt. The account breaks off and a footnote tells us that the narrator and author was killed in the upheavals of May 2034.

### The principles of meritocracy in 1958

To readers of the twenty-first century this is an odd tale. It was intended as a warning: “This is where meritocracy could lead us!” Of course, this warning was clearly off target, as the society Young foresaw was never even remotely achieved. And yet, it would be a mistake to dismiss the book entirely. Important lessons can be gained from the very distance that lies between Young’s imagined future and subsequent events. His dystopia is instructive precisely for what it failed to predict. The fact that Young’s inevitable future was not borne out in reality suggests that meritocratic logics underwent transformation and took another path. Four historically contingent principles of meritocracy can be
extracted from his account: (1) Meritocracy requires administrative overview and the careful redistribution of human ability. (2) For administrative purposes, human ability is a relatively fixed trait. (3) Competition is irrational and is to be avoided. (4) A perfected meritocracy is one where inequalities are precisely matched to abilities. It is a society where inequalities are *justly unequal*.

For the remainder of this paper I treat each principle of meritocracy in turn. I show, very briefly, how each principle reflects broader social processes and assumptions in and before 1958, and then cast doubt on the endurance of each principle between 1958 and the present.

1) *Meritocracy requires administrative overview and the careful redistribution of human ability.*

The idea of administering the distribution of ability (and replacing patronage) can be traced back to Jeremy Bentham’s *Constitutional Code* of 1830. This detailed programme for the organisation of government contains the tedious details of a so-called ‘System of Official Location’ to be used in allocating official posts. By the combination of question book, tickets, ticket board, cylindrical box and non-discerning child (who would choose the questions to be asked), candidates for governmental posts would be examined and then delivered to their respective positions. Examination would bring candidates straight to their post, in a way that maximised human resources and minimised cost (Bentham, 1830).

This was a highly mechanistic and novel system that sought to replace the vagaries of patronage with the precision of scientific allocation. In practice, patronage was first challenged in the Indian Civil Service when examinations were introduced in 1854, and in the Home Civil Service somewhat later in 1870 (Roach, 1971).

At a similar time, and following the pioneering work of Francis Galton (1869), the distribution of human abilities throughout the population was put in question. Galton suggested that the range of mental power is ‘enormous’, and yet, when you place men ‘according to their natural abilities’ in ‘classes separated by equal degrees of merit’, the number of men in each class is far from equal (Galton, 1869, p. 26). Indeed, according to Galton, the distribution of ability follows a pattern which we now refer to as a normal or bell-shaped distribution. This population level awareness was an innovation at the time (Porter, 1986). Combined with the above efforts in the civil service to replace patronage and ensure that the best man got the job, this awareness of human ability and its distribution throughout the population suggested that all vocations might be administered in a similar way.

2) *For administrative purposes, human ability is a relatively fixed trait.*

The history of intelligence testing is complex (for a recent study see White, 2006). Yet, an overall transition can be observed from an early twentieth century preoccupation with the role of genetic traits, to a mid to late twentieth century emphasis on environmental factors and their effect on mental development. The early association between intelligence and genetics reflects the initial connection between efforts to measure intelligence and eugenic thought, from Galton’s early attempts to quantify mental energy (Galton, 1885) to later work by psychologists sympathetic to the eugenic cause (e.g.
Goddard, 1914; Terman, 1919). Meanwhile, Charles Spearman (1904) advanced a theory of intelligence that suggested it was a unitary and measurable phenomenon (he labelled this supposed entity ‘g’).

The redistribution of human ability makes most obvious sense when ability is viewed as determined at birth. However, this genetic hypothesis was severely challenged following the fallout of World War II (see for example the statement issued by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1952). Moreover, the idea that intelligence could be represented as a single entity had always been a contested theory. And yet, despite such doubts, in Young’s dystopia one finds that intelligence testing is portrayed as dominant and unquestioned. This perhaps unlikely result is, Young explains, due to the predictive facility of testing. In *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the proven utility of intelligence testing in predicting future success (tautological as this may be) ensures the ongoing survival of psychometric techniques against any rising doubts over the exact nature of intelligence itself. In isolation, scientific doubt poses an insufficient challenge to the use of such instruments when their utility is demanded by the logic of meritocratic repositioning. Under conditions such as these it could be assumed for administrative purposes that intelligence is reasonably fixed even if this assumption is open to challenge from a scientific perspective.

3) **Competition is irrational and is to be avoided.**

As P J Hartog explained in his 1911 lecture, *Examinations in their bearing on national efficiency*, it is important to be clear about the precise function of examinations that are used ‘to distinguish between candidates of different merit’ (Hartog, 1918, p. 6). The ‘competitive idea’ that lingers behind notions of advance by merit can, he claimed, lead us into confusion because the idea of competition can tempt us ‘to forget the distinction between the efficiency of an examination and its difficulty’ (Hartog, 1918, p. 7). Very difficult examinations are likely to be highly competitive, but are they efficient? According to Hartog, an efficient examination is one that says something useful about those who pass it. This means that superior examinations are not simply those which are harder to pass. ‘The main question is, surely, not which candidate can do the most difficult things, solve the most Chinese of puzzles, remember the most unrememberable of formulae’ (Hartog, 1918, p. 7). Rather, superior examinations are those devices that match people to tasks and are able to divide candidates who can perform certain pre-defined social functions from those who cannot. In the field of administrative efficiency the competitive principle is inappropriate and potentially damaging.

The psychologist Cyril Burt went further, suggesting that competition is also associated with irrational drives. He railed against systems of vocational guidance where ‘the predominating element in the choice of occupation is the wish or the whim of the parent and of the child’ (Burt, 1924, p. 339). Irrational motivations include ‘selfish’ desires for a ‘quick financial return’, potentially misplaced though ‘fond ambitions’, ‘gossip’ and ‘fantasies’. The average parent also suffers from a ‘lack of psychological insight’ and ‘cannot possibly have the range of information necessary for a satisfactory choice’ (Burt, 1924, p. 339). Teachers often fill this gap of expertise but ‘the teacher is an educational not an industrial expert: and of all the professions his [sic] is perhaps the least in contact with the world of business’ (Burt, 1924,
According to Burt, a centralised administrative machinery making use of precise and rational techniques was required.

Closer in time to the writing of Young’s dystopia, these anti-competitive principles can be observed in the efforts that were made to confine grammar school examinations (GCEs) to grammar school children (see Brooks, 2008). Indeed, in the early post-war years, some educationalists felt that external examinations were fundamentally inappropriate for secondary modern schools. It was seen as ‘impracticable to combine a system of external examinations, which presupposes a measure of uniformity, with the fundamental conception of modern school education, which insists on variety’ (Ministry of Education, 1947, p. 46). In this context, one general examination, open to a vast range of pupils, would invite undue competitive effort. It was felt, by contrast, that examinations should be ‘qualifying rather than competitive’ (Montgomery, 1965, p. 142). According to this logic, only grammar schools with relatively homogenous populations (in terms of their intelligence) could withstand a single, external examination. In the grammar school, examination would be a qualifying procedure rather than a competitive device for siphoning upper streams of ability from a vast range of candidates.

The overall post-war model for secondary schooling, according to which after examination at eleven-plus pupils would be allocated to either grammar, technical or modern schools also eschewed the competitive principle. In this context, it was argued that ‘parity of schools in the secondary stage of education’ was ‘essential’ (Board of Education, 1938, p. 293). Equal status would ‘make it easier to transfer pupils to schools better suited to their needs’ without ‘creating any sense of slur or failure’ (Board of Education, 1938, p. 168). The ‘legacies of an age which had a different educational and social outlook from our own’, that gave ‘certain schools a prestige’ based on ‘other than educational grounds’ must be swept away. Once established, equality of status will ensure that all schools are ‘equally acceptable to parents’ and will enable allocations to those that will ‘best develop’ the ‘particular abilities’ of their children (Board of Education, 1938, p. 293). This ideal of parity was repeated in further reports (Board of Education, 1943; Ministry of Education, 1947). The socialist MP and Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson was also a staunch supporter. She claimed that a differentiated array of schooling is necessary in order to accommodate the range of human aptitude. Indeed, whatever we do to our education system, ‘coal’ will still have ‘to be mined and fields ploughed’. What has to be removed, simply, is the ‘fantastic idea’ that ‘you are in a higher social class if you add up figures in a book’ rather than tend the land (Wilkinson 1946 cited in McCulloch, 1998, p. 62). Meritocratic administration, it seems, requires a certain amount of parity when it comes to the esteem in which jobs are held, to make sure that the population at large accepts its human redistributions. Vast inequalities of status are undesirable in this context merely because they invite undue competition.

The subordinate position given to competition can be observed in Young’s account where companies were at first allowed to descend on grammar schools and universities in order to scout for the best brains. However, as ‘brain power planning’ was perfected, this mode of vocational positioning came to be seen as ‘wasteful’ (Young, 1958, p. 67). Competition, it appears, was only necessary in earlier, more
poorly administered times. Once administrative perfection was attained, the irrational drives of ambition were no longer required. Individuals would no longer be relied upon to redistribute themselves.

4) A perfected meritocracy is one where inequalities are precisely matched to abilities.

Following Galton’s extension of the statistical ‘law of error’ to human phenomena, resulting in the normal distribution (MacKenzie, 1981, p. 57), it was now possible to conceive of administering a human population according to its normally distributed traits. Soon after the invention of intelligence testing, Goddard (1914) classified the various grades of ‘feeble-minded’ according to their industrial capacity. Burt (1924) extended this principle to the entire population, suggesting that vocations were also normally distributed. It remained merely to match the bell-shaped distribution of human abilities to this normal distribution of jobs (see figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vocational category</th>
<th>Proportion of the total population per cent.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Higher Professional</td>
<td>0.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>II. Lower professional</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Clerks and highly skilled workers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Skilled workers. Most commercial positions</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Semi-skilled labour. Poorest commercial positions</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Unskilled labour, etc.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Casual labour, etc.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. Imbeciles and idiots</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 1. A Hierarchy of Occupations and the Normal Distribution of their Employments (Burt 1924: 349)

Acting as a sorting mechanism, schooling would also divide itself according to the normal distribution. Grammar and technical schools were to take the upper section of ability, modern schools would take the vast bulk of average and below average pupils, and special schools would take the remainder[1]. Eventually, when an external examination (the CSE) designed to suit the needs of the modern school was introduced, it was intended to cater for the upper end of modern school ability (see figure 2).
It should be noted that the CSE was not intended for the entire modern school population. It was to be a qualifying examination catering for a specific band of the normal distribution. The division of pupil populations at eleven, followed by streaming or setting in secondary schooling, and completed by an appropriate qualifying examination at the end of schooling aimed to achieve a precise match between qualifications and abilities. Overall, the differentiated provision of secondary education, the administration of qualifying examinations and the distribution of jobs was designed with a normally distributed population in mind.

**The principles of meritocracy since 1958**

Young explains how, as meritocracy matures, it graduates from administrative imperfection to a state that is increasingly just in its allocations. In an imperfect or newly established meritocracy, competition and ambition are to be allowed if not encouraged, so that genius can promote itself to the position it deserves. When meritocratic administration is perfected and all members of the population are correctly allocated according to their position within the normal distribution, competition and ambition are no longer necessary. Indeed, excessive ambition could lead members of the population to interfere with the finely tuned allocations of advanced meritocracy. This “inevitable” historical progression is what allows Young to reach his apocalyptic conclusion: a society that is *justly unequal* invites rebellion in a way that an *unjustly unequal* society does not. The transparency of administrative systems in advanced meritocracy provides an obvious target for revolt, especially when compared to the indeterminate and multiple forces of ill fortune that prevail in a less perfected meritocratic society. So, as Young appears to suggest, the principles of meritocracy are in the end self-defeating. Life for those further down the normal distribution in advanced meritocratic societies is intolerable, whilst the target for revolt is clear and explicit.

Young’s mistake was to assume that meritocracy is a universal ideal. In the early twenty-first century, British society far from resembles the apocalyptic predictions of his book, precisely because the principles of meritocracy have changed. According to my argument, administrative justice was the major “casualty” of this transition. In his 1954 study of social mobility, the sociologist David Glass makes some interesting and prescient observations in this respect. Concerned with the social consequences of perfected human sorting, Glass (1954, p. 25) argues that the ‘existence of opportunity to rise in status’ according to ability might lessen feelings ‘of personal frustration’ and bring about ‘greater social harmony’. The knowledge that we live within a system that allows us to realise our talents is seen as good for social stability. It produces contentment or at least, it avoids discontent. Glass (1954, p. 25) then makes a rather mischievous observation, suggesting that ‘even if there is little actual opportunity to rise in social status, the belief in a myth of opportunity may produce similar results’. As argued below, this switch from the *administration of* movement to a *belief in* movement did take place, forming one important aspect in the overall transformation of meritocracy. Social opportunity was indeed mythologised in this way.
This switch from administration to belief occurred when a perfect match between the normal distribution of ability and the normal distribution of jobs no longer formed the aim of (the adjusted) meritocratic logic. The principles of meritocracy instead became internalised into the practices of aspiring social subjects.

In a separate observation, Glass suggests that technical perfection in the assessment procedure could also breed discontent. Selection procedures that divide the population into deliberate streams would reinforce the prestige of certain occupations. The ‘feeling of resentment [this would engender] may be more rather than less acute’ because ‘apparent justice may be more difficult to bear than injustice’ (Glass, 1954, p. 26). This formula, we should observe, is the principle that lies behind the social unrest and subsequent death of the narrator in Young’s dystopia. Once a system of merit displays itself as increasingly just in its allocations, the situation actually becomes harder to bear (when related to one’s personal lack of success) than was the unjust system that preceded it. Here, Glass develops a point made a decade earlier by the economist Friedrich Hayek in his critique of highly administered societies. When ‘the position of an individual’ is no longer determined by ‘impersonal forces’, ‘the attitude of the people towards their position in the social order necessarily changes’ (Hayek, 1944, p. 79). ‘Dissatisfaction of everybody with his lot will inevitably grow with the consciousness that it is the result of deliberate human decision’ (Hayek, 1944, p. 80). Again, we see in this observation the possibility of an alternative system. A system that operated according to an explicit (though ultimately unrealised) attempt to achieve justice in the distribution of ability would later be replaced. The system that followed it would leave questions of overall distributive justice behind, thus avoiding the just/unjust dichotomy.

To make a detailed case for this overall transition demands more space than is available here, and so for the remainder of this paper only the brief outlines of a broader cultural shift can be suggested. This will be achieved by showing how each of the above principles (1-4) may have been inverted leading to a very different meritocratic arrangement. The adjusted principles of contemporary meritocracy can be summarised as follows: (1) Meritocracy no longer requires detailed administrative intervention. (2) Human ability is seen as malleable. (3) Competition within meritocracy is to be encouraged. (4) A perfect distribution of abilities is no longer required.

1) Meritocracy without detailed administrative intervention.

The move away from detailed administrative intervention is connected with changing modes of governance. Over the last quarter century the practice of government has moved increasingly away from direct intervention and towards a mode of steering from a distance. In this new climate, citizens are encouraged to take greater responsibility for their lives as the state withdraws[2]. The consequences for meritocracy are profound. In this revised political climate, direct human repositioning finds little support as politicians are now keen to avoid the accusation of “social engineer”[3]. Instead, individuals must take up the task of repositioning themselves. In this context, personal ambition is essential.
2) Human ability is malleable.

Despite a certain degree of resistance amongst those who believe intelligence is largely determined at birth (see Jensen, 1969; Herrnstein, 1973; Eysenck, 1973; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), the consensus seems to be that intelligence is reasonably malleable, if not multiple (see Gardner, 1983). This makes the business of meritocratic repositioning far more complicated than when intelligence is seen as fixed, unitary and determined. Nevertheless, it could be assumed, for administrative purposes at least as was outlined above, that human ability is relatively fixed and measurable. However, this assumption no longer fits with the dominant meritocratic logic that depends upon the perceived malleability of its subjects. Current meritocracy requires so-called ‘mastery children’ (more below) who ‘believe that you can improve your intelligence’ if you try (Weeden et al., 2002, p. 53). Only those who believe they can perpetually improve, can be depended upon to make the constant effort to reposition themselves that is required once the social engineer retreats. Individuals must now attend to their own social mobility.

3) Competition is to be encouraged.

In Young’s advanced meritocracy, competition was to be avoided. This view reflected the spirit of his time where competition between schools, for example, was to be deplored[4]. In the early post-war years, variations in school esteem were considered to be a limiting factor that would interfere with administrative efforts to distribute children amongst schools according to their ability, and tailor schooling to their aptitudes. Once schooling was provided for all, so the logic went, competition would become an unnecessary evil and would have to be removed by achieving parity. This anti-competitive system looks odd to us now because we are familiar with a very different approach. In the second half of the twentieth century, esteem was transformed from a limiting factor to be levelled at all costs, to a principle of organisational enhancement, pitting schools against each other as they compete for high league-table ranking. Competition has long since emerged from its formerly subordinate position, and now operates at an individual as well as institutional level.

According to some, recent trends in teaching and examination have sought to remove competition between individuals, rather than encourage it (Phillips, 1997). The rise in formative assessment may seem to be a case in point, where the use of qualitative feedback aims to replace ranking and numerical grades. According to Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam (who raised the profile of formative assessment with their widely circulated report Inside the black box), as an educational technique formative assessment is designed to replace a system ‘where the classroom culture focuses on rewards, ‘gold-stars’, grades or place-in-the-class ranking’. This makes ‘pupils look for the ways to obtain the best marks rather than at the needs of their learning’. It also generates a ‘fear of failure’ and leads to efforts by pupils to ‘try to build up their self-esteem in other ways’. We are told that, on the contrary, what ‘is needed is a culture of success, backed by the belief that all can achieve’ (Black & Wiliam, 1998, pp. 8-9). This does not, however, remove competition from the classroom. Though confrontations with failure are to be avoided, this approach poses no challenge to competition itself, which thrives on optimism. As a more recent textbook on formative assessment makes clear, formative assessment encourages competitive practices,
albeit in a carefully regulated form. ‘Helpless children’ who tend to avoid challenge, believing they will fail, are to be transformed through formative techniques into ‘mastery children’ who are ‘confident of success, believing they can do it if they try’ (Weeden et al., 2002, pp. 53-5). This is to be achieved by constructing a classroom environment employing pedagogic techniques that allow pupils to ‘learn how to communicate with their peers in non-judgemental ways’ (Weeden et al., 2002, p. 89). Pupils are trained in the techniques of benevolent and cooperative rivalry, where they peer-assess and self-assess in order to develop their powers of self-analysis and self-enhancement. Competition does not disappear within the explicitly constructive and encouraging ethic of formative assessment. What retreats is the goad of ranking. In its place pupils learn how to enhance process and develop themselves in apparent harmony with one other, each involved in personal formative cycles, occupied in unison within individual feedback-action loops. They learn to become industrious self-improvers, accepting and implementing external goals. Competition is humanised and disguised and therefore intensified by this formative technology.

4) A perfect distribution of abilities is no longer required.

Once individuals are made responsible for their own meritocratic repositioning (after all, human ability is now seen as too malleable and complex in its formation to be administered by the social engineer), aspiration is to be encouraged in a context of competitive rivalry. A perfect distribution of abilities is no longer seen as feasible nor is it required. This would demand a form of administrative intervention that no longer finds favour with systems of power. When individuals are made responsible for their own meritocratic repositioning, only an approximation of meritocratic perfection can be achieved. There is no longer any desire to manufacture a social machinery that will perfectly align the normal distribution of intelligence found within a population alongside a normal distribution of educational provision and a normal distribution of jobs.

The current meritocratic logic is perhaps best symbolised by a study published in 2010 and awarded the Ig Nobel Prize later that year, an award that celebrates so-called improbable truths. It was reported that random job promotion is the best and most effective form of progression in large bureaucratic organisations (Pluchino et al., 2010). This is just the sort of research finding that one might expect to be celebrated in a system where the logic of scientific administration has been replaced by the more fragmented and capricious logic of ambition and competitive rivalry. A perfect distribution of individuals according to their relative ability is now felt to be unattainable. Whilst patronage still remains unthinkable, chance and self-promotion fill the gap to become the principles of meritocratic society.

Conclusion

In this paper, the principles of meritocracy contained within Michael Young’s 1958 dystopia have been extracted and briefly explored. A deliberate attempt has been made to treat with the seriousness they deserve, the more outlandish predictions of his book. If Young’s work reflects the meritocratic philosophy of his times, we can assume from the vast distance that lies between his imagined future and
our present that the meaning and practice of meritocracy have since changed. Meritocracy, once defined by a desire to achieve social efficiency through careful administrative repositioning, has, through shifts in governance, reached a position where direct administrative intervention is on the retreat. In a state where ambition and competitive rivalry are to be promoted, the task for government has changed. When we are encouraged to believe that anyone can be a millionaire if he or she follows the example of Sir Alan Sugar, passes through the humiliation of Dragons’ Den, wins the lottery, or succeeds against the odds in a television game or talent show[5], other stabilising influences are required. The governmental task, I claim, is now chiefly pedagogic and moral. In the current meritocracy it is necessary to develop practices of self-care that can act to restrain hopes within safe channels. When ‘the driving force of conduct is no longer the more or less realistic desire to ‘keep up with the Joneses’, but the infuriatingly nebulous idea of ‘keeping up with celebrities’” (Bauman, 2010, p. 43), keeping things in perspective is a necessary technique. In Young’s meritocracy, social unrest derived from the lack of room that was available to ambition. In today’s meritocracy, the problem is its opposite. Beneath a symbolic order that works to stoke up unrealistic aspirations, mundane everyday techniques for maintaining perspective are vital. Thus, the governmental task in recent years has been to develop practices of self-absorption which will ensure that aspiration drives effort within acceptable channels of restraint preventing self-loss and subsequent dissatisfaction with the global order.

Notes

1. ‘[W]e can think of an area, typical of much of the country, in which up to about a quarter of all the pupils who leave the primary schools go on to secondary grammar or secondary technical schools. The remaining three-quarters apart from a small number who may be provided for in ‘special’ schools for the severely physically or mentally handicapped, will go to secondary modern schools. In the latter, there will be an ‘above average’ group, including some pupils who show themselves capable of doing work similar to that done by many pupils in a grammar school. There will be a second group, generally much larger, who represent the ‘average’ boys and girls of their age; and a third, usually smaller, group, of those who have considerably more difficulty in remembering and applying what they learn, and who certainly work more slowly. Finally, we can pick out a fourth group of really backward pupils who have a struggle to attain an elementary mastery of reading, writing and calculation’ (Ministry of Education, 1963a, p. 4).


3. For example, in his analysis of a speech made by the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment David Blunkett (2000) on social science and government, Hodgkinson (2000) shows how ‘the use of social science for wholesale re-engineering is seen [by Blunkett] as unreasonable, ‘ideological’ or ‘utopian’, and most definitely dangerous’.

4. ‘We should deplore, for example, any practice of publishing lists of external examination results, thereby indirectly promoting local competitive rivalries’ (Ministry of Education, 1963a, p. 83).

5. Indicative programmes are: The Apprentice (BBC), Dragons’ Den (BBC), The X Factor (ITV), Who Wants to Be A Millionaire (ITV), the associated film Slumdog Millionaire (2008), and The Million Pound Drop (Channel 4).
References


