Life without the ‘x’ factor:
meritocracy past and present

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This paper argues that ‘meritocracy’ is more than an abstract principle of justice. It is a social technology, the history of which is associated with changing configurations of power and knowledge. In its latest and perhaps most dystopian form, meritocracy has abandoned the principle of working towards perfectly administered distributions of human ability. Whether talents are always rewarded or not, no longer matters. The important thing is for us to act as if they are, as we strive to achieve our potential. According to present-day meritocracy, we must learn to live sustainably within systems of hope and disappointment.

Introduction

The X Factor television show is symptomatic of meritocracy today. Aspiring singers arrive on stage facing disgrace or stardom and riches. They stand before a panel of judges who themselves sit before a huge studio audience, all of which is consumed by an even larger population of television spectators. This show is designed to exhibit “the good, the bad and the ugly” (Walsh, 2007). As is often the case in life and film, it is the “bad” that are the most interesting, though for the purposes of this article they are interesting for a very specific reason, being expected, as they are, to cope within a system that elevates hope and exploits disappointment. Those who fail must not transform their despair into violence against the system that judges them, nor should they take it out on themselves.

This paper argues that here, as in other areas of life, one is expected to exhibit a form of economic morality. This term of mine does not refer to “morally acceptable distributions of wealth”, “a fair allocation of resources” or anything of that sort. Rather, economic morality represents the internalisation of economic drives in ways sustainable for those concerned. When systems of hope and disappointment form the guiding logic of social life, we adopt the procedures and attitudes of an economic morality in order to cope. This economic morality now acts to sustain meritocracy in what is, perhaps, its most dystopian stage of development [1].

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Strategy

I should be clear from the outset, this is no principled objection to meritocracy as such. Mere opposition tends to assume the stability of that to which it objects, which, in this case, would simply reinforce a conventional understanding where the term ‘meritocracy’ is employed as a timeless principle of justice [2]. To challenge this understanding, I propose to undermine meritocracy through a ‘genealogy’ of its past (Foucault, 1975) [3]. This will show how meritocracy is far from stable. Indeed, when viewed as a changeable configuration of practices, relations of power and forms of knowledge, it becomes reasonable to suggest that meritocracy can be further adjusted or perhaps even brought to an end.

One could argue that this is merely academic. After all, a clear alternative already exists in the vision of a society that would ‘inscribe on its banner: from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs!’ (Marx, 1875, p.215). This formula already poses a fundamental challenge to meritocracy, suggesting a total rupture between questions of ability or effort, and determinations of reward or merit. Instead of the meritocratic formula “ability + effort = merit” where merit is rewarded by income or social position, we have, following Marx, two entirely separate relationships: “need should define merit” and “ability should define effort or contribution”.

There is, nevertheless, a problem with this alternative in that the conditions for the creation of such a rupture have changed. Meritocracy has shifted from impersonal technology to a situation where the relation between abilities and rewards has been deeply personalised. It is here, in this realm of self-fashioning and constructed ambition, that any intervention seeking to replace our current social order would need to focus its effort. This is the political lesson that can be drawn from the history of meritocracy.

Discipline or Nurture

The history of meritocracy is a history of the relationship between two modes of power: disciplinary power and biopower [4]. Disciplinary power was an early-nineteenth century device used to construct a range of institutional sites including schools (Foucault 1975). Through a subtle economy of power individual bodies were encouraged to conform. In a disciplinary regime, power operated according to the principle of complete reconstruction building its institutions and institutional subjects from scratch. Biopower, by contrast, occupied a space already filled with life processes and relations of force. ‘Like disciplinary
mechanisms’ it sought ‘to maximise and extract forces’, but unlike discipline it sought to nurture and construct with already-existing relations in mind (Foucault, 1976, p.246). Biopower was reduced to ‘maximizing the positive elements’ and ‘minimizing what is risky and inconvenient’ (Foucault, 1978, p.19).

A key development for biopower was the mid-nineteenth century application of the law of error (later normal distribution) to human phenomena (Hacking 1990). This bell-curved distribution only occurs for characteristics that are influenced by multiple, small and dispersed causes. Hence, from the perspective of government [5], the only way to administer such things is by managing them at the level of their complexity. Complete reconstruction of a disciplinary sort appears impossible. Instead, a range of sensitive governing techniques must be administered to the different parts of the normal distribution and to the different processes that underlie them.

For a period of time, biopower and disciplinary power nevertheless coexisted, with the former acting to intensify the latter. In the mid-twentieth century this culminated in the ultimate disciplinary manipulation of life known as “extermination through labour” [6]. The early history of meritocracy reflects this process of intensification or mutual support, and a similar relationship between these two strategies of power can be observed in the related history of eugenics.

The Janus-faced discourse of eugenics

Eugenics helped create this biopolitical perception of population-level traits. Following the work of Francis Galton (1869), intelligence too was seen as naturally occurring, following the shape of a bell-curve. The overall distribution could, theoretically, be enhanced through variable rates of breeding. Galton initially suggested that the ‘power of man over animal life’ is ‘enormously great’ with the structure of future generations ‘almost as plastic as clay, under control of the breeder’s will’ (Galton, 1865, p.157). However, in later work he revised this view, asserting that the breeder is restricted to only ‘perpetuating and intensifying qualities which have already appeared in the race’ (Galton 1909, p.313). Moreover, as a naturally occurring phenomenon, any attempt to enhance overall intelligence would be constrained by a natural law – the law of regression (Galton, 1901).

Roughly speaking, Galton was moving from a disciplinary perspective of complete reconstruction to a biopolitical position that limits itself to constructing within the constraints already set by natural phenomena. This shift did not necessarily entail a retreat of power to lighter and more ‘humane’ techniques. Despite acknowledging nature’s constraints,
eugenics still embraced disciplinary approaches. Even those who are seen to be synonymous with totalitarianism, those who are conventionally viewed as being unable to comprehend the importance of life, could agree with Galton that ‘man has never yet conquered Nature in anything’, that ‘he invents nothing but only discovers everything’ and that he does not ‘dominate Nature, but has only risen on the basis of his knowledge of various laws and secrets of Nature to be lord over those other living creatures who lack this knowledge’ (Hitler, 1925, p.261).

Eugenics may have sought to nurture and enhance existing tendencies, but it was not about to recommend allowing these natural tendencies any substantial freedom to regulate themselves [7]. In the early-twentieth century, with attempts being made to manage the statistical traits of populations, ‘discipline was never more important or more valued’. This was because ‘managing the population [also] means managing it in depth, in all its fine points and details’ (Foucault, 1978, p.107). At this stage, disciplinary techniques were the only viable tools for carrying out this detailed work [8]. These techniques were increasingly replaced in the latter years of the twentieth century by moral devices.

The potential for a non-disciplinary companion to biopower, one that used moral rather than mechanistic approaches to the management of individual lives, was perceived early on by those working within the field of eugenics. The potential usefulness of morality was built upon the idea that religion, too, could be added to the list of natural phenomena, being now seen as a progressive force within the evolution of human societies (Kidd 1884; Galton 1894). Biopower should integrate these naturally occurring moral techniques, concerned, as it is, with the regulation and enhancement of human vitality. It was even hoped that a ‘national religion’ could be established along eugenic lines (Galton 1894, p.763).

The psychologist Raymond Cattell further developed these themes in the 1930s. Whilst Cattell conceded that ‘we can only cut off the tail of stragglers by direct [and disciplinary] eugenic methods’, he also felt that ‘we must leave to culture the breeding of vanguard qualities’ (Cattell, 1937, p.94). By culture, Cattell had in mind the deeply embedded techniques of religious practice. He argued that we ‘should not throw away the great, slow-built, emotional attitudes...which have grown up through the centuries around the concept of God’ (Cattell, 1938, p.186). In order to succeed, eugenic sense must gradually co-opt existing religious practices that act to guide the ‘free’ actions of individuals. When the ‘admitted ideal of civilization’ is to ‘shift regulation entirely to the individual’ (Cattell, 1933, p.158), it becomes clear that the ‘maintenance of morality by conscience’
(ibid., p.156) is the key to effective government. Regulated by a eugenic moral compass, individuals could take care of their own procreation. Christianity was here viewed as the religion most suited to the eugenic cause. With suitable adaptations Christian love could be extended to the ‘field of the un-born’ (Cattell, 1937, p.130). A ‘thoroughly Christian treatment of the defective’ (ibid., p.69) would insist that those to be born ‘shall be fit for the world’ in which they will live (ibid., p.131). Religious teachings would prepare individual lives for acts of devotion to the overall health of the population. In effect, with an updated conception of religion, eugenics would be able to depend upon something far more pervasive than mere techniques of disciplinary compulsion.

As a case-study in biopower, eugenic discourse demonstrates an intriguing Janus-faced quality. Borrowing from and reinvesting early-nineteenth century techniques, eugenics was clearly associated with the intensification of discipline. And yet, alongside these disciplinary practices, eugenic discourse was able to look forward and accommodate in its imaginary other forms of social regulation. The maintenance of life could also make use of moral techniques securing obedience to its creed through the ‘free’ interaction of conscientious social subjects. This offers, I argue, not only insights into the possible future of eugenics; it also reveals a crucial transition that was occurring within biopower, a transition that is central to understanding the history of meritocracy and its most recent incarnation.

**Early meritocracy: a system of location**

The early outlines of a meritocratic device can be found in Jeremy Bentham’s (1830) ‘System of Official Location’ designed to match individuals to jobs in a rational manner. In the United Kingdom the forces of patronage were challenged in 1854 when examinations were introduced to the Indian Civil Service. The Home Civil Service followed in 1870 (Roach, 1971). These disciplinary techniques later expanded in scope until they had the entire working population within their purview, rather than simply those destined for government posts.

In 1883 Galton called for the construction of ‘anthropometric laboratories’ that would devise tests to identify natural giftedness at an early age, an essential tool for eugenic breeding, one that would give an old phrase – the unexamined life is not worth living – a fresh eugenic twist (Galton, 1883, p.28) [9]. A prototype laboratory was set up in 1884 but it failed to correlate its measurements (Galton, 1885). As it turned out, the necessary laboratories were already in existence, these being the elementary schools that were
established as state education expanded in the late-nineteenth century (Rose, 1989). Once tests of giftedness (later named intelligence tests) had been developed, it became possible to manage an entire population in terms of this naturally occurring and statistically predictable attribute. A society became possible in which all individuals could be assigned their social role according to a single collective logic. This possibility was first applied by eugenic architects to those at the lower end of the normal distribution:

When we have learned the lessons which intelligence tests have to teach, we shall no longer blame mentally defective workmen for their industrial inefficiency, punish weak-minded children because of their inability to learn, or imprison and hang mentally defective criminals because they lacked the intelligence to appreciate the ordinary codes of social conduct (Terman, 1919, p.21).

With a programme of mass institutionalisation and sterilisation seen as politically unlikely, it was argued that mental deficiency could to some extent be managed within society by adjusting the demands of the social environment to the mental age of each individual. To assist in this task, a table of industrial capacities was designed for those with an assigned mental age of 1 to 12 years (Figure 1).

![Table: Industrial Classification](image)

**Figure 1. The Industrial Classification of the Feeble-minded** (Goddard, 1914, p.581)

This idea was later developed to cover the entire range of human capacity. Vocational choices should not be left to the ‘wish or the whim of the parent and of the child’ because the average parent suffers from a ‘lack of psychological insight’ and is commonly influenced by ‘selfish’ desires (Burt, 1924, p.339). Rather, every child ‘should be made the subject of special study’ and then recommended to prepare for a particular type of occupation for which he or she ‘seems by mental constitution best adapted’ (ibid., p.337).
The various occupations should each be assigned an ‘optimal range of intelligence’ for incoming candidates (ibid., 346), and such occupations would, he suggested, be found to follow the normal distribution in the numbers they employed (Figure 2). Overall, Burt claimed that through a system of scientific allocations it would be possible to achieve increases in industrial efficiency and reductions in worker unrest.

<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>
</tr>
<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>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. A Hierarchy of Occupations and their Normal Distribution (Burt, 1924, p.349)

A level of biopolitical calculation is clearly evident here, with the entire human population now taken as the point of reference, and with the overall productivity of society at stake. However, these designs are also disciplinary in form. The disciplinary element of these schemes lies in their effort to achieve the most ambitious target faced by disciplinary power: ‘the composition of forces’ (Foucault, 1975, p.162) where the aim is to ‘construct a machine whose effect will be maximised by the concerted articulation’ of its ‘elementary parts’. Discipline begins with a ‘functional reduction of the body’, after which each individual is to be inserted in a broader ensemble, as a ‘body-segment’ in a ‘multi-segmentary machine’ (ibid., p.164). The only difference, in the example above, is that the scale of the task has now changed from the enhanced workings of an individual disciplinary institution to the far larger project of meritocratic redistribution, one that seeks to rationalise society itself.

**Early meritocracy: the basis of democracy**

The prominent American eugenicist and psychologist Henry Goddard claimed that ‘absolute knowledge of mental levels and the organization of the social body on that basis’ would provide the foundations of ‘a perfect democracy’. Liberty can only be achieved once we recognise that society will always contain a range of intellectual capacities and must, therefore, be organised in a way that each citizen ‘is doing such work and bearing such responsibility as his mental level warrants’ (Goddard, 1920, p.126-7). This mirrors Foucault’s pithy observation that the “Enlightenment’, which discovered the liberties, also
invented the disciplines’. The democratic relation established between people in a system that is necessarily unequal but open to all along principles of merit, conceals operations of power that have ‘the precise role of introducing insuperable asymmetries’ (Foucault, 1975, p.222). Operating below collective norms of liberty, opportunity and wellbeing, can be found ‘a machinery’ of more specific normative discretions, a machinery ‘that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces [and] multiplies the asymmetry of power’. Hence the importance given to the sciences that provide this process with its ‘respectable face; hence the fear of abandoning them if one cannot find any substitute; hence the affirmation that they are at the very foundation of society, and an element in its equilibrium’ (ibid., p.223).

Responding to this argument one might ask with bewilderment: But how could we ever live without a science of human allocations, for without it social life would become raw and unworkable? How could advanced democratic societies not be meritocratic in this sense? How could they not assess, classify and allocate according to a regrettable though necessary vocational hierarchy? How could a perfect democracy not avoid assigning people with their diverse abilities to positions of responsibility and influence, positions appropriate to their talents?

Well, according to the argument developed below, these systems have already been abandoned to some extent, and in a very precise and ingenious way, one that hides itself from perception, and one that relates to the formation of an economic morality. For the moment, however, it is necessary to trace a few more lines of development within early meritocracy.

Early meritocracy: systems of schooling

In the late-nineteenth century, access to education was stratified vertically by class and wealth. The labouring poor attended elementary schools until their early teens, whilst the middle and upper classes had the benefit of various routes into secondary schooling which were also divided, roughly speaking, into more expensive schools for those who were aiming for the professions and less expensive schools for those who could not afford to make ‘gentlemen’ of their boys or ‘ladies’ of their girls. Schools in this middle band supplied the ‘commercial or white-collar clerical, sub-professional occupations’ (Sutherland, 1984, p.101-2). The partitions in schooling were not completely impenetrable. A scholarship system was also constructed which would allow for a degree of mobility between schools and social stratifications. In theory, talent would rise to its rightful place.
This would allow the occasional genius from the lower classes to step into a superior (higher class) educational stream. Scholarship would also ensure that these hierarchies were protected from critique as their divisions became increasingly accurate through an internal process of corrections. Hierarchies would become ever more justifiable as they came to better reflect the natural distribution of talent. As J.B.S. Haldane put it rather crassly:

In the remote future mankind may be divided into castes like Hindus or termites. But today the recognition of innate inequality should lead not to less, but to greater, equality of opportunity (Haldane, 1932, p.35).

This idea of occasional advance for those of exceptional ability existed first at the level of popular mythology in what I call the genius-hero trope: ‘Our history is full of names of men who have risen by their learning’ and there are ‘few schools which cannot point to at least one such hero in their past history’ (PP, 1868, pp.92-3). It was nevertheless recognised that, following the huge expansions in education that occurred during the late-nineteenth century, a more rational system had to be ‘substituted for that which’ once ‘acted spontaneously’ (ibid., p.575). As T. H. Huxley proclaimed in 1871:

No educational system in the country would be worthy the name of a national system, or fulfil the great objects of education, unless it was one which established a great educational ladder, the bottom of which should be in the gutter and the top in the University and by which every child who had the strength to climb might, by using that strength, reach the place intended for him (Huxley, 1871, quoted in Philpott, 1904, p.153).

The administrative task was to ensure that enough ladders were provided and that those already in place were without gaps. At this stage, the ‘natural’ tendencies of the system were viewed as a hindrance. It was feared that where scholarships were insufficient, lower schools would retain gifted scholars for whom they would develop superior classes, thereby encroaching on the territory of higher grade schools (PP, 1868). The problem of ‘overlapping’ was duly reported in 1895 and demands were made for an improved scholarship system that would act as a pressure relief valve, maintaining internal hierarchies against the trespass of lower grade schooling (PP, 1895).

The biopolitical perception of ‘naturalness’ was nevertheless making inroads. A significant addition to official discourse can be observed when we are told that the highest ranks require ‘the best blood and brain from all classes of society’ (PP, 1895, p.138). Basing scholarship upon blood, irrespective of colour (red or blue), leads to a set of justifications that rely less upon a mythology of the occasional academic hero (to whom are lowered ladders from the ramparts of class privilege), and borrow more from a population-
level, biopolitical perspective (where scholarship increasingly becomes a matter of rationalising the distribution of talent in a manner that maximises efficiency).

The transition from genius-hero to population redistribution was gradual and involved a number of transformations. These concerned, for example, the development of intelligence testing and the impact of this technology on methods of assessment in schools (Sutherland, 1984). There was an increasing sense that ‘primitive methods of surface mining’ must be replaced by devices able to better ‘explore the nation’s hidden resources of intelligence’ (Terman, 1919, pp.12-13). The country could no longer ‘afford to miss intelligent children’ with evidence suggesting that ‘a great many excellent fish slip past the net’ (Board of Education, 1920, pp.24-5). Eventually, the occasional scholarship became a common moment of transfer at eleven years. Now the major concern was to increase the provision of secondary schooling so that all pupil ‘types’ could be accommodated. The normal distribution of abilities was to be matched to a similar distribution of schools and then jobs:

> In a wise economy of secondary education pupils of a particular type of mind would receive the training best suited for them and that training would lead them to an occupation where their capacities would be suitably used (Board of Education, 1943, p.4).

Secondary schooling was to be classified as grammar, technical and modern, with each school type catering for a section of the normal distribution (Figure 3). Once the distribution of schools was perfected, it was hoped that ‘selection by differentiation’ would take the place of ‘selection by elimination’ (Board of Education, 1926, p.78) and the competitive drive would disappear from meritocracy. As P.J. Hartog explained in his 1911 lecture *Examinations and their bearing on national efficiency*, the ‘competitive idea’ that lingers behind merit can lead us into confusion; it can tempt us ‘to forget the distinction between the efficiency of an examination and its difficulty’. Superior examinations are not those which are simply 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 can match people to tasks, dividing candidates who can perform certain pre-defined social functions from those who cannot.
This principle of rational (and non-competitive) allocation is what lay behind the goal to achieve so-called ‘parity of esteem’ between grammar, technical and modern schools (Board of Education, 1938; 1943; Ministry of Education, 1947). The notion that parity of esteem could ever be achieved between different types of school (where each school type was associated with its own vocational class distribution) may seem odd to us now, but it was in line with the distributive principles of the time. From a disciplinary perspective there was little need for competition. Indeed, Foucault (1975) rarely mentions competition in his work on disciplinary power, and this omission would appear to be more deliberate than accidental. Disciplinary power is concerned with achieving a precise composition of forces. Techniques of rivalry and mutual comparison can be employed, but competition occupies a subordinate position. As a strategic organising principle, competition is a post-disciplinary, late-twentieth century device. In the subsequent history of meritocracy, competition was transformed from a limiting factor to be levelled at all costs, to become a principle of organisational and personal enhancement [11].

**The rise of complexity**

The transformation from early to late meritocracy was gradual, occupying much of the second half of the twentieth century. This shift involved refinements to biopower built upon a rising perception of just how complex natural human systems can be (this perception being the product of our human sciences). As the meritocratic-administrative task has become increasingly intractable in its appearance, old systems have broken down before this constructed impossibility.

This opening into complexity (and the accompanying shift towards a form of governance that would more fully embrace the apparent disorder of a more chaotic and
indeterminate world) can be understood in terms of a well-known post World War II debate concerning the ratio of influence between the respective effects of nature and nurture. There was a growing sense, in the scientific community and elsewhere, that environment or nurture had a larger than previously suspected influence on mental development, rendering increasingly untenable the assumption that relatively fixed child types could be matched to appropriate schools and eventually jobs. This debate was associated with rising calls for an alternative “comprehensive” system of education that would replace the old hierarchy of schools. It is, of course, tempting to view this point in educational history, with hereditary determinism on the back foot and comprehensive education for all, a real possibility, as the dawn of a golden era lasting until the late 1970s when the hopes of the period were eventually dashed by a resurgence of the right led by Margaret Thatcher. However, despite such opportunities for progressive reform, there occurred during this period a revolution in power that ran much deeper than these campaigns for greater equality of provision. This switch was to be found in the associated recognition of the problem of complexity, a change in perception that brought about a break between biopower and discipline and a subsequent alignment between biopower and far more insidious techniques.

In the 1950s, selection at 11 was criticised for its inaccuracy (Yates & Pidgeon, 1957) and class bias (Halsey & Gardner, 1953; Ministry of Education, 1954). In the 1960s and 1970s, more detailed studies were showing the effects of environmental disadvantage on attainment, both in terms of the variable influence of home environment (Bernstein & Young, 1967) and school culture (Hargreaves, 1967; King, 1969; Lacey, 1970; Woods, 1979). Recommendations were made for more flexible forms of organisation able to provide compensatory mechanisms (Vernon, 1957), recommendations that coincided with demands for a more flexible labour supply (Friedmann, 1955; Ministry of Education, 1959; Floud & Halsey, 1961; Taylor, 1963). Changing industrial requirements were thus well matched to the intellectual and cultural shift away from deterministic views of human ability.

Comprehensive schooling (schooling for all ‘types’ under one roof) allowed for greater flexibility of movement. The pursuit of flexibility did not, however, pose an immediate threat to the administrative designs of early meritocracy. The ultimate goal was still a fully rationalised spread of ability. Greater possibility for movement between school types or between streams within the comprehensive school (Rubinstein & Simon, 1973), would simply deliver higher levels of elasticity within the existing system. Together with
competition, fluidity as an organisational principle remained subordinate for much of the twentieth century. As principles of governance, these two were only really developed towards the end of the twentieth century, that is, after a long period of gestation. At this point, fluidity became a central organising principle and comprehensives finally gave way to genuinely unsystematic provision [12]. Comprehensive schooling should, therefore, be seen as representing the last attempt to rationalise the distribution of talent and the first move towards a system where the perfect distribution of talent became unimportant. Whilst comprehensive schooling allowed for greater internal flexibility (to achieve a better match between ability and vocational distributions), it also opened a stratified education system to the problem of complexity and, in so doing, allowed education to become truly unsystematic (in meritocratic terms). Awareness of (a) the need for occupational flexibility, and appreciation of (b) the extent of environmental influence upon the individual child, helped education embrace an indeterminate world.

Despite significant alterations to the landscape of secondary education in the 1960s and 1970s, there were, during this period, no radical adjustments to the end-of-school examination system itself. For all the attempts to increase flexibility within the school and counteract the effects of environmental disadvantage, Bentham’s ‘System of Official Location’ lived on in the examination structure. It is significant that comprehensive education was not accompanied by a comprehensive examination system until it was in decline. At first, external examinations were only deemed appropriate for grammar schools (the GCE examination was intended for the top 20 per cent of the normal distribution). Able to presume a ‘measure of uniformity’ in terms of intelligence, they would function like a yes/no logic gate. For other schools, such as the secondary modern, external examinations were seen as ‘impracticable’ because the ability range was far greater (Ministry of Education, 1947, p.46). Under pressure, the graded CSE was finally introduced to provide for the next 40 per cent (Figure 4). For the remainder (those of below-average ability), it was felt that school reports would suffice [13].
The major concern for test designers was to avoid slippage between these designated groups and to maintain boundaries between the different examinations and the types of child they were intended for (Ministry of Education, 1959; 1960; 1963). Secondary schooling for all was still intended to produce a partitioned mass, which could be served by end-of-school examinations that were, as a result, more precisely targeted for each circumscribed grouping. Examinations were to be qualifying rather than competitive. If, at the end of secondary schooling, all pupils still took the same tests, it would be evident that little had been achieved in the way of human sorting.

Today, of course, we have the GCSE, which has become an examination for all (though it was initially intended only for the top 60 per cent). Instead of acting as a qualifying test or a yes/no logic gate, the GCSE and other mainstream examinations (such as SATs) now act to provide a framework for interaction, which is very different. Today, examination has expanded to become a common framework used to link together and condition disparate events.

**The collapse of time**

The rise of complexity had its consequences for research. Take, for example, the book *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (Floud et al., 1957) which explained how the ‘problem of social waste in education’ could no longer be viewed in ‘simple terms’. Social factors ‘influencing educational selection’ take far more ‘subtle forms’ discoverable only ‘through intensive enquiry’ into the ‘home environment’ (ibid., pp.144-6). We are led to conclude from this that a finer appreciation of the morbid effects of environmental disadvantage
should not lead directly to large-scale proposals for material redistribution. Indeed, such proposals are now seen as crude in that they miss the subtleties of environmental influence. Rather, the environmentally aware egalitarian should support greater intrusion into the family. Indeed, in subsequent years the home environment of the most disadvantaged would become increasingly interesting to researchers.

Here, meritocracy transforms from a situation where children of promise are to be mechanically relocated, to a situation where the management of individual prospects occurs in situ allowing for the gentle nurture of talent. Early meritocracy depends upon the efficient location and repositioning of intelligence. Late meritocracy, by contrast, encourages detailed research that maps intellectual ability in its relation to a variable environment. Research effort changes from the calibration of instruments of extraction, to an exploration of the conditions necessary for human flourishing. It is here that biopower, with its concern with the processes of everyday life, abandons disciplinary location in favour of more contextually embedded techniques.

Discourses of parenting changed in complimentary ways. The increasing concern for the current ecological status of the population, with all its complex and interacting environmental factors, was accompanied by an overall switch from parental investment in school fees, to investment in educationally-enhanced home environments (Rose 1989; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989). The early years of a child’s life were now seen as crucial to later development, where every aspect of home life came to be viewed in terms of its educational value. Here, time collapses as the parent is encouraged to focus on the perpetual educational present; every moment becomes a moment of potential educational significance.

According to the geneticist Lionel Penrose (1949, p.61), the ‘distinction between causes which are said to be hereditary or part of the individual’s nature and those which are environmental or pertaining to nurture, must be based on a temporal sequence’. The distinction between “nature” and “nurture”, Penrose argued, is really one of time. This observation can be found repeated in the following government report:

All characteristics have a history of continuous developmental interactions, first of gene products with other gene products, then of more complex molecules with other molecules, then of cells with cells, of tissues with the environment of the mother's uterus, and finally of a whole complex organism with an equally complex environment during the whole of growth after birth (DES, 1967, p.13).

Extending this biological insight one step further, one should observe that from the perspective of biopower, there is no essential difference between the conventional eugenic
position and the environmental one, other than the shortening of time and the rise in complexity. One could indeed say that “eugenic time” with its focus on the distant ancestral past and the remote, possibly moribund future was gradually replaced by a foreshortened, individualised time, by a decreased angle of vision and a focus on the educational present. The vast expanses of genetic time have collapsed to reveal an intensely myopic concern with individual enhancement, where the aim is to ‘shift regulation entirely to the individual’ (Cattell, 1933, p.158). The disciplinary administration of talent now appears to us to be hopelessly utopian in its designs. All we can hope to achieve is to create a substructure of motivated (rather than disciplined) individuals. Following the final breakdown of early meritocracy, we must absorb meritocratic desire in our mutual efforts to work against each other in competition. Together, yet in rivalry, we further economic prosperity, pursue innovation and contribute towards progress. The common framework that acts here as both referee and principle of comparison is the framework of assessment. It no longer matters whether the distribution of talent matches the provision of educational opportunity, which, in turn, matches the distribution of jobs. Indeed, the strategic aim to achieve overlapping bell curves departs in silence. However, we continue to act as if overlapping distributions and the rationalisation of talent are the aims of meritocracy. We live as if the logic of rewarded talent and redistribution is still in place.

**Late meritocracy: the shaping of an economic morality**

Research oriented towards social justice is now marooned by a system that no longer seeks redistributive perfection. *More* social mobility, *less* bias, *more* fairness, *less* discrimination – with a collapse in the time dimension, these are our foreshortened demands. The complex dynamics of meritocratic advance are now given so much respect that those who govern hesitate to mount coordinated interventions that reach deep into the social fabric. Indeed, they now fear the label of “social engineer”. Collective efforts to offset environmental disadvantage have receded into piecemeal and disjointed actions. However, and to repeat a point already made, *on an individual basis* we still live with the residues of an older disciplinary system at the forefront of our minds. These residues provide us with our principles of movement: we must seek after merit, and merit will be rewarded.

These basic principles form the core values of an *economic morality*. However, they are also assisted by techniques that describe how we should relate to our meritocratic selves. An essential ability for the subjects of late meritocracy is to be able to keep things in perspective. Whilst Burt (1924) was concerned to bypass the irrational drives of children
and parents, today pupils and parents are encouraged to take care of their own futures. This occurs within a system of carefully constructed personal dispositions.

Many schools now test their year 7 intake and produce a set of predicted grades for future examinations to be taken in years 9, 11 and 13. For each ‘type’ of child there is an accompanying, statistically normalised progression route that is used to set expectations. This shows each ‘type’ how it can adjust itself to more ‘realistic’ aspirations and live within a likely future that is the output of statistical prediction. This progression route, the average path for that particular ‘type’, forms the minimum against which success is judged. Above average progression denotes added value. The child is encouraged to operate within this space of zeroed progress, aspiring to above average development, to the hope of positive value-added, towards a surplus value that becomes his or her maximum hope. Within this framework hopes and desires are managed on an individual basis within a personalised sequence of probable progressions. Crucially, the rate at which we mature between fixed points in time becomes the point of interest rather than the eventual distribution of outcomes. In other words, when the distance between two points is the central concern, what these points represent in themselves matters less. In late meritocracy, there is no serious attempt to match ability-distribution to job-distribution. Instead, we live within a system that has lost any drive to perfection, one that does not recoil before its defective state. This is because attention has shifted to focus on process rather than outcome. The now defunct mechanical and disciplinary micromanagement of position has been replaced by a pastoral supervision of process.

Very much at the other end of the conventional assessment continuum, though to my mind using very similar perspective-adjusting techniques, is formative assessment. This pedagogic approach is naturalised as something that ‘itself is, of course, nothing new’. Presumably, it has always been a part of ‘all successful teaching’ (Wiliam & Black, 1996, p. 538). The immediate context of the child is to be prioritised rather than the social context and the justice of his or her position within it. The child’s developmental path is individualised and broken down into a series of cyclical steps.

Learning must occur in an environment that is sustained by ‘the belief that all can achieve’ (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p.9). There should be no fear of failure. In one popular account of this system we are told how so-called ‘helpless children’ who tend to avoid challenge, must be transformed into ‘mastery children’ who believe they can always improve. This transformation is not easy, and such children may have to pass through an intermediate phase on the way from ‘learned helplessness’ to mastery. In this transitional
phase ‘they find strategies that place the blame on others or factors beyond their control’ (Weeden et al., 2002, pp.53-5). This, clearly, must be avoided. Mastery children are created by breaking down learning into the minute and achievable steps of formative improvement and by encouraging pupils to take greater responsibility for their learning instead of extending a critical gaze elsewhere. In addition to self-assessment, peer-assessment is also an important technique, as pupils learn that ‘if they want constructive feedback, they have to be sensitive about the kind of feedback they give others’ (Weeden et al., 2002, p.89). Overall, pupils learn how to compete with one another and manage their own personalised advances in a sustainable and amicable way [14].

In the Bryce report of 1895, it was noted that as a result of parental efforts to find lucrative scholarships for their children, boys were ‘hawked about from school to school, and early [on] come to think of themselves as articles of commerce’ (PP, 1895, p.173). This was a result of conveyance from one institution to the next, taking tests that might result in funding should the child be worth the investment. Today, in an era of incessant product rebranding and development, the situation is different, though it is still based on commercial principles. Through technologies of formative self-assessment it appears that some pupils are learning to commodify themselves. They are taught how to increase their quality and marketability by engaging in processes of self-analysis and self-enhancement. They learn to assess their current position in the educational market and make adjustments towards a goal that is considered realistic and within reach.

Despite claims to the contrary, competition does not disappear within the explicitly constructive and encouraging ethic of formative assessment. What retreats is the goal of ranking. In its place, pupils learn how to enhance themselves in apparent harmony with one another, each of them involved in personal formative cycles, occupied in unison within individual feedback-action loops. They learn to become industrious self-enhancers, accepting and implementing external goals. Competition is humanised and disguised and therefore intensified by this formative technology. It seems that the competitive drive has finally been elevated from its formerly subordinate position. It has achieved a disembodied form, separated from efforts to rationalise ability, finally drifting off without the constraints of disciplinary intervention.

These technologies for keeping things in perspective, for making life realistic and manageable, are essential during a time of inflated desires. 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 the celebrities’ (Bauman, 2010, p.43),
maintaining things in perspective is a necessary technique. We have come to require an economic morality in order to restrain our hopes. Here practices of self-care, taught in schools, help ensure that aspiration drives effort within acceptable channels of restraint; they help prevent self-loss and subsequent dissatisfaction with the global order. To be able to survive we must learn how to endure life without the ‘x’ factor.

Conclusion

It was once felt that variations in esteem would impede the proper allocation of individuals and lead to aspirations and desires for social advance that were in excess of individual abilities. Competition was also to be avoided as it threatened to replace scientific allocation with emotive and irrational drives. Eventually, the entire scheme of early meritocracy with its anti-competitive, anti-irrational, pro-administrative biases, fell apart until, in 2010, we reached a point where statisticians advised us that random promotion is the best form of promotion in bureaucratic organisations (Pluchino, Rapisarda & Garofalo, 2010) [15]. According to the argument developed above, random job promotion would pose no challenge to a system of late meritocracy that has abandoned the disciplinary ideal of total administration. However, as a system of job allocation this nevertheless strikes us as absurd. Random allocation does not contradict late meritocracy to the extent that it cannot challenge administrative goals that no longer exist. If it were implemented, it would nevertheless seem highly immoral. Randomness, openly acknowledged, contradicts our present economic morality according to which one must try with patience to succeed. In the end, we believe, our efforts will be rewarded.

In this sense, we are still living within the residues of early meritocracy. The institutional effort once made to redistribute individuals has been replaced by a belief in redistribution, a belief that such efforts are still being made on our behalf. And yet, meritocracy is no longer oriented towards a utopian destination in which it becomes a perfected grand scheme of scientific repositioning. This sort of highly administrative approach would entail a form of social engineering that is no longer seen as acceptable government practice. The population management of the social engineer has been replaced. Once doggedly mechanical, the cultivation of populations has receded into the mind, where it can focus on the individual’s interiority. Meritocracy is now highly individualised in the form of a guiding logic that conditions and directs our daily lives. It regulates far more deeply today than it has ever done before, seeking to guide solitary movements rather than control the eventual outcome these movements will deliver.
Meritocracy, today, is no principle of justice, if indeed it ever was. It represents a system of coercion that seeks to govern us through the manipulation of our hopes.

Notes

1. Though this paper focuses on the history of meritocracy in England the transformations it identifies are not unique to this national context.

2. As argued by Allen (2011), the assumption that ‘meritocracy’ is a timeless and unalterable ideal can also be seen in the work of Michael Young (1958) who first coined the term in his social satire The Rise of the Meritocracy.

3. This mode of historical analysis is also a political deployment (Allen 2009).

4. These descriptive terms represent a more complicated range of historical events. Limitations of space nevertheless render me vulnerable to ‘the seduction of language’ (Nietzsche 1887, I §13), which makes it hard to avoid reifying theoretical terms. For example, and to paraphrase Nietzsche, it is difficult to avoid giving the impression that “Discipline moves, discipline causes”.

5. On the link between statistics and government see Galton (1909, p.312) for whom “Statistician” was a term ‘more or less equivalent to that of ‘Statesman’’. Both deal with the problem of coming to know and administering populations.

6. Reflecting on the Nazi State, Foucault (1976, p.259) concluded: ‘no State could have more disciplinary power than the Nazi regime. Nor was there any other State in which the biological was so tightly, so insistently, regulated. Disciplinary power and biopower: all this permeated, underpinned, Nazi society’.

7. There were exceptions: The French eugenic writer Vacher de Lapouge suggested that so-called weaker individuals, such as those susceptible to ‘alcoholism, debauchery and an idle life’ should be allowed to extinguish themselves. He suggested that ‘if there were one town in France in which alcohol was free, alcoholics would congregate there like garden slugs under a buttered cabbage leaf, a succulent and fatal trap’. The reform of humanity could thus be achieved by ‘the simple play of human passions, without having to sacrifice people or be in any way violent’ (Vacher de Lapouge, 1896, cited in Pichot, 2009, pp.127-8).

8. For example: Proposals to identify, train and institutionalise the so-called feebleminded children now seen as endemic to every normally distributed population (PP, 1898); proposals to establish a central authority, the Board of Control, for the custodial care and training of all seriously feebleminded adults, also preventing dysgenic breeding (PP, 1908; Simmons, 1978); widespread sterilisation of individuals already institutionalised (Black, 2004); and finally, policies pursued in Nazi Germany, such as the Lebensborn programme, the SS marriage code, Aktion T4, and extermination through labour which, according to Black (2001), was assisted by data management systems supplied by IBM. These allowed for the quick and efficient location of those with specific abilities ‘needed for work battalions’ (Black, 2001, p.21).

9. Attributed to Socrates by Plato at Socrates’ trial in 399 BCE.

10. The intended match between educational provision and ability can be gleaned from a number of sources (e.g. Board of Education, 1943; 1938). However, the following report refers to specific proportions: ‘about a quarter of all the pupils who leave 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’. The secondary modern is then divided into an ‘above average’ group including some capable of grammar school work, a much larger ‘average’ group, and a third, smaller group for those who ‘work more slowly’. Finally, there is a fourth group of ‘really backward pupils’ (Ministry of Education, 1963, p.4).

11. This is not intended to suggest that levels of competition have increased in any overall, objective sense (that is a matter for debate). The purpose here is rather different, namely, to argue that competition has been embraced by regimes of power as a governing tool (it is no longer seen from the perspective of power as a confounding variable).
12. As Ball (2011) observes: ‘the system [today] is no longer even pretending to be a universal system’.

13. In practice, the CSE was also seen as an examination offering scope for teachers to try out new pedagogic approaches. For some it represented a chance to develop new modes of assessment and, as such, was not necessarily restricted to the less able. The examination system was (and still is) a highly contested space. For example, in 1954, over 5,000 modern school pupils were entered for the GCE; by 1962, this had reached 36,000 (Rubinstein & Simon, 1973). During the post-war years the frameworks of early meritocracy were under sustained attack.

14. These ideas are developed in more detail by Allen (2012).

15. This study was awarded the Ig Nobel Prize on 30 September 2010. This is an award that celebrates so-called improbable truths.

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