Neoliberal meritocracy, racialization and transnationalism

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The ideology of meritocracy

'Meritocracy' today is generally taken to mean a 'fair' social system in which people can progress to the top of the social pile if they are sufficiently savvy and put in enough effort to activate their talent. It is persuasive because it speaks firstly to people's desires to progress, develop and self-actualize; and secondly to a sense of fairness, in that it is pitted against the idea of unfairly inherited privilege. However, as I argue in my book *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility,* 'meritocracy' does not work as a social system and is tautological in structure (Littler 2018). The word 'meritocracy' has never been applied outside the framework of vastly unequal economic rewards, which means that the 'level playing field' it gestures towards simply does not exist, as those who achieve overwhelmingly tend to pass their wealth on to their children. As an ideology its main function has been to extend inequality: to be used by elite plutocrats to shore up and extend their power. Today, meritocratic discourse promotes a highly individualistic, competitive version of success in which people are encouraged to disavow their interdependencies; be flattered into lonely forms of empowerment, or blame themselves for 'failing' to make it; and to accept the idea that savage inequality should be a justified social norm. Indeed, in many ways it functions as the core legitimating ideological principle for the inequalities of contemporary capitalism. The supple, shape-shifting meaning of meritocracy has changed considerably over the years, according to time and place.

However we can track its genealogies and shifting movements, including its imbrications with Western imperialism, colonialism and racialization. The historical emergence of meritocracy can be understood in relation to the development in the Global North of what the political theorist C.B. MacPherson termed 'possessive individualism' and its concomitant imperial projects. The development of the sense of a bounded, individualized self, one which is not dependent upon or interconnected with others but is above all imagined as an ultra-independent being emerged during capitalist modernity. One graphic illustration of this development is provided by the evolution of the board game *Snakes and Ladders*. The earliest versions known of this game are nineteenth-century Hindu and Jain versions from India, where they were religious instruction games depicting a cycle of birth and rebirth influenced by the effects of good and bad deeds and attitudes, and in which the goal was to move past the many snakes to a zone of collective liberation. How-

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ever, in later versions, British imperial activity in India translated it into a game of Christian-capitalist moral instruction. Now the journey involved lessons on deportment and material wealth (e.g. punctuality leading to opulence, robbery leading to a beating) and the goal transmuted into reaching 'the scroll of fame,' a list of people well-known for their wealth, hard work, genius and virtue. In later, twentieth century iterations of the game, the goal was merely individual wealth.

Criticism of meritocracy

Such developments illustrate how a western capitalist emphasis on the bounded subject, in search of success through social veneration and economic profit, functioned by pushing aside more co-operative systems of thought and behaviour. Climbing the ladder has been a core motif of meritocracy, one lambasted by critical theorist Raymond Williams in the 1950s because it 'sweetens the poison of hierarchy' by offering growth through merit rather than money or birth. Hierarchies of 'losers' as well as 'winners' are integral to the structure of meritocracy, unlike a system based around co-operative egalitarianism. Indeed, such inequality was the reason why, when the word was first used in English, it was used to refer *not* to an optimum system that should be striven for, but rather to slate what was taken as an only too obvious and glaring example of unfairness. For industrial sociologist Alan Fox, the social polymath Michael Young and the philosopher Hannah Arendt, meritocracy was obviously a terrible idea, as it contradicted fairness by supporting far greater resources being given to a few. Why should the already prodigiously gifted have endless rewards heaped upon them? said Fox, incredulously (Fox 1956, 12-13).

This emergence of the critique of meritocracy was also bound up with a critique of the greater stratification of education, particularly in the UK. The grammar school system, then being popularised, ostensibly rewarded 'intrinsic merit' via testing at the age of 11 which segregated children into radically different types of school. It therefore offered greater life chances, combined with social alienation, for a few working class children, who were disproportionately white; and the castigation of numerous others into an educational zone marked 'second class.' Such a 'level playing field test' overlooked the amount of resources wealthy parents put into tutoring their offspring for the test and gaming the system. This competitive, marketised segmentation can be seen in how wealthy US parents deploy their power to in effect buy places for their children at Ivy League universities. And extremely hierarchical competitive societies overwhelmingly work to endorse the already-powerful with all their attendant pre-existing racialised and gendered forms of stratification. Natasha Warikoo and Lani Gunier have both written about the racialised effects of 'meritocracy' in the US educational system and present powerful stories about how it embeds discrimination (cf. Warikoo 2015; Gunier 2015).

Neoliberal meritocracy

Over the past few decades, what I term 'neoliberal meritocracy' has been characterised by some distinctive features. These include the extension of its logic of competition into the nooks and crannies of everyday life, and the full-scale adoption of the term as not only unproblematically positive, but as the natural and desirable structuring principle of society. Neoliberal meritocracy often brought with it a gloss of social liberalism. Anyone can make it! it was proclaimed across media texts, workplace narratives and political speeches. It doesn't matter what color your skin, your gender, your sexual orientation, your age: all have potential to climb the social ladder. In the process, neoliberal meritocracy was extracting and mobilizing elements of democratic struggles, including anti-racism and anti-sexism, and fusing them with corporate, capitalist arguments. The enfranchisement of a more diverse few at the top was to go in tandem with the disenfranchisement of the many.

Neoliberal meritocracy as 'common sense' was gradually and symbiotically developed by social theorists, cultural practitioners and policy makers, drawing on and adapting older currents of social thought. By the 1980s, for example meritocracy was being used by right-wing think tanks in order to promote not only segregation but also marketisation and privatisation in UK education. By the early 1990s in South Africa, the founder of 'the Merit Party,' Sol Schklone, was positioning meritocracy as a liberal third way, against the democratic demands of the black masses for affirmative action on the one hand and white apartheid on the other (Schklone 1991). Whether via 'third way' or other 'liberal' terms, these narratives of meritocracy were part of the discursive arsenal used to roll out neoliberalism-in-practice, with its mantras of competition, free enterprise and economic growth, crushing nationalised, not-for-profit public services across countries from Chile to the UK, South Africa to Russia, and having, as David Harvey and Naomi Klein have both documented, devastating effects on both inequality and environmental sustainability (cf. Harvey 2005; Klein 2008). The transnational nature of neoliberal meritocracy means there are striking local differences as well as striking commonalities in its usage. And still, across and between so many national contexts, the fact that the level playing field is not level, that many people start life several rungs ahead on the ladder, that the boundaries of 'merit' are set by the privileged, and continue to be profoundly racialised, classed and gendered, remain features that are minimised, downplayed and ignored by neoliberal meritocracy, and for an important reason: because it is an ideology which is itself being used to entrench and perpetuate the advantages of the already-privileged.

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