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Young and old meritocracy: from radical critique to neoliberal tool

Jo Littler

In January 2018, Toby Young stepped down from the board of the new Office For Students (OFS), the government's new regulatory body for higher education in England. This occurred after a widespread public outcry at his appointment, including an online petition calling for his removal with by more than 200,000 signatures. Young's support for eugenics, his continual tweeting about 'tits' (including those of female MPs and fourteen-year old girls), his disparagement of wheelchair access ramps and his condemnation of state school pupils as 'stains' was the kind of humour whose sense of infantile superiority appealed to a particular type of public schoolboy and *The Spectator*, but was offensive beyond it – primarily because it essentially functioned by disparaging absolutely everyone beyond it, apart from wealthy white public schoolboys. There were few groups Young had *not* offended, which made it harder for the right to defend his position, although Theresa May and Kirstie Allsopp tried.

Tory pundit and chum of Jo and Boris Johnson, Young has been a key activator of the privatized 'free' school agenda and, since 2017, has been COO of the New Schools Network, an organization given large amounts of money by the government to establish schools outside of local authority control. His appointment to the OFS, like the constitution of the OFS itself, has been accurately read by some commentators as not simply another attempt to extend the structures of privatisation (although of course it was), but as an ideological intervention attempting to ignite a 'culture war' within universities – to drag them towards the right by challenging the politics of speakers and lecturers at a time when young people are more left wing than they have been for generations.¹ Even whilst the OFS and the government continues, Young's sacking from the OFS has been an energizing minor victory against its misogynistic right-wing populism and Trump-lite politics.

A sizeable amount of the media coverage of the Toby Young debacle mentioned his father Michael Young, the sociologist, inventive social entrepreneur who co-founded the Open University and the Consumer's Association, and respected Labour grandee who penned the 1945 Labour Party manifesto. Media profiles on the OFS affair frequently highlighted Toby Young's desire and inability to live up to his father's flamboyant reputation the political differences between Youngs senior and junior.² In particular, many pieces foregrounded the connections and differences between Toby and Michael on one specific subject: meritocracy.

'Meritocracy' today is generally understood to involve the idea that a fair social system is one in which people can work hard, activate their talent and achieve social success. This credo has come to be 'common sense' within modern society. There is more-than-ample evidence, primarily through his own journalistic and social media output, that Toby Young believes that dramatic levels of inequality – the opposite of 'a level playing field' - are justifiable (he has often gone on record defending the aristocracy). It is also well known, to those with enough relevant cultural capital, that Michael Young's 1958 bestseller *The Rise of the Meritocracy* critiqued the concept. The book was a satire, with the first half documenting the expansion of democracy in Britain, and the second imagining a sci-fi

dystopia featuring a black market trade in brainy babies. The *New Republic* columnist Jeet Heer tweeted on 1st January: ‘Michael Young was the great theorist of meritocracy. Toby Young is the living refutation of meritocracy’.

Toby Young’s vested interests in the perpetuation of an elite, including himself, were eventually too graphic and too difficult to refute. Yet prior to his departure, vigorous attempts were made by the right to present him -- just as the OFS is being presented to the public more generally -- as a conduit of exactly the ‘fair’ social mobility that meritocracy has in recent decades been understood as involving. Even a critical piece in *The Independent* which suggested that Toby reaped what he sowed on social media presented him as an advocate for ‘social mobility’ and ‘fair access’, as a

[..] high profile champion of the government’s Free Schools programme, who believes in social mobility and the provision of (slight traditional) standards of excellence.

The new board exists to regulate and “uphold standards at universities” and to promote fair access to higher education, as well as safeguarding the right to free speech on campuses and preventing radicalisation.³

The entire incident is very revealing. It indicates how the ideology of meritocracy is put to work by the right and used by a plutocracy to try to extend its power, and what it might take to challenge it. Michael and Toby Young’s different interpretations of the idea of meritocracy involves far more than dramatic differences between father and son. It indicates wider, and equally dramatic, mutations of the meaning of meritocracy itself since the 1950s. (‘The idea of meritocracy may have many virtues’ wrote Amartya Sen, ‘but clarity is not one of them’).⁴ And crucially, it indicates that the expanding use of the idea of meritocracy over the past few decades has served as an extremely potent, yet highly flexible, justification for contemporary capitalist culture.

Old meritocracy

The discourse of meritocracy has multiple geographical connections and historical roots. We might trace back its contemporary meaning, for instance, to the Victorian *Self Help* narrative popularized in 1859 by Samuel Smiles, or the idea of working for consumer wealth which has been so integral to the American Dream. We might connect it to how competition is popularized as the route to diversity in contemporary Singapore; or to the advent of access to jobs by open examination in Imperial China or the nineteenth century British civil service.⁵ There are many different genealogical connections, in other words, to different components of the term.

By contrast, the actual word ‘meritocracy’ in English is less than a hundred years old. Its first recorded use discovered to date was made by the industrial sociologist Alan Fox in 1956 in the journal *Socialist Commentary*, a weekly publication to the left of the Labour party described by former Prime Minister Clement Atlee as ‘a useful corrective to the *New Statesman*’.⁶ For Fox, a ‘meritocracy’ was unequivocally a ‘grotesque’ and ‘ruthless’ social order which divided people ‘into the blessed and the unblessed—those who get the best

and most of everything, and those who get the poorest and the least'. A meritocracy, according to Fox, was a society in which

the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and the ruthless are carefully sifted out and helped towards their destined positions of dominance, where they proceed not only to enjoy the fulfilment of exercising their natural endowments but also to receive a fat bonus thrown in for good measure.

This is not enough. Merely to devise bigger and better 'sieves' ('equality of opportunity') to help the clever boys get to the top and then pile rewards on them when they get there is the vision of the certain brand of New Conservatism; it has never been the vision of socialism.⁷

Instead of a punitive meritocracy which rewards existing privilege, Fox suggests redistribution in economic terms and extra leisure time for those performing exceptionally dull or unattractive work, a practice he terms 'cross-grading'.

The meaning of 'meritocracy' as a set of practices being pushed by the right was understood by those on the left of the 1950s as noxious and reprehensible. In a now-forgotten review of Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* the cultural theorist Raymond Williams (a Cambridge don and member of Plaid Cymru) pointed out in 1958 that meritocracy had dazzled many working-class leaders and was objectionable in two respects: firstly, it weakened community and the task of common betterment; and secondly, it 'sweeten[ed] the poison of hierarchy' by offering advancement through merit rather than money or birth, whilst retaining a commitment to the very notion of hierarchy itself.⁸ Meritocracy, wrote Williams, was thus 'an alternative to solidarity'.

The Rise of the Meritocracy itself, whilst very amusing and inventive, was less politically clear in its commitment to comprehensive socialist provision of basic services than Fox or Williams. This more liberal social democratic streak was clear in Young's later statements and activities (he joined the SDP in 1981, for instance) brilliantly imaginative though many of his projects were.⁹ *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was also specifically a riposte to education policy over grammar schools, a subject which similarly concerned the philosopher Hannah Arendt, writing an article on education and meritocracy in the same year. Arendt unequivocally asserted that 'meritocracy contradicts the principle of equality, of an equalitarian democracy, no less than any other oligarchy'.¹⁰ She discussed how the system emerging in England meant that 'even under a socialist government', the country would run as it always has done, 'as an oligarchy or aristocracy – the latter in case one takes the view that the most gifted are also the best, which is by no means a certainty'. 'Meritocracy' could certainly not be understood as egalitarian.

But by the 1970s, a liberal use of 'meritocracy' began to be pushed more firmly, and not uncoincidentally at the same time as a neoliberal politics advocating the expansion of corporate power began to take hold. Daniel Bell, who was also a friend of Michael Young's, wrote a piece arguing that meritocracy should be used as an engine of productivity for the new knowledge economy.¹¹ By the 1980s, meritocracy was being energetically pushed by right wing think tanks as a justification for selling off and privatizing the provision of the welfare state. The Social Market Foundation, for example, published a pamphlet called

Meritocracy and the Classless Society which promoted educational stratification, the dismantling of the comprehensive system and the privatization of schools.¹² 'Equality of opportunity' would entail extreme hierarchies of wealth, education and status through which those with enough talent and 'grit' would be enabled to rise.

Neoliberal meritocracy

The structural and conceptual problem of course is that extreme inequalities of wealth are inevitable when capitalism is maximised and collectivized forms of provision are minimized. This is not an 'equal playing field' (a sporting metaphor popularized surprisingly late in the day, incidentally, by right wing management books in the 1980s). On the contrary, it means that only middle- and upper-class parents can have the resources to subsidise the intensive coaching for entrance exams and internships that are now positioned as the route to career success. Most people understand that the field is not level, and so the ideology of meritocracy is at its most vulnerable when the field is dramatically uneven, like the present, when 8 people own as much wealth as half the world, and in the UK we have extremes of global inequality not seen for a century.¹³

Neoliberal meritocracy began in full political force in the 1980s. Despite its huge social success building the welfare state, the Labour party was never as egalitarian and anti-meritocratic as many wanted,¹⁴ and mid-century welfarism undoubtedly privileged the patriarchy and those with white skin. Some of this resentment around social inequalities was leveraged by Thatcherism which, alongside its racism and social conservatism on questions of sexual morality, was profoundly anti-establishment in relation to class: the Thatcher government vigorously pushed a dream that anyone could make it, and linked emancipation and social mobility to the acquisition of consumer goods, home ownership and the privatisation of public utilities and social housing stock.

Blairism added a crucial new ingredient to this mix: social liberalism. New Labour promoted anti-sexism, gay rights and anti-racism. Now anyone could make it, so the story went, gay or straight, brown or white. The selective and significant provision New Labour made via SureStart (support for parents and children in deprived areas) and in tackling child poverty was far better than the family policies of Conservative governments; and yet it perpetuated the idea that, after childhood, savage individualistic competition was both fair enough and the correct way to run a society. As part of this ideology, shared by the Clintons in the US, New Labour pushed through reforms extending the process of privatising public services, through, for example, the private finance initiative (PFI) and the public-private partnerships (PPP). These initiatives handed a huge amount of power to private business interests, letting them profit from prisons and education, and helping further the shredding of social provisions by putting them in the hands of corporations.

Meritocracy within neoliberalism has had two key distinguishing features that made it different from meritocracy in the past. First, it has drawn, highly selectively, on some of the energy and power of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s by extracting the elements that could be made compatible with capitalism: the idea that anyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation, can 'make it'. Second, it has extended the idea of competitive individualism into the nooks and crannies of everyday life, through, for

example, personal branding and the extension of entrepreneurial activity to the everyday. The people that did make it 'up the ladder' were increasingly spotlighted by media narratives as parables of progress, shining examples which ordinary people needed to emulate. The rise of the TV talent show and thrusting business competitions boomed; business entrepreneurialism, rather than, say, lessons learned from co-operatives, were taught in schools. The problems of downward social mobility, and the question of the value and social worth of jobs at the 'top' (entrepreneur rather than nurse) were either downplayed, or mysteriously absent.

Where was Toby Young? In the early 1990s Toby Young founded the glossy libertarian *Modern Review* with professional contrarian Julie Burchill and Cosmo Landesman. Launched at the zenith of postmodernism, it aimed for highbrow writing on low culture and gleefully attempted to attack sacred cows. Its cover 'Swinging London', for example, featured a woman in a Union Jack mini dress hanging herself.¹⁵ This was an aesthetic which embraced glamour and contrarian spirit of punk in the service of a profoundly apolitical corporate populism which saw nothing wrong with, and did nothing whatsoever to challenge, the expansion of the market. The fusion of 'anything goes' libertarianism, 'anti-establishment' punk and the uncritical promotion of corporate values fit into the same cultural seam as the online magazine *Spiked* and Johnny Lydon selling Country Life butter. This was not just, as Anthony Barnett's handy phrase defining pro-market cultural activity under Blairism and beyond conjures up, 'corporate populism'¹⁶: it was also a kind of *corporate libertarianism*. Anything goes, apart from anything smelling like socialism.

Alternatives to neoliberal meritocracy

Meritocracy under neoliberalism has adopted many different guises, taking various forms and adopting different accents. But it always shares the same distinguishing feature: being used to extend plutocracy, or government by the wealthy for the wealthy. David Cameron's government perpetuated neoliberal meritocracy but made it more punitive: in the 'Aspiration Nation' it was your own fault if you failed.¹⁷ When Theresa May came to power her first speech promised to level the playing field and release the poor, the non-white, the oppressed women from injustice.¹⁸ What *The Sun* dubbed 'Mayritocracy' foregrounded social disadvantage, but prescribed nationalism, savage cuts to socialised provision and aid to corporations as the solution.

Like corporations using feminism in advertising, May offered what I have termed 'neoliberal justice narratives': identifying inequality and prescribing competitive capitalist solutions. Trump plays a more volatile, extreme and overtly racist but economically similar set of policies in the US. He appeals to the idea that people should be able to make it into the US on 'merit', just like he claims to deserve the job of President on the same basis. When the social fabric is turned into a savage competition, we should not be surprised when the sons, and less occasionally daughters, of billionaires and aristocrats use their tremendous advantage to 'make it' by making desperate attempts to conserve their own privilege, from Trump all the way down to the Right Hon. Toby Young.

Returning to the socially liberal, pro-corporate ‘centre ground’ will not help inequality, or climate change, or Labour’s ability to connect with the profoundly disenfranchised communities a million miles away from the lifestyle lived by Toby Young. So far, Toby Young has continued his father’s commitment try to take an ‘unconventional’ approach to issues, but whereas Michael Young largely channeled this through forms of social provision for all who needed it, largely outside of corporate interests, Toby Young’s is, as he himself readily admits, ‘a capitalist’ and conservative, and his work has served to expand inequality and corporate power. In this particular case, given that his corporate libertarianism – cf. his talk of breasts and wheelchairs – is so flamboyant, the contrast with any actual commitment to equality is palpable. The contradictions of the powerful will not always be so obvious, particularly when they have such powerful media machines at their disposal.

Meritocracy has been such a powerful discourse because it reacts against inherited privilege. But at the same time it is used to marketise the idea of equality and to extend the power of plutocrats. Instead we need to return to the critique offered by Hannah Arendt, Raymond Williams and Alan Fox: a socialist critique of meritocracy. This critique will only have enough power if it is profoundly participatory. Since the term meritocracy appeared we have hurtled from the Fordist family wage to both sexes overworking; from sidelining differently-abled bodied to cutting the very material support they need to live; from structural racism to the inequalities of corporate multiculturalism; and through the social expansion of rampant inequality. We need to reconfigure this landscape. As a nation, we have never tried an anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-authoritarian form of socialized provision before: and now, when we might actually have the possibility of it on the horizon, we need to do everything we can to achieve it.

Being against neoliberal meritocracy does not involve thinking that everyone can or should be a brain surgeon. ‘From each according to her ability, to each according to her needs’ is not a recipe for uniformity. If we value manual labour and pay it well, if we give people with unusually difficult jobs enough time off and resources to cope, if we ensure everyone has their basic needs met and the ability to flourish, life is better for everyone. Being against meritocracy needs to involve being imaginative and meaningfully democratic all the way down in order to counter fears of uniformity and the powerful ideology that competitive individualism is the only route to flourishing. This involves adopting measures towards radically reducing economic inequality (such as the high pay cap) that have been so well outlined in Andrew Sayer, Danny Dorling and Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson’s recent work.¹⁹ It involves funding universal public services, as Anna Coote argues, and developing forms of meaningful co-production, as fleshed out by Compass.²⁰ It can involve a whole host of other policies, from rent caps to placing water fountains in every public park, nationalising the railways and taking on the potential of the platform economy through an Uber run by TFL.²¹ We can have inclusive comprehensive schools; we can have universities which work together. We can teach the history of co-operation and unionization. Have political parties that are meaningful at a local level. Value the social and cultural merit of working, playing and living together, rather than competing alone.

Jo Littler is Reader in the Sociology Department at City, University of London and a member of the editorial collective of *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*. Her new book *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* is out now with Routledge.

¹ Lorna Finlayson, 'Bigger problems than Toby Young', The LRB Blog <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2018/01/02/lorna-finlayson/bigger-problems-than-toby-young/> 2 January 2018. 'UK Higher education and the perils of 'it'll never happen'. Punkademic, anonymous academic blog, 3 January 2018. <https://punkademic.net/>.

² Robert Booth 'Toby Young: social media self-obsessive still battling with his father's shadow', *The Guardian* 5 January 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/05/why-impulsive-vain-toby-young-wants-us-to-take-him-seriously>

³ Otto English (2018) 'I knew Toby Young long before his appointment to the Office For Students. He was trying to erase his history even then'. *The Independent*, 9 January. <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/toby-young-university-regulator-resignation-office-for-students-what-like-before-appointment-erase-a8149476.html>

⁴ Amartya Sen, 'Merit and Justice' in Kenneth Arrow, Samuel Bowles and Steven Durlauf (eds) *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000 p.7

⁵ Benjamin A. Elman *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. Nadira Talib and Richard Fitzgerald 'Inequality as Meritocracy: The use of the metaphor of diversity and the value of inequality within Singapore's meritocratic education system', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12(4) 2015, pp445-462

⁶ R.M. Douglas, 'No Friend of Democracy: The Socialist Vanguard Group 1941-50', *Contemporary British History*, 16(4), 2002, pp51-86

⁷ Alan Fox, 'Class and Equality' *Socialist Commentary*, May 1956, p13.

⁸ Raymond Williams, 'Democracy or Meritocracy?' *The Manchester Guardian* October 30 1958, p. 10.

⁹ Young quoted in Geoff Dench (ed) (2006) *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006 p74. See also Lise Butler, Michael Young, 'The Institute of Community Studies and the Politics of Kinship' in *Twentieth Century British History*, 26(2) 2015, pp203-224

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis in Education' in *Partisan Review* 25(4) 1968 pp493-513

¹¹ Daniel Bell, 'On meritocracy and equality' in *The Public Interest*, No. 29, Fall 1972, pp29-68

¹² Adrian Wooldridge, *Meritocracy and the 'Classless Society'*. London: Social Market Foundation, 1995.

¹³ Deborah Hardoon, *An Economy for the 99%*. London: Oxfam. 2017. See also Thomas Piketty et al, *World Inequality Report 2018*. <http://wir2018.wid.world/>

¹⁴ Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010*. London: John Murray, 2015.

¹⁵ *The Modern Review*, October 1 1997.

¹⁶ Anthony Barnett, 'Corporate populism and partyless democracy' in Andrew Chadwick and Richard Hefferman (eds) *The New Labour Reader*, Oxford: Polity, 2003.

¹⁷ For a fuller analysis see Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. London: Routledge pp89-92.

¹⁸ 'Theresa May's first speech to the nation as Prime Minister – in full' *The Independent*, 13 July 2016 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-mays-first-speech-to-the-nation-as-prime-minister-in-full-a7135301.html>

¹⁹ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*. London: Penguin, 2010. Andrew Sayer, *Why we can't afford the rich*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2016. Danny Dorling, *The Equality Effect: Improving Life for Everyone*. London: New Internationalist.

²⁰ Anna Coote, 'Are Universal Public Services the answer to Europe's widening inequalities?' *Brave New Europe*, December 4, 2017 <https://braveneweuropa.com/anna-coote-are-universal-public-services-the-answer-to-europes-widening-inequalities>. Zoe Gannon and Neal Lawson, *Co-production: The modernisation of public services for staff and users*. London: Compass, 2008.

²¹ 'New Economics Foundation calls for Khan's Cars as mutually owned alternative to Uber'. NEF Press Release, 22 September 2017. <http://neweconomics.org/2017/09/new-economics-foundation-calls-khans-cars-mutually-owned-alternative-uber/>