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# Meritocracy, Elitism and Inequality

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## Abstract

The appeal of meritocracy is plain to see, because it appears to promote equality of opportunity. However, in this paper we argue that meritocracy is also a deeply elitist project. Firstly, we place Michael Young in context to show how his critique of meritocracy should be understood as a socialist vision to ameliorate class divides. Secondly, we show how economic inequality in the UK has not generated systematic resistance: in fact, inequality and belief in meritocracy have gone hand in hand. Thirdly, we argue that people see their own lives as meritocratic rather than ascribed, and that such values are deeply embedded in popular life. We offer two explanations for how such views have come about, and show how they have helped construct a more unequal society.

**Keywords:** meritocracy, Michael Young, inequality, popular beliefs, trends, elites

## Introduction

THE TERM meritocracy was popularised by Michael Young's *The Rise of Meritocracy*, and has become an utterly mundane feature of the political landscape.<sup>1</sup> Taken up by powerful currents urging for enhanced educational provision, a more skilled workforce, and the value of human capital, it also became an iconic mantra with the rise of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination agendas, in which recruitment purely on the virtue of 'merit' became *de rigueur*. Arguing against the principles of meritocracy appeared to hark back to an 'old boys club' of elite networks and oligarchic power. It is not incidental that, as Figure 1 shows, the growing prominence of the term meritocracy in English language books took place at the very same time that references to plutocracy declined. Meritocracy thus pitted the brave new world of talent, individual reward, and dynamism, against the hidebound world of the crony establishment.

This emphasis on meritocracy was not rosy eyed: in its wake it generated a proliferation of research, emphasising how meritocratic principles were not in fact being applied. Much of this research was driven by a concern to open up opportunities, increase social mobility and thereby promote equality of

opportunity in line with the egalitarian liberal political agenda which held sway from the early 1970s. This agenda united social scientists, who emphasised the need to tackle ongoing class structural barriers to social mobility, alongside equal opportunity campaigners, especially around questions of race and gender, and the numerous campaigners for educational expansion and enhancement.

The appeal of this meritocratic agenda is plain to see. However, in this paper we argue that meritocracy is also a deeply elitist project. As has increasingly been demonstrated by social science research, income and wealth inequality has increased at the very same time that meritocracy has been embraced as a guiding political principle. Beliefs in meritocracy, we show, actually go hand in hand with greater economic inequality. This is not just a coincidental association: meritocratic beliefs are not opposed to inequality—only to discrimination, which prevents people with the right 'merits' from reaping rewards. Accordingly, our paper does four things: firstly, we place Michael Young's thinking in context, to show how his belief in meritocracy was associated with a certain kind of socialist vision which sought to ameliorate existing class divides, and that his critique of meritocracy can only be understood in terms of his socialist perspective. Secondly, we trace the remarkable co-incidence between meritocratic beliefs and economic inequality

\*Both authors contributed equally to this article.

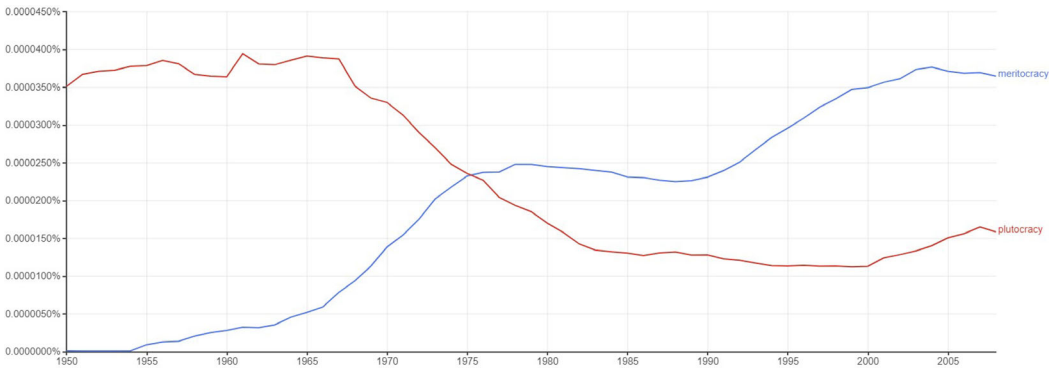


Figure 1: Trend in the words ‘meritocracy’ and ‘plutocracy’ in books published between 1950 and 2000

Source: Google Ngram [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

in the UK—a finding which endorses the widely held view that structural inequality has not generated systematic resistance. Thirdly, we make the stronger claim that people see their own lives predominantly as meritocratic rather than ascribed, and hence that there is a deeper embeddedness of such values in popular life. We show how such views can be seen as performative, in that they justify large economic differentials and help to construct a more unequal society.

### Putting Michael Young in context

Meritocracy is a dystopia, not a utopia. This is hardly an original observation—indeed it was precisely the way that Michael Young introduced the topic in 1958, and something he reminded us of half a century later:

I could see that equality of opportunity ... was itself going to produce greater inequality and was one of the basic contradictions of the whole society—all modern societies—because they all believe in equality to some extent. I mean, all advanced ones, they all have some adherence to democracy; one man, one woman, one vote, et cetera, and they all believe in equality of opportunity, which legitimises inequality in a way that wasn't possible before the idea of equality of opportunity as having a great practical relevance to education was very thought out. So I do think of it as a very deep-lying contradiction in society.<sup>2</sup>

It is often forgotten that his book was an ironic, at times bitter, account of the

inequalities which an insistence on merit—elicited by testing regimes—would entail. Young wrote as a socialist, and as someone who had written extensively about working class life in London: *Family and Kinship* became an iconic—if highly contested—account of the positive values of working class sociability and support networks which he found in Bethnal Green.<sup>3</sup> In *Family and Kinship*, Young and Willmott argued that the British authorities had failed to recognize working-class people's powerful attachment to place, and to the dense networks of kinship and neighbourliness built up over preceding generations, which they saw as the building blocks for a more mutualistic socialism'. Historian Jon Lawrence, who has re-analysed Young's fieldwork, goes on to argue that his interpretation of his Bethnal Green interviews was marked by romanticism and in fact overstates the degree of neighbourly collectiveness revealed.<sup>4</sup> But for our purposes, it is Young's vision that we focus on.

Young's scepticism about the value of meritocracy was part of a very significant intellectual movement which insisted on the positive values and virtues of working class life—other notable examples from the same period being T. H. Marshall's *Citizenship and Social Class* (1950), Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (1957), Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (1961). Young was also in dialogue with more conservative figures such as the American sociologist Edward Shils—expatriated in

London and Oxford—who argued that a modernised British aristocracy such as he detected in postwar Britain offered the best prospects for social cohesion.<sup>5</sup>

Within this context, Young’s project can be seen as one of socialism based on equalising national society—improving the vulnerability of those who were most in need by enhancing welfare provision, to be funded by those who were most able to afford to pay higher taxation. It was in the 1950s that the highest marginal rates of taxation were exacted in Britain. As Piketty and his associates have shown, British rates of taxation of top earners—which reached a rate of 97 per cent between 1941 and 1953—were also very high in international comparison. Between 1975 and 1979, they were higher than those in US, France and Germany.<sup>6</sup> It was entirely in keeping with the sociological thinking of Shils and Young that these high rates of tax could be charged, since the British upper classes were inherently rooted in Britain. Because of their traditional ties and responsibilities, they should therefore be expected to contribute disproportionately to the nation.

We are making these points to emphasise that Young’s critique of meritocracy cannot be read as a simplistic conservative tract: it was based on a specific kind of patrician socialism that was widely shared amongst the intellectual left of the time. We do not wish to defend this perspective, which in

key respects accepted a liberal one-nation script in which ‘gentlemen were born to rule’, that workers should be treated with dignity and respect, and which assumed conventional gender roles—and as Young’s later work indicated, might see immigrants as a threat to the national social fabric.<sup>7</sup> However, although Young’s own elitism is apparent, this does not detract from his astute analysis of the thoroughgoing elitism which meritocracy entails. The problem is twofold. Firstly, the conception that people can be arrayed according to their ‘merit’ can itself only be determined by a testing apparatus which will inherently require an elite infrastructure to determine it (for, as Marx put it, ‘who will educate the educators?’). Secondly, awarding unequal incomes according to such ‘merit’ both reflects and performs an economic logic in which income inequality is not deemed to be a social or political issue, but a matter of market forces and the exercise of human capital and talent.

### Meritocratic trends in Britain

Looking back at meritocracy, sixty years after Young talked about it, there appears to be a clear correlation between the strengthening of meritocratic beliefs (Figure 2) and the rise of income inequality itself (Figure 3). There is indeed an almost perfect correlation between these measures.

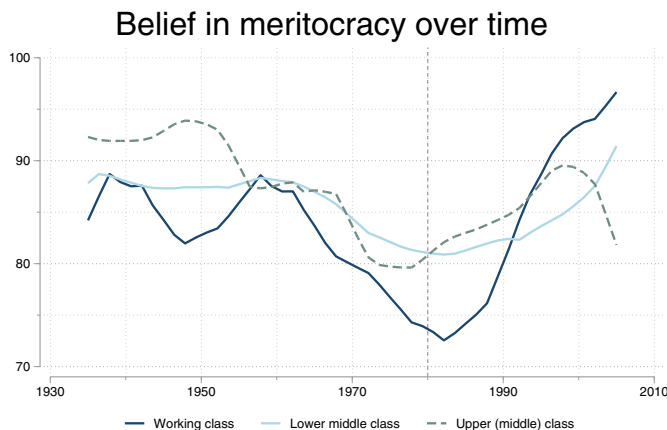


Figure 2: Britons’ belief in meritocracy by social class, 1930–2010<sup>9</sup>

Note: The vertical axis gives the approximate percentage of people who think that societal success is determined by hard work. The horizontal axis gives the year in which respondents reached adulthood. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Figure 3: Income inequality in the United Kingdom, 1937–2012<sup>11</sup>

Note. The vertical axis gives the Gini coefficient of income inequality combined from various sources. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

We have examined the trend in responses to attitudinal questions over an eighty-year period—focussing on people’s responses to the statement that ‘success is determined by hard work’. Data come from the International Social Survey programme, a widely used source for scholars of public opinion. Ours is only one way of measuring meritocratic beliefs as it does not address ‘talent’, but this makes it a preferable measure because it offers the most ‘democratic’ rendering of meritocracy, since anyone can work hard (rather than a potentially more elitist reading in which certain people have more ‘talent’). Figure 2 breaks down responses by social class: it shows that there has always been high support for such a view, with well over two-thirds of all social classes believing this, but that this reached a low point of 73 per cent for the working class, and 83–84 per cent for the two middle classes among respondents who reached adulthood in the 1980s. Remarkably, this is the point when, as Atkinson and Jenkins’ calculations reveal, income inequality reached its lowest ever level in the UK (Figure 3).<sup>8</sup> Since 1980, as income inequality has increased—very markedly in the 1980s—the belief that success is determined by hard work has also increased to the point that it is nearly universal amongst the working class.

Figure 2 suggests, therefore, that most British people have a different understanding of

the problem of meritocracy than do many social scientists and politicians. As emphasised above, the common refrain of the latter group is that meritocracy is held back by various constraints, and that policy interventions are needed to truly bring about meritocracy, whereas in fact most Britons, and certainly those in the working class, think that hard work does count. Britons are in no way unique; research shows that this view is held by at least two-thirds of citizens in every country across the West and that as income inequality rises, citizens are growing *more* convinced of the meritocratic nature of success.<sup>10</sup>

This argument is underscored by numerous qualitative and case studies. Twenty years ago Savage discussed what he called the ‘paradox of class’—that as class inequality deepens, so apparent class consciousness declines.<sup>12</sup> There is no doubting the extent to which class inequalities in political alignment in Britain, which used to be intense, have declined.<sup>13</sup> One issue which emerges from qualitative research is the view, following the initial lead of Sennett and Cobb, that this reflects the way that individuals internalise their own fates—seeing their life chances not as the product of structural forces but as due to their own endeavours and failings.<sup>14</sup> Savage called this process the ‘individualisation of class’, in which people came to see class identities not in collective

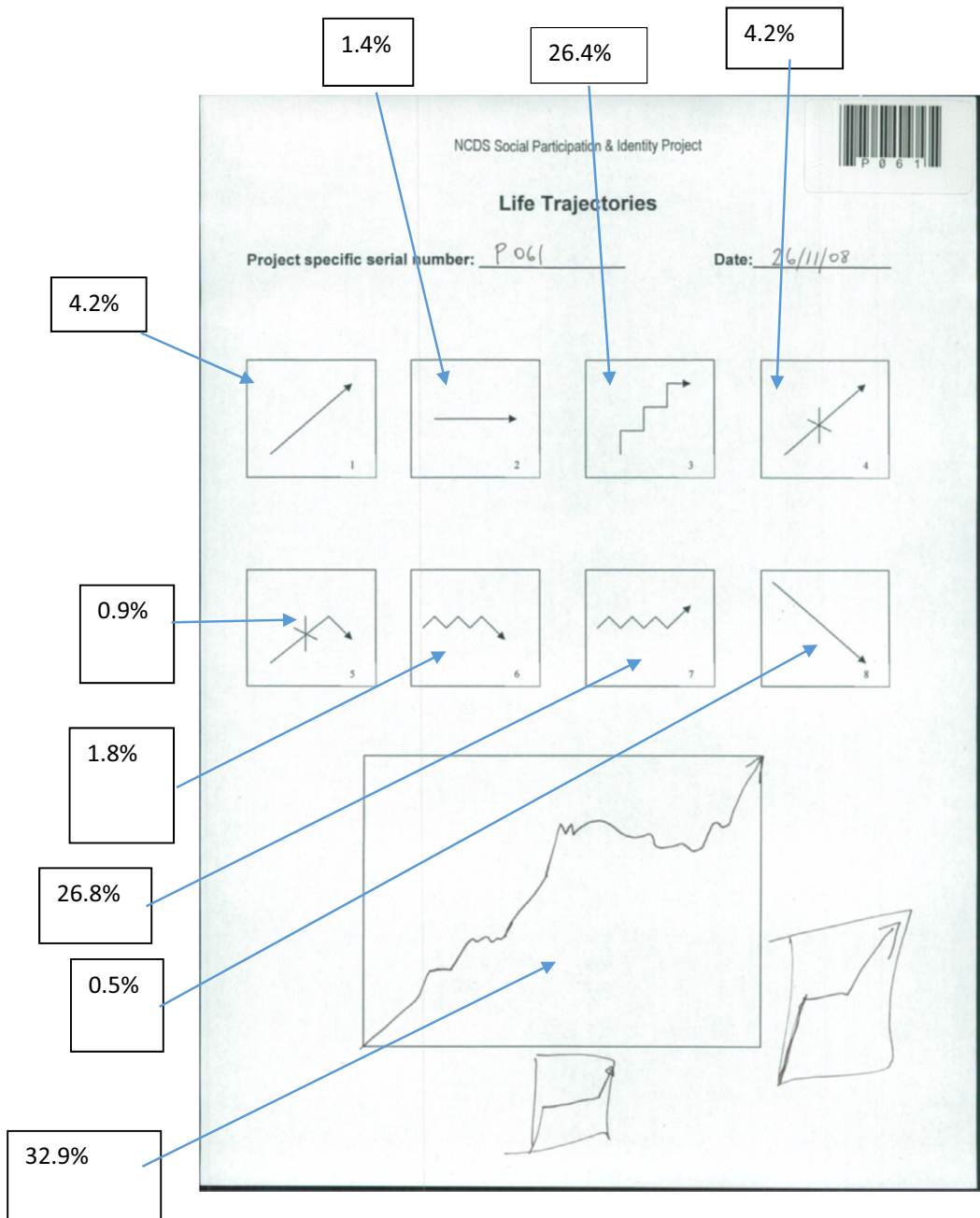


Figure 4: Visualisations of life trajectory from qualitative interviewees of 1958 birth cohort<sup>17</sup> [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

class conscious terms, but through the particular lens through which they viewed their own lives.<sup>15</sup> This argument is consistent with the now widely held view that a ‘new politics of class’ is emerging in which the

working class and underprivileged groups do not actively mobilise through political participation, but drop out and become disengaged. We can consider the contemporary power and pertinence of this perspective by

considering how people visualise their life histories.

## Meritocracy in everyday life

Meritocratic beliefs are not simply to be understood as responses to attitudinal surveys, but are also embedded in people's own thinking about their lives. This is evident from qualitative data from the National Child Development Study (NCDS) which was carried out between 11 August 2008 and 18 May 2009, when respondents were aged fifty in the vast majority of cases. Prior to 2008, qualitative methods had only rarely been applied to cohort members, and this neglect proved the inspiration for a qualitative ESRC-funded Social Participation study which sought to conduct detailed qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of the NCDS. The analysis we draw on here focusses on a sub-sample of 220 of the 2008–9 respondents. All of the selected sub-sample had taken part in the main quantitative study, with the qualitative interviews taking place within six months of an individual's main age fifty interview. The interviews were conducted by a team of researchers led by Jane Elliott at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies based at the Institute of Education, with Andrew Miles, Samantha Parsons and Mike Savage in the research team.

As part of these qualitative interviews, respondents were asked: 'if you had to depict your life up to now by means of a diagram, which of these would you choose. If none of these apply, can you draw a more representative pattern in the blank box?' Figure 4 indicates the life diagrams which respondents could choose from and include the unusually complicated picture that participant sixty-one chose to draw for herself (alongside two other diagrams she toyed with). The figure details the percentage of the 220 participants who chose various of the life diagrams. Although the exercise does not specifically ask about social mobility or meritocracy, we can get a strong sense of how people see their own life trajectories.<sup>16</sup> In what follows we discuss the main patterns revealed by participants' pick of one of eight diagrams they could choose from (67.1 per cent of participants) or their own drawings (32.9 per cent).

The most notable finding is people's emphasis that they have had an upward life trajectory, and also their reluctance to present their lives in terms of straight lines. Less than 1 per cent of participants chose a line pointing downward as best describing their life trajectory (slide 8). Only 11 per cent of the sample pick any of the straight line options, and the joint most popular of these, slide 4, has a cross in its middle. By contrast, there is a strong tendency towards jagged, upwardly pointed life diagrams, echoing the meritocratic narrative of bridged barriers and hardships overcome. Over half of participants pick one of the two dominant visual stories: the upward staircase (slide 3; picked by 26.4 per cent of interviewees) and the zig zag arrow ending by pointing upwards (slide 7; 26.8 per cent). These both represent lives in terms of jags, with a number of punctuated turning points.

There are no strong gender or social class differences in the choice of these diagrams. Men and professionals/managers tend slightly to prefer slide 3 rather than slide 7, compared to women and other social classes, but not to a very marked extent.

As other analyses from the same survey show, these visualisations indicate that people see their own lives as embodying actions and events which have taken place to or by themselves and which have had consequences. These individualised narratives are not opposed to inequality, and in fact can be deployed to rationalise people's different situations in life. There is a sense here, therefore, that people have agency over their own lives and that people's own actions affect their fortunes: in this respect they are symptomatic of an internalised meritocratic logic, rather than representations of structural forces impinging on people's lives. This is true even for those who are amongst the most precarious and insecure, but who interpret their own lives in terms of the specific misfortunes which have befallen them.

## Conclusions

In this paper we have argued against the conventional 'left' position of embracing meritocracy as an ideal, and then bemoaning the fact that in reality meritocratic principles are not fully applied. Such a framing

embraces the project of trying to push meritocracy further, by unravelling those remaining corners where meritocracy is kept at bay by nefarious elite forces. We do not doubt for one minute that such elitist forces remain powerful, and indeed they have recently been exposed by Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison in their compelling account of *The Class Ceiling* (2019). Nonetheless, an unalloyed meritocracy will not tackle inequality. We see meritocracy itself as the problem which needs tackling, for the presumption that mobility should be determined by 'merit', 'talent' and 'hard work' gives no traction to criticise huge and escalating economic inequalities—indeed, it can justify and legitimate them. Here, we return to the more collectivist socialist vision of Young and his contemporaries and emphasise the need to integrate concerns about equality of opportunity with a concern for equality of outcomes.

In making this argument, we are not simply speculating, but are drawing on our sustained (quantitative) public opinion data and our (qualitative) life trajectory visualisations. Here, we have shown how the power of the meritocratic narrative, produced and reproduced by politicians, moviemakers, as well as through ordinary people's stories about their lives, is as strong as it ever was. People may have taken notice of news reporting on inequality and heard scholars, activists, and politicians express their concerns. Those messages have, however, failed to resonate with how people themselves see their lives and make sense of society. Paradoxically, then, belief in meritocracy in Britain seems to be unabated while British society has grown increasingly unequal. This fact hints that there is something about unequal societies that keeps citizens from seeing the full extent of inequality and reinforces their meritocratic worldview.

We have already touched on part of what may explain this paradox: as inequalities deepen, so does class consciousness.<sup>18</sup> The increased social distance between rich and poor in unequal societies has a second implication: it means citizens come to see the world through the prism of their own socio-economic circles. As people surround themselves with friends, partners and colleagues with a similar level of education and social class background, they lose sight of the lives

lived under circumstances different from their own. They normalise the advantages or disadvantages they share with those around them. Consequently, citizens of more unequal societies underestimate the extent of economic inequalities and underappreciate the non-meritocratic, structural, forces that produce, promote, and perpetuate the structural barriers between rich and poor.<sup>19</sup> Elites fail to feel the following wind of privilege, and those born into disadvantage are convinced they have themselves to blame for their inability to overcome the sizeable barriers to social mobility.

Absent serious scrutiny of the elitist foundations of meritocratic ideals and meritocratic policy practice, the pursuit of meritocracy in Britain pulls ever more people into a rat race; it inevitably entails blaming the victims of structural inequalities; and it will further erode social solidarity as equality and need are abandoned in the search to reward 'merit' in all realms of life.

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