The Moral Economy of Meritocracy

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Michael Young, in his new introduction to The Rise of the Meritocracy (1994 [1958]), that work upon which much of his reputation rests, asserts with great clarity the nature of his position. “The argument of the book is that if the soil creates castes, the machine manufactures classes—classes to which people can be assigned by their achievement rather than ascribed by their birth.” His is the quintessential work on the great schism in advanced social systems: the gulf between achievement by individuals and assignment of status by rulers. That Young was unable to resolve this difference speaks to the intellectual malaise of those intent upon reforming the world but who are not quite certain how to lead the ubiquitous masses into that oft-promised world.

In my own experience, knowledge of the personal history of a scholar rarely explains his or her public contribution. Indeed, the personal and the professional are often at odds with each other. But with the case of Young his biography does permit us to understand the ambiguities of the theory with which he is most closely identified, the idea of meritocracy.

In youth, in the mid-1940s, he authored “Let Us Face the Future” that helped bring Clement Atlee’s reform-oriented Labour government to power in Great Britain. In his later years, in the mid-1990s, he was knighted Lord Dartington, doubtless commemorating his time at Dartington Hall where he absorbed Rousseau’s credo that all children are born gifted. He was a confirmed non-believer and became involved in the Family Covenant Association to promote a secular form of baptism. He was a dedicated Fabian Socialist and friend to the downtrodden, as made plain in his brilliant ethnography, co-authored with Peter Willmott, Family and Kinship in East London (1957), who began a School for Social Entrepreneurs. His work made plain that formal education was the foundation of the meritocracy, yet he argued the case for students leaving schools at any time after their primary learning to work at tasks defined as socially useful. Little wonder, then, that The Rise of the Meritocracy should continue to evoke such contradictory and often critical responses.

The thesis of my remarks is that the ambiguous status of the concept of meritocracy and its author resides in the rise and fall of a socialist Britain; or perhaps more accurately stated as the inability of twentieth-century “hard labour” to eradicate nineteenth-century soft capi-
talism. The ambiguous legacy of Young is a direct consequence of a brilliant social ethnographer who could not let go of a worn-out doctrine of social engineering. It merits direct citation: “The collection arose because of the change of directorship here [Institute of Community Studies], and a feeling among fellows that it might be a good time to take stock of what was achieved under the old regime.” The strongest evidence for this is that the Institute of Community Studies under the lengthy stewardship of Young never really used meritocracy as a research idea. The idea of meritocracy was often used by different groups of reformers, but Young himself was unable to demonstrate that the concept so strongly attached to his person was of social scientific relevance or value, something which could not be developed into something valuable for contemporary Britain.

Why, then, should it be the case that Young’s Institute never employed meritocracy as a research concept. My aim here is to explain the critical undercurrent of Young’s legacy—namely, that the very notion of merit as a source of advancement undercuts the idea of socialist revolution as an alternative to capitalism. However one addresses this issue, merit opens up vast social change and stratification within the bowels of a free enterprise system, change that in socialist terms could not take place without decimation of the present system as such. It is as if Young is reminding us, albeit with great personal pain, that the Fabians turned out to be the realists, whereas the Marxians turned out to be the utopians.

The notion of merit is after all a measuring rod at the educational level and a way of life at the ethical level. It is intrinsically conservative in its presumptions as to policy options within existing British society in particular and Western capitalism in general. This view of stratification, set forth by a self-confessed radical and opponent of the establishment did not go unnoticed by critics of the concept. For that matter, Young himself sought, not without desperation, to portray the idea of meritocracy as fanning the flames of revolution—not as a function of oppression and exploitation but as a consequence of unmet expectations and unrelieved pressure for further upward mobility.

I want to make explicit those elements in the concept of merit that its progenitors prefer to leave implicit: its propensity to create a schism, a rift, within the essential premises of socialism as a revolutionary option to gradualist improvements based on pedagogic advancement. Young repeatedly made his contempt for old-fashioned socialism plain. He saw its oratorical flourishes as resting on little more than the quicksand of factory labor and mining militancy. That the work of Young and his associates (to their own amazement it would appear) caught on as a post-World War II phenomenon did not elicit the usual happy response from the discoverer of a new idea, but the conflicted reaction of a confirmed radical in search of new ways to maintain a revolutionary posture in a volatile class environment that had outlived its utilitarian or moral outposts.

Michael Young’s work is far more complex and sophisticated than its title or its use by others would indicate. His thinking is at one and the same time a bundle of estimates, observations and values. In my opinion, there is a core set of premises in The Rise of the Meritocracy, and I will focus on these. There is so much confusion about the notion of meritocracy as such, concerns that Young himself expressed in his new introduction to his classic text, that before addressing the accuracies or inaccuracies of his forecasts, it might serve as a useful purpose to state simply and clearly what the text is actually about.

Before doing so, let me say that the
book is written with a light-hearted sense of humor. Even though at times it borders on the cynical, it is worthy of emulation by other social scientists. The text is anything but somber. Young understands human foibles, frailties, and foolishness, and his book gives expression to all of these. He knows that education is not the same as intelligence, and intelligence is not the same as creativity. Far more than the huge number of commentaries on the subject that followed, Michael Young’s book awakens us to the potential for charm and wit in looking at the human condition.

First, he asserts that the modern educational system brought about a huge shift from traditional forms of estimating merit, social class background being foremost, to an approach to employment based on schooling.

Second, he notes that this shift did not represent a shift from ignorance to intelligence in the work place or in the creative processes, but it did sort out those with educational backgrounds from those with raw physical skills.

Third, the explosion of educational plants, aided and abetted by world wars and social demands, put an end to traditional forms of seniority as a mechanism of judgment of worth. This was replaced by educational attainment.

Fourth, the rise of this “meritocracy” is not the same as an outburst in creative growth. Indeed, Young endlessly and pitilessly inveighs against the “stupid” and the difficulties of mass-education reform in helping it separate intelligence from ignorance.

Fifth, Tories and socialists alike had been caught flatfooted by this shift from seniority to education in establishing the ground rules of a new work force, and to a society based on egalitarian modes of thought.

Sixth, advancement through education—often simply identified as merit with misgivings by Young—knocks the props out from under both the pretenses of the aristocratic elements (and their doctrines of deserved privilege) and those of the socialistic elements (and their own utterly confusing doctrines of hard labor as somehow superior to modernity as such).

Seventh, although traditional class systems and alignments are dead, little more than eccentrics at the top and rabble at the bottom, protest does not necessarily cease. Expectations rise exponentially among the educated classes, which now constitute a majority. With this come new sources of unrest and social change.

These are Young’s concepts, put forth with a minimum of embellishment or apologetics. Sociological examination’s role with respect to the theory of meritocracy is to fix a place in the intellectual heavens for this concept in a new century—and away from the battles fought so long and gallantly by its inventor.

Arguably the most serious problem with the concept of meritocracy is its failure to distinguish merit from education or for that matter from cultural production as such. What was actually being advanced is little more than the outcome of Max Weber’s notion of the bureaucratic-administrative apparatus—one that requires educated people rather than intelligent people, rule makers rather than rule breakers. Intellectual achievement is quite different from administrative achievement. That both of these often reside in a place called the university only blurs these differences. But it also
creates serious crimp in the argument that the latter half of the twentieth century is somehow defined primarily (if not exclusively) by merit.

A parallel, and one might argue no less serious concern, is the increase rather than decrease in inequality in the advanced nations. While Young was careful to distinguish merit from equity, it is certainly the case that he did not envisage a situation in which (as in the United States) in the years between 1979 and 2000 real income of households in the lowest fifth, or the bottom 20 percent of earners, grew by 6.4 percent, while that of households in the top fifth grew by 70 percent. Indeed, the family income of the top one percent grew by 184 percent. In 1979 the average income of the top one percent was 133 times that of the bottom 20 percent; by 2000 that income of the top one percent had risen to 189 times that of the bottom fifth. But the significant issue for meritocracy is that this new rise in income inequality comes with a commensurate decline in mobility. What The Economist in a review of “Meritocracy in America” recently called “social sclerosis” (December 29, 2004) is not only a decline in social mobility but also the tenacity of elite controls in education and politics, or the very areas where merit would seem to trump status.

There is little in Young’s work that allows us to understand how merit as such translates into the new class of administrators, bureaucrats, functionaries, and even civil servants. In such societies, merit simply reflects the demands of the State as such, which becomes far more important than civil society; or for that matter, the State and its needs to become central to the economic performance of the workplace. In this scenario, meritocracy is a force that allows for change in the social composition of classes—away from industrial performance in the means of production: to cultural performance in the means of communication. Again, Young has nothing to say about the technological dimension of the very forces he draws our attention to. This weakness was never overcome in Young’s own writings although a number of his followers and successors have made an effort to bridge this gap between economy and technology.

Since the concept of meritocracy is most often invoked in advanced industrial and presumptively democratic societies, a question arises as to the relation of advancement to merit, but also to such issues as justice and equity. A certain overlay of cynicism pervades the work of Young and his followers, so that the cultural or ideological formations of Western Civilization are not only blotted out, but also essentially denied. Given the existence of inequalities, favoritisms, and the like, the idea that merit as such, or the educational system alone, can determine the course of stratification has a certain naïve ring. Indeed, one might well argue that the educational ladder itself is not immune to status and hierarchy. One misses this nuance in the theory of advancement through merit.

A further serious deficiency in the ethical grounds of meritocracy is its virtual absence of discourse on what areas of “merit” are most (or least) rewarded. To speak of advancement through merit does not do justice to vast differences in status, reward, and power that accrue to people depending on their areas of expertise as in engineering or computer science vis-à-vis sociology or English literature. This is not a matter of what is intrinsically better or a more worthy field, but rather what areas of the meritocracy receive stronger reinforcements and for that matter encouragement for the economic order or the political system. While the rise of the meritocracy is across the board, the rewards of this model in the social system do not necessarily follow suit. In short, stratification within fields
of education, no less than the separation of those with education from those without education, becomes a touchstone and the measurement of the concept’s practical utility. And this has still not taken place.

Young and his associates did take account of the revolt against merit through education at the end of his life. Yet the extent to which a “hard core” (perhaps still a majority) still views education as pragmatic and task-oriented at best, rather than a stepping stone to broad economic and status advancement, plays much too small a part in the notion of meritocracy. Questions of value become central once again: the positive value of being plainspoken, rooted in hand-oriented (rather than head-oriented) tasks, and a concern, often inarticulate but plainly visible, that the asking price of entrance into the meritocracy may be too high in terms of matters of familial solidarity, marriage, and love, in short, personal life style as such. These notions are implicit in Young’s personal scale of values, but less so in his intellectual definition of meritocracy.

A good deal of the debate over meritocracy derives less from issues of truth and error than the built-in ambiguity of using merit as an explanation for both the evolution and the malaise of western industrial societies. That said the term does not easily go away. Merit summarizes a good deal of the shift in society from struggles over the means of production to those of the means of education and communication. And in this subtle shift, meritocracy has spent a half century in the shadows only to emerge as a core concept—perhaps less as an explanation of where we have been so much as a policy in the direction as to where we want the social order to go.

When we complete the process of addition and substitution for the notion of meritocracy, it becomes evident that it represents less an empirical description of advanced society than a policy prescription for those societies. In short, granting the weaknesses in meritocracy as history (it is more like a half theory than a full-blown explanation of twentieth-century stratification), one is left with a choice of policies. The essential policy premise of meritocracy is individual choice and bottom-up decision-making in everything from career opportunity to lifestyle. The opponents of merit as the essential criterion must argue for some variation of liberal society as distributive justice, or better yet, a top-down reorganization of society that creates a leveling tendency, a pari-mutuel machine whereby all horses at least start the race at the same starting gate and with the same weight, even if they may yet finish at different posts depending on personal qualities and aptitudes.

In this sense, what Young and his associates presented to British, and indeed to Western societies, is the running sore within liberalism of social democracy as a third stream way of life in places extending from Great Britain to Sweden. For neoliberalism promises both freedom from statist tyranny, and at the same time, social regulation of the economy with the direct participation of the State. A sound recent illustration of this is Stein Ringen’s review-essay entitled “Poverty’s History” (The Times Literary Supplement, June 24, 2005). “If there is a small corner of the world in which poverty has been eradicated it is Scandinavia,” he writes. “The lesson there is that development is necessary but that so also are forceful social policies for redistribution.” In this application of Young’s faith in top-down solutions to social issues, the argument rests at first, inadvertently but nonetheless emphatically, on the idea of the Welfare State as the great invention in the world of action. It becomes the system best capable of overcoming the Satanic hold of merit as the ultimate test of economic worth. Burning the intellectual candle at
both ends leads Young into a practical cul-de-sac: a world in which merit defines an economic system seen to be deficient as a moral philosophy.

There is a flinty, albeit contradictory, side to Young that proved irritating to his friends and foes alike. He argues that meritocracy is a fact of post-modern and post welfare society—not a happy fact, not a free trip to paradise served up by the State, but a fact hard to ignore. It is possible those expectancies will outrun realities, and that the rising tide of advancement through educational achievement will prove its own downfall. But for the moment at least, the alternatives—the notion of heavily managed policies emanating from the State apparatus—simply do not work, and indeed breed tremendous resentment. This is so to the point that even promulgators of the past, such as the Labour Party, have been compelled to abandon such heavy-handed thinking because it thwarts innovation and frustrates individual decisions. This appreciation and acknowledgment of the empirical situation are what elevated Young and his associates at the Institute of Community Studies from the dogmatisms of party ideologists and the interests of bourgeoisie trade unionists.

It is intriguing to note that what Young accepted with reluctance, Daniel Bell asserts in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976), with a certain ironic pleasure. Meritocracy is a fair, perhaps only, way open at the moment to produce a productive and a cultivated society. The institutions of the university, commerce, and government each benefit from a system in which the most competent rise and expand political leadership and economic productivity based on universalistic premises that, while imperfect and often biased, at least move beyond traditions vested in hoary antiquity or downright ruthless authority. As with the military, the merit system affords prospects for introducing equities of class, race, and gender, unknown in the past. Further, these bootstrap efforts do not require a leveling off at the top or an incursion by the political system on the rights of individuals to move ahead.

It might well be correct that the claims about meritocracy, and even more, ambitions for it in the policy realm, are less than perfect and filled with certain self-contradictory elements as well as the aforementioned partial sort of theorizing that was characteristic of Young. But the alternatives appear far more mired in self-contradiction, and worse, carry the stigma of authoritarianism as a backdrop for the imposition of liberalism as an ideology and egalitarianism as a means to recreating the myth of the classless society. And after a century that witnessed fascism, nazism, communism, and associated themes and variations in totalitarian regimes and ideologies, one has every right to claim that the merit system, however reluctantly put forth at one end, and however repelled at the other, is arguably the best chance we have for a twenty-first century in which the sporting ideal of the best and the brightest trump what Young fiercely called the stupid and the coarse—namely free and democratic societies defined by free choices made by free peoples.