

# What is the Relation of Inequality and the Liberal Script?

Florian Waldow

*The notion of “equality” constitutes a central plank of all versions of the liberal script (albeit in different forms and interpretations). Therefore, the existence and reproduction of social inequality in liberal societies needs to be legitimated. The liberal script contains clear instructions for how this should be achieved, centring on the idea of allocating life chances on the basis of individual “merit” under the conditions of “equality of opportunity”. Education plays a crucial role here, since merit is often socially operationalised as the successful acquisition of educational certificates.*



## 1 EDUCATION: ENACTING “MERITOCRACY” AND “EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY” WHILE REPRODUCING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

The notion of “equality” constitutes a central plank of all versions of the liberal script, epitomised by the motto of the French Revolution (“*liberté, égalité, fraternité*”) and the first lines of the US Declaration of Independence (“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”). However, there is considerable disagreement between different versions of the liberal script about what equality should mean, what it should apply to and how equality should actually be implemented. The equality norm can be applied to a wide variety of areas, from equal participation in political, social, or economic life, to demands for “equality of opportunity” in the allocation of life chances (see below), to demands for material redistribution, for example through the welfare state.

Due to the centrality of the demand for equality in the liberal script, the existence and reproduction of social inequality in liberal societies needs to be legitimated. The liberal script contains clear instructions for how social

inequality within societies is supposed to be produced and legitimated: life chances should be allocated according to individual “merit” rather than ascribed characteristics such as wealth, race, or gender, and every member of society should have equal access to life chances (equality of opportunity). The resulting normative order is called “meritocracy” (Goldthorpe 2003; Yair 2007). Meritocracy and equality of opportunity can be seen as central “myths” of liberal societies (Waldow 2014b), myths being used here in the sense of “institutionalized rules” or “prescriptions” (Meyer/Rowan 1977: 343–344) that constitute “symbolic accounts that tell us who we are” (Ramirez 2012: 7).

The field of education is central for the functioning of meritocratic allocation, since in liberal societies educational certificates<sup>1</sup> – such as university degrees – are the main “currency” (Deutsch 1979) that can be converted into life chances. By extension, educational certificates are an important legitimation of social inequality. As a result, education is one of the central arenas where the myths of meritocracy and equality of opportunity are enacted in liberal societies. By enacting their adherence to meritocracy and equality of opportunity, education systems bolster up their legitimacy by demonstrating that their “formal structure” is in accordance with central myths structuring the education system’s environment (Meyer/Rowan 1977).

However, at the same time as this enactment is going on, education (re-) produces and stabilises social inequality on a massive scale, as has been demonstrated time and again by sociologists and social psychologists of education: education is “an egalitarian institution that stages an unfair competition” (Croizet et al. 2019: 143). The problem of (non-)meritocratic selection is particularly salient regarding selection for highly prestigious and highly sought-after educational institutions, such as elite schools and universities, since these provide access to elite positions (Waldow 2014b: 48). The “Opportunity Insights” project led by the economist Raj Chetty at Harvard University has amassed an impressive dataset documenting how institutions of higher education, the reproduction of social inequality and material inequality are connected and interact in the United States

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<sup>1</sup> Educational certificates tend to be the end product of a complex interplay of decisions by teachers, pupils, and parents, involving multiple processes of assessment and the decisions following from this, such as assigning pupils to certain school types, programmes, “tracks” or “streams”. Self-selection is a very important part of these processes (Kariya/Rosenbaum 1987). How the processes whereby education systems assign merit that can be converted into life chances are designed differs widely in different education systems; there are “different worlds of meritocracy” (Waldow 2014a).

(Opportunity Insights 2023). Chetty (2019) has calculated that the probability of attending Harvard University is 103 times higher for children coming from families from the top 1% of the US income distribution compared to that for children coming from the bottom 20%. This glaring discrepancy in opportunity for children from different social backgrounds highlights a basic tension inherent in the liberal script: the tension between the protection of (inheritable) private property on the one hand and the myths of meritocracy and equality of opportunity on the other.

Neoinstitutionalist organisational sociology would predict that such a glaringly obvious decoupling of the education system's "formal structure" and the way it actually works should lead to a massive loss of legitimacy of the educational system and, in extension, the political system it serves (Brunsson 1989; Meyer/Rowan 1977). While there *is* a fair amount of criticism of the educational system as not living up to the standards it purports to uphold, as a rule meritocracy with educational certificates as main "currency" for allocating life chances is still considered very legitimate, in many places increasingly so (Hadjar 2008; Mijs 2018, 2019). In fact, arguably meritocracy as a *legitimizing ideology* is stronger than ever before (Waldow 2014b).

Why, then, isn't there more fundamental criticism of the liberal prescription for allocating and legitimating inequality? Under which conditions do contestations arise? Under which conditions might the system break down entirely?

## 2 EDUCATION AND THE STABILISATION OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

Arguably, part of the answer to these questions lies in how the educational field operates and in what happens when social problems are educationalized. According to David Labaree (2008), educationalizing social problems is a common strategy for dealing with difficult social problems that for their solution would require political action unpopular with at least part of the polity (e.g. the redistribution of wealth in order to alleviate material inequality). Educationalizing the problem, i.e. reframing the problem as a problem that can be *solved* by and through education, appears to deal with the problem while avoiding taking unpopular action, even if this would be necessary to actually *solve* the problem.

Building on Labaree's reasoning (2008), I would like to focus on a couple of traits of education that contribute to education stabilizing liberal orders.

a.) Education **temporalizes** the tension between property and meritocracy which is a constituent of the liberal script. The clash between the equality norm and the existence of massive inequality is defused by, as it were, pulling apart the clashing components temporally. The alleged remedy is systematically and structurally postponed and situated in the future. There needs to be at least a theoretical chance to improve one's situation (or that of one's children) in the future. Many of these imagined improvements are again connected to education, e.g. in the shape of further education as a means of improving one's prospects on the job market or reference to equality of opportunity for one's children in the education system.

b.) Education **individualizes** collective social problems and reframes them as problems of the individual. Individual merit as expressed in educational assessment and certificates is to a large part socially determined, by factors such as family background, wealth, etc. (Brühwiler et al. 2017). Exaggerating only slightly, it can therefore be said that education systems convert social privilege into (individualised) merit (Croizet et al. 2019), thereby obscuring the social and structural base of social inequality. Education systems also tend to act as massive cooling-out mechanisms of individual educational ambitions (Clark 1960, 1980; Wiederkehr et al. 2015). Since social ambition in education-based meritocracies is so closely tied to *educational* ambition, the cooling-out of the latter arguably also cools out demands for other forms of tackling inequality, e.g. material redistribution.

### 3 WHEN DO CONTESTATIONS ARISE?

I would like to conclude with some remarks on what follows from the above for contestations of the liberal script. How resilient are the temporalisation and individualisation mechanisms in the face of glaring differences between the "normative self-definition" (Solga 2005) of societies and education systems as meritocratic and the role education actually plays in the reproduction of social inequality?

a.) *Temporalisation*: Temporalisation ceases to function when the hope of a better future, either for oneself or one's children, becomes too remote and unattainable, for instance when the ratio between graduates of a certain type and the jobs available to these graduates becomes too unfavourable. Concerning the importance of hope for future improvement in a meritocratic society, it is instructive to look at Michael Young's satirical novel "The rise of the meritocracy" (1958), in which Young coined the term meritocracy. In this novel, Young (1958) portrays a fictitious society in which a perfect meritocracy has been achieved. With the help of psychometrics, individual merit is determined at an early age, and people are guided to appropriate places in society accordingly. Through intermarriage among those with and without merit, respectively, two castes emerge, those with and those without merit.<sup>2</sup> For the latter group (including their children), there is no chance of ever advancing; they have been scientifically proven to be without merit. It is in this situation, i.e. when there is no hope for advancement in the future, that there is a revolt of those without merit, overturning the perfect meritocracy (and killing the narrator in the process).

Michael Sandel (2020) makes a similar argument when he interprets the current right-wing populist backlash in the United States as at least partly a backlash against elites legitimated by meritocracy (e.g. graduates of prestigious universities) by those who feel that they no longer have a chance to access these elites.

b.) *Individualisation*: In liberal societies, there tends to be an intensive debate centring on the relationship of education and social inequality, in terms of the conceptual framework of SCRIPTS constituting mostly "internal" contestations. Many contestations highlight how being part of a certain disadvantaged social group affects success in the education system. In different contexts, the debate focuses on different aspects; what is considered a relevant disadvantaged group differs widely. In the US, issues connected to "race" tend to be the main focus of the debate (cf. e.g. the heated debate around "affirmative action"), while "class" tends to be less of an issue. In contrast, in Germany, family

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing of Young's book, intelligence was seen to be almost exclusively hereditary. Therefore, through interbreeding among intelligent persons on the one hand and the "non-intelligent" on the other, with time possessing or not possessing merit becomes a genetic trait in the two populations.

background and migration status tend to be major foci of the debate, while the fact that e.g. East Germans are massively underrepresented in elite positions (see Mau 2019) tends to be less highlighted in the debate.

Debates around education and social inequality and, in connection, contestations of the liberal script can crystallise and intensify in relation with certain key events such as the US Supreme Court's controversial decision to ban affirmative action in university admission in July 2023 or the OECD's PISA study highlighting how tightly social background and success in the school system are correlated in Germany (Artelt et al. 2001; Tillmann et al. 2008).

In conclusion, I would like to mention two points that make it not very likely that the liberal prescription for producing, maintaining, and legitimating inequality will be contested fundamentally in the near future.

Firstly, it is notable that political contestations of meritocracy tend to be, in SCRIPTS parlance, internal contestations. Political criticisms of actually existing meritocratic systems rarely amount to demands for the total abolition of meritocracy. Most often, they demand change in how merit is defined, try to push back the possibility of using wealth to “buy” privilege – thereby safeguarding equality of opportunity, etc., but do not call into question the principle of allocating differing life chances according to merit as such.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, there is ample evidence from different contexts that “people who suffer the most from a given state of affairs are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject, or change it” (Jost et al. 2003: 14). Paradoxically, the belief in meritocracy often seems to be strongest among those who benefit least from the system (Fend/Specht 1976; Wiederkehr et al. 2015); therefore, they are not likely to contest it.

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<sup>3</sup> Just like critics of schooling rarely advocate the complete abolition of schools as such, but rather call for different – and often more – schooling (see Tenorth 2019).

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