

# What is the Relationship of Meritocracy and the Liberal Script?

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*Meritocracy is a contentious element of the liberal script. Supporters of the principle for distributing positions and goods emphasize its empowering effects for all individuals alike. Yet, critics reveal it being a façade legitimizing the actual reproduction of powerful elites. In Chávez' Venezuela like in other Latin American countries the controversies about the liberal script condense around the question of meritocracy, which is associated with many decades, if not centuries, of undelivered promises and massive inequalities. To avoid any polarization, advocates of the liberal script should reconsider de-facto effects of meritocracy beyond its principled foundations.*



Meritocracy, as the second part of the concept goes, is a form of governing. As a general principle for adjudicating positions and goods, it is a specific structuring principle for modern societies. In this sense, modern meritocracy is different from older forms of merit-based decisions, such as the famous examination system used by the Qin dynasty, which only applied to a tiny section of the (male) population. If we agree, in a Foucauldian vein, that liberalism is a form of modern governance, then the link between the liberal “script” and meritocracy is not only obvious, it is also co-constitutive. If you contest merit as a basis for appreciation or reward in economy, society, politics, and education in the name of birth or ancestral rights, you contest core principles of the liberal “script”. Yet this is not the only form of contestation that meritocracy faces.

When Hugo Chávez was elected President of Venezuela in 1998, one of his main targets within his project of redirecting policies to benefit the poor and the marginalized was the national oil company, *Petróleo de Venezuela*.

Chávez accused the management of the company of working against the interests of the country and only for its own benefit. The employees and highly qualified workers of *Petróleo de Venezuela* answered with a series of strikes that severely affected the national budget. A few years later, in April 2004, protesting employees and technicians gathered again at the plaza in front of the headquarters of *Petróleo de Venezuela*. There, they showed their support for the coup d'état that was taking place at the time, staged by a faction of the Venezuelan military against Chávez. The police violently intervened against the demonstrators. The coup plotters were defeated as well. In a move to commemorate this traumatic event, the plaza was renamed *Plaza de la Meritocracia*. Meritocracy, scorned by Hugo Chávez as *mitocracia* (myth-cracy) had taken centre stage in these dramatic weeks in the country and had become a symbol both for the elitist expert groups and supporters of regime change through a coup d'état (Coronil 2005; Mendoza Potellá 2017).

Certainly, Chávez used the term *meritocracia* as a disparaging term, in contrast to some of his opponents who, until then, had used it in a positive way. He completely dismissed this central principle for structuring liberal societies together with the groups that embodied it. But many Latin American intellectuals, politicians, and even academics who still differentiate between the effects of elite formation and inequality on the one side, and the theoretical or principled premises of meritocracy on the other side, increasingly use this term to direct invectives against the general state of things in these countries. “Meritocracy is a slogan used by the Right in order to legitimate their model of domination”, in the words of Tomás Moulian, a prestigious Chilean political scientist and sociologist (Muñoz/Romero 2018).

Particularly in Latin America, the question of merit and meritocracy has become a highly contentious issue in the past 20 years. For its critics, meritocracy only represents a façade, constructed with the aim of reproducing privileges and legitimizing spurious social differences. For its defenders, on the right wing of the political spectrum, meritocracy as a legitimate principle for distributing positions represents a bulwark against the pretensions of populist or “socialist” movements fighting against democracy. I want to make three short points about meritocracy in one of its privileged sites of enactment, the educational system, always following the supposition that there has not been one single society in the history of mankind built on strictly meritocratic principles.

Firstly, decades of social research have shown that the effects of simple social reproduction are dominant in the shaping of modern societies and their schools. The extremely low numbers of members of high social groups who fail in school systems, shows that at least one mechanism of meritocracy – being sanctioned in the case you do not show any “merit” at all – is practically deactivated. On the other side, massive evidence in educational research, not only since the beginning of PISA and TIMSS, has shown that individual *educational trajectories* are to some significant degree *decoupled from the assessment* of merit. Practices of grading as well as selective decisions by teachers and schools are complex decision-making processes that confound the measurement of achievement with a range of other considerations along gender, racial, and class lines. You do not have to quote scandals, for instance those related to admission to first-class universities in the US, in order to state that the educational system is only a *supposed* site of meritocracy. Already, the normal functioning of educational systems does not follow the meritocratic script. Venezuelan “chavistas” may have invoked this when they tried to portray professionals and technicians as being the product of a fake meritocracy, used as a cover for forms of inherited privileged.

Secondly, one core difficulty of merit-based assessment and the construction of a system based along meritocratic lines lies in the problem of *attributing merit*. Merit is not a substance but the result of a process of assessment and, in this sense, a social relationship. Someone must assess; someone must be assessed. Whether good grades are attributable to individual effort, paid private lessons, corrupt behaviour (opportunities for cheating), or simple chance is impossible to determine, even less so in a mass system like the school system. In this sense, not merit, but the variable availability of specific required knowledge is the object of educational practices purported to ascertain merit. To conclude that someone deserves to be in a special position because his/her knowledge has been positively tested many times (and even these tests are not accurate enough) presupposes the impossible task of clearly attributing merit. When chavistas portrayed their opponents as a meritocracy, they may have pointed at the probable fact that individuals had their positions not only because of intrinsic merit, not even because of their educational certificates, but because of connections, probably one of the most important forms of social reproduction in society.

Thirdly, if the former two points focused on “merit” and the difficulties of identifying it, the last point focuses on the other term, the *kratos*, or rule. Meritocracy is not about merit as such, but it is about ruling through merit. You do not have to be a Foucauldian to see that on top of the difficulties of determining and attributing merit, the question of being ruled and being governed through merit opens a wide avenue for all kind of contestations. In Michael Young’s seminal book on meritocracy, dystopian aspects of a meritocratic society are already fully on display. The illiberal effects of meritocracy must be discussed, and one possibility is also to go back to Foucault to look at his elaborations on resistance to modern rule and governmentality. Of course, Venezuelan chavistas are not Foucauldians, but in their rage against the elites working at *Petróleo de Venezuela*, they may have addressed the idea of no longer being ruled in the same way that was dominant until the end of the 20th century and to take ruling positions into their own hands.

The predicament of meritocracy as an element of the liberal script resides in two different, but related problems. Chávez, but also large swaths of the critical sociology in Latin America, may point at the state of the art of the sociological research in education concerning educational opportunities. Consistently, major studies have identified that educational trajectories are heavily shaped by familial background as well as social and cultural capital, and not in fact by effort, achievement, and performance. In a reflexive turn, this is now an object of public controversy. Recent research has found that young, educated cohorts, while still accepting meritocratic principles, now cast doubt about their functioning in educational systems. They are recipients of decades-long research on the production of inequalities in education (Becker et al. 2022). Doubts about the main elements of meritocratic principles took centre stage in the last report of the UNESCO about the futures of education. There, not competition and merit at individual level, but “cooperation and solidarity”, “knowledge commons”, and a language of togetherness is dominant (UNESCO 2021: 49, 63, 145). Members of the UNESCO commission responsible for this report also present their findings as an alternative to “meritocracy” being seen as individualistic and competition based. Is this a circumstantial problem related to a still imperfect system of meritocracy being increasingly improved? I do not think so. Perfecting meritocracy with the aim of optimizing its results would involve seriously illiberal moments of monitoring, control, and permanent assessment that profoundly contradict the central tenets of

liberal subjectivity and philosophy. It is not by chance that the Chinese educational system with its examination hell is now being complemented by a social scoring that extends the realm of merit assessment well beyond schools and universities.

The critiques against meritocracy articulated in Chávez' Venezuela may not invalidate the core of meritocratic principles as such. It is not even their objective, since these are slogans used in the heat of political struggle. Nonetheless, the widespread critique and politicization of meritocracy as a resistance against a form of being governed in Latin America may not be automatically contrary to the liberal script, but a powerful indication of its undelivered promises after many decades, if not centuries, of purportedly meritocratic dynamics. Moreover, "meritocracy" is the newbuzz word in newer political struggles related to the dawn of mass libertarianism, anti-institutionally tuned subjectivities, and political polarization in the region. An only affirmative and uncritical concept of meritocracy is firmly built into the vocabulary of emergent authoritarianisms, for instance in Bolsonaro's Brazil. Supporters and advocates of the liberal script should reconsider the question of meritocracy beyond its principled foundations. They should see this form of government of the social through the lens of its effects, and not only through the soothing lens of its legitimacy.

This less principled perspective on meritocracy as an element of the liberal script, which also considers its illiberal supporters and effects, may nonetheless have a blind spot in its narrative: Chavistas did ruin *Petróleo de Venezuela*, the company collapsed, even in the context of not so low oil prices on the world market. Venezuela plunged into a phase of rapid and sustained downturn; people starved and suffered. Fully-fledged meritocracy in its more ideological sense may not exist, but the elitist employees and technicians of *Petróleo de Venezuela* still bore some merit, in one way or another, for the fact that their business still worked.

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