

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

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*The meritocratic ideal is a core principle of the liberal script, but also a highly globalized one. While in early liberal discourse, the notion of meritocracy was positively associated with providing opportunities, it is criticized today alongside hyper-competitive individualism. Empirically, the implementation of meritocracy opens opportunities for the individual, but also legitimizes social inequalities. Evaluations of the meritocratic principle are therefore contradictory. A more realistic acknowledgment of extra-individual factors such as luck, personal networks, and systemic failures would be a crucial corrective to the aspirations of meritocracy in liberal societies*



Meritocracy, the notion that social and economic rewards should reflect talent and effort, is closely linked with two core liberal ideals: universalism and progress. In the politics of liberal citizenship, it has been articulated as the right to equal opportunity to counterbalance the inequalities produced by inherited privilege (the lottery of birth) and prescriptive categories such as gender and race. As famously formulated by T. H. Marshall, social rights were developed to mitigate the entrenched social disparities that interfere with the equal distribution of opportunities. Meritocracy's starting point is the democratization of opportunities without necessarily ensuring an egalitarian distribution of moral or material outcomes. On the other hand, the very realization of talent and effort, on which the meritocratic ideal is based, is itself conditioned by the social and economic circumstances of the individual. Already in the late 1950s, as liberal citizenship was being institutionalized in national and international fora, the British sociologist and Labour politician Michael Young, who himself was an architect of British social reforms, argued that meritocracy is bound to

produce entitlement and privilege and reinforce the social hierarchies and disparities it is intended to undermine (Young 1958). A plethora of sociological research lends support to Young's prediction. The achievements of meritocracy have been patchy, to say the least.

Yet, meritocracy is a resilient belief. Cross-national surveys show that the majority of people in various countries believe in the meritocratic creed. Combining survey waves with cohort-level data from the International Social Survey Program, sociologist Jonathan Mijs (2018) found that the percentage of people who believe in meritocracy has increased since the 1980s. In the survey's current wave, at least two-thirds of citizens in all Western countries – and as much as 85 percent in several of them (including some in Eastern Europe) – associated success with meritocratic factors. However, a converging belief in meritocratic principles is not exclusive to the West. We found the same in a representative survey that we conducted among European and East Asian (Chinese and Japanese) higher education students: 80 to 90 percent of the respondents in our sample across countries attributed personal success to talent and hard work. Even though the cultural framing of it may differ depending on the societal context (Heuer et al. 2020), meritocracy is one of the most globalized tenets of the liberal script.

The global triumph of meritocratic beliefs in the post-war liberal world order is linked to the institutionalization and mass expansion of education. Ideals of universalism and progress are firmly embedded in the education system that developed in the post-war period. Even in its most selective form of tertiary education, it promotes universalist conceptions of the individual and society and is widely understood as the engine of societal progress and social mobility (Frank and Meyer 2020). It is this transformative potential assigned to meritocratic education, and its aspirational nature, that sustains meritocracy as a global ethos. In our discussions about meritocracy and its discontents, it is helpful to keep this in mind. Like liberal citizenship, meritocracy is an unfinished and unfinishable project.

With the growing and manifest national and international inequalities that characterize the neoliberal decades, the concept of meritocracy has received fresh criticism. Although there is a growing consensus on meritocracy's failed ambitions, let me raise three points worthy of further consideration.

Firstly, much of the recent commentary on meritocracy conflates it with neoliberal policy and cultural frameworks that promote hyper-competitive individualism. Despite their selective affinity, I find this perspective lacking in nuance. Indeed, with the neoliberal political and cultural turn, meritocracy talk shifted from the equality of opportunity and its social provision to individual desert and performance. The advance of (digital) technologies that facilitated new ways of measuring and quantifying individual effort and performance in ever-expanding life domains gave further purchase to this shift (Fourcade 2021). The quantification of merit in putatively objective terms, including more elaborate testing and rankings of all sorts, reinforces a universalizing logic that locates success and achievement in the agency of the individual and reifies principles of competition. However, meritocratic principles can sit happily with group-based policies, such as affirmative action and gender quota schemes, designed to include underrepresented groups. These have been part of the liberal script of meritocracy in actual practice. Compared to 50 years ago, American colleges are demonstrably more diverse in terms of race and gender. Women, particularly white women, have benefited from quotas across the board. As sociologists documented all too well, these policies have their limitations (see, for example, Warikoo 2016). Unless accompanied by broader concerns for equality and participation and policies that address equity issues in the early stages of social reproduction and education, affirmative action can easily become a pretext for individual deservedness. But let's also not forget that since their inception, affirmative action and quota systems have been tirelessly resisted and are now under serious threat by anti-liberal currents.

Secondly, demonstrated ability, effort, and performance are the basis of meritocracy, and educational credentials are meant to authenticate these qualities. As sociological research has shown over and over, educational credentials are not only the strongest predictor of social mobility but also of social stratification. Meritocratic credentialism has long been criticized, but recent commentaries (e.g. Sandel 2020) make a further point: they argue that credentialism legitimizes deservedness by creating a hierarchy of self-worth and stigmatizing those without credentials. Thereby, structural failures are replaced with moral narratives about individual defects and responsibilities, providing a justification for continuing social hierarchies. As compelling an argument as this is, the issue here is not simply about meritocratic credentialism. For those performing low-skilled, service sector jobs, an Ivy League or Oxbridge degree, or any university degree for

that matter, would not bring respect or status. Neither would it bring the material security necessary for living in comfort and dignity and providing one's children with a fair start. This, in my view, invites a broader conversation about the relationship between redistribution and recognition gaps, for which the liberal script is yet to find a satisfactory solution.

Thirdly, as the recent commentary goes, meritocracy not only legitimizes inequalities but is also harmful to the well-being of individuals. Meritocracy entraps individuals in a race to outperform others and demonstrate self-worth; competitiveness generates overwork, feelings of failure, and mental decline (Lamont 2019). Ironically, these effects are expected to be more severe among the upper and upper-middle classes. A number of studies, mainly focusing on the US and the West, have found that the university-age population (where the upper-middle and middle classes are over-represented) is experiencing a mental health crisis. By comparison, our survey of higher education students in Europe and East Asia found lower levels of psychological distress than reported in these studies and, on average, lower stress levels among Chinese students than European students. Interestingly, we also found that Chinese students attribute success not only to hard work and achievements but equally to factors that are independent of purposeful action, such as luck. Establishing the psychological effects of meritocratic beliefs requires further empirical, comparative research. But there is a broader case to be made here for a sociology of luck (Sauder 2020). There is, for example, empirical evidence that people who regard luck as a factor in getting ahead are more supportive of redistributive and preferential policies for the disadvantaged. Inversely, attributing success to effort restrains redistributive preferences and makes inequality more acceptable. A more realistic recognition of extra-individual factors (luck, but also personal networks and systemic failures) would be a crucial corrective to the understanding of the link between merit and outcome and, more broadly, the aspirations of meritocracy.

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