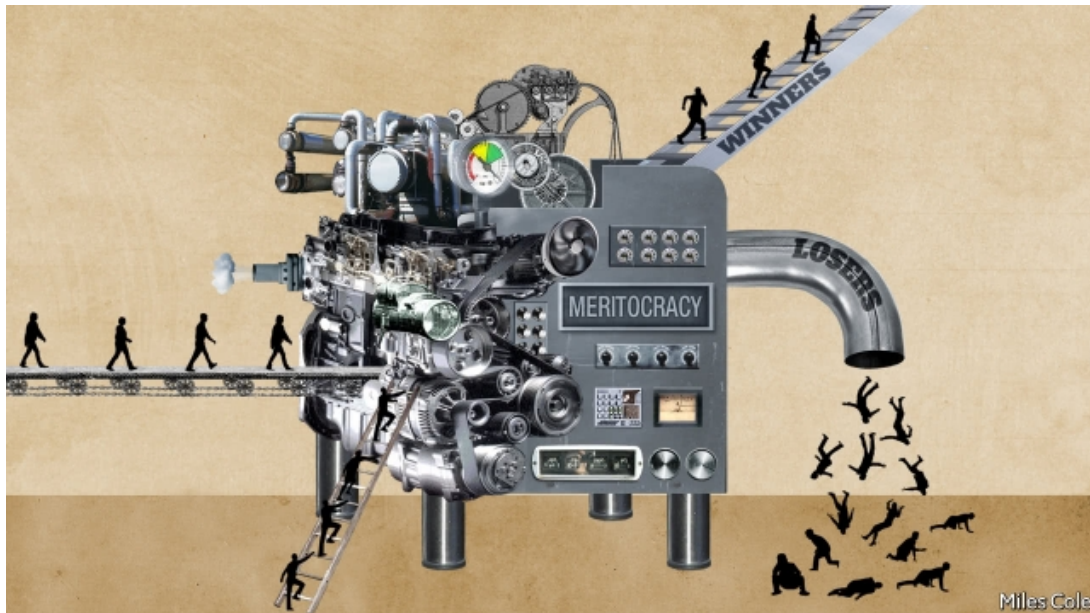


Bagehot

The merits of revisiting Michael Young

A book published 60 years ago predicted most of the tensions tearing contemporary Britain apart



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AFTER much searching, Bagehot has found a book that at last explains what is going on in British politics. This wonderful volume not only reveals the deeper reasons for all the bizarre convulsions. It also explains why things are not likely to get better any time soon. The book is Michael Young's "The Rise of the Meritocracy"—and it was published 60 years ago this year.

Young argued that the most significant fact of modern society is not the rise of democracy, or indeed capitalism, but the rise of the meritocracy, a term he invented. In a knowledge society the most important influence on your life-chances is not your relationship with the means of production but your relationship with the machinery of educational and occupational selection. This is because such machinery determines not just how much you earn but also your sense of self-worth. For Young, the greatest milestones in recent British history were not the Great Reform Act of 1832 or the granting of votes to all women in 1928. They were the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan report, which opened civil-service jobs to competitive examinations, and the Education Act of 1944, which decreed that children should be educated according to their "age, ability and aptitude".

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Young was a Labour Party grandee whose extraordinary CV included co-writing his party's 1945 election manifesto and co-founding the Open University. But he was only half-successful when it came to launching the debate about "meritocracy". Young used the term pejoratively on the grounds that meritocracy was dividing society into two polarised groups: exam-passers, who would become intolerably

smug because they knew that they were the authors of their success, and exam-flunkers, who would become dangerously embittered because they had nobody to blame for their failure but themselves. The book is as odd as it is brilliant. It purports to be a government report written by a sociologist in 2033. It is also a product of its time. Young was preoccupied by the 11-plus exam which divided British state-school pupils on the basis of IQ tests. Today the 11-plus exam survives only in pockets of the country. Young believed that IQ would supplant other determinants of life chances like wealth.

Today, the top 10% of households own 44% of the wealth. That said, however, it is impossible to look at the country without seeing Young's dystopian meritocracy everywhere. Parents agonise about getting their children into the right schools and universities. The public sector is run by manager-despots who treat their workers as "human resources". The number of MPs with working-class origins has shrunk to about 30. The penalty for failing exams is rising inexorably. The proportion of working-age men without qualifications who are "not active in the labour force" is more than 40% today compared with 4% two decades ago.

Some of the biggest changes in recent decades have made the meritocracy even more intolerable than it was in the glory days of the 11-plus. One is the marriage of merit and money. The plutocracy has learned the importance of merit: British public schools have turned themselves into exam factories and the children of

oligarchs study for MBAs. At the same time the meritocracy has acquired a voracious appetite for money. The cleverest computer scientists dream of IPOs, and senior politicians and civil servants cash in when they retire with private-sector jobs. A second is supersized smugness. Today's meritocrats are not only smug because they think they are intellectually superior. They are smug because they also think that they are morally superior, convinced that people who don't share their cosmopolitan values are simple-minded bigots. The third is incompetence. The only reason people tolerate the rule of swots is that they get results. But what if they give you the invasion of Iraq and the financial crisis?

The brains went to their heads

It is also impossible to read Young's book without being struck by how prescient it is. This imagined revolution begins in the north as people become sick of the arrogance of London and the south. The revolution is led by a "dissident minority" from the elite who, by striking up an alliance with the lower orders, rouse them from their traditional docility. The tension between the meritocrats and the masses that Young described is driving almost all the most important events in British politics. It drove Brexit: 75% of those with no educational qualifications voted to leave while a similar proportion of those with university degrees voted to stay. It is driving Corbynism, which is, among other things, a protest against identikit politicians who promised to turn Britain into a business-friendly technocracy and ended up with stagnant wages. Older Brexiteers bristle at the cosmopolitan elites who sneer at traditional values. Young Corbynistas are frustrated by the logic of meritocracy. They cannot join the knowledge economy unless they go to university and move to a big city, but universities cost money and big cities are expensive.

The tension also lies behind the growing culture wars. The most effective way to rile the meritocrats is to attack their faith in expertise: Lord Turnbull, a former Cabinet secretary, has said that Brexiteers' willingness to question current Treasury forecasts of the impact of Brexit was reminiscent of pre-war Nazi Germany. The easiest way to rile the populists is to imply that their attachment to symbols of national identity, such as blue passports or the Cross of St George, is a sign of low intelligence.

The conflict between the meritocracy and the masses also explains the most depressing fact about modern politics: why voting intentions over Brexit remain so fixed despite mounting evidence that the Brexit negotiations are a shambles and that leaving the European Union will damage the economy. Changing your mind doesn't just mean admitting that you're wrong. It means admitting that the other side was right. The likelihood that the losers in the meritocratic race are going to give the other side yet another reason to feel smug is vanishingly small.

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