

The contradictions of “meritocracy”

Giancarlo Livraghi – April 2011

It sounds easy. Let’s set up a “meritocratic” system, and magically everything will work much better. But it’s sooner said than done. Some crucial questions have no easy answers. How can merit be defined, identified, recognized, stimulated and rewarded?

The idea of “merit” has always existed, in one way or another. But it wasn’t so for “meritocracy”. The word was first used in 1958 – and it was coined critically.

It is possible to trace back the concept (though not the word) to Confucius – or maybe to another ancient Chinese author, Han Feizi – and to the experiment in the second century B.C., during the Han dynasty, of a set of exams to evaluate the “merit” of managers and employees in the state bureaucracy. It wasn’t easy then and it isn’t now. Two thousand years later, in a different cultural and social context, we are still facing the same problems.¹

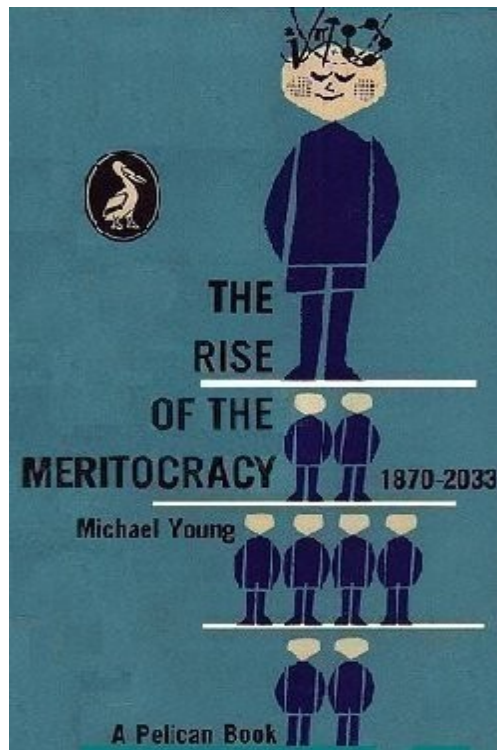
It is sometimes said that Aristotle had “meritocratic” ideas, but that was “aristocracy” – and it isn’t the same. One could also consider the role of philosophers in Plato’s *Republic* – but that, too, was a different approach.

Michael Young and the invention of meritocracy

The fact is that the word was used for the first time fiftythree years ago, in an interesting book by Michael Young: *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

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¹ It isn’t a casual coincidence that now China is revaluing Confucian thinking. In a difficult transition from bimillennarian mandarin and bureaucratic rule to a necessarily more flexible environment – and in an awkward coexistence of a formally communist political system with the turbulent growth of savage capitalism, combined with widespread corruption – it becomes necessary to seek some sort of “meritocracy”. So far with scarce, if any, results. In the rest of the world, in different situations and cultures, there are anyhow complex problems and widespread errors in all forms of hierarchy.



It isn't an exercise in futurology, though the story it tells is placed in the future. Published in 1958, it pretends to be a report of a revolution in 2034 and a history of developments, starting in the Sixties, that led to the crisis.²

It's based on the specific political and social structure in the United Kingdom, but the concept can be worth considering also in different contexts. With cutting irony, he tells how a school system meant to be egalitarian and based on "merit" can be turned into a new sort of hereditary aristocracy.

Michael Young imagines that, as a result of school reform and wider access to universities, traditional oligarchies worry about losing their privileges – and regain power by taking control of intelligence.

This creates a deep, and widening, rift between a mentally and culturally evolved minority and a vast majority stultified by the banality of mass media and deliberately stupid entertainment³

The discrimination is ruthlessly selective. The stupid children of the aristocrats are degraded to the "inferior classes", while the bright offspring of the plebeians are adopted by the privileged families. So the subjects are deprived of the mental and organizational resources that they would need to challenge the system.

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² Michael Young explains the rise of the "merit culture", from 1870, with documents of real facts and opinions. While, obviously, all the consequences following the publication of his book are fiction.

³ Some of this is actually happening – see *Tittytainment* gandalf.it/araianna/titty.pdf

There seems to be no way out. But there is a gap. Residues of traditional sexism are keeping too many intelligent women at a lower rank that they deserve. Several years after the regime was installed, young female aristocrats find an alliance with old trade union leaders (left in the lower classes before they were deprived of intelligence) and so the underdogs find the leadership that they were missing.

The upheaval, in May 2034, is fearsome. But the story comes to an end before the outcome can be understood. Michael Young doesn't tell us if and how the "May risings" lead to any permanent results – and he comments that it's probably "a hundred years too late."

Doubts, risks and problems

The story imagined by Michael Young is clearly related to three classics on the degeneration of modern societies: *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley in 1932, *Animal Farm* in 1945 and *1984* in 1948 by George Orwell (even though the word "meritocracy" wasn't used in their books.)

There are serious reasons to believe that a "hierarchy based on merit" is more likely to be a problem than a resource. However meritocracy, originally conceived as a disease, was later more widely, though vaguely, perceived as desirable. This can be conceptually reasonable. But it's unlikely to work in practice if its complexities aren't understood.

Before we get to "how it can do good" it's worth considering three other books about the problems.

One can be seen as ironic fantasy, though the subject is bitterly serious. *The Marching Morons* by Cyril Kornbluth, 1951. He didn't call it meritocracy, because the word hadn't been invented, but the concept is similar.

It's a science fiction story about a devious character who is reanimated from cryostasis in a future where, because of birth control in the better educated classes and vast proliferation of the most ignorant, a small minority of intelligent people rules over an immense multitude of idiots. The mischievous "clever survivor" offers to the élite a cruel solution for overpopulation: promise wonderful holidays on Venus and lose the stupid tourists in empty space. At the end of the story, he becomes a victim of his own deceit. ⁴

⁴ In 2006 the idea was turned into a disappointing movie called *Idiocracy* – a clumsy attempt to be funny about a future in which intelligence is extinct and humanity is totally stupid. Poorly conceived and worse produced, it's even more stupid than the idiots in the story.

The Peter Principle

The title of the book published by Laurence Peter in 1969 has become so famous that it's quoted in dictionaries as an "idiomatic expression". But little, if anything, has been done to solve the problem.

Conceived in a cultural environment in which meritocracy is assumed to be prevailing – and essentially desirable – the Peter Principle states that *«in a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.»*

Laurence Peter ironically defines the subject of his work as "the salutary science of hierarchiology". He explains that an organization based on merit tends to promote every competent person to a higher level. People who are good at performing their task are moved to doing something else. The process continues until they reach their level of incompetence – and there they remain.

The result is constantly spreading incompetence. And competent people find themselves reporting to the incompetent, who hinder them in their work.

Peter's teachings are widely ignored, not only because they are uncomfortable, but also because managers don't like to be told that they are wrong in choosing and promoting their employees – or, even worse, that they are the ones who have reached the fatal level of incompetence.

A more extensive comment on the Peter Principle is in chapter 6
of *The Power of Stupidity* – gandalf.it/stupid/chap06.pdf

The situation now is worse than it was when it was defined by Laurence Peter – because the concept of "merit" is even more confused. Hirings and promotions are often due to the protection of oligarchic powers, appearance or intrigue that have little to do with "competence". Or to the dominating force of financial speculation, as we shall see further on.

Parkinson's Law

Another basic book about "why things don't work" doesn't contain the word "meritocracy", for the obvious reason that it was published in 1957, a year before Michael Young's.

With a strong sense of humor, on very serious problems, Cyril Northcote Parkinson wrote mainly about the malfunctioning of the decision process in hierarchic systems. But there is no lack, in his work, of observations on the questionable criteria for the evaluation, and rewarding, of merit.

For instance there is a chapter in *Parkinson's Law* called *The Short List, or Principles of Selection*. It's about how people are chosen for roles of important responsibility – and it offers an amusing, while distressing, description of how widely spread (and also “institutionalized”) selection criteria are totally unrelated to a person's competence in fulfilling the task. It would be long to quote here Parkinson's extended and intriguing list of examples, but it isn't difficult to find the symptoms of this syndrome in all sorts of organizations.

In another chapter, *Injelititis, or Palsied Paralysis*, Parkinson defines a dangerous disease called *injelitance*: the rise to authority of people with unusually high combinations of incompetence and jealousy.

He explains that *«the injelitant individual is easily recognizable from the persistence with which he struggles to eject all those abler than himself, as also from his resistance to the appointment or promotion of anyone who might prove abler in course of time.»* And so *«the central administration gradually fills up with people more stupid than the chairman, director, or manager.»* As a result *«there will soon be an actual competition in stupidity, people pretending to be even more brainless than they are.»*

Sometimes injelitance may be counteracted if *«an individual of merit»*, who has been in disguise, hiding his intelligence, *«when he reaches high rank suddenly throws off the mask and appears like the demon king among a crowd of pantomime fairies.»* If this happens in the early stages of infection, *«recovery is possible in the next ten years. But these instances of natural cure are extremely rare. In the more usual course of events, the disease passes through the recognized stages and becomes incurable.»*

Injelititis is contagious. It spreads until a stage is reached *«when there is no spark of intelligence left in the whole organization from top to bottom»* and so *«the institution is, for all practical purposes, dead. It can lay in a coma for twenty years. It may quietly disintegrate.»*

If the organization doesn't self-destruct, the only course is to dismantle it. *«Infected personnel should be dispatched with a warm testimonial to such rival institutions as are regarded with particular hostility. All equipment and files should be destroyed without hesitation. As for the buildings, the best plan is to insure them heavily and then set them alight. Only when the site is a blackened ruin can we feel certain that the germs of the disease are dead.»*

It's distressing to find that too many brainless organizations are artificially kept alive – sometimes even resuscitated, though not cured of their demeritocracy.

More comments and analyses on *Parkinson's Law*
and other books by Cyril Northcote Parkinson are in chapter 5
of *The Power of Stupidity* – gandalf.it/stupid/chap05.pdf

The perversity an danger of Social Darwinism

An awful school of thought, so-called “Social Darwinism”, was proclaimed by Herbert Spencer and other economists in the nineteenth century. The concept of “survival of the fittest” was warped to mean that the most successful people (specifically the richest) are entitled to merciless dominance over the less affluent, to be treated as misfits who don’t deserve to survive, except as tools or servants of the powerful.

Now that dismal theory has been rejected by everyone, including economists. But it’s still ruthlessly practiced in many situations, in several different ways – and it has been getting worse in recent years.

There is obstinate stupidity in the multiplication of violence, repression, persecution, exploitation. Problems that existed and remain unresolved. Others that are newly born, or are growing, with triumphant obtuseness. Human nature appears to be irremediably self destructive. But it isn’t so.

Since the early days of “The Enlightenment” it was clear that the naïve notion of the *bon sauvage*, as imagined by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, isn’t proven by fact or history. It isn’t true that human beings, “good” and kind-hearted in their “natural state”, are made barbaric and cruel by modern civilization. But it’s equally wrong to believe the opposite: that man is naturally egoistic and “bad” – so that social awareness and cooperation need to be enforced by authority.

Studies on the origin of our species have made considerable progress in 150 years of development since Darwin. A particularly interesting discovery is “the central role of trust in human evolution”⁵ Any species that can be called “human” is neither totally collective nor totally individualistic. It survives and develops only by dynamically balancing the two factors.

It would be naïve to believe that evolution can happen without contrast and conflict. Or that human nature is dominated by altruism, solidarity and care for the “common good”. But it is just as wrong to assume that civility, ethics, cooperation and solidarity are contrary to the structural and genetic character of our species. They are necessary for its survival – and even more so for an evolution that isn’t merely the art of surviving, but also of developing and improving.

Some other observations on this subject are in part 6
of *Stupidity: instinct or culture* gandalf.it/stupid//instcult.pdf

⁵ This is explained in *The evolution of evolution* – gandalf.it/stupid/darwin.pdf

Rewarding demerit: financial gambling

A blatant example of demeritoracy is the (so called) economic crisis in which we are living. That isn't caused by the (existing and serious) problems of real economy, but by the wretched domination of financial gambling, rewarding tricksters who fake accounting – and whoever is lucky in catching the trend when a speculative wave distorts the ups-and-downs of the stock market.

The consequences are often catastrophic for whoever has to pick up the pieces, but in the meantime the gamblers (if they didn't simply run away with the money) can be promoted way beyond their ability (if any) to manage a business or produce results in a real market.

This infection could have been easily diagnosed twenty years ago, but it was allowed – actually encouraged – to spread until it became a dreadful, still unresolved, epidemic. It will take years to understand if world leaders and opinion makers will be able to learn from this experience or will again do more of the same – or, maybe, plunge into another disastrous blunder.

There are, unfortunately widespread, cases that go beyond the Peter Principle – such as the promotion to higher levels of people who were already incompetent in their role.

Another problem is the proliferation of mergers, acquisitions and concentrations. Causing the loss of those identities and cultures that had made companies successful – their unique ability to do something better than anyone else. Many people are removed not because they are incompetent, but because of duplicate roles in the merged organization (another reason is that the cost of acquisitions is partly recovered by cutting staff.)

In the boiling cauldron of the mixedup organization roles overlap and interfere. The people rewarded and promoted are not the most competent, but those favored by the prevailing faction. Power games and hierarchic maneuvering replace any consideration of merit or ability. Even if they survive the massacre, the best people are often moved to roles where they don't fit – and anyhow they are demotivated by an environment in which quality doesn't matter.

Commitment isn't rewarded, competence isn't recognized, everyone strives for survival in the vicious circle of intrigue and appearance. The classic Peter Principle combines with other misfunctions to make things even worse.

Aristocracy and other tricky words

If we go back to Aristotle (or, more broadly, to words with a Greek etymology) we find that *aristocracy* is supposed to mean “the rule of the best”. In theory, it’s a pretty good idea. But who and how decides who are the “best”? With which criteria? History shows that in practice aristocracy has nearly always turned into something else – hereditary privilege, feudalism, power cliques or appointment “from above” rarely based on any real merit. As it has happened with many other concepts starting with “good intentions” but degenerating into a loss of their original meaning.

There is also, now as always, a problem of perspective. Whoever is successful tends to believe that whatever made it happen is merit. And, therefore, that meritocracy means promoting more of the same.

There other words that are broadly considered negative. Such as *plutocracy*, *autocracy*, *bureaucracy*. Or, with a different desinence, *oligarchy*, *hierarchy*, *tyranny*, *dictatorship*. But, though conceptually despised, they continue to multiply, under all sorts of disguises. We can joke about *idiocracy*, but there is no lack of examples of how it can be distressingly real.⁶

Even *democracy*, the most desirable and least unfair form of government, can often decay. And just as often the word is used to define systems that aren’t at all democratic.

Demeritocracy (and what to do with unmerit)

There could be no end to a list of circumstances and behaviors that generate and multiply demeritocracy. We can all, by simply observing facts, add examples and look for reasons why. In a broad perspective, the same concept can be applied as for stupidity. It can’t be totally eliminated, but there is a lot that we can do to reduce and control its power. The more we understand it, the better we can prevent or avoid its awful effects.

But there is another problem. What do we do with the “undeserving”, or those with less “merit”? Let’s imagine (unlikely as that is) to be working with an infallible meritocratic system. The unavoidable consequence is that someone isn’t chosen – and is left unemployed, or demotivated by a missed promotion. This doesn’t only cause social damage, but also a decrease of efficiency and quality within the organization.

⁶ The peculiar case of *monarchy* is different from all others. For many millennia it was hereditary autocracy, widely accepted as “divine right”. In ten European countries it has become “constitutional”, with a role of national identity and tradition, but not of government. There are many more, de facto, monarchies around the world – but, nowadays, only a few where the autocrat is called king or emperor.

In addition to avoiding promotions to incompetence, we must also take good care of the people that remain where they belong. Or, more broadly, of whoever, though not in the higher levels of the hierarchy, is carrying out a necessary and irreplaceable task.

Doing so with formal mechanisms or generic (often hypocritical) benevolence is worthless – and can be irritating when it's ritual banality. Genuine and sincere care for human values is much more important than conventional ceremonial.

Very few people are totally deprived of merit. But even in that case no civil society can afford to ignore them. Even criminals must be treated with humanity. In theory, this is the rule – and an opinion shared by considerate people. But facts are too often below any acceptable level.

It happens often, on the other hand, that selection standards fail to identify, or to effectively encourage, the best merit. The brightest, most inspiring, really innovative people are often unconventional. Impatient, irreverent, disobedient, undisciplined. Discovering and developing talent is an art. As difficult as it's precious.

Merit isn't power – and often power isn't merit

It isn't etymological meticulousness to ask ourselves what happens when “merit” is combined with “ocracy”. All words ending with *-cracy* or *-archy* are, in one way or another, dangerous. And so is the concept of power.⁷

For any organization or human community to work properly, from the smallest bunch of people to the governance of the whole planet, it is necessary to entrust someone with an adequate amount of “power”. When it's understood as responsibility, it can work quite well. But too often it becomes arrogance. Because there is a mechanism, in the nature of power, that works as counter-evolution – it favors the most unfit.

How do people gain power? Sometimes by not even trying. They are entrusted by other people, because other people trust them. They have natural leadership and a sense of responsibility. This process has a good chance of rewarding merit, generating well deserved, well motivated power. But there are much fewer examples of such “intelligent power” than we would all like to see.

The reason is that there is *competition* for gaining and maintaining power. An aggressive, sometimes fearsome, often anxious, always troubled, craving for power.

⁷ See *The Stupidity of Power*, chapter 10 of *The Power of Stupidity* also online gandalf.it/stupid/chap10.pdf

The people who don't seek power per se, but are more concentrated on their responsibilities in doing good for others, have less time and energy to spend on gaining more power – or even holding on to what they have. Those who have a greed for power, regardless of its impact on society, concentrate on the struggle for power. With consequences that aren't at all meritocratic.

As Friedrich Nietzsche said, «*people pay a high price for gaining power: it makes them stupid*». Power is an addictive drug. People in power are often afflicted with megalomania. They are led to believe that *because* they have power they are better, smarter, wiser, than ordinary people. They are also surrounded by sycophants, followers and exploiters enhancing their delusion.

The victims of this perverse mechanism aren't just the “ordinary people” who are subjected to the whims and abuse of the intermediaries as well as those of the powers above. They are also, quite often, the people at the top, who become prisoners of their entourage.

This is why we can never fully trust power. It should not be admired, believed or even respected without making sure that whoever holds power really deserves it.

What happens with merito-crazy? It would be nice if we could find a way of giving responsibility only to those with the appropriate “merit”. Unfortunately, it's difficult. But there is also another problem in the concept.

There can be (and there are many) people of extraordinary merit who don't have the ability, or even the desire, to “rule”. Therefore a “meritocratic” system needs to understand, recognize, correctly reward, fondly admire the merit of those who give us wonderful contributions without having, or wanting, any “-crazy” or “-archy” of any sort.

In a harmonious, intelligent system we can understand, and use effectively, the differences in attitude and ability. Some people can have better organization talent, and therefore a management role, without necessarily a higher “rank” than others who, in another way, are making an equally important contribution.

“Quality circles” aren't only cross-departmental and cross-cultural aggregations of different competence, talent and expertise. They can be very useful as such – but even more effective if and when they become structural for the whole organization.

The superiority of such systems is abundantly proven. But unfortunately hierarchic structures continue to prevail. They are much less efficient, but enjoyed by bureaucrats – and by managers (or rulers) too often motivated by their careers instead of any quality values.

The ambiguities of “merit”

There is a crucial question. What do we mean by “merit”?

When a system tries to be formally meritocratic it is forced to rely on a rigid and arithmetically measurable mechanism. Such as a standard set of exams or evaluation techniques. Of the same sort of those used to measure an “intelligence quotient” – which, notoriously, don’t work. For several reasons, including the cultural bias that rewards compliance and discourages diversity, promotes obedience and discredits independent judgment, appreciates habit and doesn’t understand innovation.⁸

We need also to understand that there can’t be any universal concept of “merit”. The same person can be excellent in one role, inadequate in another. Any rigid definition of tasks and responsibilities leads to inefficiency.

(For all my life I have been saying that organograms don’t work because people aren’t rectangular – and I have been lucky enough to experience the outstanding results that can be achieved by adapting structure to human resources, not vice versa.)

We are plagued with a vicious spreading of demeritocracy. Such problems have always existed – and we could understand them better if we weren’t forgetting, or disregarding, the lessons of history. But we also need to understand that the problems we are facing are different from anything that we had experienced in the past.

The reasons for the difference are explained at the end of
Stupidity: instinct or culture (as mentioned in page 6)
and also in *Stupidity and Biology* chapter 2 of
The Power of Stupidity – gandalf.it/stupid/chap02.pdf

It’s essentially a matter of size. Humanity has never been so numerous – and with such massive influence on the environment of the whole planet.

We still need to learn as much as we can from history and prehistory, anthropology and biology, geology and ecology. But also to understand that we are in a situation of which we have no prior experience. Demeritocracy has become unsustainable.

It’s typical, as it’s distressing, that in such an emergency we have a loss of trust and a spreading of passing the buck (when things don’t work the blame is on someone else.)

⁸ For such conventionality of education the oligarchy imagined by Michael Young would risk progressive decline into complacency and dumbness. But we don’t need imaginary scenarios to understand this problem. There are real examples of cultures degrading into habit and dogmatism for their unwillingness, or inability, to understand the merit (and intelligence) of people and ideas that don’t fit their prejudice.

It's difficult, but it isn't utopia

It's quite clear that the concept of "meritocracy" is questionable – and can be understood in many different ways. But this doesn't mean that it's wrong. Quite to the contrary, when it works it isn't only morally and socially desirable, it also produces excellent results.

Whoever has practical experience of living and working in environments where there is mutual respect, strong motivation, merit recognition, knows how pleasant they are and how they generate quality. But the perception and the atmosphere are more emotional than rational, more instinctive than ritual, more human than procedural. And ay, there's the rub. It's very difficult, probably unachievable, to understand and manage merit with standardized, bureaucratic, formal criteria.

The subject of meritocracy has been, and continues to be, widely debated. Many believe, with some good reasons, that it's utopia. Unfortunately it is, if we imagine that it can be universally homogeneous, applicable to everybody and everything by rigid rules and with the same criteria. But this doesn't mean that it's impossible.

With flexibility and good sense, sympathy and sensitivity, we can really understand and encourage merit – much more and much better than how it's done in most organizations (including those that believe, or pretend, to be meritocratic.) And also in all sorts of human relationships.

Rather than a method, it's an idea. More than a discipline, it's an ideal – as such, unreachable as "total perfection", but worth pursuing to the highest achievable level.

We could, if we really tried, make substantial progress in recognizing and encouraging merit, wherever it is. Any effort to do so is, in itself, admirable – though even in "the best of all possible worlds" we could never be able to discover all the people who, without having, nor seeking, the limelight, are improving some part, large or small, of the world we live in.

Probably nobody will ever erect a monument to those many, generous "unknown". But they deserve our everlasting gratitude. Without them, we would be heading for doomsday.