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Universities in the Age of Meritocracy 2.0

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Simon Chesterman*

Traditional measures of merit have served their purpose. Enabling everyone to flourish — even as artificial intelligence threatens to outshine us all — requires that we diversify those yardsticks, while also being clear that they should not define a person's worth or limit their potential.

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It's admissions season for universities and, as usual, we are seeking to admit the best students into our programmes.

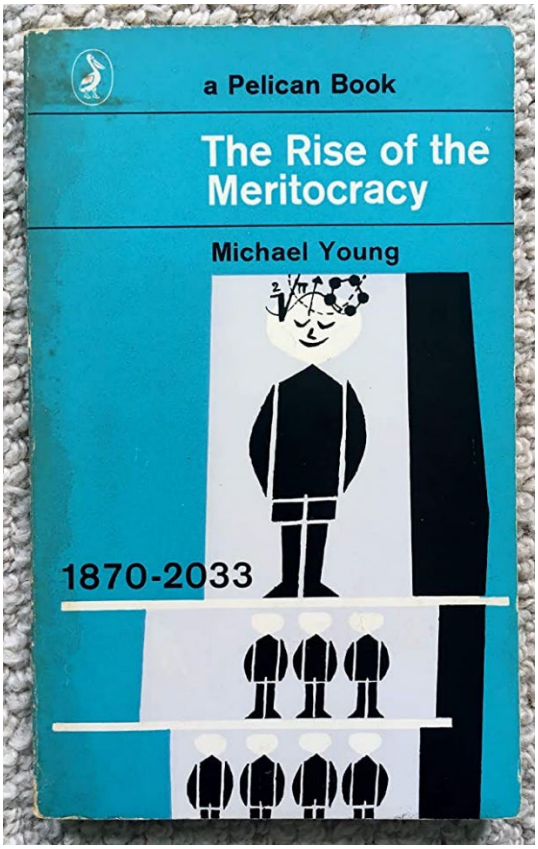
But what does "best" mean? A century ago, it would have had more to do with breeding and gender than brains. In recent decades, the focus shifted to measurable qualities like IQ and standardised tests, such as A-levels and the International Baccalaureate.

Today, there is a growing realisation that more diverse factors should be considered. That includes controlling for the impact that wealth has on the accumulation of academic and other credentials, as well as shifting the focus from past achievement to future potential.

In the process, we are redefining "merit". This affects not just who gets to attend university, but the significance those opportunities have for one's role in society.

1 The fall and rise of meritocracy

Given the importance of meritocracy to Singapore's success — a search of Hansard reveals that it has been mentioned in 281 separate sessions of Parliament — many are surprised to learn that the term was originally meant as a joke.

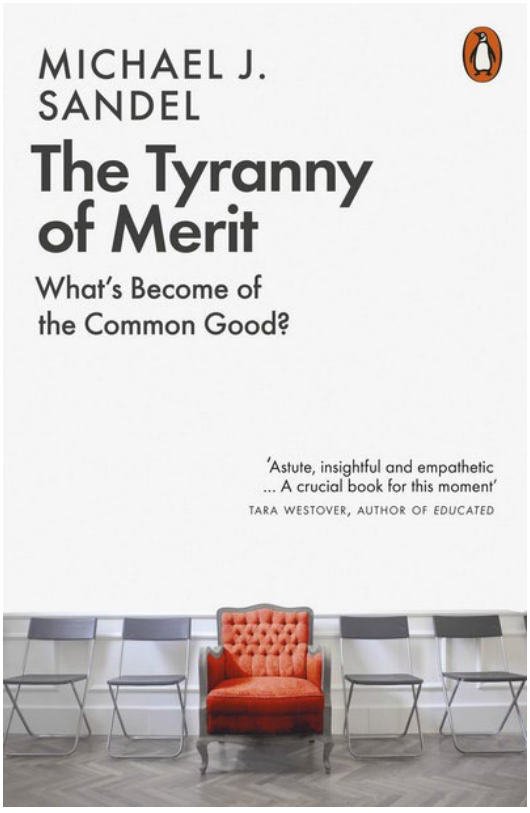


British sociologist and politician Michael Young coined it in his 1958 dystopian satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The book is framed as an academic treatise written in 2034, looking back on a society that replaced aristocracy with meritocracy — only to find that hereditary class was swiftly succeeded by similarly rigid categories of merit.

In theory, allocating opportunities for advancement based on talent rather than birth is fairer and more efficient. It is fairer for individuals, whose prospects are not limited by their parentage. For society, it broadens the pool of human capital on which to draw.

In practice, however, those who attain positions of privilege will try to ensure that their children do similarly well. Young predicted that this would limit social mobility, while many of those who did rise a rung or two would pull the ladder up behind them.

In his 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit*, Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel attributes many of America's present social and political fractures to this inexorable logic of unbridled meritocracy.



Neither Sandel nor Young defend aristocracy. But it had, at least, the virtue of transparency in its arbitrariness. No one in the upper classes could reasonably claim that they landed there by dint of hard work. Nor did those in the lower classes blame themselves for their lot in life.

Not so in a meritocratic system. Allocating opportunities based on merit does not reduce inequality; rather, it aligns inequality with ability.

The result is a presumption that people get what they deserve.

For the elites, this removes self-doubt and encourages the view that they are entitled to their privilege, earned by innate qualities and hard work ("IQ + effort = merit").

For those left behind, it implies that their lot in life is indeed their own fault — that, if they had only been smarter or worked harder, things might have been different.

Young predicted in his novel that this combination of hubris and resentment would give rise to a backlash against meritocracy, a revolt postulated for 2034.

Sandel suggests that, in 2016, when Britain voted for Brexit and America voted for Trump, that backlash came eighteen years early.

2 Life imitates art

Young later expressed bemusement and regret that his work was taken literally. In a new edition published some three decades after it had become a bestseller, he noted that the fate of many influential books is that people do not actually read them.

For his part, Sandel acknowledges the irony of critiquing meritocracy from Harvard — one of the very tallest of the ivory towers. Yet he sees in his own students the cost of an obsessive pursuit of "merit", with stressed young people amassing credentials at the expense of leisure and sleep.

This obsession is abetted by their parents, epitomized by the US admissions scandals of 2019, in which more than fifty people — mostly parents — were charged with bribery and fraud committed in the hope of gaining their children entry to elite universities.

In Singapore, we see echoes of that obsession in the billion-dollar tuition industry and efforts to pad and embellish résumés.

Sandel's solution is to replace much of the admissions process for elite universities with, essentially, a lottery. Take the thousands of applications, screen out those who would not flourish, and toss the rest down the stairs. Then pick up as many files as you have space for and leave it at that.

I don't propose that we hand selection of students over to chance, nor that we abandon meritocracy. But we can broaden our conception of "merit", while ensuring that we do not confuse merit with value.

3 A broader definition of merit

Speaking in March, Minster for Education Chan Chun Sing endorsed the need for a broader understanding of merit beyond grades — a "meritocracy of skills" that recognises diverse forms of talent, as well as the fact that talents may emerge at different stages of life.

Universities are moving in this direction, with greater emphasis on aptitude-based admissions and more entry points for lifelong learning.

At NUS College, where we are currently admitting our second cohort of students, one of the first points our leadership team agreed on was that we want bright students — but not necessarily the "brightest" in a narrow academic sense. We want students who are passionate about learning because they are curious, because they are willing to take risks — their interest in university should go beyond grades.

That's why my colleagues and I interview many times more students than we can admit. Because we aren't looking to measure their past credentials so much as their future potential — and their commitment to *using* their abilities, not to hoard achievements, but to give back to the society that has shaped and supported them.

4 Merit versus value

In his 2021 SR Nathan Lectures, Monetary Authority of Singapore Managing Director Ravi Menon also argued for recognising many forms of merit. He went on to stress that those who succeed must not forget how much help they have received along the way; how much fortune has helped in their life's journey.

If we are honest with ourselves, luck plays a tremendous role in many of our successes. Luck in our genes and our health, luck in family support and encouragement, luck in the educational and career opportunities given to us.

If meritocracy is to be considered fair, those who are so lucky should also accept the responsibility to work hard, to give back — to share their luck with others.

This suggests a kind of meritocratic *noblesse oblige* — a concept found in diverse religious traditions and familiar to many in the Spider-Man line that "with great power comes great responsibility".[1]

Yet, in addition to tempering the hubris of the elite, it is equally important to address the sentiments of those who were not so lucky, who do not reap the same rewards society has to offer.

For there is a temptation to confuse the money that one makes with one's contribution to society. A salutary lesson of the pandemic that I hope we do not forget is that the workers most essential to society are not always the most highly paid.

Fault lines are emerging here also. In Britain, for example, healthcare providers will be striking next week. Some wryly observed that they appreciated the weekly rounds of applause during Covid-19 lockdowns— but they would have preferred a pay increase.

5 Time for an update

The increasing role of artificial intelligence (AI) is only going to exacerbate these tensions.

Traditional measures of merit, like standardised tests, are precisely the things at which the new generative AI models like ChatGPT excel. The fact that it struggled with the PSLE is testimony to the difficulty of that test and the brilliance of Singapore's students — but, having passed the US bar exam, it's just a matter of time before ChatGPT scrapes through PSLE also.

It is far too early to see what the consequences of these newfound abilities will be, though the swift advances by large language models have prompted the first serious call for a moratorium on AI research.

What does seem clear is that, to the extent that we measure humans and AI on narrow measures of merit like standardised tests, humans will lose.

[1] A related notion is also found in one of political philosopher John Rawl's principles of justice: that social and economic inequalities, if they are be justified, must satisfy two conditions: First, they are to be attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society." In other words, it's ok if some in our society are given more responsibilities and rewards, but only if doing so is to the common good, especially the good of those who are disadvantaged.

That doesn't have to be a bad thing.

Cars and boats can move faster than us, but that doesn't stop us running and swimming. It does change the way we think about transportation, however.

Moving forward, the challenge is to recognise the diverse ways in which people can succeed, while also embracing a more inclusive vision of human potential.

And, for those who do succeed, a little humility — "there, but for the grace of God, or the accident of birth, or the mystery of fate, go I" as Sandel puts it — is a good place to start.

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