



ESSAYS

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Lulled by the celebritariat

Exactly 50 years ago Michael Young published his famous dystopia "The Rise of the Meritocracy." His son Toby argues that we never got the meritocratic educational elite predicted by his father, instead we got the celebrity class

By Toby Young

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Fifty years ago, the sociologist Michael Young—my father—published a book that, in his own words, gave him a minor claim to immortality. A dystopian satire in the same vein as 1984, it was an attempt to sound a warning bell about various social and political trends by describing a future in which they had come to fruition. It wasn't as successful as Orwell's book, but it did enjoy some afterlife thanks to a word my father coined to describe the new ruling class that would hold sway in this nightmarish future. It was called *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. People are often surprised when I tell them that my father invented the word "meritocracy"—they assume it must have been around for ever—and even more astonished to learn that he wasn't a fan. How could anyone be against meritocracy? It seems incomprehensible today. The commitment to making Britain more meritocratic has become an ideological shibboleth that almost no one dissents from. Michael disapproved of meritocracy because he saw it as a way of legitimising inequality. After all, if everyone starts out on a level playing field, then the resulting allocation of rewards—however unequal—seems fair. Those at the very pinnacle of our society might not inherit their privileged position, as their forebears had done, but its pyramid-like shape would be preserved. Indeed, once this hierarchical structure became legitimised, as it would in a meritocratic society, it was likely that power and wealth would become concentrated in even fewer hands. Just how prescient was *The Rise of the Meritocracy*? Equality of opportunity has become every bit as entrenched as my

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show that Britain is not a meritocracy—has calculated that the proportion of privately educated high court judges has barely changed in the past 18 years: 74 per cent in 1989 compared to 70 per cent in 2007. And according to the trust, "the proportion of independently educated top newspaper editors, columnists and news presenters and editors has actually increased over the past 20 years." Analysts of the broader sweep of social mobility are divided on how much it has slowed down (see David Goodhart's previous article), but there is some consensus that there has been a falling off since the time my father wrote *Meritocracy*. What there is no dispute about is the surge in inequality in Britain in recent decades. According to a recent survey by the OECD, income inequality grew steadily from the mid-1970s, dipped briefly in the mid-1990s, then continued to grow until 2000 when it started to dip again. Overall, the long-term trend is towards greater inequality. In 2005, the earnings gap between rich and poor was 20 per cent wider than it was in 1985. This begs the question of what, if anything, legitimises Britain's current levels of inequality? In the absence of genuine equality of opportunity, what secures the consent of ordinary people to the unequal distribution of rewards? To put it another way, if the meritocratic bulwark against egalitarianism that my father identified has failed to materialise, why are higher taxes on the rich not more popular? Writing in the 1960s, the sociologist WG Runciman, author of *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*, argued that ordinary people tolerate high levels of inequality because they don't compare themselves with those at the top, but with people like themselves. By that measure, they are far better off than they were 50 years ago, even if their incomes have grown by a smaller percentage than the top earners. However, this argument doesn't seem plausible any longer. Mark Pearson, the head of the OECD's social policy division, has identified something he calls the "Hello! magazine effect" whereby people now compare themselves with the most successful members of society, thereby increasing their insecurity and sense of deprivation. This appears to be tied up with the decline of deference. A person's social background may still affect their life chances, but it no longer plays such an important role in determining their attitudes and aspirations, particularly towards those higher up—and lower down—the food chain. That famous sketch on the Frost Report in which Ronnie Corbett, Ronnie Barker and John Cleese explained the workings of the British class system—"I look up to him because he is upper class, but I look down on him because he is lower class"—now belongs to a bygone age. As Ferdinand Mount notes in *Mind the Gap*: "The old class markers have become taboo... The manners of classlessness have become *de rigueur*." To put it another way: a profound increase in economic inequality has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in social and cultural equality. We can see this most clearly in changing attitudes to popular culture. It is a cliché to point out that the distinction between high and low culture has all but disappeared in the past 25 years or so. In this free-for-all it is high culture that has been the loser, with most educated people under 45 embracing popular culture almost exclusively. As a student in the mid-80s, I was proud to call myself an "Oxbridge Gooner"—one of several dozen students at Oxford and Cambridge who regularly attended Arsenal games—and such groupings are commonplace now. The rich and the poor no longer live in two nations, at least not socially. Economic divisions may be more pronounced than ever, but we support the same football teams, watch the same television programmes, go to the same movies. Mass culture is for everyone, not just the masses. *** Yet if Britain is no longer a deferential nation—if its citizens don't accept that their place in life should be dictated by their class status—why is egalitarianism still the dog that hasn't barked in British politics since 1979? Could it be that partly because of the power and ubiquity of popular culture, Britain is now perceived to be far more meritocratic than it actually is? This phenomenon has been widely documented in

celebritariat." I am thinking of the people featured in *Heat* magazine, rather than Hello!—the premier league footballers and their wives, pop stars, movie stars, soap stars and the like. For all its shortcomings, the celebrity class is broadly meritocratic and because it is so visible it may help to persuade people that Britain is a fairer place than it really is. One of the criticisms levelled at Britain's professional elites is that they have become closed shops, creating insurmountable barriers to entry. The same could not be said of the celebritariat, a class that is constantly being refreshed, with old members being forced out to make way for the new. Indeed, we now hold national competitions—The X Factor, Pop Idol, Britain's Got Talent—to discover genuinely deserving candidates to promote into the celebrity class. If the celebritariat really does play a role in legitimising economic inequality, it is also because ordinary people imagine that they, too, could become members. A YouGov poll of nearly 800 16-19-year-olds conducted on behalf of the Learning and Skills Council in 2006 revealed that 11 per cent said they were "waiting to be discovered." Some commentators believe that the preponderance of reality shows and their casts of freaks and wannabes—the lumpen celebritariat—have devalued the whole notion of stardom. Yet the YouGov survey discovered that appearing on a reality television programme was a popular career option among teenagers, and another poll found 26 per cent of 16 to 19 year olds believe it is easy to secure a career in sports, entertainment or the media. If the existence of the celebrity class does play a role in securing people's consent to our winner-takes-all society, then the fact that the entry requirements are so low helps this process along. If people believe there is a genuine chance they might be catapulted to the top, they're more likely to endorse a system in which success is so highly rewarded. To paraphrase the advertising slogan for the National Lottery, it could be them. As with the lottery, people may know that the actual chances of winning are low but the selection mechanism itself is fair—a level playing field. After that, their "specialness" will take care of the rest. The music critic Albert Goldman identified this attitude in his 1978 book on the disco phenomenon: "Everybody sees himself as a star today. This is both a cliché and a profound truth. Thousands of young men and women have the looks, the clothes, the hairstyling, the drugs... the self-confidence, and the history of conquest that proclaim a star... Never in the history of showbiz has the gap between amateur and professional been so small." (Quoted by James Wolcott in "Now, Voyeur," *Vanity Fair*, September 2000.) The celebritariat—and the illusion of easy access to it—has played the role in postwar Britain that my father expected to be played by the educational meritocracy. The Rise of the Meritocracy ends with a riot at Peterloo in which the disenfranchised masses overthrow their new masters. This is largely because the meritocratic class has become so efficient at identifying the most able children at birth that the ones left behind have no hope of making it. Will the day come when the celebritariat endangers its own existence by becoming a self-perpetuating elite, closed off to new members? There are signs that this is beginning to happen, with the children of famous people inheriting their celebrity status, just as aristocrats inherited their parents estates. It sounds odd to say it, but for those like my father who dream of turning Britain into a socialist paradise, the greatest cause for hope may be the existence of Peaches Geldof.

Toby Young is the author of *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People* (Abacus)