



MERITOCRACY: A DEFINITION ESSAY

Alex Badion

Class of 2001, Eastern Visayas State University - Tanauan Campus
Bachelor of Science in Industrial Education

Some people are familiar with this word – meritocracy, but some are not. The term meritocracy has existed for centuries. It was first coined by British politician and sociologist, Michael Young¹ in his 1958 satirical essay, “The Rise of the Meritocracy”, which pictured the United Kingdom under the rule of a government favoring intelligence and aptitude (merit) above all. The essay is written in the first-person by a fictional historical narrator in 2034, and interweaves history from the politics of pre- and post-war Britain with those of fictional future events in the short (1960 onward) and long term (2020 onward). The essay was based upon the tendency of the then-current governments in their striving towards intelligence to ignore shortcomings and upon the failure of education systems to correctly utilize gifted and talented members within their societies. Young's fictional narrator explains that, on the one hand, the greatest contributor to society is not the "stolid mass" or majority, but the "creative minority" or "restless elite". On the other hand, he claims that there are casualties of progress whose influence is underestimated and that, from such stolid adherence to natural science and intelligence, will bring arrogance and complacency. This problem is encapsulated in the phrase "Every selection of one is a rejection of many".

If we are going to consolidate the different meanings of this word contextually, it's vivid and clear that meritocracy is a kind of ideology. ²Meritocracy itself is not a form of government, but rather an ideology. Government positions in a meritocracy would be given to individuals based upon possession of certain merits which could range from intelligence to morality to general aptitude to specific knowledge. Supporters of meritocracies do not necessarily agree on the nature of "merit", however they tend to agree that "merit" itself should be a primary consideration during evaluation. Meritocracy, in the first, most administrative sense, is a system of government or other administration (such as business administration) wherein appointments and responsibilities are objectively assigned to individuals based upon their "merits", namely intelligence, credentials, and education, determined through evaluations or examinations. The "most common definition of meritocracy conceptualizes merit in terms of tested competency and ability, and most likely as measured by IQ or standardized achievement tests."

Although meritocracy as a term is a relatively recent invention, the concept originates from the works of Confucius, along with other Legalist and Confucian philosophers. The first meritocracy was implemented in the 2nd century BC, by the Han Dynasty which introduced the world's first civil service exams evaluating the "merit" of officials.³ Meritocracy as a concept spread from China to British India during the 17th century, and then into continental Europe and the United States.⁴ With the translation of Confucian texts during the Enlightenment, the concept of a meritocracy reached intellectuals in the West, who saw it as an alternative to the traditional ancient regime of Europe.⁵ In the United States, the assassination of President Garfield in 1881 prompted the replacement of the American Spoils System with a meritocracy. In 1883, The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act was passed, stipulating government jobs should be awarded on the basis of merit through competitive exams, rather than ties to politicians or political affiliation.⁶

Like "utilitarian" and "pragmatic", the word "meritocratic" has also developed a broader definition, used to refer to any government run by "a ruling or influential class of educated or able people."⁷ This is in contrast to the term originally coined by Michael Young in 1958, who critically defined it as a system where "merit is equated with intelligence-plus-effort, its possessors are identified at an early age and selected for appropriate intensive education, and there is an obsession with quantification, test-scoring, and qualifications."⁸ Meritocracy in its wider sense can be any general act of judgment upon the basis of people's various demonstrated merits; such acts are frequently described in sociology and psychology. Thus, the merits may extend beyond intelligence and education to any mental or physical talent or to work ethic. ⁹In rhetoric, the demonstration of one's merit regarding mastery of a particular subject is an essential task most directly related to the Aristotelian term Ethos. The equivalent Aristotelian conception of meritocracy is based upon aristocratic or oligarchic structures rather than in the context of the modern state.¹⁰ The most common form of