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More for the many, less for the few: Corbynism and the myth of meritocracy

Jo Littler

‘Corbynism’ has been a dramatic departure from the endorsement of neoliberal policies that have dominated the previous three decades of Labour and mainstream UK politics. The continual marketization of the public sector is at least at the moment off the Labour Party’s official agenda. Neoliberal financialisation and the economic growth of CEO income is no longer implicitly perceived to be intimately connected to social progress. This genuine shift is what both greeted the initial outburst of enthusiasm for Corbyn and what propelled him into his position as leader, as people both flocked to rejoin the Labour party and to join it for the first time, attracted by the shift in the political landscape towards a genuinely more democratic option. It is also what brought him so much closer to power at the 2017 General Election than almost anyone -- particularly the mainstream commentariat and the centre/right of the Labour Party -- had predicted.

In the process, Corbynism has challenged and ruptured the neoliberal narrative of meritocracy: of a landscape where everyone can have the opportunity to succeed socially if they just work hard enough to activate their talent. Meritocratic discourse has been used in the service of capitalism for a very long time, but has been very energetically reinvigorated and revitalized over the past few decades in British politics in order to provide a persuasive alibi for the expanding wealth and privilege of plutocratic elite and the widening chasm between rich and poor. You don’t need redistribution, runs this argument, because everyone, individually, has the opportunity to succeed if only they work hard enough. This chapter outlines the movement of ‘meritocracy’ in recent history and in British political discourse, asks how Corbynism has positioned itself in relation to this trenchant set of beliefs, questions what it has done so far to significantly challenge the myth, and discusses how a progressive agenda dealing with neoliberal meritocracy could be taken forwards. Tackling neoliberal meritocracy, the chapter argues, has been a key component of the success of Corbynism so far; extending its challenge can further extend its potential.

What meritocracy is and how it has been used

Today ‘meritocracy’ is generally taken to entail the idea that anyone, if they work hard enough, can activate their talent and climb the ladder of social success. It is a powerful discourse which appeals to democratic sentiments because it appears to emphasise ‘fairness’ as opposed to the vested interests of a privileged elite (which of course is in itself a very good thing). Its mantra of ‘equality of opportunity’ also speaks to the idea of extending yourself, of personal growth and flourishing, of being able to move beyond where you started in life (also very good things). We

can trace both these aspects of the ideology of meritocracy back through many different histories and geographies: whether to the French Revolution's idea of the 'free space for all talents', for example, or open entrance exams in the UK civil service.¹

However, meritocracy has also, and is increasingly, used to endorse extreme income differentials. The emphasis on talent, flourishing and overcoming difficulties is emphasized and the problems and severe difficulties that come with inequality are downplayed or ignored. Again this has occurred in lots of different spaces and places: we might consider how the contemporary Singaporean higher education system urges its subjects to work harder to achieve upward social mobility whilst downplaying the problems of the less wealthy, or how narratives of the American Dream have often focused on those consuming their way to an upward social trajectory rather than those stuck at the bottom.²

These are all different examples of meritocratic discourse. The idea was expressed before the word came into being in English, but the first recorded use of the term is by the British sociologist Alan Fox, who wrote about trade unions and industrial sociology.³ In an article in *Socialist Commentary*, a journal which was at that time a more radical version of *The New Statesman*, Fox used the word meritocracy in a completely critical, negative way.⁴ Why would you want to give 'a fat bonus' to people who already have so many 'natural endowments', he asks? That vision, which belongs to 'a certain brand of New Conservatism' will just exacerbate a 'grotesque paradox', will create divisions between the 'blessed and the unblessed', make for a miserable society. Instead we should think about how to share our time and money more equitably to produce a happier society. Fox's vision didn't involve everyone doing the same occupation, or abolishing entry criteria for being a doctor; but it did suggest that financial and social rewards should be more evenly distributed, and that those doing uninteresting manual work, for example, should be paid decently and have more leisure time through what he called 'cross-grading'.⁵

That meritocracy had a negative value was also assumed in the 1950s by the philosopher Hannah Arendt. In an essay reflecting on 'The Crisis in Education', based on a lecture given in Germany and aiming at a wider audience through its US publication in 1958, she was scathing in her criticism of the British introduction and extension of the grammar school system, as an extreme form of educational and social segregation. 'What is aimed at in England is 'meritocracy'', she wrote, and '[m]eritocracy contradicts the principle of equality, of an equalitarian democracy, no less than any other oligarchy.'⁶ In the same year the British social democratic polymath Michael Young, who was involved in setting up a range of inventive progressive initiatives including the Consumer's Association and the Open University, as well writing Labour's 1945 manifesto, published a gently satirical bestseller called *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.⁷ The first half depicted the extension of the democratic franchise in the UK to the (then) present day; the latter half depicted a fictional dystopia with a roaring trade in black-market brainy babies.

But by 1972 Young's friend the American sociologist Daniel Bell was suggesting that meritocracy could perhaps be used in a more positive fashion as an engine of the knowledge economy, where money could be generated from ideas.⁸ Then by the early 1980s it was being used by a range of right-wing think tanks in a wholly celebratory fashion as a progressive state to aspire to, in tandem with cutting public services (and in some cases to argue for abandoning comprehensive education altogether).

It is no accident that this complete *volte-face* in the value of meritocracy – from term of slander to wholly positive word -- occurred during the exacerbation of neoliberal culture from the 1970s. Neoliberalism, and neoliberal meritocracy, involved seismic shifts which were produced through multiple, interconnected realms: through think tanks, through parliamentary action, through changing economic policies, through mutating the sense of what was normal, possible and desirable in everyday discourse and popular culture. Slashing public funding for socialized forms of provision, and marketising public services, neoliberalism encourages us to believe that we are above all individuals who need to be in a permanent state of competition with each other in order to achieve. In the west or the Global North since the 1970s we have been increasingly incited to position ourselves as independent strivers who brand and promote ourselves, our worth gained not through sharing but through striving to beat others.

Neoliberal meritocracy is therefore characterised firstly by the extension of such individualized forms of competition into everyday life. We have been incited to 'free ourselves' by becoming entrepreneurial in every aspect of our being, from our expressive portfolio of career ambitions to our energy requirements and children's choice of schools. Secondly it has drawn, highly selectively, on the anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic social liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s for its lifeblood. Anyone can make it now! we are told: no matter where you are from, it's up to you. Meanwhile, the ladders that we are encouraged to climb individually get longer and longer, making it much harder for those who cannot draw on existing resources of privilege to climb them – and whilst they are simultaneously blamed for their own failure.

Meritocracy in British political discourse

In the later part of the twentieth century, at the beginning of the time we now think of as 'neoliberal', the idea that social mobility and 'equality of opportunity' should combine with the erosion of some manifestations of vested privilege was promoted by political leaders. Most notoriously it was given an almighty push under Margaret Thatcher, who sold off key chunks of the Welfare State's family silver (including its telecommunications and gas industry and much of its social housing). Being able to rise up and buy your own individual car and house (rather than be in council housing or use buses) and make lots of money was the motif of the era which birthed the figure of the yuppie and the working-class financial trader in the City. The subsequent Prime Minister John Major -- less plummy in tone than Thatcher and never having been to university, let alone Oxbridge -- was slightly more convincing as the subsequent prime ministerial persona peddling a similar discourse.

When New Labour swept to power in 1997, they kept the narrative of a land of equality of opportunity – using the ‘m’ word with regularity – but widened this idea out in terms of ethnicity, class and sexuality. Now anyone could make it, so the story went, gay or straight, brown or white. The selective and significant provision New Labour made via Sure Start (support for parents and children in deprived areas) and in tackling child poverty was far better than the Conservative governments; and yet it continued the idea that, after the early years, savage individualistic competition was both fair enough and the correct way to run a society. As part of this ideology, shared by the Clintons in the US, New Labour pushed through reforms shredding social provisions by putting them in the hands of corporations, instigating the private finance initiative (PFI) and the public-private partnerships (PPP) that handed a huge amount of power to private business interests and letting them profit from prisons and education.

David Cameron perpetuated neoliberal meritocracy but made it more punitive. In the ‘Aspiration Nation’ it was your own fault if you failed – no matter the privileges that led to such an uneven starting block in the first place. Under the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government even Labour’s early years’ provision was cut and the privatisations continued apace in, for example, libraries, hospitals and housing. But the increasingly jarring disjunction between the obvious privilege of the ‘chumocracy’ of Cameron’s privately educated and often aristocratic cabinet and the ‘necessary’ cuts of austerity politics increasingly didn’t wash with large sections of the population. The 99% were experiencing deprivation and less ‘opportunity’ on a range of scales, even if many weren’t exactly sure who to blame (Brussels? Red tape? Tories? “Labour’s deficit”? migrants?). This free-floating disillusion in search of a target fed into the Brexit vote (‘we’ll teach the political class a lesson’), confounding Cameron’s expectations and leading to his downfall and the reign of Theresa May. At the beginning of her term, Theresa May promised to level the playing field, giving a first speech promising to release the poor, the non-white, the oppressed women from injustice. ‘When it comes to opportunity we won’t entrench the advantages of the fortunate few, we will do everything we can to help anybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.’⁹ This was a rhetoric of meritocratic equality of opportunity worthy of Blair. But as time wore on it increasingly jarred, for large sections of the public, with the effects of May and Chancellor Hammond’s actually-existing policies, with an expanding number of people using food banks, and the manifesto commitment to a ‘dementia tax’, which did not sound like levelling the playing field as pushing those who couldn’t pay off it altogether. It is within this context that Corbynism’s significant success in challenging neoliberal meritocracy needs to be understood.

Neoliberal meritocracy as common sense

The traffic between Westminster politics and popular culture simultaneously takes the form of explicit links between powerful figures and policies, and the more diffuse, less empirically graspable but critically important form of cultural discourse through which ideas of what is ‘normal’ and ‘common sense’ circulate. Neoliberal meritocracy, for example, can be seen operating through very particular policies: by, for instance, extending the process of marketising public services by facilitating and encouraging PFI and PPI in the public sector. It

also functions through particular appointments, such as telegenic businessman Alan Sugar being installed as New Labour's Enterprise Tsar.

The scale and depth of neoliberal meritocracy as 'common sense' in British politics and cultural life is immense. We only have to look at the extent to which for example entrepreneurialism has become embedded as an unproblematic and normalised ideal to aspire in education and popular culture. Children are now regularly encouraged at school to be entrepreneurs; they do not very often learn, however, about how to set up co-ops, or about the difference between left and right on the political spectrum. Newspapers and magazines regularly encourage mothers to be 'mumpreneurs': to solve the problems of inflexible working conditions, an overwork culture and expensive privatized childcare by setting up their own business from home whilst their child crawls beneath it. (*The Daily Mail* offers prizes for the 'Mumpreneur of the Year'). It is no accident that Donald Trump, who translated his media power into political power by fusing it with his vast personal wealth, was the US presenter of the vastly successful TV franchise *The Apprentice*. Encouraging us to laugh at the foibles of contestants, to feel our own superiority, *The Apprentice* popularized the act of competing in a wide range of thrusting business cultures as a glamorous and normal act of aspiration that anyone could aspire to. It surfed a wider wave of competitive reality TV shows including *Idol* and *The Voice*, which dramatized 'meritocratic' competition that anyone could compete in and potentially win.¹⁰

Entrepreneurialism is popular because it speaks so powerfully to multiple issues: the inflexibility of much modern working cultures, to the possibilities of self-realisation, to the possibility of financial success in a precarious and highly stratified world. Neoliberal entrepreneurialism channels such desires through competitive individualism, economic growth and the search for private profit, rather than co-operation, inventing new forms of diverse, non-authoritarian forms of social protection (or 'socialism'). These multifaceted imbricated relations of power means that changing neoliberal meritocracy also needs to be tackled on a number of levels: in terms of policy, practitioners and popular common sense.

Aspiration for all

How does Corbynism promise to break with the discourse and social structure of neoliberal meritocracy? Clearly, its 2017 Labour party manifesto promises forms of social democratic redistribution from an earlier Keynesian moment. Student fees are to be abolished, key functions are to be re-nationalised, privatization in the public sector is to radically scaled back and ended.¹¹

The vocabulary and imaginary of Corbynism moves beyond and against neoliberal meritocracy. This is apparent in a recurrent slogan popularized early in his term, 'Aspiration for all'. 'The most important message my election offers' he stated after becoming leader

is that the party is now unequivocally on their side. We understand aspiration and we understand that it is only collectively that our aspirations can be realised.¹²

Aspiration was, as we have seen, a key term of Cameronism (who made frequent references to Britain being an 'Aspiration Nation') and was also a key word used in 2016 by the more Blairite candidates for Labour leadership, particularly Liz Kendall.¹³ It is a very good example of how a core neoliberal word – aspiration – has been taken up by Corbynism and re-articulated: for 'all' rather than the individual; or as the election slogan put it, for the many, not the few. Whereas Cameron and Kendall used aspiration to advocate 'equality of opportunity' in the form of individualization and privatization, Corbynite 'aspiration for all' involves the public ownership of schools, strengthening teachers' trade union representation, strengthening workers' rights and collective success. This work of re-articulating 'meritocratic feeling' away from individualism and into mutuality has been a key part of its successful politics.

At this point post-election, the right and centre wings of the parliamentary Labour party have been temporarily shocked into silence by a result far better than their doomsaying predicted. It is very noticeable that a recurrent area of criticism of those on the centre or right of Labour is the charge that the manifesto pledges don't connect enough to working-class poverty, particularly in the early years, and that the manifesto pledges are either erroneous or grievous mistakes.¹⁴ The accusation that the promises to abolish student fees would be an unfair burden on the working class is regularly made by centre-left MPs, for example, and a recent editorial on the Blairite faction of the Labour Party *Progress* described the manifesto's pledges disparagingly as 'bungs' (bribes).¹⁵

These are interesting charges on a number of levels. It is often noticeably a middle-class response to radical universalist policies and its anxiety about the working classes can often ring hollow. They can be blind to the importance of the party's appeal to the students, with reports of queuing round the block at polling stations near universities as well as levels of co-ordination among Labour students which hasn't been seen for years. They are also indicative of a technocratic blindness to the difficulty of cutting through a right wing media, and the power of having bold left redistributive policies in order to do so – a strategy which worked extremely well for the Corbynites. It is right to want more for early years; it is right to raise the issue of addressing the cut in tax credits and universal credits; but it regularly ignores the radical effects of socialized redistribution and how the manifesto also factors in, foregrounds and fully costs a boost for early years and Sure Start provision.

The reason why many more of those on Labour's right-wing are obsessed by early years' provision is not simply because the early years are important. They undeniably are. But so are middle years and the late years. This particular constituency are perpetually focused on early years because the idea of levelling the playing field at the outset of life and then letting people suffer at the mercy of marketization for the rest of it is not only fully compatible with but is the central tenet of neoliberal meritocracy. The problem with this is that firstly it is naïve. Creating an oasis of social welfare safety blankets for babies and toddlers whilst letting corporations make a profit out of education and healthcare everywhere else in the social system becomes increasingly hard as corporations become more powerful. Secondly, it individualizes and abandons people later on in their lives. We need to have forms of democratic, participatory, diverse, accountable and socialized provision for schoolchildren, for students, for the old, for

the disabled, for everyone who needs housing and clean food and drinking water. The Blairite fixation on looking after the children and then creating a fully marketised adult experience where we are individually responsible for our own success simply does not work: to see this we only have to look at Grenfell, at food banks, at the stratospheric scale of personal and household debt.

Corbynism is promising a profound break with neoliberal meritocracy simply by putting socialism across the life course back on the table and it needs to build on this in a number of ways. Central to neoliberal meritocracy is the idea of competitive individualism and social mobility. It needs to foreground and expose the sheer destruction wrought by competitive individualism and its status as a total fallacy. We are all different individuals who are connected to each other in a range of complicated ways. No person is an island; nobody comes into the world completely on their own.¹⁶ At the same time it is critical that any critique of individualism is combined with non-authoritarianism, with the idea of flourishing and diversity. Combining messages, politics and policies of mutualism with diversity is critical.

As we have seen, neoliberal meritocratic language harnesses the idea of equality of opportunity. This formulation has historically been pitted against 'equality of outcome' -- the idea of economic redistribution promised by the left. There are two key problems here. The first is that 'equality of outcome', on a rhetorical level, simply does not speak to everyday sense of wanting to grow and flourish, to extend yourself, to move beyond where you came from. The second is that whilst 'equality of opportunity' sounds good, it is always used to savage any forms of mutualism/the welfare state/social safety nets. Corbynism therefore needs to combine rhetoric, policy and strategies of redistributing wealth and mutual support with *diversity*, with the sense that people and the environment can be enabled to flourish in a range of ways.

How to do this is at one level about the simultaneously strategic and genuine use of rhetoric and image; Ken Loach's General Election campaign advert, for instance, depicting a wide diversity of Britons existing in a wide range of habitats, was a powerful example. Foregrounding a more diverse and complex society pushes socialism beyond the authoritarian imaginary. There are many longstanding traditions as well as newer experiments in participatory democracy that Corbynism can draw on to these ends. They include support for, and the generation of, worker's co-operatives, where the means of production are owned by the workers (not to be confused with the more ambiguous forms of co-operativism that are outside the orbit of workers' control, as Marisol Sandoval points out, of which the Co-operative Bank has become a depressing example.¹⁷ The work of the great political economist Robin Murray gives us many guides here, not least on platform co-operatives in the age of Google.¹⁸ This all entails moving towards a left politics that is very much of the future, which is reclaiming modernity, which is fashioning a twentieth-century socialism.¹⁹

The forms of co-production encouraged by think-and-do tanks like Compass, in terms of, for instance, how you might have comprehensive schools with greater levels of parental engagement, is also a powerful example here --- a long way from the destructive segmented

markets of faith, 'free' and grammar schools.²⁰ Making public libraries centres for community activity rather than closing them down or selling them to corporations is another. Moving towards more equality necessarily has to involve changing the disproportionate system of voting in our country and moving to a more proportionate system, or PR. Another more controversial means of democratic flourishing exists in relation to Europe. Debates over Brexit obviously constitute a zone which is very 'overdetermined' with meanings, politics and feelings. One of the motivations of those who oppose Brexit is an often fairly vague sense of cosmopolitanism: of simply wanting to be 'part of' Europe, of belonging beyond Little Britain, beyond the nation. Whilst Brexit is 'about' the European Union, with all of that institution's neoliberal power, it is also 'about' people's movement and interconnections and sense of themselves as part of a larger social geography. It makes sense not to alienate metropolitan cosmopolitans over Brexit, for this cosmopolitanism is progressive; it needs to be connected to and fused with democratic anti-neoliberal socialism.

Such forms of radical participation, then, combined with the more Keynesian, mid-century policies that Corbynism currently offers -- such as scaling back corporate power in media and banking and nationalizing key industries -- has the potential to further enthuse and energise those who need it most. To survive in this new century we do not need cut-throat individuals who want to step on other people's hands whilst they move up the social ladder of an imaginary 'meritocracy', but instead to use and invent ways of sharing the wealth and cultivating social, cultural and environmental diversity. The opposite of neoliberal meritocracy, promising significant forms of wealth redistribution, gives Corbynism immense potential; emphasising diversity, and radical forms of participation, promises to extend it.

¹ This chapter draws on and summarises some of the work produced in my book, Jo Littler, *Against meritocracy: culture, power and myths of mobility*, Routledge, 2018

² Talib, Nadira and Richard Fitzgerald, 'Inequality as Meritocracy: The use of the metaphor of diversity and the value of inequality within Singapore's meritocratic education system', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 12(4) 2015 pp445-462;

³ This is the first use identified so far; I think there will be earlier instances awaiting discovery by a diligent historian.

⁴ Fox, Alan 'Class and Equality' *Socialist Commentary*, May 1956, pp11-13; Kynaston, David *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box*, 1957-59, Kindle edition, Bloomsbury 2013, location 3666

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Arendt, Hannah 'The Crisis in Education' in *Partisan Review* 25(4) 1958, pp493-513; reproduced in Arendt, Hannah *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in political thought*. Penguin Books, 2006, pp176-7

⁷ Young, Michael, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. 2nd revised edition. Transaction Books, 2004

⁸ Bell, Daniel, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books. 1972.

⁹ May, Theresa 'Theresa May's first speech to the nation as Prime Minister – in full' *The Independent*, 13 July 2016 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/theresa-mays-first-speech-to-the-nation-as-prime-minister-in-full-a7135301.html>

¹⁰ Nick Couldry and Jo Littler, 'Work, Power and Performance: Analysing the 'reality' game of *The Apprentice*'. *Cultural Sociology*, Vol 5 No 2, 2011 pp263-279.

¹¹ Labour Party, *Labour Party Manifesto: For the many, not the few*. The Labour Party 2017.

¹² Corbyn, Jeremy 'Britain can't cut its way to prosperity. We have to build it' *The Guardian*, 2015

¹³ Gilbert, Jeremy 'What hope for Labour and the left? The election, the 80s and 'aspiration'. *Open Democracy* 27 July 2015. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/jeremy-gilbert/what-hope-for-labour-and-left-election-80s-and-%E2%80%98aspiration%E2%80%99> Accessed 1 December 2016

¹⁴ Andrew Harrop, 'Labour must return to first principles on child poverty', *The Guardian* 13 July 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/07/labour-manifesto-child-poverty-welfare-benefits>

¹⁵ Progress Editorial 'A New Establishment', 7 July 2017. *Progress Online*. <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2017/07/07/a-new-establishment/>. Also see the Fabian Society

¹⁶ Gilbert, Jeremy *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism*, Pluto 2013

¹⁷ Sandoval, Marisol 'What would Rosa do? Co-operatives and radical politics' *Soundings* 63, 2016, pp98-111.

¹⁸ Murray, Robin *Co-operation in the Age of Google*. Co-operatives UK, 2010; Murray, Robin 'Post-Post-Fordism in the Era of Platforms' *New Formations* 84/5, 2015, pp184-208

¹⁹ Fisher, Mark and Jeremy Gilbert, *Reclaim Modernity: Beyond Markets Beyond Machines*. Compass publication, October 2014. <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Compass-Reclaiming-Modernity-Beyond-markets-2.pdf>

²⁰ Zoe Gannon and Neal Lawson, *Co-production: the modernization of public services*. Compass. <http://www.compassonline.org.uk/publications/co-production-the-modernisation-of-public-services-by-staff-and-users/>