

## 0.1 Chapter 1: capitalism: Misemployment

### 0.2 Misemployment

## 1 On Meritocracy

One of the few ambitions shared by politicians across the political spectrum is that of creating a fully meritocratic society, that is, a society in which all those who make it to the top do so only because of their own talents and abilities (rather than thanks to unfair privilege: upper-class parents, a friendship with the boss etc.). Throughout the Western world, all governments have (in theory!) the common goal of trying to create a hierarchy based on actual ability, replacing posh, chinless halfwits with the meritorious, wherever they may be found and whatever age, colour or gender they might be.



Geert Vanden Wijngaert/AP/Press Association Images

This meritocratic ideal has brought opportunity to millions. Gifted and intelligent individuals who for centuries were held down within an immobile, caste-like hierarchy, are now free to express their talents on a more or less level playing field. We have largely turned the page on a western world that was once filled with rulers who were too sick or stupid govern, lords who couldnt manage their estates, commanders who didnt understand the principles of battle, peasants who were brighter than their masters and maids who knew more than their mistresses. No longer is background an impassable obstacle to advancement. An element of justice has finally entered into the distribution of rewards.



Rex/Moviestore

But there is, inevitably, a darker side to the idea of meritocracy: for if we truly believe that we've created (or could even one day create) a world where the successful truly merited all their success, it necessarily follows that we have to hold the failures exclusively responsible for their failures. In a meritocratic age, an element of justice enters into the distribution of wealth, but also of poverty. Low status comes to seem not merely regrettable, but also deserved.

Of course, succeeding financially (without inheritance or contacts) in an economic meritocracy endows individuals with an element of personal validation that the nobleman of old, who had been given his money and his castle by his father, had never been able to feel. But, at the same time, financial failure has become associated with a sense of shame that the peasant of old, denied all chances in life, had also thankfully been spared. The question of why, if one is in any way good, clever or able, one is still poor becomes infinitely more acute and painful for the unsuccessful to have to answer (to themselves and others) in a new meritocratic age.



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There has turned out to be no shortage of people willing to answer the question on behalf of the poor. For a certain constituency, it is clear (and perhaps even scientifically provable) that the poor owe their position to their own stupidity and degeneracy. With the rise of an economic meritocracy, in certain quarters, the poor have moved from being described as unfortunate, the target of the charity and guilt of the paternally-minded rich, to being described as failures, fair targets of contempt in the eyes of robust self-made individuals, who are disinclined to feel ashamed about their mansions or shed crocodile tears for those whose company they have escaped. In the harsher climate of opinion that can gestate in the fertile corners of meritocratic societies, it has become possible to argue that the social hierarchy rigorously reflects the qualities of the members on every rung of the ladder and so that conditions are already in place for good people to succeed and the dummies to flounder attenuating the need for charity, welfare, redistributive measures or simple compassion.





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It was the sociologist Michael Young who first explored the downside of a belief in a supposedly just social system. Today all persons, however humble, know they have had every chance, he explained in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. If they have been labelled dunce repeatedly they cannot any longer pretend... Are they not bound to recognise that they have an inferior status, not as in the past because they were denied opportunity, but because they are inferior? To the injury of poverty, a meritocratic system has added the insult of shame.

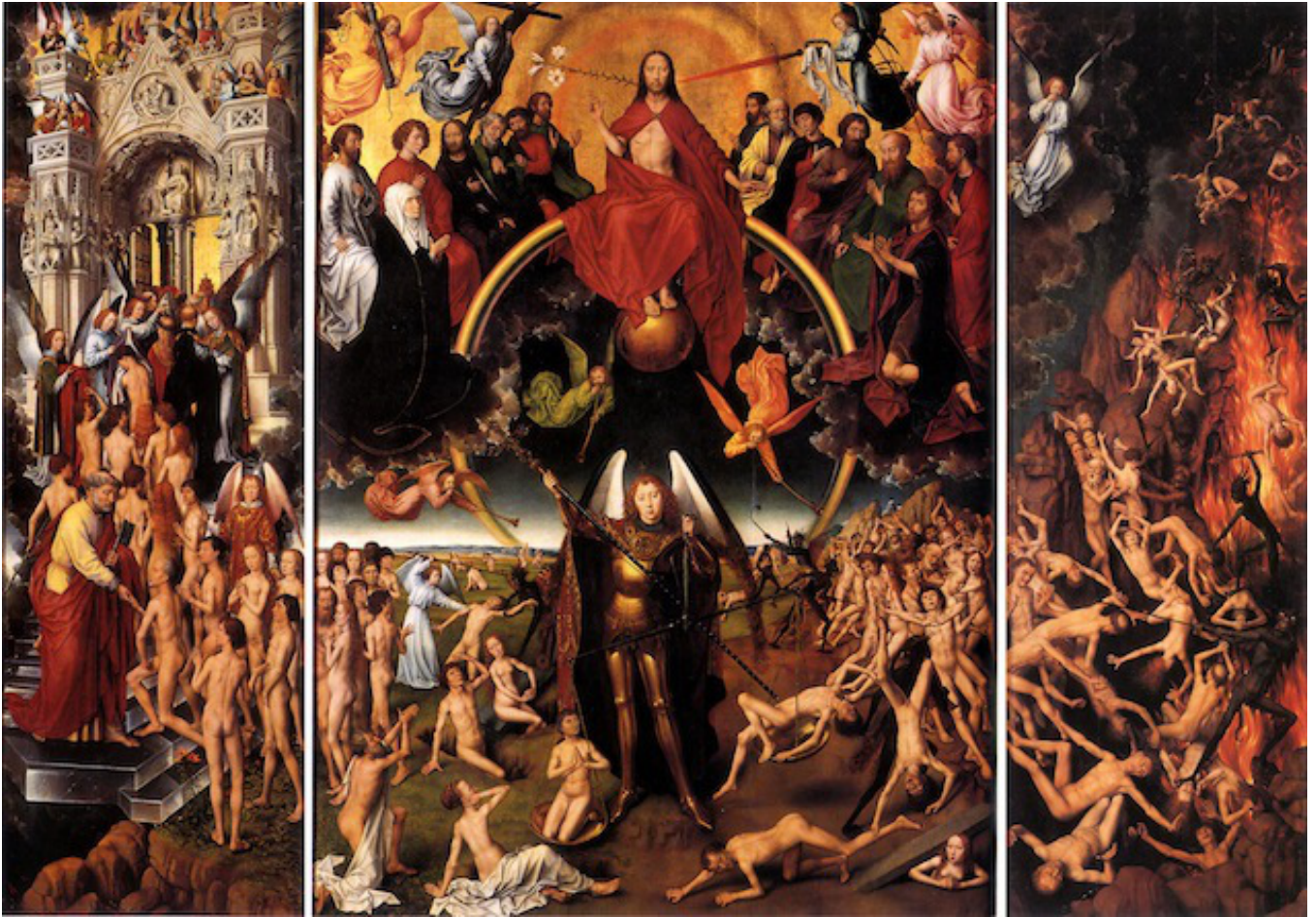


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It's a symptom of our greater faith in meritocracy that it's largely become impossible to explain away our failures as the result of bad luck. While it is granted that luck maintains a theoretical role in shaping the course of our careers, the evaluation of people proceeds, in practical terms, as if they could fairly be held responsible for their biographies. It would seem unduly (and even suspiciously) modest to ascribe a victory to good luck and, more importantly in this context, pitiable to blame defeat on the opposite. Winners make their own luck, insists the modern mantra: which would, for example, have puzzled the ancient Roman worshippers of the Goddess of Fortune. It is alarming enough to have to depend for our status on contingent elements. It is harder yet to live in a world so imbued with notions of rational control that it has largely dismissed bad luck as a credible explanation for defeat.

But of course, there never can be a truly meritocratic system, because the merit of an individual is far too complex and subtle a thing to be determined by what job you have. Those who have faith in meritocracy are essentially subscribing to an insane, and certainly arrogant assumption that ordinary humans (employers, customers) can handily take over the solemn responsibilities that past ages more wisely left in the hands of a God who, helped along by the angels, was due to weigh the souls of each person on the Day Judgement.





Hans Memling, *The Last Judgement* (1467/1471)

To free ourselves from some of the more punishing side-effects of a meritocratic worldview, it would be wise to cease investing something as haphazardly distributed as jobs and money with moral connotations and to retain a little of the old-fashioned, modest belief in a distinction between what someone earns and what their souls are like.