

The IQ Elite:
Meritocracy and the Politics of Intelligence, 1958-1969

*The world beholds for the first time the spectacle of a brilliant class, the five per cent of the nation who know what five per cent means.—Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy.*¹*

For the new fraternity that I had in view, the qualification was to be neither scientific achievements nor learned publications, but solely and simply the possession of a high intelligence—roughly (I suggested) that of the ablest 1 per cent in the general population. Such a group would admittedly constitute an élite; but, drawn from every rank and occupation, it would be essentially a democratic élite.—Cyril Burt.²

¹ Young, 1961 [1958], 103.

² Burt in Serebriakoff, 1966, 19.

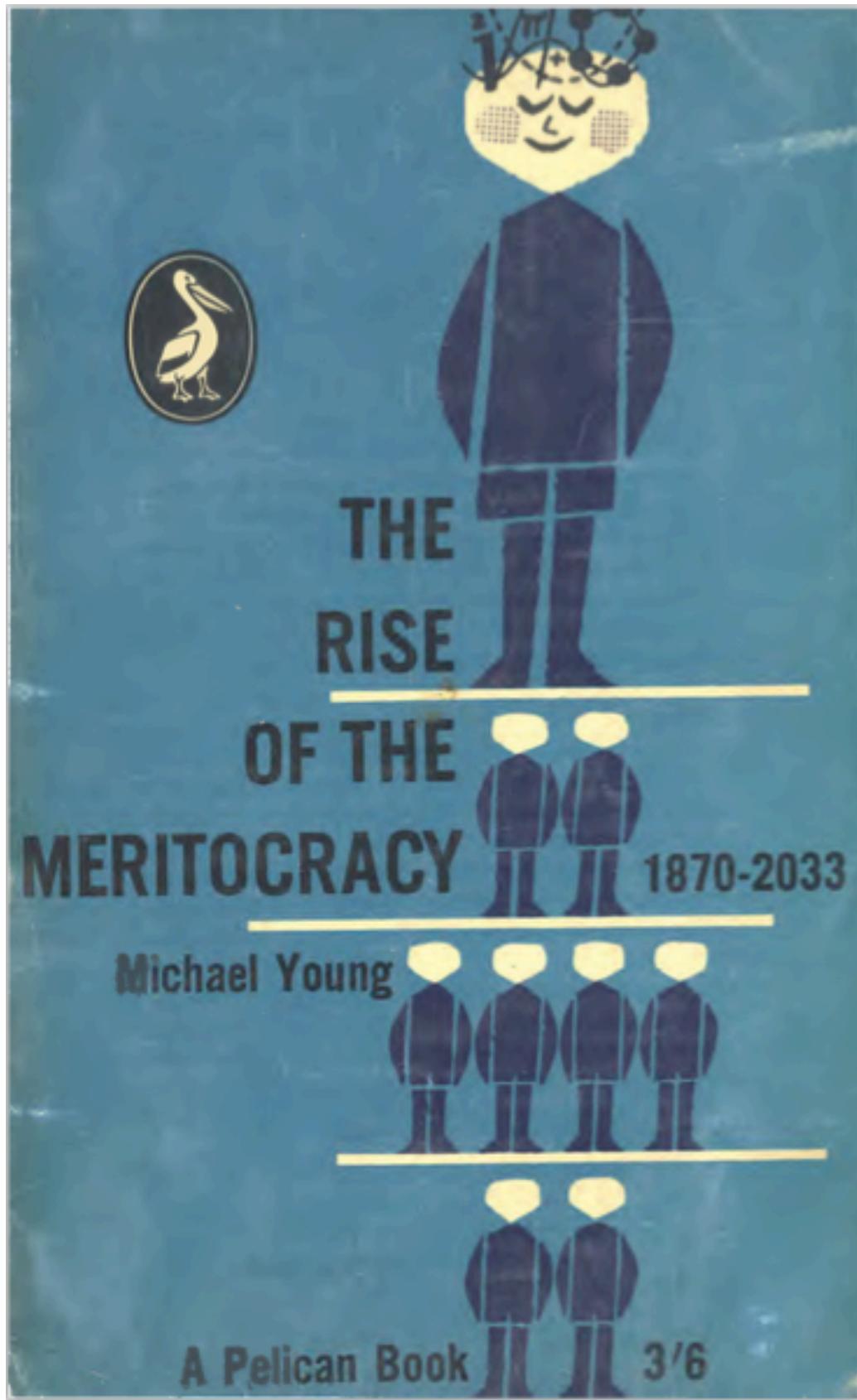
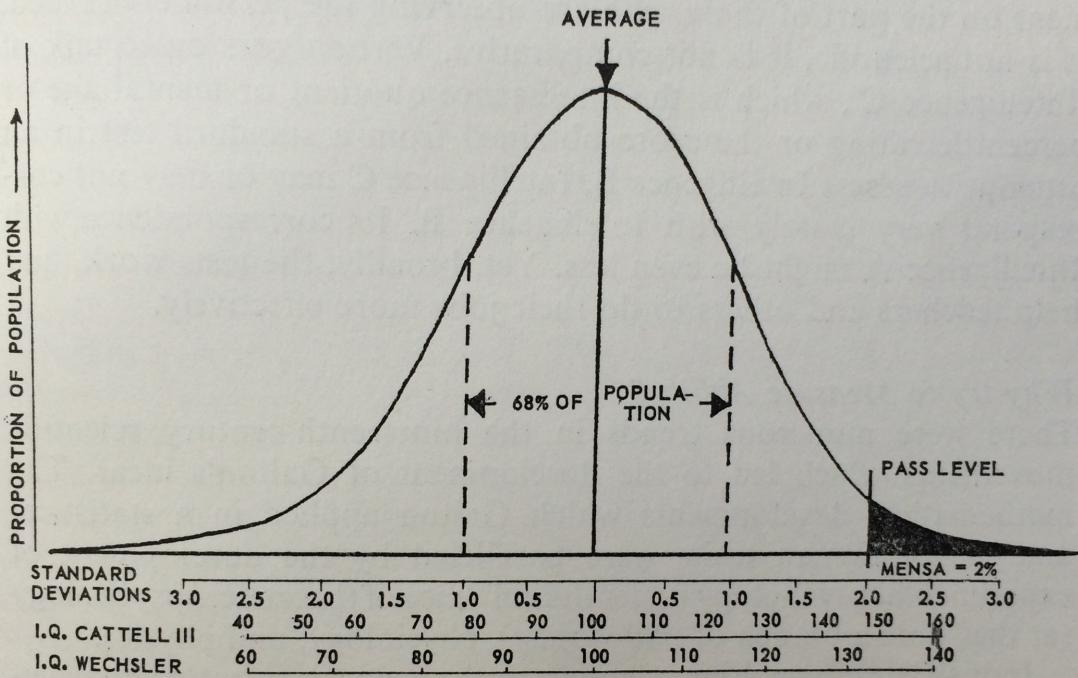


Figure 1: The IQ elite stands on the shoulders of the faceless lower classes. Young, 1961 [1958]. From here, cited as [Young, 1958](#).

Lord Wiffen (Born 9 August 1957, Bradford. Father, spinner)	Mr Ernest Bevin (Born 9 March 1881, Winsford, Somerset. Father, farm labourer)
5-11 A Stream Primary School. I.Q. 120	5-11 Learnt to read and write at village school
11 11-plus exam. I.Q. 121	11 Left school to take job as farm boy
13 Bradford Grammar School. I.Q. 119	13 Kitchen boy, Bristol
14 Ditto.	14 Grocer's errand boy
15 Ditto.	15 Van boy
16 Sixth form. I.Q. 118	16 Tram conductor, then van boy again
18 State scholarship, Cambridge University. I.Q. 120. Subsequently 2nd class B.Sc.(Sociology) and M.Sc. (Mental Testing)	18 Drayman
28 Lecturer on Human Relations in Industry. Acton Technical College. I.Q. 123	28 Secretary, Bristol Right to Work Committee
29 Commonwealth Fellow Harvard University. I.Q. 115	29 Secretary, Bristol Carmen's Branch of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside & General Labourers Union
32 Deputy Research Officer, United Textile Factory Technicians Union. I.Q. 115	32 Assistant National Organizer of Union
34 Ditto.	34 National Organizer of Union

Figure 2: In the future meritocracy, individuals' identities became closely connected to their IQ scores. Young, 1958, 147.

THE NORMAL CURVE



The bell curve diagram shows how intelligence test scores are distributed in the population.

The 'I.Q.' score which is equivalent to a given number of standard deviations is seen to be different for different types of test.

Figure 3: Mensa defined its IQ elite as the top two percent of the population. Serebriakoff, 1966, 33.

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In 1946, an eccentric barrister founded an exclusive club in London with a single criterion for entry: an exceptionally high intelligence quotient.³ For a dozen years, the Mensa Society languished in membership and was little noticed. Starting in the late 1950s, interest picked up. Over the next decade, Mensa—a club for the IQ elite—increased its ranks from a few hundred in the 1950s to 17,000 by 1967, and it received wide attention from the British media.⁴ Explaining the phenomenon from across the Atlantic, the *New York Times* identified in the United Kingdom a “new confidence among the highly intelligent. Brains are recognized now as valuable commodities, and people who have them are willing to stand up and be counted.”⁵

Over the same period there emerged a broader proliferation of discussion of potential and actual IQ elites in Britain. Michael Young’s dystopian satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, published in 1958 and reissued by Pelican in 1961, depicted a society governed by intelligence tests, in which citizens identified themselves with their IQ scores on “National Intelligence cards” and were allocated to social roles accordingly. The neologism describing this society, “meritocracy,” signified, as the sociologist Richard Hoggart put it in a review of the book, an “aristocracy of brains.”⁶ Recognizing the poignancy of such a vision for the nation’s political imagination at this time, another reviewer of the book identified the new word as “a shibboleth to test the tongue of every aspirant to power in contemporary Britain.”⁷ Young’s coinage rapidly entered the English language.

The term was adopted at the same time as the release of a rush of IQ-related publications, suggesting wide interest in the subject: H.J. Eysenck’s *Know Your Own IQ* (Pelican, 1962) and *Check Your Own IQ* (Pelican, 1966); a reissue of Francis Galton’s *Heredity Genius* (Fontana, 1963); and Mensa Secretary Victor Serebriakoff’s *IQ: A Mensa Analysis and History* (Hutchinson, 1966). To many contemporary observers, the demands of justice and international economic competition necessitated the production of a meritorious elite. And the ability associated with merit had become identified with

³ Hereafter, often, “IQ.”

⁴ Power, 1962; Heilpern, 1967.

⁵ O’Neill-Barna, 1960.

⁶ Hoggart, 1958.

⁷ Curran, 1959, 68.

intelligence as defined and detected by psychologists, whose tests had been institutionalized in the British education system and were pervasive by the 1950s.⁸ But while many had seen the harnessing of brainpower as essential to the future flourishing of Britain, the recognition of the IQ elite as a self-aware bloc, and not just an economic resource, was met with a striking ambivalence, represented on the one hand by the dystopian vision of the “meritocracy,” and on the other by journalistic reports on the Mensa Society, which largely saw it—contrary to the lofty geopolitical goals of its organizers—as quirky and mostly benign. As the diversity and vigor of discussions around the highly intelligent attest, by the early 1960s, speculating about the future of the IQ elite was increasingly seen as crucial to understanding the future of Britain’s social democracy.

This dissertation reconstructs the emergence of ideas about an “IQ elite” in Britain in the late 1950s and 1960s. While the “brainpower” of gifted children—measured in IQ since the 1910s in the United Kingdom—had been seen as a crucial national resource that the state needed to harness for the nation to stay economically competitive, by the late 1950s, high-IQ individuals had come to be seen as a nascent social and political force, not just a passive stock. The imagination of the IQ elite drew on eugenicist, psychological, sociological, dystopian, and political-philosophical discourses. It was most immediately a product of, and came to shape, debates about education policy—especially regarding the consequences of merit-based segregation in state secondary schools. But its function could not be reduced to that controversy: it was used as a discursive tool for thinking through the tradeoffs of equity and efficiency in an advanced industrial democracy; the contours and implications of equality of opportunity; how class structure shifted, and whether elites were always necessary, in an affluent society; and, more specifically, what IQ signified and whom institutionalized intelligence tests benefited. For commentators like Michael Young, imagining the implications of the production of such an elite through state psychometrics called into question whether the equal opportunity society, as it was developing, was compatible with egalitarianism: when all barriers to achievement were swept away, he wondered, would differences in innate ability—very often equated with intelligence quotient—inevitably produce an even

⁸ Sutherland, 1984, 164-190; Wooldridge, 1994, 257-263.

more rigid and demoralizing social hierarchy than did the arbitrary class privilege of before? This depended in part on how much IQ was determined by genetics, and how much by environment; scientific questions like this became inextricable from both the optimistic and dystopian visions of the IQ elite in this period.

Historicizing the IQ elite fills a hole at the intersection of two literatures: one on the history of elites, the other on the history of educational psychology. On the one hand, intellectual historians have studied discourses about intellectual elites in mid-century Britain; on the other hand, historians of science and education have traced the interdependent development of educational psychology and the idea of intelligence. Neither side has examined on its own terms the particular political imaginary of an intellectual elite that was defined by the educational psychologists' measure and that emerged in response to its institutionalization.

Historians of education and psychology have traced the ideological and institutional origins of the rise of educational psychology and the adoption of intelligence tests in educational selection in Britain.⁹ Adrian Wooldridge and Ben Jackson have also situated the rise of the critique of “meritocracy” in the history of debates among postwar Labour Party members, informed by the educational sociology of the time, about what kind of equality they should support, and how.¹⁰ These studies provide crucial institutional and intellectual-historical context, but they overlook the way in which these background forces produced and were intertwined with an emergent imagination of an IQ-defined intellectual elite—semantically associated with terms like “meritocracy,” “brains,” “skimmed cream,” and “egghead”—that had real effects on political discourse. Reconstructing the emergence of discussion around the IQ elite reveals how the subjects of prior histories of intelligence fit into and influenced changing social and political imaginaries in postwar Britain.

Intellectual historians have emphasized the importance of such imaginaries in mid-century Britain, but in their focus on providing revisionist accounts of classic debates about and among intellectuals, they have overlooked how in the late 1950s and 1960s the intelligence quotient was understood to define an intellectual elite that existed

⁹ See Sutherland, 1984; Rose, 1985; and Wooldridge, 1994.

¹⁰ See Jackson, 2007, 164-176; and Wooldridge, 1994, 164-200 & 311-318.

prior to education, culture, and social role. Recent studies by Stefan Collini and Guy Ortolano—one on intellectuals in Britain, the other on the “two cultures” debate—have emphasized the importance of historicizing discourses about intellectual elites. In *Absent Minds*, Collini made clear that his subject was “the *question* of intellectuals in twentieth-century Britain,” not the sociological role that intellectuals played.¹¹ Similarly, Guy Ortolano stressed that it was the “‘two cultures’ *controversy*, not the *two cultures*, that must be the object of study.”¹² This dissertation follows their lead, focusing on the cultural and political stakes around the novel discursive construction of a particular vision of a mental elite defined by intelligence quotient.

Discussions of an IQ elite were distinct from, but overlapped with, the mid-century British imagination of the “intellectual.” The cultural image of the “intellectual” that Collini has described was an educated expert who was trusted to address publics on issues of broad concern and guide general opinion.¹³ The architects of the Mensa Society imagined a similar role for the IQ elite, but the latter differed in that it was defined by raw intellectual ability, not education, although most believed that in an equal opportunity society the IQ elite and the educational elite would be identical. The IQ elite was also distinguished from “intellectuals” in that the latter were imagined as individual personalities, while the IQ elite was almost always discussed collectively. Even when the secretary of the Mensa Society planned for the IQ elite to fill the role of intellectuals in guiding public opinion, he imagined this happening through collective opinion polling of the membership, not via the particular reputations and personalities of high-IQ individuals.

Guy Ortolano has argued that the “two cultures controversy” was less about disciplinary boundaries than, at a moment of increasing expert professionalism, competing visions of history and politics, contrasting C.P. Snow’s “technocratic liberalism”—which tended to see British society as developing too slowly as a result of classism, nostalgia, and anti-scientific bias—with F.R. Leavis’ “radical liberalism”—which tended to see development as happening too fast, undermining community and

¹¹ Collini, 2006, 1.

¹² Ortolano, 2009, 9.

¹³ Collini, 2006, 52.

culture.¹⁴ The story of the IQ elite is consistent with and sheds new light on Ortolano's insight that arguments about intellectual elites in the 1960s attracted so much attention and controversy because they were proxies for political arguments about how British society should develop. The IQ elite was *not* primarily imagined within the typology of the "two cultures," but it *was* used to discuss—mirroring what Ortolano takes to be the essential feature of the Snow-Leavis debate—the potential trade-offs between producing an intellectual elite in the interest of rapid economic growth, on the one hand, and the maintenance of democracy, solidarity, and community on the other. While the IQ elite was sometimes associated more closely with technoscientific education and expertise, it could just as easily be connected to the civil service and politics; indeed, it is of particular interest in testing Ortolano's argument because the IQ elite by its very nature was defined by measured ability, not specialization. Unpacking the stakes that the rise of an elite defined by raw mental ability was understood to carry highlights the importance of intertwined scientific and political controversies over what ability was, how it was acquired, and how it should be valued in postwar Britain.

In chapter 1, I show how intelligence came to be imagined as a passive resource that the British state needed to harness in order for the nation to remain economically competitive. Reformers tried to accomplish this through the institutionalization of intelligence tests for selection into a universal state system of merit-segregated secondary schools. In chapter 2, I describe how in the 1950s sociologists destabilized the seemingly neutral image of intelligence as a passive resource through empirical studies on the relationship between class, education, and intelligence. Starting in the early 1950s, Michael Young also challenged the IQ-elitism that was central to the assumption of merit-based selection in education on theoretical grounds, arguing within Labour circles that the state-facilitated production of a ruling meritorious elite would create class antagonisms even more destabilizing than those under the hereditary aristocracy of before. In chapter 3, I describe how in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), Young communicated his critique of IQ-elitism to a broader audience by projecting into the

¹⁴ Ortolano, 2009, 11. On the increasing role of expert professionalism in British society at this time, see Perkins, 1989, 405-406 & 447-448. On the relationship between technical expertise and managerialism, see Edgerton, 2006, chapters 3-5.

future the dynamics of a society that prioritized economic growth and privileged equality of opportunity over other egalitarian ideals, showing how it inevitably produced undemocratic rule by an IQ elite. In chapter 4, I show how reviewers of *Meritocracy* understood Young's portrayal of the rise of an IQ elite to be an important narrative for discussing how British society was developing and should develop. In chapter 5, I trace the rapid adoption of the term "meritocracy," demonstrating that throughout the 1960s the term connoted the antidemocratic implications of the rise of an IQ elite facilitated by state-imposed intelligence testing. In chapter 6, I describe the early history of the Mensa Society, showing how the organizers of the group imagined an active, political role in the world for the IQ elite that they convened, and demonstrating that they were forced explicitly to distance their vision from the undemocratic image of "meritocracy." At the same time, journalists who directly observed Mensa's social activities reported on the private society as a benign human-interest story, suggesting that, when they did arise, fears of the IQ elite tended to be inextricable from its creation through, and capture of, state power. I conclude by suggesting how the story of the IQ elite sheds light on the adoption of "meritocracy" as a positive ideal by politicians like Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair.

I. “The Intelligence Quotient of the Nation”¹⁵: Eugenics, Psychology, and Education, 1869-1944

Looking back on the typology of intellectual elites in 1960s Britain, one would be forgiven for privileging the neat divide between scientific and literary intellectuals that C.P. Snow used in his 1959 Cambridge lecture on modernization and the “two cultures.” Indeed, many of Snow’s contemporaries adopted his framework, but it was not the only way to understand the distribution of Britain’s brainpower in this period. In 1965, in reaction to the dominance of Snow’s delineation, a Cambridge psychologist, Max Hammerton, took to the radio to present what he thought was a crucial intervention in the “two cultures” debate.

Hammerton was perturbed by what he thought was a troubling omission. Despite the divisions that Snow had identified, what united the cultures overwhelmingly, he stressed, was a high level of intelligence as measured by IQ. “Highly intelligent people,” he argued, were “rather rare....Snow’s cultures—all three of them—are of necessity limited to a small—perhaps a very small—fraction of the population.”¹⁶ The omission in the debate was that Snow’s cultures really only covered a small IQ elite, and ignored what Hammerton called “the fourth unculture”—the masses who did not possess the high IQ that the psychologist imagined was the ticket for entry into Snow’s exclusive groups. For Hammerton, this awkward fact prompted the question of the necessity of franchise limitations for those of unexceptional brainpower—which he quickly dismissed. But for him, that intelligence was a “scarce commodity,” as he put it, posed a theoretical and practical problem for democracy in what he perceived to be an increasingly complex age.

Discussion of the antidemocratic implications of tasking a limited stock of brainpower with managing society had strong recent precedent. The most influential vision of dystopian rule by an IQ elite was contained in Michael Young’s *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958).¹⁷ A sociologist and Labour Party insider, Young had written the democratic socialists’ 1945, 1950, and 1951 manifestos, and headed Labour’s research department from 1945 to 1951. His satire depicted a future Britain ruled by a

¹⁵ “Judgment Test For Voters,” 1938.

¹⁶ Hammerton, 1965. Snow had recently identified a third intellectual culture: the social-scientific.

¹⁷ On Young, see Wooldridge, 1994; Dench, 1995; Briggs, 2001 & 2006; Jackson, 2007; and Butler, 2015.

meticulously measured IQ elite, which by 2033 was on the verge of being overthrown by populist revolution. This vision was shaped by, and contributed to, debates within the party about education policy and, more broadly, what type of equality postwar British democratic socialism should strive for.¹⁸

The IQ test was central to these debates. By the start of the 1950s, as the Labour Party was finishing up its first postwar term in office, virtually all state school students were sorted into secondary schools, as part of the “eleven plus” exam, according to such psychometric tools. This system was the result of a long process of reform, informed by psychologists, that culminated in the 1944 Butler Education Act, which established universal secondary education, segregated according to merit.¹⁹ To understand this postwar moment, when an elite defined by the psychologists’ measure became a political flashpoint, requires tracing the history of the theory and practice of intelligence in Britain.²⁰ This chapter argues that by the early 20th century psychologists and politicians had come to imagine intelligence as a resource that had to be harnessed by the state in order for the nation to compete internationally, and that this was an important factor in the institutionalization of intelligence tests and universal merit-segregated secondary education in Britain.

The history of “intelligence” is deeply bound up with the histories of eugenics and psychology. In 1869, Francis Galton published *Hereditary Genius*, which argued that natural ability was transmitted by heredity, and that it was normally distributed throughout human populations. In his theory, intellectual ability was privileged as a general marker of human excellence. As Nikolas Rose has argued, for Galton intellectual ability was not just a discrete characteristic; it formed “an index of the quality of all the faculties, both mental and physical, the surest sign of the state of constitution.”²¹ This identification formed the basis of a social policy outlook that Galton called “eugenics.” He argued that once the natural laws were understood about how intellectual ability,

¹⁸ Jackson, 2007, 169-176.

¹⁹ Usually, English and arithmetic exams supplemented the intelligence tests. For an overview of this process of reform, see Sutherland in Thompson, 1990, 119-170.

²⁰ See Evans & Waites, 1981; Norton in Webster, 1981, chapter 8; Paul, 1984; Sutherland, 1984; Rose, 1985; Thomson, 1998 & 2006; Lemann, 1999; Nuttall, 2006; Carson, 2007; Chitty, 2007; Bashford, 2014.

²¹ Rose, 1985, 72.

identified with civic worth, was distributed, social policy could be designed to improve the “human stock.”²²

To forge this understanding, administrators required scientific theories and tests of intelligence. In the first two decades of the 20th century, psychologists developed the concept of “general intelligence” as an index of all-around intellectual ability and created tests to measure such a quality.²³ In 1913, the London County Council employed the psychologist Cyril Burt to develop and deploy such instruments, in order to help an expanding elementary education system identify “mentally defective” children for special education.²⁴

By 1920 in Britain, intelligence had become synonymous with “what the test measured, but now backed by a theory of intelligence as a normally distributed, innate, heritable, general cognitive capacity.”²⁵ While the immediate goal for hiring Burt had been to sort “defective” students for special education, mental measurement did not just attend to the needs of those children understood as “backward.” From early on in Britain, intelligence tests were seen as a mechanism of justice for the gifted, since, implemented through the education system, they gave students a chance to exercise what the tests found to be their innate abilities regardless—it was believed—of their prior educational opportunities or class background.²⁶ A 1921 *Observer* article introduced the test as a means toward equality of opportunity: “Every child must have *an equal chance*, his educational fate must be determined, not by Dame Fortune or by the parental purse, but by his own talents.”²⁷ It was widely believed that intelligence tests detected ability that individuals possessed independent of economic circumstance.

²² Rose, 1985, 74.

²³ On ‘general intelligence,’ see Rose, 1985, 119. On the first intelligence tests, see Sutherland, 1984, 123; Wooldridge, 1994, 87. On the development of the “intelligence quotient,” see Sutherland, 1984, 127; Wooldridge, 1994, 88. The application of intelligence testing in the American army in World War I was also important for their development. See Rose, 1989, 17-19; and Carson, 2007, chapter 6.

²⁴ Wooldridge, 1994, 81.

²⁵ Rose, 1985, 140.

²⁶ Wooldridge, 1994, 175-198; Jackson, 2007, 82.

²⁷ Thomson, 1921.

In addition to being a mechanism of justice, tests were also seen as an imperative of international economic competition, a means to national efficiency and dynamism.²⁸ Intelligence testing became deeply integrated into discourses of national efficiency and social wastage associated with various reform movements, including eugenics.²⁹ Especially in the aftermath of the Boer War, public anxieties arose about whether Britain would be able to compete in the future with Russia, America, Germany, and Japan.³⁰ Eugenics provided a framework for the application of social policy to ensure national strength. Intelligence came to be seen, particularly by liberals and socialists, as a national resource that had to be harnessed through education.³¹

This vision of intelligence as a passive stock, which social policy needed to mobilize to ensure competitive growth, would continue for decades. In a 1923 speech, for example, David Lloyd George compared the “waste of brain power” to the waste of land and coal reserves in order to argue against class favoritism in education.³² The call of Lloyd George and many others for expanding educational opportunities found its realization in the 1944 Butler Act, whose goal, as one economic historian told the *Manchester Guardian* in the 1950s, had been scientifically to detect how large “the deposit of high-grade brains in our society” was, and to harness the best of them through grammar schools.³³ This imagination of brainpower on a national scale influenced politics and policy.

As intelligence testing was introduced more widely as a mechanism of educational selection in the 1920s and 1930s, most believed that the intelligence quotient described something largely inherited and unchanging over the life course. Cyril Burt was the most prominent advocate of this position, spreading it through popular media like radio addresses.³⁴ This view had important consequences for education reform, justifying mental testing early in life as a means of segregating students into what were deemed

²⁸ Rose, 1984, 75-89.

²⁹ Rose, 1984, 75-89.

³⁰ Sutherland, 1984, 38; Wooldridge, 1994, 21.

³¹ Rose, 1984, 75; Wooldridge, 1994, 169-189.

³² “Mr. Lloyd George on Liberalism’s Future,” *Manchester Guardian*, 1923.

³³ “Finding Time For New Subjects in the Schools,” 1957.

³⁴ E.g., Burt, 1930.

appropriate educational environments.³⁵ This was the position taken by the influential Spens Report on education (1938), and ultimately in the 1944 Butler Education Act, which created a universal merit-segregated secondary school system, in which pupils were sorted through the eleven plus exam, which used IQ testing.³⁶

Despite scattered concerns about the assumptions behind the intelligence quotient, by the 1950s, most local education authorities had implemented IQ tests alongside more traditional arithmetic and English tests for selection between grammar schools, which promised upward mobility, and secondary modern schools, which did not.³⁷ IQ tests were age-specific, administered by paper in groups, and evaluated things like verbal ability and visual perception.³⁸ The universality of the tests in the form of the eleven plus helped to normalize the assumptions psychologists made about what the intelligence quotient measured. By 1954, the *Economist* could write that “people have grown so accustomed to being harried by intelligence tests at eleven...that they have come to believe not only in their efficiency—at least for others—but also in the absolute fixity of each individual’s endowment.”³⁹ The system’s segregation according to what was believed to be an absolutely fixed quality led to feelings that a natural hierarchy was emerging. As the *Manchester Guardian* summarized this period, “much discussion of the economic impact of the atomic age stemmed from the possibility that natural endowment in terms of brain power divided men into two categories—those who would take the initiative in the new situation and those whose abilities precluded this.”⁴⁰ Leftists would later question the arrangement precisely because of the naturalized hierarchy that it conceded, but in the 1940s and 1950s Labour members supported this system segregated according to brainpower, since merit-based educational selection promised to replace the unjust class-based selection system that had dominated in the past.

³⁵ See, for example, “High Intelligence,” 1934.

³⁶ Sutherland, 1984, 186-187; Jackson, 2007, 198.

³⁷ “Admissions to Grammar Schools,” 1953. For early concerns about environmental influence and the stability of IQ, see “Intelligence in Children,” 1927; and “The ‘Intelligence Quotient,’” 1932.

³⁸ For details about the development and content of group IQ tests in the interwar period, see Sutherland, 1984, 133-139. On the development of the eleven plus, see Sutherland, 1984, 164-190.

³⁹ “Stretching the Intelligence,” 1953.

⁴⁰ “Finding Time For New Subjects in the Schools,” 1957.

Due to its use in educational contexts, the intelligence quotient became bound up with—perhaps inextricable from—equality of opportunity, the high political ideal that was closely associated with the efficient harnessing of the nation’s stock of brainpower. As the sociologist A.H. Halsey described the situation in retrospect, “Equality had been defined narrowly to mean equal treatment for equal measured intelligence.”⁴¹ In the 1950s, sociologists would destabilize this contingent intertwining of psychological theory, testing method, political philosophy, and educational policy by questioning widely held assumptions about the nature of intelligence.

⁴¹ Halsey, 1963.

II. "Is This The Classless Society?"⁴²: Michael Young and the Sociology of Intelligence, 1945-1958

As London was being bombed in 1941, George Orwell wrote an essay on “socialism and the English genius” in which he argued that a central fact of recent English life had been the “decay of ability in the ruling class,” leading him to describe the nation as “a family with the wrong members in control.”⁴³ Besides a few outliers like Ernest Bevin, Orwell wrote, the most able had not been allowed to rise to the top, but the imperatives of the present war would wipe out these barriers. Through the metaphor of the family, Orwell anticipated a shift of control to the most able; here, ability was an unmarked general category not associated with psychometrics.

By the late 1950s, Michael Young, in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, was also putting forth a vision of a British future in which the most able were in control, but the metaphor was not one of family, and nor was the tone optimistic. In Young’s vision, attempts to put the ‘right members’ in control of society, through institutionalized psychometrics, produced an elite—specifically defined by IQ—that felt naturally superior to the scientifically determined lower orders, with decisively antidemocratic implications. Between Orwell’s and Young’s divergent images, a universal system of secondary education had emerged whose mission was to allow the ablest to rise to the top through educational selection based on IQ tests; and, in the 1950s, sociologists’ research facilitated doubts about the desirability, and even viability, of such an equal opportunity society. This chapter shows how Michael Young criticized the ability-based elitism he felt was central to the project of the equal opportunity society, and how sociologists’ research came to destabilize widely held assumptions about what IQ measured, how it was transmitted, and who benefitted from its institutionalization. The combination of Young’s theoretical criticism of the likely sociological dynamics of an equal opportunity society, and the empirical revelation that state-imposed IQ testing produced and reproduced inequalities, revealed how intelligence was not just a passive resource that the state harnessed, but could define a self-conscious elite with interests of its own.

⁴² Young, Michael. “Is This The Classless Society?,” Churchill Archive Center, Cambridge, Mark Abrams Papers, Box 67. Undated, ~1951. An early, expanded draft of chapter five of “For Richer For Poorer” – see note 44.

⁴³ Orwell, 1941.

Since the early 1950s, Michael Young had been warning other Labour Party insiders that emphasizing equality of opportunity over other forms of equality would produce an ability-defined elite, whose assumption of power would jeopardize democracy in Britain.⁴⁴ He argued that privileging social mobility over solidarity would accentuate inequality, destroy community, and undermine the value system of the working class; that it would redistribute intelligence upwards, stripping the working class of its most able potential leaders, thus undermining the Labour movement; and that this combination of a novel hopelessness for those at the ‘objectively’ determined bottom and hubris among the ‘objectively’ determined elite could result in even more destabilizing sociological dynamics than the more arbitrary hereditary class privileges of before. As Young wrote in an early draft of a policy document circulated among Labour Party insiders, “once the ablest people have risen to the top, will they not naturally form an élite of superior persons, unchallengeable in their claim to exercise power because their right is derived from sheer ‘merit?’”⁴⁵ For Young, this was a threat to socialism, community, and even democracy itself, since “it is very difficult to espouse the principle of democracy as well as the principle of the élite.”⁴⁶

For Young, critique of a meritorious elite in general and of one defined by IQ in particular were inextricable, due to the institutional context of the educational selection mechanism used by secondary schools, which defined ability narrowly as one’s score on an intelligence test. From early on in his analysis of equality of opportunity, Young criticized the framework of IQ testing. As he wrote, “one of the amazing pre-conceptions of those who talk about selecting the most able for higher education, is that there is something called ‘ability’ which can be weighed or measured like sugar. The extraordinary hoax of intelligence tests is that they have hoaxed intelligent people.”⁴⁷ Privileging one unidimensional measure of excellence, Young argued, destroyed solidarity and community, jeopardizing the pluralistic working-class value system that

⁴⁴ See, for example, Young, Michael. “For Richer For Poorer.” Churchill Archive Center, Cambridge, Michael Young Papers, 2/1/1, 1952. See also Jackson, 2007, 173-174.

⁴⁵ Young, “Classless Society?,” 20.

⁴⁶ Young, “Classless Society?,” 21.

⁴⁷ Young, “Classless Society?,” 11. The eleven plus was the gateway to grammar schools and thus to higher education as well for state students.

Young would study in his groundbreaking ethnographic work with Peter Willmott on the sociology of an urban working-class community, *Family and Kinship in East London*.⁴⁸

Criticism of the idea and measure of “general intelligence” was not unique to Young, nor was it new.⁴⁹ Since the tests’ introduction, some had argued—with little influence—that intellectual abilities could not be reduced to a unidimensional measure, while others had challenged the assumption that it did not change over the life course.⁵⁰ Others argued that the fatalistic judgment of the test, whether accurate or not, would be disastrously demoralizing. A 1943 article in the *Listener*, for example, suggested that the “psychological effect of being informed that one has a low I.Q. may be disadvantageous or even disastrous.”⁵¹ As schools deployed intelligence tests, onlookers immediately recognized the blind spots of such an impersonal system for the production of a meritorious elite.⁵²

In advancing his analysis, Young was responding to immediate debates about education policy, but he was also attacking an older tradition of Fabian elitism. George Bernard Shaw had advocated rule by a benevolent, talented elite in a socialist society. In 1948, in a postscript to a new edition of the 1889 *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, Shaw argued that the “haphazard Mobocracy must be replaced by democratic aristocracy: that is, by the dictatorship, not of the whole proletariat, but of the five per cent of it capable of conceiving the job and pioneering in the drive towards its divine goal.”⁵³ Shaw’s words would also appear in *Meritocracy*; notice the symmetry between “meritocracy” and “mobocracy.”⁵⁴ Young framed his concerns in response to the vision of an earlier tradition in his party that explicitly advocated rule by a “democratic aristocracy.”

As Young circulated his theoretical criticism of the equal opportunity society, sociologists were destabilizing assumptions about the neutrality of the intelligence tests

⁴⁸ Young and Willmott, 1957.

⁴⁹ Wooldridge, 1994, 157-158.

⁵⁰ See, for example, “The Intelligence Quotient,” 1932.

⁵¹ Boase, 1943.

⁵² Before the 1944 Education Act, local education authorities had been gradually introducing education testing for selection. See Sutherland, 1984, 133-139.

⁵³ Quoted in Young, “Classless Society?,” 21. On Shaw’s political thought, see Griffith, 1993, chapters 1 and 2.

⁵⁴ Young, 1958, 38.

that were supposed to facilitate social mobility, validating with empirical evidence many of the criticisms that had gone unheeded before. Sociologists' demonstration in the 1950s that the middle class benefitted from merit-based selection more than the working class opened up space for the imagination of an IQ elite as an active, self-interested political bloc, and not just a passive, objectively determined resource mined disinterestedly by the state. Although by the early 1950s sociology had a meager institutional footprint in the United Kingdom, sociologists' work on social mobility became influential in political circles—in particular, among Labour Party insiders.⁵⁵ As one French sociologist put it in retrospect, “British sociology [was] essentially an attempt to make intellectual sense of the political problems of the Labour Party.”⁵⁶

From early on, social scientists reinforced the close connection between equality of opportunity and ability as measured by intelligence quotient. Sociologists measured the degree of equality of opportunity in society by comparing the percentage of children at the same IQ level from different classes who went on to grammar schools and higher education. In 1935, the sociologists J.L. Gray and Pearl Moshinsky had shown that, while the average middle-class child had a higher IQ than a less privileged one, due to its size, the working class contained many high-IQ children, who had few educational opportunities.⁵⁷ In response to this finding, the *Guardian* argued that the state ought to “cherish and develop their exceptional intellectual capacity as a vital national possession,” drawing on the prevalent imagination of brainpower as a crucial resource that the nation wasted at its own peril.⁵⁸ Here, unlike later, there was no sense of an active, self-aware IQ elite that could itself take action in addition to being acted upon.

By the 1950s, with the expansion of secondary education, sociologists could demonstrate that equality of opportunity, narrowly defined in the terms of the intelligence quotient, had been achieved. In 1953, A.H. Halsey and L. Gardner showed that with the expansion of opportunities for secondary education following the Butler Act and other

⁵⁵ Jackson, 2007, 164-167. On the history of British sociology, see Abrams, 1968; Anderson, 1968; Kent, 1981; Bulmer, 1985; Genov, 1989; Kumar, 2001; Halsey, 2004; Jackson, 2007; and Savage, 2010.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Butler, 2015, 10.

⁵⁷ Roberts, 1935.

⁵⁸ “Ability and Opportunity,” 1935.

reforms, the discrepancy that Gray and Moshinsky identified in the 1930s had disappeared: high-IQ children tended to achieve grammar school and even higher education regardless of class. Contrary to expectations, this had not increased working class students' share of educational achievement; in fact, the 1944 Education Act had harmed them and helped the middle class.⁵⁹ This was due to the greater share of high IQs in higher classes, which had been established firmly since at least the 1930s; but sociologists believed genetic inheritance of intelligence and upward mobility could not account for all of this skewed distribution. They were coming to see an increasing role for the environment in the formation of IQ: people were not just wealthier because they had high IQs, but had high IQs because they had grown up in resource-rich environments.⁶⁰

Sociologists and psychologists also showed how IQ was not constant over the life course, overturning a belief that had been central to the eleven plus system, that a test at that early age could reliably sort students for subsequent years of secondary education. As the *Economist* forcefully concluded, in response to articles published in the *Lancet* establishing this point, "the immutable can now change; it can expand if it is stretched."⁶¹ This was a large blow against the finality of the eleven plus, and opened up further the question of environmental influence on intelligence. If IQ was subject to change over the life course, and was influenced by home environment, then educators could not justify sorting students from the age of eleven according to tests, since their scores were subject to change, and since the contingencies of their home environments could be improved through social policy.

In the 1950s, sociologists challenged long-held assumptions that intelligence tests measured something inherited and stable, and that they would be a bounty for working class children. Intelligence, they showed, was formed, not just born, thus revealing how high-grade brains were not simply a passive resource to be discovered and harnessed, but were themselves the product of the political actions of state actions and inactions. Meanwhile, Michael Young developed a theoretical sociological analysis of the equal opportunity society, suggesting that the seemingly democratic drive to put the ablest in

⁵⁹ Halsey and Gardner, 1953. See also Floud, Halsey, and Martin, 1956.

⁶⁰ Wooldridge, 1994, 272-275.

⁶¹ "Stretching the Intelligence," 1953. See also "Intelligence Tests," 1953.

charge would only create new class antagonisms and undermine democracy. Incorporating the findings of the empirical sociologists, he went on to communicate the image of an IQ elite to a wide audience in his dystopian satire, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

III. “A Futuristic Morality Tale”⁶²: The Rise of the Meritocracy (1958)

Young saw significant sociological dangers in the IQ-elitism entrenched in the British education system. In the early 1950s, Labour MP Richard Crossman asked Michael Young to contribute to what would become the *New Fabian Essays*, an attempt by Labour thinkers to present an updated philosophical vision of democratic socialism for the 1950s. Crossman rejected his submission, according to Young because it challenged Labour orthodoxy on equality of opportunity.⁶³ Young turned his contribution into *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a dystopian satire that would become the most highly visible representation of the IQ elite in British society. In *Meritocracy*, Young novelized the sociological analysis that he had developed since the early 1950s. The book presented an image of high-grade brains not just as a passive resource that had to be harnessed through social policy, but as the defining characteristic of an IQ elite, which wielded social and political power. This chapter shows how in *Meritocracy* Michael Young communicated his sociological critique of the privileging of equality of opportunity by projecting contemporary trends into the future, showing vividly how an IQ elite emerged and undermined democracy.

Meritocracy was written from the perspective of a historical sociologist in the year 2033. By the turn of the 21st century the hereditary economic privileges of the past had been swept away, largely thanks to the democratic socialists of the Labour Party. A new system had gradually been put in place, in which social roles were allocated according to merit. Merit here was defined according to an equation: I+E=M (intelligence + effort = merit).⁶⁴ IQ testing gradually became a central feature of society. Young’s historical sociologist traced the meritocracy back to the introduction of the competitive examination for entrance to the civil service in the 1870s, and he attributed its rapid rise to the demands of international competition and the contingencies of two world wars. The narrator—ostensibly a supporter of meritocracy—argued that while Labour Party members had acted as “socialist midwives of progress” by opposing inherited class

⁶² Barker, 1995.

⁶³ Young, 2006, 73.

⁶⁴ Young, 1958, 94.

privilege, the Left of the Labour Party eventually became a buttress against meritocracy as it raised concerns on egalitarian grounds about the emerging intelligence hierarchy—a clear reference to the potential outcome of the efforts that Young himself was making within his party. The hallmark policy that these egalitarians advocated in Young's narrative, as in reality, was the replacement of the merit-segregated secondary education system with comprehensive schools. In the book, the failure of the "psychological egalitarians" to moderate the meritocracy through comprehensive reform allowed the unimpeded rise to power of an IQ elite. By 2033, the high-IQ leaders of society had rolled back democratic institutions, leading to social unrest. Populist democrats threatened revolution, and the book's narrator set out to write the text of *Meritocracy* in 2033 in order to explain the historical forces that produced this moment of crisis.

State-imposed intelligence testing structured Young's "meritocracy." In the narrator's interpretation, the success of the educational reforms that brought about the meritocracy "depended upon the continuous growth in the efficiency of selection methods."⁶⁵ The narrator argued that the spread of intelligence testing as a means of selecting students was spurred on by their demonstrated effectiveness for the American and later British armies in World War I and World War II. The 1944 Butler Education Act, by expanding secondary education, had been a necessary step in the rise of the meritocracy. "By 1950," he went on, "most of the children in the country were taking these tests...and...high I.Q. was established as the chief qualification for entry to the élite."⁶⁶ "Progress" for the narrator became identified with the improvement of intelligence testing and the universalization of its application.⁶⁷ IQ tests, structuring society, became bound up with its ideals.

The book confronted contemporary debates about I.Q. prompted by the research of sociologists discussed in the previous chapter. In the world of *Meritocracy*, intelligence was partly inherited and partly a product of environment; the goal of psychologists was to understand how to bring "the actual nearer to the potential."⁶⁸ That IQs could change over the life course—a finding widely reported in the British press in

⁶⁵ Young, 1958, 69.

⁶⁶ Young, 1958, 70.

⁶⁷ Young, 1958, 70.

⁶⁸ Young, 1958, 74.

1953—had become institutionalized in Young’s IQ society, which maintained Regional Centres for Adult Education, where citizens were encouraged periodically to retest their intelligence levels, in case an intervening change in their IQ meant that their labor was better allocated elsewhere.⁶⁹ Young’s narrator referenced and validated many of the sociologists’ criticisms of IQ testing in the eleven plus: for example, that early IQ testing had unjustly condemned people to particular life tracks even if their IQs changed in subsequent years. This injustice was later resolved, the narrator explained, not by phasing out the state-issued IQ test, but by improving it and applying it constantly.⁷⁰ Thus, any developments in IQ that the eleven plus could not capture later in life would be detected subsequently.

Young’s book showed how the equal opportunity society—organized by state-imposed intelligence tests—by its very nature produced an IQ elite, and the drama of *Meritocracy* was the sociological and political tensions that emerged between this meritocratic elite and those left behind.⁷¹ In this society, every person was judged according to his or her intelligence. Each citizen was given a “National Intelligence card” detailing his IQ, “which [accompanied] a person throughout his life, unless he [had] conscientious objections.”⁷² These cards were updated as individuals discovered changes in their IQs through their participation in Regional Centres for Adult Education, which became the sole means of social mobility later in life. The absolute identification of the individual and his or her IQ score in the meritocracy was brought into absurd focus by a court decision that concluded “that there was no obligation on anyone to put anything more than his current I.Q. in his *Who’s Who* entry.”⁷³ From the early 1950s Young had been warning of a narrowing of values through the privileging of measured intelligence, and this was brought to a satirical extreme in the meritocracy, where the life course itself became conceptualized as a series of IQ tests, vividly illustrated in a side-by-side contrast between the lives of Ernest Bevin and the 21st century’s “Lord Wiffen,” the latter of

⁶⁹ Young, 1958, 75-76.

⁷⁰ Young, 1958, 75.

⁷¹ Young, 1958, 104-125.

⁷² Young, 1958, 72.

⁷³ Young, 1958, 76.

whose life was described in a timeline with IQ measures next to each year of life.⁷⁴ In the meritocracy, you were what you scored.

The sociological dangers that Young had identified for the equal opportunity society in the early 1950s became pronounced, ultimately leading to class antagonism and revolutionary unrest. In the meritocracy, the elite became overconfident in itself, and the working class lost its confidence, since the position of each was now dictated by ostensibly objective measures, rather than the arbitrary class privilege of prior ages.⁷⁵ “For the first time in history,” Young’s narrator stated, “the inferior man has no ready buttress for his self-regard.”⁷⁶ Connected to this loss of self-regard—a particular concern for Young—was the undermining of the Labour movement, as its potential leaders were skimmed off into the IQ elite.⁷⁷

Indeed, in the meritocracy, the elite of society was made identical with the IQ elite through state power. At first, the lower classes, now also defined exclusively by IQ, attempted to elect their own kind into government, and the intelligence quotient of Parliament declined.⁷⁸ In response, some demanded revisions to democracy to ward off a race to the bottom of Parliamentary intelligence—for example, an I.Q. requirement for parliament membership was proposed. Ultimately the high-IQ meritocrats stripped the House of Commons of power and threatened to discontinue the adult IQ testing centers, the sole hope of mobility for working class adults. This threat, among other perceived injustices, sparked a populist revolt, which, a concluding footnote in the book informed the reader, ultimately took the life of the narrator. In the world of Young’s book, the equal opportunity society produced an IQ elite that undermined the very democracy that had brought it into power in the first place.

The IQ elite depicted by Young satirized the “democratic aristocracy” of George Bernard Shaw. Shaw advocated rule by the enlightened five percent of society. In Young’s meritocracy, those with IQs of 125 ruled society: precisely those in the 95th

⁷⁴ Young, 1958, 147. See Figure 2.

⁷⁵ Young, 1958, 107-108. See Figure 1 for an illustration of the IQ elite standing on the shoulders of the lower orders.

⁷⁶ Young, 1958, 108.

⁷⁷ Young, 1958, 140-147.

⁷⁸ Young, 1958, 136.

percentile, or top five percent, of intellectual ability.⁷⁹ Young satirized Shaw's position by literalizing his elite according to the mapping of the normal distribution. In doing so, Young showed what he thought were the anti-democratic tendencies at the heart of Fabian elitism. As Young's narrator put it, defending the meritocracy, "think of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and Bernard Shaw—the modern Conservative Party is carrying on their battle."⁸⁰ In his portrait of the rise of an IQ elite, Michael Young showed how in the long run there could be no such thing as a "democratic aristocracy," and that the latter project was implicit in reform efforts that privileged the rate-race of equality of opportunity over other values like community and solidarity.

⁷⁹ Young, 1958, 103.

⁸⁰ Young, 1958, 96.

IV. "The I.Q. Society"⁸¹: Meritocracy Reviewed

The book's vision of an IQ elite as an active political force, and not just a passive resource, palpably struck its initial audience. This chapter shows how reviewers of *Meritocracy* took its presentation of the antidemocratic implications of the production of an IQ elite to be a central feature of the book, and how they immediately used this political imaginary to discuss how Britain ought to balance the imperatives of economic competition and democracy.

Reviewers of *Meritocracy* highlighted its presentation of an IQ elite in various ways. Richard Hoggart described the meritocracy to *Observer* readers as "an aristocracy of brains," a "society more rigidly divided into castes than ever before."⁸² The *Listener* called Young's meritocracy a "shining, efficient, precisely assessed Utopia of the intelligence," in which "people with high I.Q.s have now broken through into the new élite and the old working and middle classes have been denuded of their most talented members."⁸³ The *Economist* described it as "an elite of top people, no longer encumbered with hereditarily privileged dumb-clucks," presiding over a "new, and paradoxically wide-open, caste system."⁸⁴ As the *Encounter* reviewer put it, the book portrayed a world in which "brains and status go together in close correlation. The new upper classes consist exclusively of people with high I.Q.s....The lower classes are at the bottom because they are mentally inadequate, and for no other reason; their fault is in themselves, not in their stars."⁸⁵ That readers took the meritocracy's intelligence hierarchy to be its central feature was suggested by a radio discussion of the book, pithily entitled "The I.Q. Society."⁸⁶

Young's presentation of the emergence of an IQ elite prompted reviewers to evaluate whether something like a meritocracy already existed, whether it was likely to come into being, and whether it was desirable. Some argued that Young's book was a

⁸¹ Paul, 1959.

⁸² Hoggart, 1958.

⁸³ "Book Chronicle," 1958.

⁸⁴ "The New Caste System," 1958.

⁸⁵ Curran, 1959.

⁸⁶ Paul, 1959.

warning against society's overemphasis on economic efficiency, growth, and competition. The *Economist* wrote that the meritocracy was clearly an "odious" place, which revealed how the demands of economic efficiency—"a mania for capital expansion"—could in fact lead to a reduction in human welfare.⁸⁷ A participant in the "I.Q. Society" radio program also noted that in Young's book "economic productivity rules the ends of human society."⁸⁸ Raymond Williams emphasized the book's critique of state-imposed top-down selection in particular, calling it a "shameful attempt to decide other people's futures according to some obsolete model in our minds." One such model was intelligence itself: "We think of intelligence as absolute and limited because we have been told to think so, by this kind of society. It seems increasingly obvious, in practice, that our concepts of intelligence are peculiarly unintelligent."⁸⁹ For reviewers, Young's book described a nation forced by economic imperatives to submit itself to an aristocracy of brains.

Some reviewers argued that the meritocracy that Young presented was approaching, and fast. The *Times* wrote that "for the first time in our history...we are advancing ability wherever it is found....In a country whose economic survival depends on discovering and promoting the best brains, even such schools would still be selective instruments. There is no getting away from the rise of the meritocracy in a scientific world."⁹⁰ The *Economist* similarly argued that the trends Young described were both real and inevitable: "A 'meritocracy' of one sort or another is on the way. Not even the most rigidly comprehensive schooling, so long as it does not flatten superior ability altogether, will keep that ability in the working class. Working-class environments, habits, and society generally are already rejected by the gifted who have a chance to escape them."⁹¹ For these readers, the demands of international competition and industrial development required the production of the kind of IQ elite Young described.

Other readers emphasized political dynamics that made the rise of meritocracy unlikely in Britain. Raymond Williams stressed that meritocratic allocation of many

⁸⁷ "The New Caste System," 1958.

⁸⁸ Paul, 1959.

⁸⁹ Williams, 1958.

⁹⁰ "I.Q. + Effort = Merit?," 1958

⁹¹ "The New Caste System," 1958.

social roles did not necessarily entail a meritocratic distribution of political power: while he agreed that professionals, administrators, and technicians were increasingly being selected based on merit, “the power [was] still largely elsewhere.”⁹² Writing in *Encounter*, Charles Curran argued that there were significant sociological barriers to the kind of society Young envisioned, including nepotism and the political power of voters who could not compete with the IQ elite.⁹³ Ultimately, he believed that society would only accept Young’s IQ elite to a certain degree: “The common man is ready to use Mr. Young’s five per cent, to let them have their careers open to talent, to echo their catchwords. But this does not mean that he is ready to let them fix the pattern of his life, or to mold the shape of society in their own image.” Either democracy or preexisting non-meritocratic aristocracy could stave off the rise of the meritocracy, some believed.

Reviewers praised Young for outlining the social costs of a society organized hierarchically with an IQ elite at the top. For the *Economist*, the crucial question the book presented was how to balance the impersonal, economicistic demands of the meritocracy—which was inevitable—with the fragile sociological structures—solidarity, working class pride and power—that Young had shown it threatened to undermine.⁹⁴ A 1959 radio discussion on Young’s book stressed the danger of relegating social valuation to a psychometric test, opposing the single-minded “I.Q. Society” to one with “plural values,” and concluding that “intelligence and aptitude are mere sounding brasses and tinkling cymbals, without moral judgment and character to give them weight and meaning.”⁹⁵ In contrast to the *Economist*, which framed meritocracy as necessary for the survival of British democracy, the thrust of Raymond Williams’ review in the *Guardian* was that the two—meritocracy and democracy—were mutually exclusive.⁹⁶ To all readers, Young’s presentation of the future of British society as dominated by an IQ elite forced a deep consideration of widely held political assumptions—in particular, whether the equality of opportunity that was supposed to extend democracy would ultimately undermine it.

⁹² Williams, 1958.

⁹³ Curran, 1959.

⁹⁴ “The New Caste System,” 1958.

⁹⁵ Paul, 1959.

⁹⁶ Williams, 1958.

In prompting such deliberation, Young's book fit into an "anti-Utopian" tradition of novels that projected present trends into the future to make an argument about contemporary politics.⁹⁷ Reviewers situated *Meritocracy* in this lineage, comparing it to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*.⁹⁸ Raymond Williams also set it in the tradition of British satire exemplified by Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," although he feared that the zeal for educational selection would make the parodic nature of Young's story lost on some.⁹⁹ To communicate his analysis, Young tapped into existing literary traditions that many readers were aware of.

The image of an anti-democratic IQ elite was not confined to discussions of Young's book. The rapid uptake of "meritocracy" both facilitated, and was the sign of a broader growth in, the imagination of the IQ elite in British society. The desire in public discourse for a term that pithily communicated such an entity was apparent to one reviewer, who upon reading Young's book could immediately write that "in calling his end-of-the-rainbow State a 'meritocracy,' he has coined a valuable new word," an indispensable political "shibboleth."¹⁰⁰ The broad and swift adoption of "meritocracy" suggested that Young had hit a nerve in a generation of adults, the future of whose children was being determined by their IQ scores, a measure whose meaning was increasingly being called into question by sociologists.

⁹⁷ The word "dystopia" did not enter wide usage until the 1970s.

⁹⁸ Hoggart, 1958; "The New Caste System," 1958. Young gave a clever nod to these two works in the text of *Meritocracy*: see Young, 1958, 114.

⁹⁹ Williams, 1958.

¹⁰⁰ Curran, 1959, 68.

V. “Shibboleth”¹⁰¹: The Rise of “Meritocracy,” 1959-1969

Pelican reprinted *Meritocracy* in 1961. By the early 1990s the book had sold over 500,000 copies.¹⁰² This chapter argues that throughout the 1960s, the term “meritocracy,” coined in Young’s popular work, connoted the antidemocratic implications of the production of an IQ elite through a merit-segregated state education system, and it was used to challenge such a system in arguments for comprehensive education reform.

In the immediate years after the publication of *Meritocracy*, usages of the term often explicitly referenced Michael Young.¹⁰³ For example, in a 1961 *Listener* essay on the increasingly important role of sociology in political thought, Christopher Martin wrote on the shift away from the hereditary class privilege of the 19th century, and toward a seemingly “classless society” that nevertheless produced new inequalities.¹⁰⁴ He clarified: “I mean something far more like what Michael Young has called the meritocracy, where distinction by brains replaces the older distinctions of land, wealth, or birth. Under pressure, and unevenly, we are moving toward this sort of society. It would lead to a more rabid class struggle, a sort of Sparta with its cream of battling technocrats propped on a substratum of helots.” Martin referenced Young, and Young’s term—the section heading here was “Towards a Meritocracy”—to articulate this new “distinction by brains.” By 1963, the sociologist A.H. Halsey could describe “Michael Young’s well-known thesis about the ‘meritocracy,’” describing it as “the tyranny of the clever over the stupid.”¹⁰⁵

Even as the term became used without reference to Young, it still retained its class-antagonistic, dystopian ring, associated with an IQ elite: e.g., “class distinction of

¹⁰¹ Curran, 1959, 68.

¹⁰² Dean, 1990.

¹⁰³ See Paul, 1959; Gellner, 1959; “Grammar schools ‘indispensable’ and ‘irreplaceable,’” 1959; Young, 1960; “Snobs and Strivers,” 1960; “Consumer Quest,” 1960; Martin, 1961; Mayer, 1961.

¹⁰⁴ Martin, 1961. See also Gellner, 1959.

¹⁰⁵ Halsey, 1963.

the meritocracy,” “morally distasteful pattern of meritocracy.”¹⁰⁶ The consequences of this class antagonism could be detailed explicitly: the problem with “meritocracy” and the “false idolatry of intelligence tests,” the novelist Angus Wilson argued in 1965, was the production of “a growing alienated underprivileged class, [a] ‘poor white’ breeding-ground of racialism, violence and other social ills.”¹⁰⁷ Another British writer published a darkly satirical “meritocratic proposal” in the *Guardian* in 1966, proposing a justification for sending the American lower classes to die in Vietnam on the basis of their low IQ scores.¹⁰⁸ The term also continued to be associated with the implication that the state’s privileging of intelligence testing eroded a pluralism of values in favor of an impersonal, unidimensional metric.¹⁰⁹ For example, an essayist wrote in the *Guardian* in 1967, “we live in a (rapidly developing) meritocracy. But the word ‘merit’ in this context tends to have a very limited application. It refers to measurable intelligence and only sometimes secondarily to other qualities.”¹¹⁰

Semantically related to the discourse around the IQ elite was the metaphor of skimmed cream. Elite schools were said to “cream off” the best students.¹¹¹ In its review of Young’s book, the *Times* described the meritocracy as a world in which “the lower orders are becoming like skimmed milk.”¹¹² The social scientist Mark Abrams described “the elite of tomorrow” similarly: “the bulk of the new men and women represent the cream of the nation’s intelligence.”¹¹³ Another article described the equal opportunity society that Britain was building, which was “creaming the very best of the working-class young for entry to the middle class, creaming the very best of the middle-class young for entry to the establishment....Regarded as a moral question, as Michal Young demonstrated in ‘The Rise of the Meritocracy,’ the procedure is unspeakable.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶ “To each according to his need,” 1967; “Why intelligent students rebel,” 1969. Other examples of it being used without reference to Young: E.g.: “Teachers Urge Priority for School-Leaving at 16,” 1964; “New Rich,” 1964; Wilson, 1965; Tindall, 1967.

¹⁰⁷ Wilson, 1965.

¹⁰⁸ Reynolds, 1966.

¹⁰⁹ Hoggart, 1963.

¹¹⁰ Tindall, 1967.

¹¹¹ “Time for an Oxbridge Reappraisals,” 1960.

¹¹² “I.Q. + Effort = Merit?,” 1958.

¹¹³ Abrams, 1960.

¹¹⁴ Mayer, *Observer*, 1961.

Discourse around the IQ elite in the 1960s was closely associated with “meritocracy,” but it could not be reduced to this single word.

In Young’s book, the narrator had identified the rise and failure of attempts to replace merit-segregated secondary education with comprehensive schools as the last breath of egalitarian resistance before the onset of full-blown meritocracy.¹¹⁵ In reality, the specter of meritocracy became mobilized in Britain as a warning to argue in favor of comprehensive school reform. For example, in a letter about the future of the Labour Party and whether selective education would harm the movement, one man wrote to the *Times* arguing that “to retain grammar schools would in no way provide the left with more intellectual leaders. It would simply create a ‘meritocracy.’”¹¹⁶ Likewise, John Newsom, who headed the 1963 government committee reporting on education for below-average students, warned the National Union of Teachers of the danger of bolstering the merit-based selection system and thus creating “a new meritocracy, a nation not divided by birth or money, but a much more sinister one, a nation built up of eggheads who have the power and the generality of population who lack it.”¹¹⁷ Through “meritocracy,” and the specter of the IQ elite, commentators highlighted the negative social effects that a highly competitive system, which threatened to leave behind its weakest members, would have. A 1964 *Guardian* op-ed on education reform warned against the “meritocratic rat-race which might one day begin if we’re not careful,” stressing that “schools are places where intelligence should be developed, not used merely as a qualifying mark.”¹¹⁸ Young’s book had provided a term to articulate the hierarchical implications of selective state education, which, contemporaries stressed, would produce a nation ruled by those privileged by their brains.

Soon, comprehensive reform became government policy. Labour’s successful 1964 manifesto included a commitment to replacing the merit-segregated system of secondary education with comprehensive schools.¹¹⁹ After assuming power in 1965, education minister Anthony Crosland issued circular 10/65, which directed local

¹¹⁵ Young, 1958, 53-57.

¹¹⁶ “Disillusion in Labour Youth,” 1959.

¹¹⁷ “Teachers Urge Priority,” 1964.

¹¹⁸ Deadman, 1964.

¹¹⁹ Dale and Kavanagh, 2000, 114.

education authorities to draw up plans to reorganize secondary education along comprehensive lines.¹²⁰ In retrospect, whether or not it was in fact a necessary condition, many credited Michael Young's dystopian vision of the future implications of the merit-segregated system with shifting public opinion in favor of comprehensive school reform.¹²¹ Ben Jackson has argued that Young played an underappreciated role in spreading his critique of meritocracy within the Labour Party, and in particular with influencing the thought of Anthony Crosland.¹²² Crosland's zeal for comprehensive reform was exemplified by a quotation his wife related: "If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to destroy every fucking grammar school in England."¹²³ His position drew on the work of the sociologists of education who had argued that environmental influences affected intelligence. In the words of the sociologist A.H. Halsey, Crosland came to believe that education should specifically provide everyone with the opportunity to "grow one's own I.Q."¹²⁴ Young's influence in the Labour Party extended beyond Crosland. In 1963, Crosland's colleague Richard Crossman—the same man who had rejected Michael Young's contribution to the *New Fabian Essays*, which ultimately became *Meritocracy*—was quoted as saying that, in promoting science and technology, as Labour's new platform emphasized, British society also had to avoid creating a "scientific meritocracy."¹²⁵ The specter of the IQ elite reached the lips of sitting MPs.

Resistance to the merit-segregated secondary school system was articulated through the term "meritocracy," which pithily communicated how a state system that seemed inherently inclusive and democratic could be sowing the seeds of an aristocracy of brains.

¹²⁰ Fenwick, 1976, 132.

¹²¹ See, for example, Eysenck, 1969; Dean, 1990; Bell in Dench, 1995, 125; Barker, 1995.

¹²² Jackson, 2007, 172-173 and 198-199.

¹²³ Barker, 1995.

¹²⁴ Halsey, 1963.

¹²⁵ Cole, 1963. See also "Mr Wilson outlines his plans for the 'New Age,'" 1963.

VI. "When Good IQs Get Together"¹²⁶: The Mensa Society, 1946-1966

Just as the pessimistic vision of the IQ elite conveyed by “meritocracy” was spreading in the early 1960s, opportunities for ordinary people to test and identify with their IQ scores were proliferating.¹²⁷ A year after Pelican’s 1961 reissue of *Meritocracy*, it released another IQ-related publication, the psychologist H.J. Eysenck’s *Know Your Own IQ*. The book opened with an exhortation to “know yourself,” giving readers the opportunity to see where they fell on the IQ hierarchy through a series of intelligence tests, which it compared to a thermometer.¹²⁸ Given the controversy that the tests aroused, and the specifically antidemocratic implications that Michael Young had associated with their spread, it was not surprising that readers responded to this democratization of IQ measurement with ambivalence. The *Guardian* called the tests that the book contained the “most potent—some would say the most sinister—of abstractions,” adding, pessimistically, that they were inevitable in “our meritocracy”.¹²⁹ On the bright side, Eysenck’s reviewer cheekily added, the majority might actually be happy in relating to their scores: “Most people will be able to congratulate themselves: either on having done better in life than their IQ would suggest, or conversely on having greater abilities than the world has recognised.”¹³⁰ The book sold briskly.¹³¹ Through Eysenck’s work, readers were able to engage with intelligence testing outside of the state context in which they likely previously encountered them.

Some readers who discovered that their scores put them in the IQ elite wanted to actively identify as such, by socializing with their brainy peers. One such opportunity was conveyed to readers of the *Daily Mail* on Saturday, August 21, 1965, who discovered a series of self-administered IQ tests, presented as an opportunity to see if they qualified

¹²⁶ O’Neill-Barna, 1960.

¹²⁷ While state students were issued IQ tests for secondary school selection, popular interest in these tests suggests that local education authorities notified them of their school placement, but not of their particular scores.

¹²⁸ In the book Eysenck did provide a balanced survey of the criticisms of intelligence testing and the responses to those criticisms, ultimately defending the practical usefulness of the IQ measure. See Eysenck, 1962, 8-37.

¹²⁹ “IQmanship,” 1962.

¹³⁰ “IQmanship,” 1962.

¹³¹ Schatzman, 1997.

as “genius,” and thus could gain entry to the Mensa Society, an exclusive club that only accepted members with IQs in the top two percent.¹³² Since 1959, the Mensa Society had been exploding in membership. The most influential leaders of the society, Cyril Burt and Victor Serebriakoff, believed that Mensa was building a “democratic aristocracy” made up of the IQ elite, which would constitute an active social and political force in international politics, guiding public opinion against the whims of the market and the masses. This chapter shows how while in response to the Mensa organizers’ stated intentions some saw it as a nascent realization of a sinister meritocracy, most reported the society’s actual meetings as quirky, benign gatherings of “eggheads,” using the light pejorative adopted from America. Thus, while the dystopian association with the IQ elite had clearly spread, when disassociated from state power, onlookers tended to see a concrete gathering of IQ elites as an idle curiosity, rather than a foreboding sign of antidemocratic tendencies.

The Mensa Society traced its origins to none other than Cyril Burt, who had adapted the intelligence test for the United Kingdom in his capacity as the London County Council’s first official psychologist, and who had introduced audiences to psychology and mental testing in radio addresses in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1945, in one of these programs, on “Utopian Societies,” Burt called for the creation of a high-IQ organization. A London barrister took up the charge in 1946.¹³³ The club’s membership stagnated, and by the mid-1950s, the “movement had only a few hundred members and appeared in danger of talking itself to death.”¹³⁴ But by the end of 1960, Mensa had “rocketed to a modest fame and doubled its membership.”¹³⁵ This was in no small part due to the new leadership of Victor Serebriakoff, a factory manager and longtime dedicated member, who made expanding membership a priority, largely through advertising. Indeed, the *Daily Mail* reported that the vast majority of members had signed up after seeing the society’s advertisements in newspapers like the *Observer* and *Sunday*

¹³² “Think you’re a genius?,” 1965. For a visualization of Mensa’s two percent, see Figure 3.

¹³³ Sprott, 1966.

¹³⁴ Power, 1962.

¹³⁵ O’Neill-Barna, 1960.

Times.¹³⁶ By 1967, it had 17,000 members, across fifty countries, up from only 2,000 in 1960.¹³⁷ The club's primary activities involved dinners and lectures followed by conversation.¹³⁸

While savvy advertising was the proximate cause of membership growth, the success of Serebriakoff's strategy relied on broader cultural shifts: at the same time as skepticism toward state-imposed intelligence testing was growing, more and more people were interested in knowing and actively identifying with their intelligence scores, as the brisk sales of Eysenck's books attested. People wanted to *know* if they were in the IQ elite. With the critical distance afforded by the Atlantic Ocean, American newspapers could clearly identify that in the United Kingdom there had been a palpable growth in interest in people with high intelligence. The *New York Times* called the growth of Mensa a "clear signs of the times," spotting an increased desire for highly intelligent people to identify as such.¹³⁹ The *Washington Post* called the phenomenon "the idea of solidarity among the eggheads."¹⁴⁰ Intelligence's increase in public visibility was palpable in many contexts: "elsewhere in England are other evidences of a new interest in the intellect—brain trusters 'on the telly,' celebrities in fashionable circles."¹⁴¹

For the architects of Mensa, this development was no fleeting fashion. They saw their microcosmic IQ elite as an emergent social and political force, potentially of world-historical significance. In particular they imagined for it a benevolent role in guiding public opinion against misleading influences. Cyril Burt argued that elites defined by their institutional positions—whether in the media or government bureaucracies—could wield their outsize authority for self-interested purposes; the "intelligence élite," on the other hand, in Burt's words, only defined by a psychometric score, was in its diffuseness

¹³⁶ Wareham, 1961.

¹³⁷ Heilpern, 1967; O'Neill-Barna, 1960.

¹³⁸ Planned lecturers for the London Mensa gatherings included H.J. Eysenck, A.J. Ayer, and Arthur Koestler. See Wareham, 1961; Longmuir, 1964; "Mensa talk called off," 1966.

¹³⁹ O'Neill-Barna, 1960.

¹⁴⁰ Power, 1962.

¹⁴¹ O'Neill-Barna, 1960.

and diversity likely collectively to offer sound advice for the correct path for the polity, both national and international.¹⁴²

Mensa's secretary, Victor Serebriakoff, similarly saw Mensa members as worldwide "intellectual leaders, who will show the way to a better state of affairs."¹⁴³ He argued that high-IQ individuals needed to become conscious of themselves as an elite class with their own particular responsibility: "Today we need a new self-conscious ability class with the motto *sagesse oblige*."¹⁴⁴ The increasing demand for "brains" had made them subject to economic forces. A class-consciousness among the IQ elite would allow its members to shelter themselves from the demands of the market that could misdirect their potential: "The needs of the whole community are paramount; and if in the future brains are available only to the highest bidder, the disparity in prosperity between the haves and have-nots can only be increased."¹⁴⁵ Echoing the earlier discourse about brainpower as a national resource, by the 1960s, "brains" were increasingly discussed explicitly as a commodity—of severely limited supply and growing demand, due to the changing structure of the advanced industrial economy and the military research imperatives of the Cold War. As Serebriakoff put it, "brains, considered as a commodity, are in what in commercial jargon is called 'short supply.'"¹⁴⁶ For him, making concerted efforts to turn high-grade brains from passive resource into organized class would prevent market forces from poorly allocating their labor.

Serebriakoff drew on the idea of the "intellectual," who was above material interests and spoke truth to power.¹⁴⁷ But the IQ elite differed from the more traditional image of intellectuals described by Stefan Collini, since the IQ intelligentsia was defined not by culture or education, but by raw intellectual ability as measured by intelligence tests; and rather than stressing individuality and personality, the Mensa elite, he envisioned, would be polled collectively for their opinions.¹⁴⁸ Similar to Burt, Serebriakoff stressed the role of this new "ability-class" in producing and communicating

¹⁴² Burt in Serebriakoff, 1966, 15-16 & 21; Burt, 1966.

¹⁴³ "Arthur's New Table," 1966.

¹⁴⁴ Serebriakoff, 1966, 83.

¹⁴⁵ Serebriakoff, 1966, 86.

¹⁴⁶ Serebriakoff, 1966, 81. See also Hammerton, 1965; and O'Neill-Barna, 1960.

¹⁴⁷ See Collini, 2006, 53.

¹⁴⁸ Serebriakoff, 1966, 120-122.

opinions that would act as a countervailing force to the information and opinions disseminated by the misleading, self-interested actors in mass-media, whose interest was in profit, not truth.¹⁴⁹ To gather such socially valuable opinions, Mensa produced knowledge about its members, primarily through surveys, some of the results of which—social and political attitudes “of the top two percent”¹⁵⁰—were published in an appendix to Serebriakoff’s 1966 book.¹⁵¹

Burt and Serebriakoff did not hesitate to make clear that they advocated a form of elitism.¹⁵² Burt wrote in his introduction to Serebriakoff’s book that a self-organized force of intelligent individuals could “mark the first step towards what Bernard Shaw in his *Fabian Essays* once described as ‘a truly democratic aristocracy’”—precisely one of the ideas that Michael Young parodied in his *Meritocracy*.¹⁵³ Serebriakoff advocated top-down mental measurement for the allocation of social roles in a way eerily reminiscent of Young’s satire, writing that the leaders and professionals “so necessary to the successful functioning of modern complex societies and organizations...can be better selected by objective psychometric techniques than by nepotism, the old-boy network, or by the vagaries of the democratic method.”¹⁵⁴ For Mensa’s advocates, psychometrics would summon efficiency, dismantle nepotism, and give convenient side-step to the pesky kinks of democracy.

At the same time, Mensa’s leaders tried to stress that their advocacy of an empowered IQ elite was not a rejection of democracy. As Burt put it, his zeal for the aristocracy of high-IQ individuals was not meant to “imply that the final decision should be placed in the hands of an intelligence élite: such a scheme would be unthinkable in a democratic state.”¹⁵⁵ In making clear that they were not advocating an end to democracy, both Burt and Serebriakoff had to explicitly distinguish their political visions from that of

¹⁴⁹ Serebriakoff, 1966, 127-129.

¹⁵⁰ Power, *Washington Post*, 1962.

¹⁵¹ H.J. Eysenck also submitted the group to personality testing, and Cyril Burt had hoped to make them “guinea pigs” to a range of psychologists and sociologists. See Sprott, 1966; and Burt in Serebriakoff, 1966, 20.

¹⁵² Cf. C.P. Snow’s technocratic liberalism: see Ortolano, 2009, 250-251.

¹⁵³ Burt in Serebriakoff, 1966, 11.

¹⁵⁴ Serebriakoff, *IQ*, 125.

¹⁵⁵ Burt in Serebriakoff, 1966, 15.

a “meritocracy,” revealing just how prevalent Michael Young’s critique had become. Burt wrote that when he told people of his idea for the high-IQ society,

the few who take it seriously protest at once that ‘nothing could be more anti-democratic.’ Has not Michael Young, they ask, in his book on *Meritocracy* vividly chronicled the rise and fall of yet another Utopia with its H.Q.s for I.Q.s....and has not his ‘sad prophetic history’ demonstrated once and for all the futility of any such dream?¹⁵⁶

Discussing Mensa in the 1960s, Burt could not avoid Young’s vision of the undemocratic meritocracy, inextricable from discussions of a politically organized IQ elite. Likewise, Serebriakoff made sure to add that “mankind will have no patience with a meritocracy but it is entitled to expect a sense of dedicated responsibility from those members who have inherited more than their fair share of the general stock of ability.”¹⁵⁷ Serebriakoff stressed that while in the dystopian *Meritocracy*, the new ability class, through its merit-based influence, seized the reigns of state power, he advocated an IQ elite that had influence without power. This influence, guided by a “code for the intelligent” that he described in his book, would be benevolent: “The new world civilization toward which we are striving requires the emergence of a self-conscious world-wide cadre of the able; a cadre which knows and accepts its role and its responsibilities, and which is loyal to the bond of intelligence.”¹⁵⁸ The society’s spokesmen believed that an IQ elite that did not undermine democracy was both possible and desirable—a position that, for Young, would have been sociologically naive, since for him power and influence went hand in hand.

Despite these qualifications, the Mensa leaders’ echoes of Young’s meritocracy—and, thus, the antidemocratic implications of their political vision—were not lost on some. One review of Serebriakoff’s book described its vision as “mensatocracy,” calling its elitist aspiration to defend truth throughout the world via a super-state entity a “horrific concept.”¹⁵⁹ Soon, one could read, in the context of education reform, a warning against creating “schools for a super-intellectual élite, Mensa schools, schools for the

¹⁵⁶ Burt in Serebriakoff, 1966, 11.

¹⁵⁷ Serebriakoff, 1966, 126.

¹⁵⁸ Serebriakoff, 1966, 131-136.

¹⁵⁹ “Identifying the IQ elite,” 1966.

meritocracy,” which segregated students according to their brains.¹⁶⁰ The *Times Literary Supplement*’s review of Serebriakoff’s book was devastating in its condemnation of the trend, chalking it up to intellectually insecure individuals who rested their feelings of self-worth on “an outmoded psychological and eugenic pseudo-science,” even echoing the bigoted paranoia of the Lavender Scare of the 1950s, noting that the phenomenon called “irresistibly to mind the scene in Proust where the homosexuals recognize each other: the footman, the man going to the ball, the husband, all members of an involuntary secret society, linked by invisible bonds stronger than those of family or any other social group. For basic to the thesis of this book is the notion that a minority of people with a high I.Q. will be found scattered throughout society, whose secret interests and concerns link them indissolubly whatever their jobs or families.”¹⁶¹ Witnesses to the Mensa organizers’ stated political vision feared that the phenomenon, like the rise of the meritocracy, threatened democracy.

But while readers of Serebriakoff’s programmatic book, which imagined Mensa as a super-state organization tasked with guiding the administration of the globe, understandably saw parallels with meritocracy, witnesses to Mensa’s everyday activities, divorced from state power, saw it as a benign organization for quirky “eggheads” who did not have other social outlets in which they could express their identity as intelligent people. Newspaper reports emphasized the unlikely characters associated with Mensa. One article interviewed the society’s youngest member (eight years old); another portrayed her large family, in which five of eight children were Mensa members; a third depicted a twelve-year-old girl who preferred sports to science, telling the *Guardian*, “I feel very flattered to join Mensa—but it won’t stop me enjoying my football.”¹⁶² The *Daily Mail* profiled a prisoner who was attempting to join Mensa, under the headline “The crook just 12 points short of being a genius.”¹⁶³ When newspapers related organizational details of the society, it was almost always in the context of internecine squabbles. As Mensa grew rapidly, internal controversy arose about how the growing

¹⁶⁰ Gourlay, 1966.

¹⁶¹ Vaizey, 1966.

¹⁶² See “‘Rubbish’ says young egghead,” 1966; Heilpern, 1967; and “Girl with brains and boots,” 1970.

¹⁶³ Parkhouse, 1962.

organization should be governed. Journalists reported gleefully the chaos that such arguments unleashed within the club: once could read in the *Observer* of a reform faction called “Seriously Interested Group for Reform in Mensa,” or SIGRIM, and a reactionary faction called the “Special Interest Group for Reform in SIGRIM,” or SIGRIS.¹⁶⁴ This unrest even forced Arthur Koestler to cancel a talk he was scheduled to deliver to the society, the *Daily Mail* reported.¹⁶⁵ Journalists saw little connection between this dysfunctional private society for eccentrics and the state power that had imposed the eleven plus, which was so closely associated with Michael Young’s dystopian meritocracy. In the press, Mensa members were portrayed as lovable, feckless “eggheads,” not a sinister elite with anti-democratic aspirations.¹⁶⁶

This warm, if slightly condescending, attitude towards “M’s,” as Mensa members called themselves, was apparent in an essay on IQ by the writer Ronald Deadman, where he described his affection for the right side of the bell curve that portrayed the distribution of intelligence in society: “I’ve always had a soft spot for that little mossy slope at the extreme right-hand edge [of the curve] where the geniuses live. I like to think of them, all Mensa members, bursting with grey matter around the IQ 160 mark, squabbling among themselves in just the way people at the other end squabble, all victimized by their terms of reference instead of moving beyond them.”¹⁶⁷ Humor about Mensa also reflected its perceived harmlessness, whether in the *Times Literary Supplement*’s suggestion for “a poetic version of the celebrated Mensa organization, maybe, with a minimum Poetry Quotient of 148 as the required level,” or, across the Atlantic, Woody Allen’s 1974 *New Yorker* story about call-girls for the mind, “The Whore of Mensa.”¹⁶⁸

Michael Young’s warning about the anti-democratic implications of an IQ elite had gained enough traction that Burt and Serebriakoff, advocating the production of a politically organized IQ elite, were forced to respond to, and distance themselves from, his dystopian vision; and reviewers of the latter’s book evoked some of the skepticism

¹⁶⁴ Heilpern, 1967. For an American account, see “Ms and FeMs at the Biltmore,” 1966.

¹⁶⁵ “Mensa talk called off,” 1966.

¹⁶⁶ For a cultural history of the “egghead” in the United States, see Lecklider, 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Deadman, 1964. For the curve, see Figure 3.

¹⁶⁸ See Hamilton, 1966; and Allen, 1974.

that Young had tried to stoke. But the everyday reality of Mensa activities, completely disassociated from the state power that had been the object of Young's scrutiny, meant that onlookers saw it as a harmless curiosity. The uniformity with which Young's critique of meritocracy was applied in the 1960s to state power rather than private organizations pointed to a severe limitation in his analysis, which would soon come into focus when anti-statist politicians were easily able to redefine and appropriate "meritocracy" as a positive ideal.

Conclusion: “Down with Meritocracy”¹⁶⁹: The IQ Elite and the Afterlife of “Meritocracy”

In “meritocracy,” Michael Young coined a term that pithily expressed concerns that the state’s imposition of intelligence testing for merit-segregated education would facilitate the rise of a ruling IQ elite and thus undermine democracy. The system he was reacting to was the result of a long process of education reform, in which, drawing on eugenics and educational psychology, reformers had conceptualized the nation’s intelligence as a scarce resource that the state had to harness for the nation to compete economically and thus flourish. Toward that end, intelligence testing was introduced to the education system; equality of opportunity was defined as equal education for equal measured intelligence, and intelligence as innate and stable.

In the 1950s, empirical sociologists destabilized these assumptions about IQ, showing how the stock of national intelligence was not only harnessed by government policy, but shaped by it too, since, sociologists showed, environment—itself malleable through social policy—was important in the formation of intelligence. Michael Young also showed how intelligence was political by describing a mechanism through which the reigning vision of equality of opportunity would not produce more democracy and social equality, but rather the aristocracy of brains that he called “meritocracy.” Mensa’s spokesmen, Cyril Burt and Victor Serebrikoff, also imagined a political role for an IQ elite; while their vision was optimistic, they received pushback due to the resemblance between their imagined advisory super-state run by the IQ elite and the dystopian meritocracy. Young’s warning was fundamentally about the connection between state power and the creation of an IQ elite; the private, apparently apolitical, and clearly feckless actual activities of Mensa did not elicit the skeptical response that its organizers’ stated political vision did. Also, by the mid-1960s, the state mechanism that *Meritocracy* directed its skepticism towards was being dismantled. Influenced by Michael Young, in 1965 Anthony Crosland initiated comprehensive school reform, which heralded the end of the eleven plus. By 1966 the *Guardian* could write that “for school children at least, intelligence testing is now beyond the pale. The eleven plus, by almost common consent,

¹⁶⁹ Young, 2001.

was unfair, inefficient, and sometimes vicious in its effects.”¹⁷⁰ Here was a world in which the details of Young’s satire, where in the future the state universalized intelligence testing, were no longer as poignant as they had been.

The close connection between Young’s concept of “meritocracy” and state-imposed intelligence testing points to what would become a consequential blind spot in his critique. Neither Young nor the initial adopters of his neologism extended their concerns beyond the state to private organizations and economic interests. This was part of a pattern in Young’s career: in Labour Party debates, his criticisms focused on the top-down economicistic gaze of the welfare state that he thought too many democratic socialists assumed.¹⁷¹ Moreover, there was a distinct feeling among party members like Crosland and Young that in the aftermath of the Second World War, the income and wealth distributions had been adequately compressed, and that the remaining problems of inequality were social and sociological—ones of status and prestige, not of economic power.¹⁷² Young’s critical imagination was directed against state policies and away from the economic realm. For him, the IQ elite would be a product of myopic state overreach, not the tyranny of markets.

With this perspective, it is easier to understand how politicians like Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair adopted “meritocracy”—which in the 1960s had been unambiguously dystopian—seamlessly as a positive ideal. The most bombastic afterlife of “meritocracy” and the IQ elite flared up starting in the 1970s around disciples of Cyril Burt like the psychologists Arthur Jensen and H.J. Eysenck in the controversy over race, genetics, and intelligence.¹⁷³ But the most consequential was likely the

¹⁷⁰ “Identifying the IQ elite,” 1966.

¹⁷¹ For example, his ethnographic work with Peter Willmott showed how Labour housing policy’s privileging of the nuclear family missed how working class families operated through extended kinship networks. See Young and Willmott, 1957.

¹⁷² Harris in Thompson, 1990, 103. See also Young, Michael and Edward Shils. “What is Living and What is Dead in Socialism?” (Draft). Churchill Archive Center, Cambridge, Michael Young Papers, 2/1/2, undated (~1954). 1-2; and Crosland, 1956.

¹⁷³ On the race and IQ controversy, see Kevles, 1986, 269-271; Wooldridge, 1994, 363-383 and 406-408; Richards, 1997, 259-285; and Cohen-Cole, 2014, 230-234.

Psychologists like Arthur Jensen, H.J. Eysenck, and Richard Herrnstein reemphasized the importance of genetic inheritance in the determination of intelligence, in response to the environmentalism that had prevailed starting in the 1950s. In his 1973 *IQ in the*

resurgence of market liberalism most closely identified in Britain with Margaret Thatcher. In that context, by the mid-1970s, “meritocracy” could be associated with a pragmatic, market-oriented polities that presented a vision of society that was unapologetically competitive and that consisted of individuals, not classes. In 1975, the *Economist* wrote that Thatcher was “not an ideologue: the awful metaphysical questions do not haunt her...Her political philosophy is simple and trad [sic]: she values ability, hard work and enterprise, and believes in individual liberty, thrift and application which she wants the state to encourage. Believing in meritocracy she finds it hard to notice the claims of the non-meritocrats.”¹⁷⁴ As she told the *Sun* in 1983, “I believe in merit, I belong to meritocracy.”¹⁷⁵ Here was a meritocracy with no specter of the rise of a dystopian IQ elite facilitated by the state.¹⁷⁶ By 1990, Thatcher’s successor, John Major, was reported as advocating a “classless meritocracy” “that leaves no social haemorrhaging in its wake”—a vision that to Young was sociologically naive; but the meritocracy was now primarily imagined as mediated by the market, not the state (which simply “encouraged”), and was thus beyond the scope of Young’s original satire.¹⁷⁷

As Guy Ortolano and Adrian Wooldridge have suggested, this “meritocracy” was new precisely in that it emphasized the allocation of ability through market forces rather than selection through top-down state institutions.¹⁷⁸ The earlier form was exemplified by

Meritocracy, Herrnstein warned of the creation of a hereditary meritocracy due to the combination of equality of opportunity and high heritability of IQ (Herrnstein, 1973, 129). Jensen and Eysenck suggested the possibility of a genetic basis for racial disparities in measured intelligence, and the movement was received by many as a resurgence of white supremacist biological racism (see Edson, 1969; and Eysenck, 1969, 1971, & 1972). Thus, in its contact with the United States, the image of the IQ elite became explicitly racialized, ultimately, most infamously, in discussion around the “cognitive elite” of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994, 315).

¹⁷⁴ “Blessed Margaret,” 1975. For the earliest non-dystopian, positive usage of “meritocracy” I could find, see “The Alternative Government,” 1963.

¹⁷⁵ Henry, Wendy. “Interview for *The Sun*.” Margaret Thatcher Foundation. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105089>.

¹⁷⁶ Thatcher’s actual record on educational selection was mixed: she both claimed to support merit-based selection and “abolished more grammar schools than anyone before or since” (Wooldridge, 1994, 393).

¹⁷⁷ White, 1990; Hill, 1990.

¹⁷⁸ Wooldridge, 1994, 402-403; Ortolano, 249-253.

the eleven plus and by Victor Serebriakoff's vision of the Mensa elite, whose self-conscious organization would allow members to shield themselves from the vagaries of market forces and thus apply their brainpower in the public interest. The market liberals' "meritocracy" departed from Young's sociological vision in denying the collective power of elites and deemphasizing both the psychological measure of the intelligence quotient and the role of the state. The sinister specter of the IQ elite was inextricable from state power, as journalists' anodyne accounts of the private affairs of Mensa suggested. It is likely that meritocracy's semantic shift from dystopia to positive ideal was so smooth precisely because the negative associations Young had attached to the term were so closely linked to state power and not the market. Thus, the pessimistic vision of Young's statist meritocracy was on the surface not necessarily mutually exclusive with the market liberals' rosier image of post-stagflation market meritocracy. In the 1990s, the leader of Young's own party, Tony Blair, became meritocracy's biggest booster, and the irony was not lost on some.¹⁷⁹ In 2001, six months before his death, Young took to the *Guardian* with an essay entitled "Down With Meritocracy," in which he expressed disappointment at Blair's appropriation of the term.¹⁸⁰ In that essay, Young extended his older, pessimistic vision of meritocracy from the state's IQ elite to—as he put it—the "business meritocracy" which had actually prevailed, accentuating inequalities and undermining democracy. The dystopia, it was suggested, had arisen—but not in the way Young had expected.

¹⁷⁹ See Barker, 1995; Wheen, 2001; and Blair, 2001.

¹⁸⁰ Young, 2001.

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