

The Concept of Meritocracy

Guys:

One of the central tenets of the ideology of capitalist democracy is the concept of *meritocracy*. Although this concept is inherently fallacious, the power of the capitalist class in this country is such that it has managed to elevate this concept to the status of inviolate common sense in the psyche of the *ignorantsia*. Let me explain where the fallacy in this concept lies.

To begin with: meritocracy is a concept that sees the allocation of material rewards in society as resting on *merit*, which itself is assumed to be based on such qualities of an individual as intelligence, effort and ambition and not on membership of preordained social groups—whatever their definitional criteria: class, sex, race, ethnicity, and so on. In other words: from the meritocratic point of view, one's class status in society is based on social achievement, not social ascription. One of the most widely used and accepted measurement of social achievement in modern societies today is educational qualifications or academic achievement.

Now, in a meritocratic society academic achievement is presumed to rest on equality of educational opportunity. However, equality of educational opportunity itself is supposedly governed by the principle of meritocracy: namely that academic achievement is a function of one's individual qualities of intelligence, effort and ambition in school, and not on one's social background, be it in terms of class, race, sex, ethnicity, and so on. It follows from all this that if there is a slippage in academic achievement then explanation for it must be sought in flaws in the individual's qualities (perhaps there is limited intelligence, perhaps there is insufficient effort, perhaps ambition is lacking, etc). And if this slippage is consistent among some social groups then these flaws must also be universal within these groups. (A corollary of this view is that since these groups (leaving class aside) are presumed to be biological constructs, regardless of what science states, the flaws are biologically determined and hence society is powerless in the face of their immutability.) However, the meritocratic logic rests on the assumption that we do *not* live in a society that is social structurally riven for historically determined reasons (rather than biological reasons), and where social groups exist in unequal power relations.

But Guys: Is this assumption correct? Is the social structure biologically determined? More to the point, Does academic achievement rest solely on individual qualities? Is it not possible that it may also depend on where one is within the social structure because one's location in that structure allows one access to specific educational advantages (manifest in such ways as access to resource-rich schools, qualified teachers, safe neighborhoods, etc.) In fact, research in support of this point is so extensive and ubiquitous in the field of education that it even renders reference citations to it redundant.

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