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# Introduction

## *A Revolutionary Idea*

It is now a commonplace that the ideas which have shaped and sustained Western societies for the past 250 years or more are faltering. Democracy is in retreat. Liberalism is struggling. Capitalism has lost its lustre. But there is one idea that still commands widespread enthusiasm: that an individual's position in society should depend on his or her combination of ability and effort. Meritocracy, a word invented as recently as 1958 by the British sociologist Michael Young, is the closest thing we have today to a universal ideology.

The definition of the word gives us a sense of why meritocracy is so popular. A meritocratic society combines four qualities which are each in themselves admirable. First, it prides itself on the extent to which people can get ahead in life on the basis of their natural talents. Second, it tries to secure equality of opportunity by providing education for all. Third, it forbids discrimination on the basis of race and sex and other irrelevant characteristics. Fourth, it awards jobs through open competition rather than patronage and nepotism. Social mobility and meritocracy are the strawberries and cream of modern political thinking, and politicians can always earn applause by denouncing unearned privilege. Meritocracy's success in crossing boundaries – ideological and cultural, geographical and political – is striking.

The one thing that the most successful politicians in recent decades have in common is their faith in Michael Young's neologism. Margaret Thatcher regarded herself as a revolutionary meritocrat, engaged in an epochal struggle with languid establishmentarians in her own party and thuggish collectivists on the left. Ronald Reagan pronounced that 'all Americans have the right to be judged on the sole

basis of individual merit, and to go just as far as their dreams and hard work will take them'. Bill Clinton declared that 'all Americans have not just a right but a solemn responsibility to rise as far as their God-given talents and determination can take them', a formula reiterated by Barack Obama.<sup>1</sup> Tony Blair repeatedly identified New Labour with meritocracy.<sup>2</sup> David Cameron declared that Britain is an Aspiration Nation and that his government was on the side of 'all those who work hard and want to get on.'<sup>3</sup> Boris Johnson praised meritocracy for 'allowing the right cornflakes to get to the top of the packet'.<sup>4</sup> Such praise for meritocracy is hardly surprising: opinion polls repeatedly show that large majorities of people are deeply opposed to interfering with the meritocratic principle. A Pew poll in 2019, for example, found that 73 per cent of Americans, including 62 per cent of African-Americans, say that colleges should refrain from taking race or ethnicity into account when making decisions about student admissions.<sup>5</sup>

Meritocracy straddles the East–West divide. In his address to the National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2017 President Xi urged the Party to select officials 'on the basis of merit regardless of social background'.<sup>6</sup> His acolytes never miss an opportunity to point out that China's relative success in fighting the Coronavirus pandemic compared with the West is proof of its superior ability to choose its leaders. Singapore pays top civil servants more than \$1 million a year in salary and performance bonuses. South Koreans worship the American Ivy League even more fervently than Americans do themselves.

And the divide between the public and private sectors too: successful civil services the world over have introduced elite streams and merit-based promotion; successful firms, such as McKinsey and Goldman Sachs, sell themselves on the basis of their brain power; the tech industry regards itself as meritocracy incarnate. The 'citizens of nowhere' that Theresa May once tried to demonize are, in fact, citizens of the global meritocracy.

Our culture reverberates with the sounds of meritocracy in action. The term 'smart' (American for 'clever') has crept from people ('the smartest guys in the room') to technology ('smartphones') to policy ('smart government', 'smart regulations', 'smart foreign policy').

During his presidency Obama used the adjective in the context of policies more than 900 times.<sup>7</sup> Companies boast names such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, IQ Capital Partners and Intelligence-Squared. Bill Gates advises schoolchildren to be nice to nerds on the grounds that one day they will be working for them. Sports stars and managers routinely boast that their sports are ‘meritocracies’ in which all that matters is skill.

Politicians are alternately boastful and defensive about their IQs. As well as declaring himself a ‘very stable genius’, Donald Trump has repeatedly boasted that he has ‘a very good brain’ and a ‘high IQ’. During his first run for the presidency back in 1987, Joe Biden ticked off a voter who asked him about his educational qualifications by retorting, ‘I think I probably have a much higher IQ than you do . . . I’d be delighted to sit down and compare my IQ to yours.’<sup>8</sup> Boris Johnson has been known to rag David Cameron because he was a King’s Scholar at Eton, a sure sign of mental ability, while Cameron was an Oppidan, or regular fee payer.

This is not just froth. The meritocratic idea is shaping society from top to bottom. A growing proportion of great fortunes are in the hands of people with outstanding brain power: computer geeks such as Bill Gates (Microsoft) and Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) or financial wizards such as George Soros (who pioneered hedge funds) and Jim Simons (who helped to found computer-driven ‘quant investing’).<sup>9</sup> The world’s richest man, Jeff Bezos, graduated *summa cum laude* and Phi Beta Kappa from Princeton and makes a point of surrounding himself with academic super-achievers. High-IQ types are even thriving in the more rough-and-ready corners of capitalism: six of the seven biggest Russian oligarchs of the 1990s earned degrees in maths, physics or finance before becoming natural-resource tycoons.

Bill Clinton’s belief that there is a tight connection between earning and learning is proving truer by the day. In the United States, for example, a young college graduate earns 63 per cent more than a young high-school graduate if both work full time – and college graduates are much more likely to have full-time jobs.<sup>10</sup> This college premium is twice what it was in 1980 and is continuing to grow. Raw intelligence is one of the best predictors of success in life. Peter Saunders, a social-mobility researcher, estimates that performance in an IQ

test at the age of ten predicts a child's social class three times better than their parents' social class does.<sup>11</sup> A study of a cohort of British children born in 1970 found that those in the top quartile of IQ scores at the age of ten were much more likely to reach elite social positions (28 per cent) than those in the bottom quartile (5.3 per cent).<sup>12</sup>

Education and IQ also determine where we live. In post-war America people with degrees were evenly distributed regardless of region or the urban–rural divide. Today only 10 per cent of inhabitants of Detroit have degrees compared with more than 50 per cent of inhabitants of San Francisco, Boston, New York and Washington, DC. Once-proud regional elites are being subsumed into a national elite defined by education and headquartered on the coasts. In Great Britain, talent is now concentrated in Greater London and an archipelago of high-IQ towns such as Oxford and Cambridge. A study of the whereabouts of almost half a million Britons who volunteered to have their DNA recorded in the UK Biobank suggests that people who leave deprived areas are brighter and healthier than those who stay behind.<sup>13</sup>

Parents the world over labour on the same treadmill of meritocracy-driven hope and anxiety: British parents provide their teenage children with an average of ten hours' extra tuition a week, Chinese parents with twelve, South Korean parents with fifteen and Bulgarian parents with sixteen.<sup>14</sup> In South Korea, some parents pray every day for a hundred days before their children take exams then sit outside school on the day of the exam, praying. In Singapore, the global capital of meritocracy, students erect shrines to the 'bell curve God', referring to the normal distribution curve, the 'omnipotent, inscrutable force that rules over their lives'.<sup>15</sup> These tests don't stop when we leave school or university: global estimates suggest that companies use aptitude and personality tests for 72 per cent of middle-management jobs and 80 per cent of senior ones.<sup>16</sup>

## DOWN WITH MERITOCRACY!

Even at the best of times, ruling ideologies provoke sharp criticisms. In volatile and dyspeptic times, they can quickly become an object of

hatred. The meritocratic idea is coming under fire from a formidable range of critics who roundly denounce our ruling ideology as ‘an illusion’, a ‘trap’, a ‘tyranny’ and an instrument of white oppression. This criticism has yet to shift popular opinion, which remains stubbornly loyal to the meritocratic idea. But it is already gaining traction not just in the ivory tower but also in influential public-policy circles. The criticism comes from a wide range of different sources – from elite academics as well as angry populists. It feeds on some of our most profound anxieties about everything from racial injustice to the psychological strains of hyper-competition.

The Black Lives Matter movement is one of the most powerful protest movements of recent years. Its prime target is brutality, particularly police brutality towards African-Americans – it was ignited by the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012 by a member of the neighbourhood watch and then re-ignited, on an even larger scale, by the killing of George Floyd by a police officer, in 2020. But it has also popularized critical race theory, an ideology that was incubated on American campuses from the late 1960s onwards, and which provides the intellectual underpinnings of a succession of successful books, such as Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017), Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (2018) and Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist* (2019).

Critical race theorists start from the premise that Western society – particularly American society – is structurally racist. Racism is not confined to intentional acts of discrimination committed by immoral individuals. It is part of the DNA of society – structural rather than just intentional, and unconscious as well as conscious. Critical race theorists are fiercely hostile to the meritocratic idea, which they regard, at best, as a way of justifying social inequality as natural inequality and, at worst, as an offshoot of eugenic theory. They reject the intellectual building blocks of meritocracy: that people should be judged as individuals rather than as members of ethnic groups; that it’s possible to produce colour-blind assessments of individual educational abilities; and, indeed, that it’s possible, through progressive policies, to escape from the burden of history.<sup>17</sup> For them, the legacy of slavery and colonialism is present in everything we do, racial identity is all-pervasive, and colour-blindness is not just impossible but, by



denying reality, a form of racism in itself.<sup>18</sup> Supposedly objective tests are saturated with cultural and therefore racial prejudice. ‘The use of standardised tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies,’ argues Ibram X. Kendi.<sup>19</sup> Educational institutions, including the most self-consciously progressive universities, are vectors of race-based inequality. The only way to forge a better future is through collective struggle for collective ends. Critical race theorists frequently drive their point home by pointing out that many of the earliest exponents of mental measurement, such as Francis Galton, were out-and-out racists.<sup>20</sup>

Conservative populists may be on the opposite side of the ideological divide from critical race theorists, but they share their fierce hostility to meritocracy. Populists delight in criticizing meritocrats for being ‘smug’, ‘self-righteous’ and ‘out of touch’. They also have more substantial objections. They complain that the so-called cognitive elite has done a dismal job of running the world: the financial crisis was driven by highly qualified ‘quants’ who built a mathematical house of cards, while the Iraq debacle was masterminded by neo-conservative intellectuals who promised that the entire adventure would be a ‘cake walk’. Tucker Carlson, one of Fox News’s most prominent pundits, also argues that meritocracy acts as a ‘leech’ on society as a whole, crowding successful people together in self-obsessed enclaves and dulling their empathy with their fellow citizens:

The SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] 50 years ago pulled a lot of smart people out of every little town in America and funneled them into a small number of elite institutions, where they married each other, had kids, and moved to an even smaller number of elite neighborhoods. We created the most effective meritocracy ever . . . But the problem with the meritocracy [is that it] leeches all the empathy out of your society . . . The second you think that all your good fortune is a product of your virtue, you become highly judgmental, lacking empathy, totally without self-awareness, arrogant, stupid – I mean all the stuff that our ruling class is.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the sharpest critics of meritocracy come from the very heart of the meritocratic system itself. Daniel Markovits is the Guido

Calabresi Professor of Law at Yale Law School, an institution that admits only 1 per cent of applicants and then offers them a golden ticket into the new American elite. In *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019) this self-acknowledged uber-meritocrat argues that ‘merit is nothing more than a sham’.<sup>22</sup> Meritocracy is now the opposite of what it was intended to be, he argues: a way of transmitting inherited privilege from one generation to another through the mechanism of elite education. Members of the elite spend millions of dollars purchasing educational advantage for their children, sometimes by moving to the right school districts, sometimes by sending their children to the right private schools, but always by providing them with a rich diet of extracurricular activities. At the same time, poorer children are trapped at the bottom of the ladder, weighed down from the get-go by poor infant care, poor schools and general lack of opportunity. This palace of illusions is also a factory of misery. The successes of the system are crushed by overwork: documents to read late into the night; emails to answer at all hours; an ever-buzzing smartphone.

Michael Sandel is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of the Theory of Government at Harvard University, Yale’s perennial rival for the top slot in America’s meritocracy machine. In *The Tyranny of Merit* (2020) he presents an equally uncompromising message. For him, meritocracy is nothing short of ‘toxic’. This toxicity is inherent in the meritocratic idea for reasons that Michael Young laid out sixty years ago: because it says to those at the bottom of the pile that they *deserve* their fate, thereby diminishing them as human beings. But it is rendered even more lethal by contemporary social developments: the stalling of social mobility, the destruction of manual jobs by a combination of technology and globalization, and the rise of a technocratic elite who have little in common with ordinary people. Sandel looks forward to a more balanced future in which we stop fetishizing merit and put more emphasis on democracy and community.

The Markovits–Sandel fusillade is the latest example of the ‘revolt of the elites’ against the very ideology that is the foundation of their elite position. *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, the elites’ favourite papers, regularly contain op-eds arguing that ‘our elites stink’ (David Brooks)<sup>23</sup> and that ‘it’s time to abandon the cruelty of meritocracy’ (Steven Pearlstein).<sup>24</sup> Publishers have invented a new

form of misery memoir that stars disillusioned meritocrats grappling with the intellectual and moral emptiness of life in elite educational institutions: read Ross Douthat's *Privilege* (2005), David Samuels's *The Runner* (2008) and Walter Kirn's *Lost in the Meritocracy* (2009) and shed a sympathetic tear.

There is truth in all these complaints. The critics are right that the theory of meritocracy can often be a disguise for class privilege. Privileged children who begin life with supportive parents and then waft along on a cloud of good schools and extra tuition have a much better chance of realizing their full potential than poor children. Oxford and Cambridge recruit more students from eight elite schools than they do from 3,000 state schools put together.<sup>25</sup> Ivy League universities have more students who come from households in the top 1 per cent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half.<sup>26</sup>

Critical race theorists are right that black people are often the worst affected by the uncritical assumption that everybody deserves what they get. Black people start off with significant material disadvantages, with the typical American black family possessing only an eighth of the wealth of the average white family.<sup>27</sup> They encounter more disadvantages as they grow older: more pollution, worse schools, a higher chance of arrest, ingrained attitudes. It is no wonder that meritocracy can seem like a crown of thorns rather than a liberation.

The critics are right that the distinction between winning and losing can be much too sharp. It sometimes seems as if we are now living in the world of the 1992 film *Glengarry Glen Ross*: 'We're adding a little something to this year's sales contest. As you all know, first prize is a Cadillac Eldorado. Anybody wanna see second prize? Second prize is a set of steak knives. Third prize is, you're fired.'<sup>28</sup>

They are also right that meritocracy is an unbending taskmaster. Most professionals spend their lives on a meritocratic treadmill, rather like prisoners in one of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon penitentiaries. They spend the first twenty-five to thirty years of their lives acing exams, getting into elite universities, finding slots in brand-name companies, and the next twenty-five to thirty years trying to win promotions, please their bosses, make their names in the world. Then, as they grow older, they visit their meritocratic obsessions on their children. Today's parents worship Oxbridge and Harvard with the

same devotion that earlier generations reserved for God and His prophets.

We should nevertheless be cautious about rejecting an idea that is so central to modernity. Critiques of liberalism or democracy, even if they are partially justified, have led us to some dark places. We need to beware that the same thing might happen with critiques of meritocracy, particularly in the wake of a Trump presidency that has trashed meritocratic principles in government through the wanton use of nepotism, political favouritism and the systematic denigration of expertise.

At the very least, a few questions are in order. What exactly is the problem with the meritocratic idea? Is it that it supports the status quo (the left-wing criticism)? Or is it that it keeps everybody in a state of constant anxiety (the communitarian criticism)? Are meritocracy's problems inherent in the idea itself? Or are they the product of a failure to implement meritocracy vigorously enough? Is there a sensible compromise between having 'you're fired' as third prize and giving everybody prizes? Professors Markovits and Sandel worry that meritocracy is producing intolerable pressure to succeed. But aren't there other compelling explanations for this pressure, such as slow economic growth, which is increasing competition for desirable jobs, or the relentless increase in the amount of knowledge that needs to be mastered, which is forcing would-be professionals to work ever harder?

And is there a better system for organizing the world? The relevant question is surely not whether meritocracy has faults. It is whether it has fewer faults than alternative systems. Meritocracy's advocates don't argue that it's perfect. They argue that it does a better job than the alternatives of reconciling various goods that are inevitably in tension with each other – for example, social justice and economic efficiency and individual aspiration and limited opportunities. Critical race theorists suggest that race should be taken into account in all decision-making. But isn't there a danger that this will reinforce racial divisions and turn all ethnic groups into political interest groups? Progressives have taken to arguing for getting rid of SATs and other tests and replacing them with more holistic modes of assessment. But this opens the way to favouritism or politically inspired rigging. Michael Sandel wants to distribute university places on the basis of 'a lottery of

the qualified'.<sup>29</sup> But this risks making American universities even more impersonal than they already are: rather than choosing to study a particular course with a particular set of professors, students will simply have to hit the right numbers to reach the threshold and then will see their names put into a giant sorting hat. It also undermines one of the central tenets of higher learning: that academics are capable of making fine distinctions about the quality of people's minds. That is, after all, what tenure committees and academic referees spend much of their time doing. Or perhaps we should also distribute named chairs and tenured professorships on the basis of a lottery of the qualified?

One reason why the current debate about meritocracy is so frustrating is the lack of a historical perspective. Meritocracy is not an abstract idea that came to the world, like Minerva, fully formed from the head of Jupiter. It is a way of thinking about the world – and indeed organizing the world – that has evolved over time in the light of economic pressures and political agitation. How can we judge whether meritocracy is a tyranny or a liberation unless we can see it in its historical context? And how can we tell whether it is a sensible way of organizing the world or a trap unless we can see how it came about?

The fact that there is no convenient history of meritocracy is remarkable, given that it is one of the great building blocks of the modern world – and an increasingly controversial one. There are dozens of histories of the other building blocks – democracy, freedom, capitalism – many of them excellent. There are still remarkably few studies of meritocracy, and the best of the lot, Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, is as exotic as it is brilliant, a strange combination of history and science fiction. Anybody who wants to understand the subject has to venture down some obscure byways labelled 'the history of education', or 'the history of the civil service', or, most obscure of all, 'the history of IQ testing'.<sup>30</sup> The aim of this book is to fill this void: to explain where the meritocratic idea came from, how it replaced feudal ideas about 'priority, degree and place', how it evolved over the centuries and why it eventually became the world's leading ideology. In the process I also hope to offer some perspective on roiling debates about whether it is a mistake that needs to be rejected or a still-progressive idea that can be a force for good in the world.

## HISTORY LESSONS

The history of meritocracy reveals three things that are vital to understanding our current condition.

The first is that meritocracy is a *revolutionary* idea, the intellectual dynamite which has blown up old worlds – and created the material for the construction of new ones. For millennia, most societies have been organized according to the very opposite principles to meritocracy. People inherited their positions in fixed social orders. The world was ruled by royal dynasties. Plum jobs were bought and sold like furniture. Nepotism was a way of life. Upward mobility was discouraged and sometimes outlawed.

The meritocratic idea was at the heart of the four great revolutions that created the modern world. The French Revolution was dedicated to the principle of ‘a career open to talents’. The American Revolution advanced the idea that people should be allowed to pursue life, liberty and happiness without being held back by feudal restrictions. The Industrial Revolution unleashed animal spirits. The liberal revolution, which was headquartered in Britain but influential across middle-class Europe, introduced open competition into the heart of government administrations and educational systems.

The meritocratic idea transformed Western society from the inside out. It changed the tenor of the elite by reforming the way that society allocates the top jobs and the nature of education by emphasizing the importance of raw intellectual ability. It did all this by redefining the elemental force that determines social structure. ‘When there is no more hereditary wealth, privilege class, or prerogatives of birth . . .’ Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, in one of the earliest attempts to understand what was going on, ‘it becomes clear that the chief source of disparity between the fortunes of men lies in the mind.’<sup>231</sup>

The establishment of this ‘chief source of disparity’ at the heart of society entailed a momentous intellectual revolution: the rejection of the aristocratic ethic and its replacement by a meritocratic one. Examine the basic building blocks of the meritocratic world view – assumptions about individualism, intelligence, hard work, the family, social mobility – and you discover that they are at variance with the attitudes that

dominated most previous societies. The rise of the meritocracy entailed a comprehensive revolution in the way people think about the world.

In meritocratic society, people are individuals before they are anything else: masters of their fates and captains of their souls.<sup>32</sup> This is particularly true of the elites: Scott Turow calls the new elite ‘the flying class’ or the ‘orphans of capital’, who regard it as a ‘badge of status to be away from home four nights a week’. (For several years, Nicolas Berggruen, a successful investor, took this to extremes as a ‘homeless billionaire’ who spent his life flying from hotel to hotel in his private plane.) In traditional aristocratic societies, what matters is people’s relationships with family and land. The first question aristocrats asked about somebody was ‘who are his people?’ British aristocrats come with place names attached; the higher the rank, the bigger the place. The German *von* expresses the link between the *Herr* and his *Herrschaft*.

In meritocratic society, people are judged on the basis of their personal qualities: if examiners take background into account, they do so in order to come to a truer assessment of a candidate’s inborn abilities. In aristocratic society, they were judged on the basis of their connections and relations. When the future 10th Earl of Wemyss attended his interview for admission to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1837, he was asked just one question: ‘How’s your father?’<sup>33</sup> In meritocratic society, people are supposed to refrain from overt influence-peddling. In aristocratic society, influence-peddling was the stuff of social life. A popular story about the Habsburg empire features a charming young man who, ‘at dinner with his father and some well-placed family friends, ate soup as a cadet, the main course as a lieutenant, and dessert as a captain’.<sup>34</sup>

In meritocratic society, coming from nowhere is a badge of honour, while being what Warren Buffett calls a ‘member of the lucky sperm club’ (by which he means being a child of a member of the elite) is a defect to be explained away. For most of history, established elites have looked down on parvenus as offences against the natural order. Forgetting his own petit-bourgeois origins, Dr Johnson insisted that ‘mankind are happier in a state of inequality and subordination’.<sup>35</sup> Hannah More satirized the tradition-loving squire of Hanoverian England:

## INTRODUCTION

He dreaded nought like alteration,  
Improvement still was innovation.<sup>36</sup>

One of Victorian England's favourite hymns summed up the doctrine perfectly:

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

In meritocratic society, raw intelligence is the defining human quality. The marriage announcements in the *New York Times* list university affiliations and post-graduate degrees where they used to list family pedigrees. Joe Biden's wife, Jill, makes a point of calling herself 'doctor' to prove that she's more than just an appendage of her husband. Several German politicians have lost their jobs because they fabricated their doctorates. Aristocratic societies were at best ambivalent about 'smarts'. Walter Bagehot observed in 1867 that 'a great part of the "best" English people keep their mind in a state of decorous dullness . . . They think cleverness an antic, and have a constant though needless horror of being thought to have any of it.'<sup>37</sup> As late as 1961, Lord 'Bobbety' Salisbury (the fifth Marquess) is thought to have scuppered Ian Macleod's chances of becoming prime minister by describing him as 'too clever by half'.

Ideas have become the currency of the global elite. Bilderberg and Davos invite 'thought leaders' to address corporate titans. TED conferences are so enthusiastic about ideas that they can seem like religious festivals. 'We don't have castles and noble titles,' says Andrew Zolli, the organizer of an ideas forum called Pop Tech, 'so how else do you indicate you're part of the elite?' Aristocratic societies regarded ideas as either dangerous in themselves or, if they have to be indulged, things that should be taken only in measured quantities, like wine with a good meal. 'I'm not sure I like boys who think too much,' Endicott Peabody, Groton's most famous headmaster, once proclaimed. 'A lot of people think of things we could do without.'<sup>38</sup>

This revolution of values applies particularly starkly to the question of hard work. Aristocratic societies regarded hard work as proof of low



birth and conspicuous leisure as proof of superiority. Today's rich, by contrast, have replaced conspicuous leisure with conspicuous work – and the 'effortless superiority' that was supposed to distinguish the Balliol man with 'effortful superiority'. Daniel Markovits calculates that more than half the richest 1 per cent of households include someone who works more than fifty hours a week – a far higher incidence of overwork than you find in the rest of the population.<sup>39</sup> Prominent businesspeople have taken to giving absurd interviews to the press about how they get up at 4 a.m. (Indra Nooyi, boss of PepsiCo), immediately leap on an exercise bike, work out furiously in the gym (Tim Cook of Apple), and then spend their days in a whirlwind of activity.<sup>40</sup>

Before it took over the world, meritocracy was the rallying cry of the oppressed and marginalized everywhere. Feminists demanded that they should be allowed to compete for jobs and educational distinctions and judged by the same standards as men. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) argued that girls and boys should go to school together and learn the same things. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) argued that 'the principle of the modern movement in morals and politics' is that 'merit, and not birth, is the only rightful claim to power and authority', meaning that women had to be freed from Victorian restrictions.<sup>41</sup> One of the seminal moments in the early history of feminism came in 1890 when the Cambridge examiners had to rank a woman, Philippa Fawcett, 'above the senior wrangler' (i.e. top scholar) because she got the top mark, despite being formally banned, as a woman, from taking a degree.

The working classes seized on the meritocratic principle to prove that they were just as good as their supposed social betters. Working-class autodidacts performed astonishing feats of learning in hostile circumstances. Working-class scholars forced their way into elite universities by dint of superior brains and effort. Working-class politicians went out of their way to prove that they were just as well educated as members of the establishment. Ramsay MacDonald, the illegitimate son of a Scottish ploughman, who was prime minister in 1924 and 1929–35, was fond of pointing to all the working-class autodidacts he knew as a child who were far more learned than university academics. A tubercular watchmaker introduced him to Shakespeare, Burns and Charles Dickens. A local ragman kept a book propped open against

his barrow and presented it to the young MacDonald when he showed an interest. It was a translation of Thucydides.<sup>42</sup> The result of all this intellectual effort was a revolution: the powers that be were forced to concede that it was not only inefficient but also immoral to deny opportunity to talent wherever it appeared.

The same was true of other marginalized groups who used meritocratic standards to confound ancient prejudices. Great Jewish intellectuals such as Albert Einstein made a mockery of Nazi ideas of the master race. Great black intellectuals such as Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois proved that blacks could hold their own in the corridors of intellect. Martin Luther King was such a morally compelling figure because he held out the hope of a future in which everyone would be judged by the content of their character rather than the colour of their skin. Marginalized groups can be at their most influential when they appeal to universal standards and collective hope – and shaming the ruling class can be a much more effective way of persuading it to hand over power than attacking it.

Socialists seized on the meritocratic idea to give substance to their vague hope of a better society. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the intellectual father and mother of the British Labour Party, argued that socialism was about making sure that everybody had a job suited to their natural abilities – which, given the natural abilities of Britain's traditional rulers, meant a social revolution. John Spargo, one of the leading lights of the Socialist Party of America, devoted much of his 1906 classic, *Socialism*, to demonstrating that 'not human equality, but equality of opportunity to prevent the creation of artificial inequalities by privilege is the essence of Socialism'.<sup>43</sup> Émile Durkheim, one of the French left's greatest thinkers, argued that social solidarity depended on the proper use of individual talents.

By contrast, conservatives treated meritocracy as a threat to the social order. In 1872, George Birdwood, a high Tory, predicted, angrily, that civil service reforms would produce a world in which men were 'tested for the public service by means of positive Chinese puzzles' and that schoolchildren across the country would be trained in solving these puzzles.<sup>44</sup> In 1898, W. H. Mallock, a popular novelist and conservative polemicist, criticized equality of educational opportunity on the grounds that it would institutionalize social disharmony

by encouraging the masses to entertain ideas above their stations.<sup>45</sup> In 1953, Karl Mannheim, a German-born sociologist at the London School of Economics (LSE), argued that conservatives should champion the group, such as the nation or association, rather than the individual, on the grounds that groups have distinctive collective identities that make them the modern equivalents of feudal estates.<sup>46</sup>

The second lesson from history is that meritocracy is a *protean* idea. We can all agree on what ‘meritocracy’ means in a general way: allowing people to rise as high as their talents and efforts will take them. But what does this mean in practice? The notion of ‘talent’ has changed over time. Until the early twentieth century, ‘talent’ carried a moral as well as an intellectual connotation. Plato believed that the character of his philosopher kings was just as important as their intellect. Enlightenment thinkers talked of ‘virtues and abilities’, not abilities alone. The twentieth century saw the progressive demoralization of ‘talent’, thanks to the invention of IQ testing (which identified ability with measurable intelligence) and the rise of technocracy (which fetishized technical skills above moral outcomes).

Terms such as ‘allowing’ and ‘as high’ are equally problematic. In the nineteenth century, policy-makers interpreted ‘allowing’ to mean removing barriers to competition. But was it enough just to remove barriers if some children were given superb educations and others left school at ten? This reasoning led progressively to mass secondary-school education, to mass higher education and to affirmative action. Some meritocrats have interpreted ‘as high’ simply to mean rising as high as your talents will allow. Others have interpreted it as an argument for giving political power to the most intelligent.

There are, in fact, lots of different types of meritocracy. There is *political* meritocracy, which argues that the merit principle should be applied to the heart of the political regime. Plato dreamed of a brave new world in which the most talented ruled the state. The Founding Fathers gave Supreme Court justices jobs for life so that they wouldn’t be compromised by democratic pressures. Liberals such as J. S. Mill and Friedrich Hayek have argued in favour of giving people with qualifications more votes or creating a second chamber of highly educated people. There is *technocratic* meritocracy, which emphasizes technical expertise to the exclusion of things such as character or

virtue – or indeed to the old-fashioned quality of judgement.<sup>47</sup> There is the *businessperson's* meritocracy, which emphasizes the importance of the battle of the marketplace, and the *academic's* meritocracy, which focuses on academic results. Different versions of the meritocratic idea have come to the fore at different times.

The third lesson is that, precisely because it is both revolutionary and protean, the meritocratic idea is capable of *self-correction*. There have been notable occasions in the past when it has looked as if meritocracy was degenerating into a defence of the status quo. In mid-nineteenth-century America, it looked as if the ‘men of merit’ who fathered the American Revolution were handing on their leadership positions to their children. Then vital new forces such as the Jacksonian Democrats and new immigrant groups such as the Irish and Italians displaced them in the name of open competition. In the late nineteenth century, it looked as if a new elite of robber barons was transforming America into an aristocratic society. Again the meritocratic spirit renewed itself: Teddy Roosevelt declared war on the ‘malefactors of great wealth’, civil service reformers embraced the merit principle and ‘captains of learning’ revitalized the universities.

Many of today’s sternest critics of meritocracy think that it is beyond reform. A growing number of left-wingers who march under the Social Justice banner argue that society should resort to explicitly non-meritocratic principles such as race consciousness or equality of outcome. In fact, the historical evidence suggests that it is eminently reformable. Marginalized groups can use the principle of merit to shame entrenched elites into levelling the playing field. Institutional reformers can emphasize the extent to which supposedly elite institutions fail to live up to the meritocratic principle.

Today’s critics of the meritocratic idea nevertheless get one big thing right: that the meritocratic elite is in danger of hardening into an aristocracy which passes on its privileges to its children by investing heavily in education, and which, because of its sustained success, looks down on the rest of society. The past four decades have seen one of the most depressing developments in the history of the meritocratic idea: the marriage between merit and money. The new rich, having done well out of global markets and booming asset prices, have entrenched their positions by buying educational privileges for their children. The

old rich have embraced meritocratic values in order to add education, or at least certification, to the long-established fortifications that surround their estates. With levels of social mobility declining, an idea that was designed to promote social mobility is morphing into its opposite, promoting social closure and the return of caste.

I called this book ‘The Aristocracy of Talent’ for two reasons. The first is that so many meritocrats have used such terms themselves. Plato talked about ‘philosopher kings’. The French and American revolutionaries talked about ‘natural aristocrats’. A character in Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, distilling the revolutionary mood of the late nineteenth century, proclaimed that ‘we, the bourgeoisie – the Third Estate, as we have been called – we recognise only that nobility which consists of merit’.<sup>48</sup> More recently, people have taken to talking about ‘the best and the brightest’, ‘the great and the good’ and ‘the leadership class’. The second reason is to sound a note of warning. An aristocracy of talent ought to be an oxymoron. The aristocracy of talent can survive only if it is constantly recruiting new talent from the rest of society and downgrading members of the elite who don’t quite make it. The ‘aristocracy of talent’ can and should be celebrated when it upsets the status quo, but if it distorts the meritocratic principle, using it as a way of entrenching its position at the top of society, then it needs to be challenged.

## THE PLAN OF THE BOOK

Part One introduces the pre-meritocratic world, a world in which people’s stations in life were fixed by tradition and jobs were allocated on the basis of patronage, nepotism, inheritance and purchase. Poets condemned self-seeking individuals as enemies of the heavenly order. Patrons gave away senior positions on a whim. Governments sold off jobs in the civil service and the military. Dullards acquired Oxford and Cambridge fellowships for the simple reason that they were related to the people who founded the colleges. Even as the old world went on its merrie way, there was another world in the making: a world of intellectual aristocrats, mandarin scholars, ‘pauper born’ bureaucrats and roving intellectuals and entrepreneurs. Part Two examines the history of meritocracy before modernity. Plato’s *Republic* provided a blueprint

for a world run by carefully selected and rigorously trained guardians. China introduced a system of examinations designed to select top scholars from across the empire. The Jewish people have always put a marked emphasis on intellectual success for both theological reasons (they see themselves as a chosen people guided by a rabbinical elite of scholar-priests) and practical ones (they have often had to make a living as entrepreneurs, middlemen and fixers). The great organs of medieval society, the Church and the king's household, invented mechanisms of (limited) 'sponsored mobility'. If meritocracy has a relatively short history, it has also had a long prehistory.

Part Three focuses on the three great liberal revolutions that created the modern world – two of them bloody (the French and, to a lesser degree, the American) and one of them peaceful (the British liberal revolution, which transferred power from a landed elite to the liberal intellectual aristocracy without a shot being fired). These revolutions were all driven by the same underlying force so succinctly identified by de Tocqueville: 'The mind became an element in success; knowledge became a tool of government and intellect a social force; educated men played a part in affairs of state.'<sup>49</sup>

The American revolutionaries wanted to replace the 'artificial' aristocracy of the land with a 'natural' aristocracy of virtue and talent. David Ramsay, a South Carolina historian, celebrated the second anniversary of American Independence by arguing that America was a unique nation in human history because 'all offices lie open to men of merit, of whatever rank or condition'.<sup>50</sup> Thomas Jefferson, the most committed, if also the most contradictory, of the new breed of philosopher-meritocrats, wanted to discover 'youths of genius from among the classes of the poor' and provide them with a free education. Later, Americans rejected this top-down view of society in favour of opening opportunities for upward mobility. But the essence of the American experiment remained the same: create equality of opportunity but expect that equality of opportunity to lead to a highly unequal outcome as people sorted themselves out according to their abilities and energies.

The French Revolution was a messier affair as well as a bloodier one. The revolution was inspired by a similar revolt against the 'artificial aristocracy': the revolutionaries declared that all men should be

treated as equal before the law and that all careers should be opened to talent. Feudal privileges were abolished; the purchase of jobs was prohibited; elite schools were strengthened. Yet the result of this explosion of energy was confused: Napoleon mixed dynastic and meritocratic principles indiscriminately; and the Restoration brought back some of the most dubious features of the old regime. The France that emerged from the revolution was a strange mixture, half furiously meritocratic, half nostalgically aristocratic.

The most idiosyncratic revolution took place in Great Britain. The revolution was led by the intellectual aristocracy – a group of intermarried families with names such as Huxley, Darwin and Keynes – who owed their success to their sharp brains rather than to their broad acres. These reformers first subjected established institutions such as the civil service and the universities to open competition and then gradually built a ladder of opportunity for scholarship children.

Chapter Eleven looks at the rise of IQ testing. IQ testing provided a convenient way of testing mental ability and expressing that ability in a single number – so convenient, in fact, that, only a few years after IQ tests were invented, the US army used them to classify millions of recruits in the Great War. IQ testing also addressed three questions that anybody who takes the meritocratic idea seriously must confront. Is intelligence inherited or acquired, and, if both, in what proportions? How can we distinguish between innate ability and mere learning? And how much social mobility can we expect in a properly meritocratic society?

Chapter Twelve looks at the triumphant march of meritocracy after the Second World War. This was the glorious era in the history of the meritocratic idea: an era in which the left and the right could agree on the importance of giving everybody a chance to develop their natural abilities; an era in which opportunities were expanding in the form of university places and white-collar jobs; an era in which society as a whole celebrated the power of intelligence, as represented by scientists, engineers and even public intellectuals.

Chapter Thirteen re-examines the story through the lens of sex. The story of the rise of women is often written in terms of collective struggle for group rights. This chapter argues that it is just as important to recognize the role of liberal intellectuals such as J. S. Mill (and his

wife, Harriet Taylor), who argued that the meritocratic revolution could not be complete until women were given a fair chance. The shift in the overall balance of the economy from brawn to brains made it inevitable that women would perform just as well as men. The feminist revolution thus represented the logical continuation of the introduction of open competition in the nineteenth century.

Part Five tells a darker story. Chapter Fourteen details the revolt against the meritocracy on the left. This revolt started in academia, with various specialists questioning both the power of IQ tests to measure intelligence and the deeper theory that IQ testing rested upon. This revolt was particularly fierce in Britain because of the role of the 11-plus in dividing children into sheep and goats. Academic doubts about IQ tests fed upon deeper intellectual currents. Egalitarians argued that the principle of meritocracy smuggled the principle of elitism into the heart of the socialist project. The proper aim of the left was equality of outcome rather than equality of result. Communitarians argued that the principle of meritocracy was dividing communities into the educational equivalent of the saved and the damned. Radical intellectuals such as Michel Foucault deconstructed every imaginable boundary – between the sane and the mad, the good and the bad, the law-abiding and the homicidal and, of course, between the bright and the average – as the product of bourgeois power. Increasingly, the debate was between egalitarians, who believed that all should have prizes, and super-egalitarians, who believed that prizes were just part of the ‘bourgeois problematic’.

Chapter Fifteen examines the recent marriage between meritocracy and plutocracy. The egalitarian revolution in the state sector was a failure not only because it deprived working-class children of an avenue of social mobility but also because it coincided with a meritocratic revolution at the top of society. The privileged discovered the importance of intellectual success: British public (i.e. private) schools and American Ivy League universities put increased emphasis on school results. The children of the meritocrats who had thrived in the 1950s and 1960s devoted their considerable resources to passing their privileges to their children. Even during the Great Depression, when, in Charles and Mary Beard’s phrase in *The Rise of American Civilisation* (1930), poverty was ‘stark and galling enough to blast human nature’, Americans still believed that there was ‘a baton in every toolkit’.<sup>51</sup> Today, thanks to the



widening meritocracy gap, they, along with the citizens of other advanced countries, particularly Britain, believe that the baton has been taken away. That is a dangerous situation as well as a sad one.

Chapter Sixteen looks at the more recent populist revolt against the meritocracy – a revolt that takes up many of the themes of the 1960s (that the elite owes its privileges to a rigged system rather than hard work and ability) but mixes it with powerful cultural resentment. The populist rebellion is driven by a revolt of the exam-flunking classes against the exam-passing classes. In Britain, one of the strongest predictors of how you would vote in the Brexit referendum was educational level.<sup>52</sup> In America, the proportion of people who voted Republican in presidential elections in the hundred best-educated counties, judged by the proportion of degree holders, shrank from 76 per cent in 1980 to 16 per cent in 2020.<sup>53</sup> Donald Trump, who was particularly successful at appealing to blue-collar workers, even declared, ‘I love the poorly educated.’<sup>54</sup>

Chapter Seventeen returns to one of the themes of the earlier part of the book: the Far East. Singapore is the closest thing the world has seen to Plato’s Republic or Confucius’s mandarin state. This is significant in itself: Singapore’s success in making the leap from a swampy backwater into one of the world’s richest societies demonstrates the power of the meritocratic idea in producing prosperity. But what matters even more is that China – a giant economy that is rapidly catching up with the United States – has decided to model itself on Singapore. China has not only embraced educational meritocracy: Chinese schoolchildren increasingly tread the same path as their mandarin predecessors, only this time they study engineering rather than the Confucian classics. It has also embraced political meritocracy: China prides itself on eliding the difference between political and administrative positions and promoting politician-bureaucrats on the basis of a succession of increasingly demanding tests. Even middle-aged aspirants for high office have to sit written examinations.

The more the West abandons liberal meritocracy in favour of plutocracy modified by quotas, the more it will cede the future to China. But how do we revitalize a meritocracy that is degenerating into plutocracy? And how do we live with this most demanding of taskmasters? That is the subject of the conclusion.

PART ONE

Priority, Degree and Place



# I

## Homo hierarchicus

In *Troilus and Cressida* (1609) Shakespeare's Ulysses presents a view of society that is as repugnant to the meritocratic world view as possible. Society is divided into estates and degrees. People are born into a fixed place in the world. The social order is a reflection of the divine order. Fail to 'observe degree, priority and place' and everything will collapse in ruins – the natural order as well as the social order:

What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!  
What raging of the sea! shaking of earth!  
Commotion in the winds! frights, changes, horrors,  
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate  
The unity and married calm of states  
Quite from their fixture! O, when degree is shaken,  
Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
Then enterprise is sick! How could communities,  
Degrees in schools and brotherhoods in cities,  
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,  
The primogenitive and due of birth,  
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,  
But by degree, stand in authentic place?  
Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, hark, what discord follows!

This hierarchical view of the world was the dominant view in Europe until relatively recently. It also found striking echoes in other pre-modern societies such as India with its caste system of Brahmins and untouchables and Japan with its rigid hierarchy. I will focus on

Europe because it was Europe that first saw the ‘prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels’ comprehensively challenged.

## THE THEORY OF INEQUALITY

The pre-modern world conceived of itself as a hierarchy of social groups – estates, orders or corps – that were ordained by God and defined by their relationship to two great verities: their social function (those who prayed, those who fought and those who worked) and their position in a hierarchy of status that stretched downward from the heavens (the word *état* is derived from the Latin for ‘status’).

Charlemagne instructed his subjects in the early 800s to ‘serve God faithfully in that order in which he is placed’. The 843 Treaty of Verdun, which divided Charlemagne’s empire between his three sons, proclaimed the principle that ‘every man should have a lord’ with the same certainty that the United Nations proclaimed, in 1948, that human rights are universal. In 1079 Pope Gregory VII declared that ‘the dispensation of divine providence ordered there should be distinct grades and orders’. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII reiterated that the members of each social order should not aspire to the prerogatives and honours of people in higher social positions.<sup>1</sup>

This theory of fixed estates was a distorted image of reality, of course. There were plenty of occupations that didn’t fit into this simple tripartite hierarchy – merchants, millers and strolling players, for example – and the number of misfits increased as society became richer. People nevertheless continued to be wedded to a status hierarchy that defined everything in terms of its relationship with manual labour. Those who lived a little like priests – for example, men of letters or lawyers, or, at a pinch, teachers – had a high position in the hierarchy. Those who soiled their hands with manual work had a lower position, even if they grew quite rich. Money could never wash the stain of manual labour from your hands.<sup>2</sup>

The hierarchy of status was reinforced by a hierarchy of legal rights and obligations. T. H. Marshall, one of the founders of sociology in Britain, noted that in a society of estates ‘people have a position (status) to which is attached a bundle of rights, privileges, obligations and

legal capacities enforced by public authority'.<sup>3</sup> Nobles were entitled to trials in special courts, where they were judged by their peers, and even to particular punishments suited to their rank: in France nobles were entitled to be decapitated if they were found guilty of a capital crime, if decapitation can be counted as a privilege, rather than being tortured to death. They were also exempted from various taxes on the grounds that they were already serving the state through their military prowess. Nobles were also bound by obligations to fight for their king (or other feudal lord) and to provide for their dependants, starting with their family members. Removing group-specific legal rights and replacing them with individual rights was at the heart of the Enlightenment project in the eighteenth century.

The hierarchy of status doubled as a hierarchy of honour. Honour determined how people treated you: the more honour you possessed, the more deference you were owed. Honour also determined how you treated other people: because you possessed honour you were obliged to treat other people with a (measured) degree of civility. Honour was a demanding taskmaster. If someone insulted your honour, they could not be allowed to get away with it: hence the plague of jousts and duels that took so many young noble lives. '[A] hundred and fifty years ago, we would have had to fight if challenged,' says Ivor Claire, the aristocratic hero 'with feet of clay' in Evelyn Waugh's *Officers and Gentlemen* (1955). 'Now we'd laugh. There must have been a time . . . when it was rather an awkward question.'

The world of special rights and privileges extended to corporate bodies. Some of these bodies, such as aristocratic assemblies and universities, were reserved for the elite. Others, such as town councils, provincial estates and professional guilds, might involve 'middling sorts' or even below. A striking proportion of the population of pre-modern societies enjoyed special privileges, either in the form of rights or exemptions, by virtue of their membership of certain estates or corporations or guilds or by virtue of their birthplace. This meant that pre-modern regimes were both enormously complicated and enormously hard to define: you might discover that a person from, say, Ludlow, had a claim on an Oxford college for a subsidized education for no reason other than that he came from Ludlow and a wool merchant had forged some special link eons ago. What mattered were the

ties of nature and custom that bound you to your superiors rather than the universal rules that ideally govern opportunities in a meritocracy.

This organic view of society rested on both ancient and biblical authorities. Aristotle talked about ‘natural’ rulers and ‘natural’ slaves: some people were designed to rule, some to obey, and that was just the way things were. The Bible is full of passages emphasizing the importance of obedience. ‘Obey them that have the rule over you,’ thunders Hebrews 13:17. ‘The powers that are be ordained of God,’ St Paul says in Romans 13:1. ‘Render . . . unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s,’ Jesus says in Matthew 22:21. Across Europe a black-coated intelligentsia took every opportunity, from their regular Sunday sermons to celebrations of births, marriages and deaths, harvests and holidays, to repeat these passages and add fulminations of their own. The message is well summed up in a nineteenth-century British ditty:

God bless the squire and his relations  
And keep us in our proper stations.

This belief in natural hierarchy found its most elaborate expression in the notion of a great chain of being, a chain that stretched from the foot of God’s throne to the ‘meanest inanimate object’.<sup>4</sup> This governed social thought in the Middle Ages and became even more elaborate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the doctrine of ‘correspondences’. Shakespeare’s contemporaries saw a correspondence everywhere they looked: between hierarchy in the divine world and hierarchy in human society, or even between the human body and the body politic, with the monarch acting as the head and the labourers as the hands. Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World* (1614) contains a fine passage on how the social hierarchy is an extension of natural hierarchy (though not fine enough to save him from being beheaded in 1618):

Shall we therefore value honour and riches at nothing and neglect them as unnecessary and vain? Certainly no. For that infinite wisdom of God, which hath distinguished his angels by degrees, which hath given greater and less light and beauty to heavenly bodies, which hath made differences between beasts and birds, created the eagle and the fly, the cedar and the shrub, and among stones given the fairest tincture to the ruby and the

quickest light to the diamond, hath also ordained kings, dukes or leaders of the people, magistrates, judges, and other degrees among men.<sup>5</sup>

According to this view, an untuned string meant more than a single discordant note. It meant disharmony on a universal scale – cosmic anarchy in which the universe ceased to obey laws and disorder was unleashed on every corner of God’s creation. Thus Othello worried that ‘chaos is come again’, Ulysses talked of ‘this chaos, when degree is suffocate’, King Lear’s madness reflected the anarchy that comes from the rebellion of children against their father.

If all this sounds more like a literary trope than a guide to everyday living, it is nevertheless true that the theory of priority, degree and place was woven into society. To demonstrate this point, let’s look at the way the theory of inequality worked in a particular society at a particular point of time: in the England of the Tudors and Stuarts. This England – Shakespeare’s England – is of particular interest because many of the old assumptions of hierarchical society were being tested by a new commercial society and a new philosophy of Renaissance humanism. The defenders of the old order had to explain themselves because they were being challenged for the first time. In 1642–51, a quarter of a century after Shakespeare died, Britain exploded into a Civil War that sounded many of the themes of a new meritocratic social order.

## HOW HIERARCHY WORKED

In a society in which the most important economic resource was not the brain inside your head but the land under your feet, the most powerful people were the ones who owned that land. In the Middle Ages landed aristocrats had held their lands – ‘fiefs’ or ‘fees’ – in return for providing military service for the king. Members of the landed elite invested psychologically as well as financially in turning themselves into warriors. They spent most of their youth learning how to fight, most of their leisure time sharpening their skills in hunting and jousting, and most of their surplus money on equipping themselves with horses and armour.<sup>6</sup> They organized themselves into morale-boosting fraternities such as the Templars, the Knights of



St John and the Teutonic Knights; told romantic tales about knights on horseback who went off in search of honour, adventure and, through the Crusades, religious salvation;<sup>7</sup> and otherwise bound each other together by three adamantine bonds: shared danger, shared breeding and shared myths.

The cost of warfare was nevertheless exorbitant in both blood and treasure. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries knights were tanks in human form: mounted on horses for mobility, covered with heavy armour for protection, equipped with lances and swords for offensive power, serviced by a retinue of lesser soldiers such as servants and shield bearers, and expensive to operate. According to one study, almost half of the male members of British ducal families born between 1330 and 1479 met a violent end.<sup>8</sup> So it is not entirely surprising that, as the Tudors established a centralized state, aristocrats spent less time fighting and more time cultivating their estates and politicking in Court.

The principle of hierarchy governed every social relation. Masters ruled over serfs. Husbands ruled over wives and children ('I know not which live more unnatural lives,' John Taylor, a seventeenth-century poet quipped, 'obedient husbands or commanding wives.') Men ruled over animals. Society celebrated hierarchy in everything from the most elaborate rituals, such as state dinners, to the smallest gestures. The two great symbols of this society were the hat and the whip. People were forever doffing their hats in deference to their betters – and those who refused to doff their hats were frequently given a whipping or put in stocks.<sup>10</sup>

The social order was founded on entitlement: certain people were entitled to a certain treatment because of who they were rather than what they had achieved. Aristocrats regarded themselves as superior to the common herd by virtue of generations of careful breeding. 'If there are races among animals there are races among men,' Margraf Karl Friedrich von Baden wrote. 'For that reason the most superior must put themselves ahead of others, marry among themselves and produce a pure race: that is the nobility.'<sup>11</sup> Still, members of the ruling class inherited duties along with privileges: they had to keep the machinery of government going (for example, by serving as lord lieutenants of their counties) and they had to provide an example of good

conduct. 'In the greatest fortune,' observed Richard Brathwaite in his *English Gentleman* (1630), 'there is the least liberty.'

He sinnes doubly, that sinnes exemplarily: whence is meant, that such, whose very persons should bee examples or patternes of vigilancy, providence and industry, must not sleepe out their time under the fruitlesse shadowe of Security. Men in great place (saith one) are thrice servants; servants of the Sovereaigne, or state; servants of Fame; and servants of Businesse. So as they have no freedome, neither in their persons, nor in their actions, nor in their times.<sup>12</sup>

The basic unit of society was not the individual but the family. The aristocratic family was defined by its relationship to two great existential facts: place and time. 'We belong to our possessions, rather than our possessions belong to us,' Lord Montagu of Beaulieu put it as late as 1974, speaking for his caste down the generations. 'To us, they are not wealth, but heirlooms, over which we have a sacred trust.'<sup>13</sup> The only thing as important as land was lineage – the individual landowner was 'the ancestral baton-carrier in the relay race of family destiny', as one historian puts it.<sup>14</sup> Rights, status, laws, property, all were justified by inheritance rather than utility, by tradition rather than reason.

John Galsworthy summarized this outlook in his novel *The Country House*, written in 1906, set in 1891, but relevant through the ages. 'I believe in my father, and his father, and his father's father, the makers and keepers of my estate,' the local squire proclaims, 'and I believe in myself and my son and my son's son. And I believe that we have made the country, and shall keep the country what it is . . . And I believe in my social equals and the country house, and in things as they are, for ever and ever. Amen.'<sup>15</sup> The Curzon family motto made the same point more concisely: 'Let Curzon holde what Curzon helde.'<sup>16</sup>

The best way to justify change was to present it as a return to tradition. Pre-modern societies actively willed themselves to be 'stable', in the same way as modern societies will themselves to be 'mobile', citing traditions wherever possible but, if they couldn't find them, simply inventing them. As soon as new men had made enough money to become respectable they either married into an established family or purchased a coat of arms that 'proved' they belonged to the ancient

aristocracy.<sup>17</sup> Daniel Defoe captured this in *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726):

We see the tradesmen of England, as they grow wealthy, coming every day to the Herald's Office, to search for the coats of arms of their ancestors, in order to paint them upon their coaches, and engrave them upon their plate, embroider them upon their furniture, or carve them upon the pediments of their new houses . . .<sup>18</sup>

The flip-side of deference to tradition and lineage was dislike of change and rootlessness. Sir Edward Coke, an Elizabethan and Jacobean lawyer and one of the fathers of common law, advised everyone to 'Hold all innovations and new ways suspicious.'<sup>19</sup> Lord Salisbury, three times prime minister in the late-Victorian era, pronounced gloomily that 'whatever happens will be for the worse and therefore it is in our interest that as little should happen as possible'. In Anthony Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1876) Abel Wharton, QC, vigorously opposes his daughter's marriage to Ferdinand Lopez – rightly, as it turns out – because he doesn't know where Lopez comes from and who his people are. He might be clever and plausible – but he has no roots and no history, and 'no one knows anything about him'.<sup>20</sup> He is a man fallen out of the moon.

Medieval and Early Modern societies worked as hard to put limits on people's freedom to improve themselves as today's societies do, at least formally, to boost social mobility. Governments laid down rules about how much land different sorts of people could buy, what sorts of clothes they could wear and what sorts of sports they could play: archery was for the plebs, bowls and tennis for the toffs.<sup>21</sup> It also devoted a great deal of effort to tying people into elaborate apprenticeship systems. 'If any young man unmarried be without service,' a sixteenth-century legal scholar thundered, 'he shalbe compelled to get him a master whom he must serve for that yere, or else he shalbe punished with stockes and whipping as an idle vagabond.'<sup>22</sup>

Educational mobility was a particular bugbear. In the early sixteenth century James I forbade people who were 'not gentlemen by descent' from entering the Inns of Court.<sup>23</sup> In the seventeenth century Oxbridge colleges introduced the status of Fellow Commoner (Cambridge) or Gentleman Commoner (Oxford) so that well-bred undergraduates

could sit with the Fellows rather than with run-of-the-mill undergraduates (for double fees, naturally). In the sixteenth century, continental universities drove poorer students from student lodgings and obliged them to do domestic work, frequently looking after richer students. Paris, Bologna and Perugia deprived poor students of the right to vote and become members of academic councils, while Louvain obliged paupers to wear a white shoulder piece, instead of the traditional black, for graduation ceremonies.<sup>24</sup> In the 1720s, Bernard Mandeville, supposedly a great champion of the liberal order, attacked charity schools on the grounds that they would make the poor discontented with their lot in life: ‘it is requisite that great numbers of [the poor] should be Ignorant as well as Poor’.<sup>25</sup>

Up until remarkably recently the best sort of people had little time for the three great articles of faith of today’s meritocrats: hard work, ambition and education.

Living nobly meant avoiding all forms of manual work, including trade. Christianity taught that work was a punishment for the Fall – before the Fall, Adam and Eve had not had to labour to get nature to yield up its fruits – while aristocratic snobbery taught that engaging in labour was inherently degrading. Some places, such as the Kingdom of Naples, had laws which forbade nobles from engaging in gainful employment; others, such as England, relied on social convention. True aristocrats made it clear not only that they weren’t contaminated by labour but that they couldn’t possibly be: just as Chinese mandarins had long fingernails encased in silver to demonstrate that they could not lift a finger to do anything practical, European aristocrats had clothes that made work impossible – long dresses for women and fine silk breeches for men.

Conspicuous leisure was but one aspect of conspicuous consumption: living nobly meant demonstrating that you had time to waste and money to burn. Nobles employed armies of retainers wherever they went: coachmen to drive them, footmen to tend to them, pages to accompany them, ushers to introduce them, hangers-on to peacock around with them. They built themselves large, sometimes gigantic, houses that required armies of servants to run them and legions of visitors to justify their existence.

For some members of the old aristocracy this prohibition even

extended to education, on the grounds that it filled children's minds with nonsense even as it enfeebled their bodies. Richard Pace, Henry VIII's secretary of state, who had studied at Winchester, Padua and Oxford, heard one peer exclaiming, 'I swear by God's body, I'd rather that my son should hang than study letters.' Sir Thomas Elyot complained that 'to a great gentleman it is a notable reproach to be well learned and to be called a great clerk'. Edmund Spenser said that nobles deemed it a 'base thing' 'to be learned'.<sup>26</sup>

As for ambition, a remarkable range of authorities agreed that ambition was a double abomination: a sign of individual depravity and a threat to social cohesion. St Augustine defined ambition as the chief enemy of the good. Machiavelli identified ambition and avarice as 'Furies' that were designed to 'deprive us of peace and to set us at war'.<sup>27</sup> The Calvinists' Genevan translation of the Bible included seventy-seven admonitions against ambition, including the assertions that 'God detesteth ambition' and that Adam was destroyed not by pride but by ambition.<sup>28</sup> Shakespeare's tragedies feature characters who are seized by ambition that drives them upwards beyond the limits prescribed for them by their birth: Richard III is deformed, both outwardly and inwardly, by ambition; Macbeth is a victim of 'vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself'. In the *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1628) Robert Burton defined ambition as 'a canker of the soul, an hidden plague . . . a secret poison, the father of livor [envy], and mother of hypocrisy, the moth of holiness, and cause of madness, crucifying and disquieting all that it takes hold of'.<sup>29</sup>

How did this society of orders and degrees work in practice? How were privileges passed from generation to generation? How were jobs allocated and opportunities distributed? In order to answer these questions we have to understand that the family was not only the basic *social* unit of pre-modern societies. It was the basic *political* unit as well.

## 2

# Family Power

In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels declared that ‘the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles’. It would have been just as true to have said, back then, that ‘the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of family struggles’. Before the mid-nineteenth century the commanding heights of almost all ‘hitherto existing societies’ were controlled by ruling families. The questions at the heart of domestic politics were family questions. Could the ruling family produce healthy children? Could it hold out against claims to the throne by rival families? Foreign policy was equally dynastic. Royal marriages represented an opportunity to guarantee the social order for future generations by producing an heir: failed successions could lead to bloody civil wars or international conflagrations.

Today we instinctively regard the idea that people should inherit real political power, as opposed to the pantomime variety, as an abomination. The British have turned their royal family into a branch of the entertainment industry: the royals are allowed to live in their gilded cages provided they devote their lives to ceremonial functions (bringing in a Hollywood actress to add more multicultural sparkle proved to be an innovation too far). The moment the royals try to exercise real power, as Prince Charles tried to do with his campaigns on architecture, GM foods and the countryside, they tell them, irritably, to shut up.

We naturally warm to critics of the dynastic principle who have wagged their fingers down the ages, such as Hippocrates, a Greek sage, who warned that ‘where there are kings, there must be the greatest cowards. For [here] men’s souls are enslaved, and refuse to run

risks readily and recklessly to increase the power of somebody else'; or Ibn Khaldun, the great Arabic historian, who argued that dynasties will always degenerate over time because a childhood of luxury corrupts the human spirit.<sup>1</sup> There are only twenty monarchies left in a world that boasts more than 200 sovereign states.

Yet for most of history dynasties have been the rule rather than the exception: today's meritocratic certainties are, in fact, recent innovations which most people in most places would not have understood. People as widely dispersed as the Aztecs and the Chinese have embraced dynasty. The Japanese Yamato dynasty has been on the throne since 660 BC. Dynasties have dominated business as well as politics: Antinoris have produced wine in Tuscany since 1385, Berettas have made guns nearby since 1526 and Rothschilds have played a starring role in banking since the eighteenth century. 'The banker's calling is hereditary,' wrote Walter Bagehot, who followed his father into the banking business and became editor of the *Economist* by dint of marrying the daughter of the magazine's founder as well as possessing unrivalled journalistic talent. 'The credit of the bank descends from father to son; this inherited wealth brings inherited refinement.'

Dynasties have taken different forms in different parts of the world. The West has strongly favoured both monogamy and male primogeniture for a mixture of religious and economic reasons: Christianity forbids even the most powerful rulers from taking more than one wife at a time, while primogeniture prevents the break-up of great estates and limits feuding between rival claimants to the throne. Outside the West, polygamy has been the rule. Powerful men had lots of 'wives', either in the form of legitimate wives in polygamous regimes or concubines in monogamous ones, in part because they could and in part because they wanted to have as many children as possible to maximize their chances of producing that all-important healthy male heir.

Despite these striking differences, dynasties the world over have tended to draw on the same rhetoric and resources. They present themselves as the guarantees of the social order and links between the Earth and Heaven. They act as centrepieces in a wider network of aristocratic families who mix the transfer of power with the transmission of genes. Royals surrounded themselves with other dynasts: Louis XVI decreed that you could not be presented at Court unless

you boasted a noble pedigree going back to 1400, which limited the list of candidates to a thousand families.<sup>2</sup> Elite families talked about genealogical links with the same enthusiasm that today's high-flyers talk about their educational credentials.

That said, the relationship between royal families and other aristocratic families was complicated: sometimes royals succeeded in subordinating other dynasties to their will, often by tempting them to abandon their local principalities for life at Court; sometimes aristocratic families succeeded in keeping kings on a tight leash, most obviously in Poland, where they had a right to elect their kings. In aristocratic societies there is usually a battle between the *primus* and the *inter pares*.

Dynasties also went through similar cycles: born out of force or fraud, they eventually clothed raw power in the robes of civilization. Confucius argued that successful emperors rule through moral example. 'He who governs by his moral excellence may be compared to the Pole-star,' *The Analects* has him saying, 'which abides in its place while all the stars bow towards it.' Augustine, Aquinas and Erasmus argued that kings needed to be models of virtue – devout and honest, just and merciful – if they wanted to survive. The populace must submit without question, of course, but the king must play his part by showing grace and benevolence. Dynasties also promoted the same patterns of behaviour: patronage and deference, fawning and intrigue, all follow as inexorably from the dynastic principle as preoccupations with exams and career hierarchies follow from the meritocratic principle.

Dynastic courts were invariably centres of intrigue: whether you examine Turkish sultans or Chinese emperors or European kings, courtiers are always plotting to get the ear of the king or his successor, often to drip in poison about their rivals. Writing about Louis XVI, Britain's ambassador in France argued that intrigue was inescapable:

His Majesty wishes to place Himself out of the Reach of all Intrigue. This, however, is a vain Expectation, and the Chimera of a Young, inexperienced Mind. The throne He fills, far from raising him above Intrigue, places Him in the Centre of it. Great and Eminent Superiority Of Talents might, indeed, crush these Cabals, but as there is no Reason



to believe Him possessed of that Superiority, I think, He will be a prey to them and find Himself more and more entangled every Day.<sup>3</sup>

Dynasties also had one fundamental thing in common: they minimized the difference between the public and the private, or the political and the personal: all politics was family politics. Frederick Pollock and F. W. Maitland got to the heart of the matter in their great *History of English Law* (1895): ‘Just in so far as the ideal of feudalism is perfectly realized, all that we call public law is merged in private law; jurisdiction is property, office is property, the kingship itself is property.’<sup>4</sup> Countries were essentially family estates: a king inherited his country in much the same way as a landowner inherited his estate, and ran it in much the same way. This meant that maps were always in flux as this or that portion of an inheritance passed from one family to another. It also meant that alliances could suddenly change as the owner of one estate fell out with his neighbour or, alternatively, married off his daughter to a neighbour’s son. The inhabitants of countries had no more say in these great affairs of state than the peasants living on a great estate had in the affairs of a great landowner.

The passage of time weakened Pollock and Maitland’s ‘perfect feudalism’. In 1419 a French lawyer argued that ‘the lordship that the king has in the kingdom is of a different kind from the lordship of property that is transmitted through family inheritance’. Even as Louis XIV declared that ‘the state is me’, other lawyers distinguished between the king as a physical person and the king as the embodiment of the nation state. Even so, dynasties continued to blur the line between public and private until at least the nineteenth century: they not only owned large pieces of land personally (as the Queen of England still does) but also handed out offices of state as if they were personal gifts.

## POLITICS AS BIOLOGY

The dynastic principle put the physical person of the monarch at the heart of power: monarchs led their country’s troops into battle at least until the middle of the eighteenth century and, through the royal household, provided the nucleus of the state. The closer you were

physically to the king, the closer you were to the centre of power. The oldest offices were all related to the monarch's physical needs – looking after his horse or falcons, guarding his bedchamber – and were all reserved for members of his own family or the most blue-blooded aristocrats. In Britain, the Groom of the Stool, who became one of the most powerful figures in the royal household, originally had the job of supervising the sovereign's bowel movements. In France, the right to present the king's napkin during the dinner was given to the highest-born person present. Post-medieval kings sometimes tightened the links between themselves and the upper nobility at the same time as they were building more professional bureaucracies: Louis XIV doubled the number of pages (young nobles of impeccable breeding) who were sent to Versailles in order to learn Latin, dance and horsemanship, from 80 to 160.<sup>5</sup>

Louis XIV – perhaps the most splendid example of the most splendid of European monarchies – demonstrated the importance of putting the physical person of the monarch on display to his leading subjects. Getting dressed in the morning and undressed at night were elaborate ceremonies, known as the *levée* and the *coucher* and lasting about an hour and a half each, which took place before large audiences of the finest in the land. Hundreds of people watched him go a-hunting (which he often did several days a week). The king dined in public, with senior aristocrats watching from comfortable seats and lowlier people filing past, sometimes asking for favours as they went. The obvious function of this display was to allow courtiers to beg for favours – which they did morning, noon and night. But it also allowed them to gawp at the royal person – take a measure of his nature and chat about their proximity to the great man to their friends. The king was a pop star to be admired – and even touched – as much as he was a ruler making decisions.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of physical proximity to the king was illustrated at its most brutal by royal deaths. Marie Antoinette's chambermaid described the kerfuffle when news of Louis XV's death arrived: 'A terrible noise exactly like thunder was heard in the outer room of his apartments: it was the crowd of courtiers deserting the antechamber of the dead sovereign to come and greet the new power of Louis XVI.' You could never be too early to start grovelling to the new king.

As well as blue bloods, courts contained a variety of hangers-on

whose unifying feature was that they existed to satisfy the king's needs, physical, psychological or whatever: fools and minstrels to entertain him; women and boys to titillate or soothe him; bosom buddies to amuse and advise him; writers to sing his virtues; artists to paint his picture and sculpt his form; and huntmasters to prepare for hunting and shooting.

Some monarchs had a weakness for clever companions: Louis XIV brought talented members of the bourgeoisie to Court, including Vauban, Racine, Molière and Mme de Maintenon. Other monarchs deliberately chose weak companions such as dwarfs, exiles or ne'er-do-wells. Henry VII had several mentally defective companions – called 'naturals' or 'innocents' – who accompanied him on his travels around the country.<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth I had a dwarf, Thomasina, whom she showered with gifts such as gowns, gloves and ivory combs.<sup>8</sup> (The Duc de Bourbon's many peculiarities – he was 'very considerably shorter than the shortest men', had livid yellow skin and laboured under the delusion that he was a dog – were put down to the fact that his mother kept a dwarf as a companion.)<sup>9</sup> The Chinese and Turkish courts favoured eunuchs because they couldn't threaten the ruler's bloodline (or ego) by impregnating his concubines, or else challenge his family's claim to the throne by harbouring dynastic ambitions of their own. The Turkish sultans also surrounded themselves with slaves whom they recruited by conquest but then promoted to powerful positions. Many of the most senior officers in the civil service and the military corps started life in bondage.

By putting a monarch on the throne, the dynastic principle also put the facts of biology at the heart of politics. Monarchs might be semi-divine beings to their supporters – the visible links between the earthly and the heavenly orders – but they were also biological beings. The facts of biology could be particularly demanding for European monarchies, reducing the number of legitimate children they could produce and, given high rates of infant mortality, sometimes ensuring that girls or distant relations succeeded to the throne.

The birth of a healthy son was the subject of national as well as familial celebration: when Charles VI of France announced the birth of a male heir on 6 February 1392, Paris exploded with joy, according to one account: church bells rang, the streets filled with revellers carrying