

AMERICAN MERITOCRACY: IDEAL OR DYSTOPIA?

Coordinator: Lenore Cooney

“Education is the key to a good life.” “What you learn is what you earn.” “You can make it if you want and try.” For many of us in US post-World War II generations, the axioms of the Meritocracy—a “political system in which economic goods and/or political power are vested in individuals based on talent, effort and achievement rather than wealth and class”—seemed to deliver as promised. But over time Meritocracy’s underlying rationale has come to appear more problematic, and the system’s downsides more pronounced.

The study group examines the questions Meritocracy raises, along with its implications for society. Is intelligence and talent earned? How much is achievement—even the very ability to work hard—dependent on the luck of genetic endowment? On socio-economic circumstances? Who decides which talents are worthy of power, income, wealth, social status, esteem? Are we obsessed, as some critics argue, by a system of quantification, test-scoring, qualifications, credentialing? Is access to superior educational resources (elite private schools, public schools of the “Golden Suburbs”) the key to membership in the power elite? Is there any consideration of what is of value to the common good?

What happens to the majority of Americans who get left behind? Do they have any expectation for social and economic mobility? What effect has growing inequality had on physical and mental health? How much has the hubris that infects the Meritocratic system contributed to the rise the “politics of resentment” that threatens to tear our country apart? Finally, is it possible for America to live up to its Meritocratic aspiration: a decent and dignified life for all?

Lenore Cooney has coordinated or taken part in numerous study groups that examine social issues, many of them involving race and class, through various lenses: sociology, history, economics, health.

Type of Study Group: Presentation followed by discussion

Readings and other Materials/Online Services:

Readings will be sent by email prior to each session

LP² STUDY GROUP PROPOSAL FOR SPRING 2023

***** SYLLABUS - A WORK IN PROGRESS *****

WEEK 1

TOPIC: What is the Meritocracy?

Origins of the concept; how has it played out in American life?

READING/VIEWING:

"Michael Sandel vs Adrian Wooldridge on meritocracy" on *Intelligence Squared*, (YouTube, Sept. 23, 2021);

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOpdahGGoxE>

"The Red Baron: On Michael Young and the ideal of meritocracy" by Kwame Anthony Appiah, (*The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 11, 2018).

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/10/11/michael-young-red-baron/>

WEEK 2

TOPIC: Guiding principles of meritocracy: fact or fallacy?

READING/VIEWING:

"A belief in meritocracy is not only false: It's bad for you" by Mark Clifton, (Princeton University Press, June 22, 2020);

<https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/a-belief-in-meritocracy-is-not-only-false-its-bad-for-you>

"Achievement in the Workplace" by Emilio Castillo, (MIT/Sloan Management Review, June 3, 2016);

"The Myth of the meritocracy: who really gets what they deserve?" by Kwame Anthony Appiah, (*The Guardian*, Oct. 27, 2018).

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/oct/19/the-myth-of-meritocracy-who-really-gets-what-they-deserve>

QUESTIONS:

Are intelligence and talent naturally endowed, or won through effort? Which should be rewarded? What talents are rewarded? Does their value depend on a specific time and place, the needs and tastes of a given society?

WEEK 3

TOPIC: Education as primary determinant of a good life?

READING/VIEWING:

"Is Meritocracy Making Everyone Miserable?" by Louis Menand, *The New Yorker*, Sept. 23, 2019);

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/30/is-meritocracy-making-everyone-miserable>

"Toppling the myth of meritocracy" by Michael Sandel, (*The Harvard Gazette*, Jan. 5, 2021);

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/01/the-myth-of-meritocracy-according-to-michael-sandel/>

Excerpt from *Dream Hoarders* by Richard Reeves;

"The dangerous separation of the American upper middle class" by Richard Reeves, (2017 Brookings Scholar Lecture Series, YouTube, Aug. 7, 2017).

<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-dangerous-separation-of-the-american-upper-middle-class/>

QUESTIONS:

Should the University be the chief arbiter of merit in American society?

Have elite universities become the exclusive preserve of America's wealthiest? Have we created a new power elite in the twenty percent of Americans who qualify as meritocrats?

WEEK 4

TOPIC: Unintended consequences: economic, social and health

READINGS:

"Meritocracy and inequality: moral considerations" by Theodor Teklu, (*Nature.com*, Jan. 9, 2018);

"The Great Divide: Education, Despair and Death" by Anne Case and Angus Deaton, (National Bureau of Economic Research, Sept. 2021).

<https://www.nber.org/papers/w29241>

WEEK 5: Politics of resentment: how meritocracy divides America

WEEK 6: What can be done? An open discussion