Meritocracy and Reification

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My article ‘Anti-Authority: Comparing Popper and Rorty on the Dialogic Development of Beliefs and Practice’ rejected the notion that Popper was a dogmatic liberal technocrat who fetishized the epistemic authority of science and the epistemic and ethical authority of free markets. Instead, it stressed how Popper sought to develop the recognition of fallibilism into a philosophy of dialogue where criticism replaced appeals to any form of dialogue-stopping source of epistemic and ethical authority. The debate that followed in the SERRC, and the book based on this (‘Democratic Problem-Solving: Dialogues in Social Epistemology’), ranged over a number of issues. These included: the way prevailing traditions or paradigms heavily mediate the reception of ideas; whether public intellectuals were needed to improve public dialogue; the neoliberal turn in higher education; and the way neoconservatism is used to construct public imaginaries that present certain groups as ‘enemies within’.

Throughout these discussions Ioana and I argued against elitist and hierarchical positions that sought to delimit what was discussed or who had the right to impose the terms of reference for discussion, based on an appeal to some form of epistemic-institutional source of knowledge. Horizontalist dialogue between different group tackling problems caused by neoliberalism and prejudice was advocated in place of vertical instruction where an expert or political elite set the terms of reference or monologically dispensed ideas for others, presumed to be passive and ignorant, to accept. Our main interlocutor, Raphael Sassower, put more emphasis on appeals to epistemic-institutional sources of authority, with it being argued, for instance, that public intellectuals were of use in shaping how lay agents engaged with the state.

One issue implicitly raised by this was that of whether a meritocracy, if realised, would make liberal capitalism legitimate, by removing the prejudice and structural disadvantage that many groups face. I argue that attempts to use this concept to legitimise liberal capitalism end up reifying all agents, no matter what their place in the status-class hierarchy. This reification undermines the development of a more dialogic democracy where people seek to work with others to gain control over the state and elites. In place of both well-meaning and more cynical— neoliberal— appeals to meritocracy rewarding educational-intellectual performance with a well-paid job, it is argued that the focus needs to be on critical pedagogy which can develop a more dialogic education and democracy. Such an approach would avoid reification and the legitimisation of existing hierarchies by rejecting their claims to epistemic and ethical authority.

Education, Economics and Punishment

Protestors responding to Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations about the extent of surveillance carried out by the NSA (National Security Agency) held placards saying that Orwell’s ‘1984’ was a warning and not an instruction manual. Decades earlier the socialist, social reformer and Labour MP Michael Young witnessed a change in language akin to seeing the phrase ‘double plus good’ come into popular use to appraise government policies.

Young supported many successful educational reforms. These included the reduction in ‘grammar schools’, which are state schools that select pupils, and the removal in most
counties of the ‘11-plus’, which was the intelligence test used to select a small number of pupils for grammar schools. While children at grammar schools studied A levels and were expected to go to university, the rest were expected to leave school at 16 for unskilled jobs or, if they were lucky, apprenticeships. For critics of the 11-plus and grammar schools, the test’s objectivity was at best moot and its consequence was to reinforce not just an economic hierarchy but an affective-symbolic status hierarchy too. The majority who did not go to grammar school and university were constructed as ‘failures’ who deserved to be in subordinate positions to those constructed as ‘naturally’ superior.

Given the very small number of working class pupils who passed the 11-plus the consequence of this was to legitimise the existing class hierarchy by presenting the middle class and upper class as naturally superior. Interestingly, following the drive to create a mass higher education system in the UK, it has become evident that pupils from ‘public schools’ (that is, fee paying schools) often fare worse at university than working class pupils with the same or similar A level grades, because the latter got the grades with fewer resources spent on them. Such working class pupils would have attended ‘comprehensive’ (non-selective) state schools (Preston 2014).

Young also helped establish the Open University (OU), which allowed mature students to study for a degree. Many of students of the OU, who successfully graduated, had failed their 11-plus, and the OU attracted academics regarded as famous intellectuals, such as Stuart Hall, to design courses and deliver some of lectures, which were broadcast on BBC2 (a state-owned TV channel dedicated to ‘high cultural’ and education programming). Unfortunately though, recent studies have confirmed that class bias exists in job selection.

Graduate job applicants are judged in terms of their accent and mannerism, with ‘posh’ behaviours being taken as a proxy for intelligence or at least a signal that the applicant will be easier to work with than someone lacking the same ‘cultural capital’ (Weaver 2015). Furthermore, rich parents are able to fund their student-offspring’s unpaid internships in corporations and government in expensive cities, creating networking opportunities and a way to build experience for the CV, with this ‘social capital’ being impossible for students who do not come from rich backgrounds (Britton, Dearden, Shephard and Vignoles 2016). People may respond to this by calling for an increased ‘meritocracy’ but Young, who coined the term ‘meritocracy’, was opposed to the idea of legitimising a new hierarchy.

As a warning about a society that wished to eschew egalitarianism, he wrote ‘The Rise of the Meritocracy: 1870-2033’ (1994 [1958]). This was a satirical vision of a dystopian future where class hierarchy based on a small number of extremely rich individuals having power because of inherited wealth and privilege had been replaced by a hierarchy based on ‘merit’ defined as intellectual ability plus effort. Young coined the term ‘meritocracy’ to define the latter type of society. While this is now considered an honorific term, Young used his neologism in a pejorative way. Obviously Young saw the existing class hierarchy based on privilege as illegitimate, but for him replacing it with a meritocracy was unacceptable because such a society would end up with a rigid and absolute hierarchy between those seen as the deserving powerful and rich and those seen as the undeserving mass with no power and money. A meritocracy would be ruthless and inhuman for segregating people and defining many as biologically inadequate and of lower worth in every sense than others.
In his book the narrator describes how with no intelligent leaders the lower classes will remain at worst sullen or rebellious in a directionless way which the police ‘with their new weapons’ will be able to repress efficiently. Those not in the elite are spoken of in a dehumanised way as chattel which reflects the way the old class privileged elite saw the working and middle classes, having been socialised at private school and Oxbridge into the view that the upper class were entitled to rule. At the end of the book the publisher inserts a footnote to say the narrator has been killed at Peterloo. Young then saw the defining concept of his dystopian vision become used by all mainstream politicians and commentators to assess policies and the normative aspirations that were meant to inform them. He was particularly incensed by the way New Labour under Tony Blair endorsed the principle of meritocracy.

In 2001 Young wrote an article for the Guardian entitled ‘Down with Meritocracy’ where he lambasted those who had been selected through meritocratic education, as he saw it, arguing that they were ‘insufferably smug’ and so self-assured that ‘there is almost no block on the rewards they arrogate to themselves’ (Young 2001). He hoped for New Labour to use progressive taxation to tackle the greed and power of the new meritocratic elite but realised that would mark a big change away from New Labour’s pro-capitalist values.

Against Young, I hold that while progressive policies narrowed the income gap in the post-war years, class privilege and widening income inequality has defined UK capitalism since the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s. In graduate recruitment the top jobs are allocated not on grades—or ‘merit’—alone but on class background and internship experience that can only be attained from a rich background, and the amount of wealth accrued by those in the top 1% is increasing, while others have a reducing share of national wealth (Harvey 2005). Indeed, middle class jobs are now becoming precarious with a lot of people in both the middle and working class being forced to become self-employed and pay for their own training, have no sick pay and holiday pay, and be entirely responsible for their pension, etc. This is presented as liberating employees but is a sign of the current weakness of deunionised labour to resist the imposition of insecurity following a recession (Friedman 2014).

After Young’s death, the university fee was tripled to £9000 (in 2012) and the government’s accountants estimate that around half of these loans will not be repaid in full (McGettigan 2013). The changes to higher education did not end there and the current Conservative government hoped to ‘liberalise’ the ‘market’ in higher education, in England, by encouraging the extensive start-up of for-profit providers, through deregulation, despite the problems this created in the US, which the Harkin Report catalogued. Resistance from the House of Lords and a desire to push the legislation through Parliament before it is prorogued for the hastily called General Election in May—widely seen as a vote on the Conservative vision of Brexit—led to compromise, with new providers still needing to be validated by existing providers.

The Conservatives also set up a new audit regime to measure teaching ‘excellence’, called the ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ (TEF). This will measure teaching quality in part by using employment data and data from the National Student Survey (NSS), completed by all third-
J. Cruickshank

year undergraduates, despite the NSS being specifically not designed to be used in a comparative way, with NSS data not furnishing meaningful deviations from the mean (Cheng and Marsh 2010; HEFCE 2001). A high TEF score would then be used to permit universities to raise the tuition fee in line with inflation (for discussion of these proposed changes see: Cruickshank 2016, 2017; Holmwood 2015a, 2015b).

The Lords argued that the fee increases had to be decoupled from TEF scoring. In a compromise, the fee can rise with inflation every year, for institutions who will take part in the TEF, with no link to a TEF score, until 2020, at which point full-inflation rises will be connected to TEF scoring. One possible consequence of linking scores to fee increases is that grade inflation will continue and that recruitment will be biased towards students from more privileged backgrounds, in Russell Group universities and middle ranking universities, with such students being seen as more likely to be employment ‘successes’, thanks to class privilege.

Such moves mark an intensified attempt definitively to redefine students as customers. For the Conservatives, and those in Labour who supported the Browne Review that led to the tripling of the fee, and the Liberal Democrats who were in coalition with the Conservatives, education and especially higher education, are to be defined in terms of customers making ‘investments’ in their ‘human capital’, to gain market advantage over other students competing for jobs. Education was not to be see in terms of being good in itself and good for fostering the development of critical and informed public.

For many politicians, students were not to see education as a ‘public good’ (with a well-informed critical public benefitting democracy) but a ‘positional good’ in market competition (Holmwood 2011). Brown (2015) argues that under neoliberalism a market rationality becomes ubiquitous with domains outside market competition being defined as analogous to competitive market relations. Here though education is redefined as being an actual commodity for instrumental use in competitive market relations between customers of human capital seeking advantage over each other. All of this is quite overt in the government’s Green Paper and White Paper on changing higher education. In these documents, it is made clear that customers are expected—and ‘enabled’, by the changes proposed—to make the correct investment in their human capital.

Customers will have TEF data and government controlled price signals to go on when it comes to judging the usefulness of a human capital investment and they will be further enabled by having a greater range of providers to choose from, with for-profits offering lower priced vocational training degrees, assumed to be more attractive to potential customers in ‘hard to reach’ disadvantaged communities. The government documents also make it clear that the customer is to be of use to the economy and to not be a burden by being underemployed and failing to pay back all their student loan (for discussions of these issues see: Collini 2012, 2017; Cruickshank 2016; the debates between Cruickshank and Chis, and Sassower, in Cruickshank and Sassower 2017; Holmwood 2011; Holmwood, Hickey, Cohen and Wallis 2016).

Obviously, there is a tension with such arguments. On the one hand, the market is seen to be a way to realise a meritocracy, with customers investing in the right human capital to succeed in a zero-sum competition with fellow customers. On the other hand, the market is
not so much just a means to realise meritocracy for the benefit of competitive individuals, but is instead an end in itself that individuals need to support with correct investment choices. The consequence of this is that if individuals are unemployed or underemployed, it is due to a personal failure to make the right investment choice. Moreover, if the individual is unemployed or underemployed it is not just deemed a matter of personal failure but a matter of their supposed fecklessness harming all by undermining economic productivity. Failure to make the right human capital investment is deemed a moral failure by the customer who eschewed the information provided by the audit regime to pursue a whim, with this costing the economy as a whole.

As part of this narrative, the Conservatives clearly state that the economy needs more ‘STEM’ (science, technology, engineering and maths) graduates, and thus less humanities or social science graduates. To be an unemployed or underemployed sociology or philosophy graduate is thus, with the Conservatives’ view, to be a feckless consumer. Despite the emphasis on objectivity in STEM subjects, it is ironic to note that the Conservative’s case about a lack of STEM graduates undermining economic performances rests on a problematic use of tiny literature and ignores the fact that the subject with the highest unemployment rate is computer science (Cruickshank 2016). It is also worth noting that many MPs and leading figures in journalism and broadcasting studied PPE (philosophy, politics and economics) at Oxford having attending expensive elite public schools.

An increasingly punitive approach, which from an economic point of view is dysfunctional, is now being pursued against individuals deemed to have failed in their moral duty to serve the economy. Contrary to the liberal fear of dogmatism stemming from normative commitments to ends, the Conservatives (and many in Labour too), hold that the end justifies the means, and so the end of protecting the economy—which is an end in itself—is taken to justify means that undermine the economy. If the Party want $2 + 2 = 5$ it will obtain.

William Davies, in a recent article in the *New Left Review*, explored how the latest phase of neoliberalism engages in increasingly severe punishments for being unemployed. For Davies (2016), what he terms ‘neoliberalism 3.0’ (following earlier phases of establishing and then normalising neoliberalism), is defined by its vengeance against those deemed to have failed. Policies such as ‘sanctioning’ welfare claimants (that is, removing benefit payments for a period of weeks or months) for trivial problems, such as arriving 5 minutes late to an interview with a welfare bureaucrat, even if the lateness was not their fault, do nothing to increase economic productivity but are relentlessly pursued. Such policies prevent people from entering the labour market, because the removal of benefits creates severe stress and requires time to access foodbanks and appeals processes, in place of job hunting and being well enough to attend job-interviews. Nonetheless, sanctions are continually being imposed as extremely punitive punishments to make life far worse for those already experiencing hardship. As Davies puts it:

> In contrast to the offence against socialism [in the 1980s], the ‘enemies’ targeted now are largely disempowered and internal to the neoliberal system itself. In some instances, such as those crippled by poverty, debt and
collapsing social-safety nets, they have already been largely destroyed as an autonomous political force. Yet somehow this increases the urge to punish them further (2016, 132).

Conservative rhetoric sought to demonise those receiving benefits, defining them as the ‘shirkers’ who get housing and money given to them by the welfare state as a reward for fecklessness, which punished the ‘hard working strivers’ who ‘got up early to see the curtains still closed in the house of the shirker claimants’ who they supported with their taxes. Working people were encouraged to feel nothing but resentment and hate towards the unemployed by the Conservatives.

Let’s explore two tensions in contemporary neoliberalism. First, there is the tension between technocracy and affect. On the one hand, neoliberals seek to reduce normative political questions about reforms to ‘value-neutral’ / technocratic questions about regulating objective market forces. Critics are quick to point out that neoliberalism is itself a normative position, with a value driven commitment to corporate capitalism being facilitated by state policies and spending, contrary to the anti-interventionist / free market rhetoric (see for instance: Davies 2014; Van Horn and Mirowski 2009). One example of this is the rise of private prisons in the US. Here in the UK, the state has been tendering out NHS services to corporations and the Conservatives hoped to reconstruct the market in higher education to facilitate for-profits. All of which means that neoliberalism is another form of interventionism (Cruickshank 2016). Furthermore, any notion of market forces ever being objective *sui generis* forces is erroneous given that they always already presume a legal and political framework, and certain sets of social expectations about contractual relations and the importance of work to define selfhood in modernity, etc. On the other hand, the claim about the need for politics to be reduced to the technocratic administration of objective market forces sits alongside the state constructing imaginaries that are meant to generate emotional and even visceral appeal.

Individuals are encouraged not only to resent and hate those classed as moral failures who failed to serve the economy, but to recognise their moral responsibility to serve the economy *and* be happy. Individuals need to be happy so as to be ever more efficient at work. Happiness is meant to increase despite the increase in job insecurity with the rise in temporary contracts and the use of self-employed contractors replacing salaried staff (for discussion see for instance: the debates in Cruickshank and Sassower 2017; Davies 2014, 2015, 2016). An affective hierarchy is sought whereby ‘winners’ for the moment despise ‘losers’ and feel happy to fulfil their moral duty as winners to serve the economy, while also feeling ever more insecurity which cannot be allowed to turn into anxiety and depression, for that may result in a winner becoming a despised loser. People are to be broken up into discrete bits, with insecurity boxed off from happiness.

Second, the political statements and policies from the Conservatives are contradictory, with the economy being a meritocratic means to serve individuals, an end in itself, and an end that is to be protected by attacking ‘failures’ in a way that undermines the economy. From a technocratic point of view, the punitive policies are problematic and contradict the notion of objectively managing ‘market forces’. However, neoliberalism is not just normative, rather than value-neutral, but affective too. This means that markets are not expressions of ‘human nature’ but are engineered with the view that they *ought* to serve corporate interests *and* that
people need to be affectively engineered to fit such markets. Such affective engineering means gearing up their emotions to make them want to be happy-efficient means for corporate profit making (as more productive employees), and making them reduce worth to financial worth, with losers seen as less-human / non-human / ‘worthless’ objects of hate.

Orwell was right to hold that controlling language helps control thought. More than this though, demonising language and punitive policies can combine to control thought. Control here can be manufactured by not only seeking to preclude criticism of the state’s treatment of people, by setting the terms of reference in an argot of morally correct winners and people who choose moral-economic failure, but also by removing any affective motivation to see those demonised as people in need of ethical-political defence from punitive policies. Preventing some people from entering the labour market may undermine the espoused focus on pure market efficiency but it will not damage corporate profit making, which always has a ready supply of labour, and does allow for more effective corporate plutocracy through affective divide and rule.

The normative end of serving the corporate economy is served by creating affective hierarchies to preclude unity and make people fearfully seek happiness. One way of thinking about this is to see it in terms of a cost—benefit analysis, where the small cost of undermining the employment potential of those seeking work is outweighed by the benefit of undermining protest by presenting the losers in the game rigged for corporate victory as objects of hate beyond dialogue and recognition as fellow democratic subjects.

People would seem to have to live in a state of severe double-think, embracing the moral injunction to be happy to serve the economy whilst hating those moral and economic failures who failed to serve the economy, in a condition of increasing precarity in the labour market. Such a condition has to entail quite a high degree of cognitive dissonance. All of this is rendered feasible by a process of reification. People defined by politicians and the right-wing press as voiceless moral failures who failed to serve the economy become demonised objects, with their existence as subjects that have complex histories in difficult times being occluded, while government policies reduce welfare and serve corporate profit-making. The process of reification does not stop there.

Other workers come to be perceived as threatening objects, in a ceaseless competition. And, thanks to social media, now complemented by the drive to require happiness to be efficient at work, other employees / colleagues and even friends are seen as threatening objects reduced to their expressions of happiness: lives are reduced to discrete representations of happiness via uploaded photos on ‘Facebook’ and their ‘likes’, and the presentation of the happy-efficient self, using technology to self-quantify exercise to maximise happiness and efficiency, etc. Ultimately those deemed to be winners become reified too for they are not ends in themselves but defined as of worth solely as a means for the economy to prosper.

As a cog in a machine they have value and just as a broken cog is worthless junk because it has no value in itself, so too people that cease to be deemed of use to the economy are deemed worthless. This reification can enable the fragmented self to continue in a less than secure environment and to accept Conservative policy as an affective whole even if it has
practical contradictions, for the reified self would take the statements and policies of the Conservatives at face value, rather than seek out contradictions. The only way to avoid being demonised is to be validated as a happy and efficient employee, defining oneself purely as a means, and not questioning the source of validation. The state becomes an ethical authority, rolling back the self and making the private self contingent on public politics and the corporate interests behind this. In all of this the economy too becomes reified, with the human relations and exploitation involved being occluded, as the economy becomes an ethical object, which the state serves, gaining its ethical authority from serving this object of veneration.

While liberals reject the charge from Marxists and anarchists that the state serves the economy, neoliberalism, especially in its 3.0 punitive form, does come to present the state as deriving its legitimacy from ethically serving the economy, although in this form, the actual economic relations between corporations and politics is obscured. Accepting the ethical authority of the state means the reified winner can self-perceive not as a subject with affective bonds and socio-economic similarities to other subjects, but as an object cut off from other threatening objects or objects to despise, with happiness and worth gained from its conformity to the demands of the economy.

**Naturalising Hierarchy**

Recently (10th April 2017) BBC Radio 4 broadcast a documentary called ‘The Rise and the Fall of the Meritocracy’ which sought to assess the contemporary relevance of Michael Young’s book. The programme was written and hosted by Toby Young—Michael Young’s son—who writes for the ‘Spectator’ (which he also co-edits), the ‘Telegraph’ and the ‘Daily Mail’, all of which are right-wing publications. Before exploring Toby Young’s argument, it is useful to situate his approach to meritocracy by sketching out how liberalism has sought to justify the existence of chronic poverty alongside capitalism creating enormous wealth for a few.

For liberals, liberalism is legitimate because it affords equality of opportunity. The existence of chronic poverty and unemployment throughout the history of liberal capitalism therefore raises a difficult issue for liberals. For if prejudice precludes people getting jobs, or if the economy systematically fails to produce sufficient job opportunities, then the legitimacy of liberalism is heavily compromised or negated. Nineteenth century liberals dealt with this by holding that there was a biologically defective underclass given to sloth, crime, addiction and sexual irresponsibility, and unable to face the discipline of work. While philanthropy was to be extended to the ‘respectable working class’ who would work hard, the ‘unrespectable working class’ (the underclass), were to be denied charity and also even subject to sterilisation (indeed, sterilisation policies continued well into the twentieth century). Why a legitimate system for distributing wealth meant that the ‘respectable working class’ needed charity in addition to work was an issue left unaddressed.

For later neoliberal politicians and commentators, from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, the answer to the question as to why chronic poverty existed was that a deviant underclass subculture had been created by the welfare state, which socialised children into welfare dependency. Here a supposed lack of discipline in the home, caused by a lack of a working father and children being raised by a mother on welfare, was taken to lead to educational and
then employment failure, the pursuit of immediate gratification with drugs, alcohol and sex, and crime to pay for the drugs and alcohol. Concepts of the underclass are used to reinforce patriarchy as well as the class structure. In the UK, the Conservatives argued that the state and especially the welfare state, had to be ‘rolled back’ to undermine the development of a ‘something for nothing culture’ whereby people wanted welfare in place or working.

Charles Murray is the main ideologue for the neoliberal policy of removing the welfare state. Murray argued in *Losing Ground* (1984) that people in the US used to work their way up from very low paid jobs to jobs with better incomes until well-meaning policies made it more economically worthwhile to claim benefits in place of work. Murray used a thought-experiment to discuss this and his claims about the real value of welfare increasing are disputed (Wilson 1990). For Murray, those choosing welfare over work were just as rational as other individuals, because they were just responding to external economic stimuli. Although Murray does not explicitly discuss rational choice theory (RCT), his position is a form of RCT and as critics of RCT hold, it is determinist, which would remove any normative component from the theory, contrary to his intentions. People are seen, in effect, as automata that react to positive and negative reinforcement stimuli, with the former being those that enable the most efficient way to realise ‘utility’, or material self-interest.

Murray’s definition of the initial choice for welfare over work as being as rational as other individuals’ behaviours was though disingenuous because Murray wanted to put the blame on reformers for not understanding how humans were motivated, so as to then argue that reformers had created an underclass that was welfare-dependent, criminal and intrinsically less able that other people. Do-gooder reformers failed to understand human nature, for Murray. One group he despised were called normal so as to strengthen his critique of another group he despised. In his highly controversial book ‘*The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*’ (1994), co-authored with Herrnstein, the argument was made that innate intelligence rather than parental social class or environmental factors were the best predictor for economic success or failure. Murray and Herrnstein also argued that ‘racial’ differences were to be accounted for in terms of differences in intelligence with the authors also trying to avoid controversy by putting in the caveat that environmental factors may play a role as well. Murray also came to the UK and wrote in ‘*The Emerging British Underclass*’ (1990) about a deviant sub-culture in the UK socialising children into welfare dependency and crime, in place of any tacit reference to RCT.

Unsurprisingly sociologists have rejected the concept of the underclass in general and Murray’s arguments in particular. For most sociologists, the concept of an underclass is an ideological and not a social scientific concept, because there is no empirical basis to hold that the cause of poverty is a deviant sub-culture caused by welfare dependency. This concept homogenises people into a category that has been developed specifically to demonise them. Against the view that chronic unemployment and poverty are a result of welfare dependency, it is often argued that the deindustrialisation that started in the 1980s which created major structural unemployment is the main cause of contemporary chronic poverty (see MacDonald and Marsh 2005 for a good discussion of these issues).
Toby Young began his programme by presenting the votes for Trump and Brexit as populist revolt against elites. Michael Sandel was then interviewed, and he spoke of the ‘meritocratic hubris’, whereby the rich and powerful smugly present themselves as deserving winners and the rest, implicitly at least, as losers. For Young, the recent populist revolt was to be seen as similar to that envisioned by his father, with the masses reacting to the meritocratic hubris of the economic elite. Presenting the vote for Brexit in such a way is problematic though because seeing these events as a populist reaction to elites by those resenting their implicit or explicit classification as losers, misses the point that many who voted for Brexit were not struggling financially but were older, more affluent voters in the south of England—traditional ‘Tory voters’ in Conservative safe seats (Hennig and Dorling 2016).

Such voters were responding to hierarchies but were not seeking to challenge the existing hierarchy but reinforce it, by ‘taking back control’ of UK borders by keeping immigrants and migrants out. Prior to the referendum for Brexit, the Conservatives had done much to inscribe a neoconservative imaginary that presented Muslims as an internal threat and immigrants, migrants and refugees as an external threat. The Conservatives had been aided in this by the right-wing tabloids, especially the Daily Mail, which Toby Young writes for. It is odd that someone discussing rule by a cognitive elite defines a populist reaction against elites in terms of more wealthy voters influenced by a paper he writes for supporting a policy many in the Conservative party championed.

Again, we can speak of reification, for while those politicians supporting the vote for Brexit, and the tabloid press, presented people from outside the UK as threatening objects, the ‘left-liberal’ media reacted by presenting immigrants and migrants as objects of use for the economy, or as refugee objects of pity. The terms of reference on all sides of the debate set up a dualism between a national subject within the national borders and external objects beyond those borders, with the main debates then being whether those objects were a threat or not, or of use or not. And of course, as a narrative device in the programme, those deemed losers in a competitive, meritocratic, society were reduced to being threatening objects. Economic losers became demonised as a potentially threatening enemy within, following Conservative rhetoric in the 1980s about the victims of deindustrialisation in the north of England being enemies within (for discussion of this see Bruff 2014; Cruickshank and Sassower 2017; Hall 1983). The question posed by the programme became how can we justify the unequal outcomes of a meritocracy and deal the threat of violence from the losers, defined as an homogenous mass of people lacking ability and intelligence? All of which was an unacknowledged return to Thatcher’s ‘authoritarian populism’ that demonised the northern industrial unionised working class who needed to be defeated to move to a post-industrial deunionised low pay service sector neoliberalism (Hall 1983). Against these, Thatcher sought to mobilise support from those, including those in the southern working class, who identified as ‘middle class’, aided in this by the selling off of social housing to tenants, and selling of the nationalised industries with people encouraged to buy shares. Divide and rule with the winners despising the losers was the name of the game as Thatcher began the process of creating a welfare state for the rich, through tax policy and undermining benefits.

After using Sandel to pose the problem of populist revolt, Young then interviewed Peter Saunders (a controversial right wing sociologist who had argued that private property ownership was ‘natural’), Charles Murray, Rebecca Allen (an economics academic currently
running an education think-tank called ‘Education Datalab’), Oliver James (a psychologist) and Robert Plomin (a geneticist and expert on intelligence). With the token exception of James, all of these people supported the idea that socio-economic success was about half due to nature, meaning inherited intelligence from intelligent and rich parents, and half due to nurture, with the latter being connected to the former, due to successful parents creating the most conducive environment for the children to succeed. After interviewing Allen, Saunders and Murray, none of whom are scientists, Young interviewed James, who criticised the lack of scientific evidence to show that intelligence was inherited, before returning to Allen, and then moving on to Plomin in an attempt to use scientific authority epistemically to underwrite and guarantee the claims of Saunders, Murray and Allen.

The case was made that a meritocracy had allowed for class mobility, but now most of the intelligent people were in the higher positions in society, and so the lack of social mobility more recently was not due to failures in equality of opportunity, but a lack of intrinsic ability in those remaining in the working class and lower middle class. Young then considered whether technology could be used by parents to enhance their offspring’s intelligence to make them more successful than their parents, with the (threatening objects) of ordinary people demanding the state provide this for them for free. Whether the future would be stable or not was left open, thus inviting the conclusion from those who supported his ideas that the state needed to be a strong law and order state, to tackle threats from a potential genetically inferior ‘enemy within’.

While Toby Young sees himself as a laissez-faire liberal, his position on meritocracy and class mobility is really post-liberal, in the sense that the core liberal principle of equality of opportunity becomes redundant, given that the hierarchy of wealth ends up reflecting a hierarchy in nature (the most innately intelligent at top) and a hierarchy in nurture based on nature (with the cognitive elite creating the best environment for the child to develop).

One question raised by this, is do the more intelligent deserve more money? For Sayer (2005), the answer is no because they benefit by realising their ability in meaningful work. For Allen, the answer was yes. She was clear, contrary to Conservative rhetoric about ‘strivers’, that successful people had not ‘worked harder’ than others (a claim hard to support anyway, given the pressures on many working people), but that their natural ability made them entitled to rewards. A meritocracy could thus exist without meaningful class mobility where those at the ‘top’ deserved economic fortunes and power not for being ‘strivers’ but for being naturally superior, with the question then becoming, how to deal with the losers defined by their lack. Yet all of this rested on a non sequitur, which is surprising given Allen’s claim to be cognitively superior to the majority of people. If it were the case that some were significantly more intelligent than others, with this being passed to their children, then there is no logical motivation to conclude that such people morally and legally deserve large houses, private education, expensive cars, pensions to make retirement more comfortable than most, etc., while others starve after being sanctioned because a bus broke down. To say ‘I have above average intelligence’ does not logically entail the conclusion ‘therefore I deserve more material rewards’.
One could try to argue that the more intelligent need a motivation to apply their intelligence but this trades on a theory of human nature as acquisitive, which is speculative and contingent on the rise of capitalism. It also overlooks the problem that given the choice of meaningful work or meaningless routine work for 40-50 years on the same pay many, I suspect, would opt for the former. We also need to question the use of science here. Popper (1959, 1963) argued that science is fallible and induction entails logical problems, so seeking to establish a claim to scientific certainty by talking of current scientific studies supporting a view (a position which James contests), is in itself erroneous.

Popper rejected all appeals to epistemic authority holding that there were no institutional sources of authority and no inner sources of authority such as the ‘authority of the senses’ for empiricism. Theories could be corroborated but never justified or verified, and all theories needed to be open to critical dialogue, so that they could be changed. If a self-defining elite defined a theory which they based their claim to superiority on as certain, and defined others as cognitively inferior and thus not worth entering dialogue with, science, politics and ethics would all go into major decline for Popper. We would have a post-liberal closed society.

A naturalised hierarchy would justify a plutocratic meritocracy with no class mobility and define the majority as useless and threatening objects, in place of an affective hierarchy where a plutocracy operates with people being told to define themselves as happy winners, unless they are unemployed. The former could well prompt discord but it would be probable, I imagine, that another affective hierarchy would be mobilised, which focused on nationalism rather than class. People could be told to accept their natural superiors and hate the threatening objects from different countries. One of the tabloids Toby Young writes for put a lot of effort into demonising migrants and continually demanding a xenophobic nationalism from its readers.

**Critical Pedagogy contra Meritocracy**

Calls for more of a meritocracy to make society ‘fairer’ are popular in politics and the press but misguided for two reasons. First, the concept of meritocracy is used to legitimise liberalism, when the reality is one of the rich getting richer with the notion of equality of opportunity being out of kilter with reality in capitalism (Harvey 2005). Second, appeals to meritocracy are used to either support an affective hierarchy, or to support a naturalised hierarchy. With the former, people are reified to see themselves as happy successful objects. On the one hand, their worth is to be derived by them and others from their ability to serve the economy as an end in itself. On the other hand, the economy is presented as a means to serve individuals, with meritocratic competition rewarding the most able. Those with merit are to see themselves as winners and to despise losers as losers and as people letting the economy down. The tension is obscured by the state, presenting itself as drawing its ethical authority from serving the national economy, which focuses on individual reward for winners, with national economic gain being a by-product of this, and collective punishment for losers, with stigmatising language and punitive and sadistic policies. Winners though lose their individuality to become objects of use to the national economy, with this requiring them to obey the injunction to be happy to be of greater use to the national economy, and losers lose their individuality to become despised objects of hate, to be punished irrespective
of their individual complex histories. With the turn to a naturalised hierarchy, nationalism would be intensified, with the likely construction of a xenophobic nationalism.

This is not to support an early Frankfurt School pessimism, as espoused by Adorno and Horkheimer, for the process of reification is not totalising. People are protesting because of hardship and unfairness to others, in the UK and in the US against Trump, for instance. What I will argue here is that critical pedagogy offers a way out of the meritocratic morass. Freire's (1993) work on critical pedagogy applies to all forms of education, from schools, colleges and universities to political education. Freire saw education as intrinsically political, not just in terms of the content, but in terms of the structure too. He famously rejected what he termed the ‘banking approach’ to education, which was where an authority figure deposited discrete pieces of information in passive learners. The consequence of such an approach was to reinscribe existing hierarchies based on claims to authority. Freire argues that:

> the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students […] and the teacher is the Subject of the learning process while the students are the mere objects. […] The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed (1993, 54).

The banking approach thus entails reification with learners being defined as—and self-defining as—passive objects. These objects are only of value when accepting and serving subjects, who have agency and authority. This didactic hierarchy then serves to legitimise the existing social and political hierarchies, because it trains people to define themselves as passive objects whose only worth is defined in relation to serving authority. As Freire puts it:

> More and more the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression. The oppressed, as objects, as ‘things’, have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them (1993, 42).

The outcome of the banking approach to education is that people’s minds become ‘colonised’ by the oppressors.

Here we can say that attempts to realise meritocracy, where some people from the working class are allowed to move into middle class positions, will entail the banking conception with private and state education being based on pupils accepting the authority of the teacher because of their institutional position. The rise in audit culture as a government controlled proxy for market signals with neoliberal interventionism, where the state constructs and controls the market (Cruickshank 2016; Mirowski 2011; Van Horn and Mirowski 2009), exacerbated this problem. For this means that teachers had to teach to the test, ensuring pupils remember and regurgitate factoids that are then forgotten. Education does not
J. Cruickshank

encourage a love of learning and a way to develop oneself but turns pupils into industrial objects processing words to get a number on a piece of paper. Seeking a meritocracy in such circumstance would just entail colonised objects moving on to assume positions in the middle classes where they remain colonised and where they act to help colonise those below them, issuing orders for people perceived as objects below them.

Citing Fromm, Freire argues that the oppressor consciousness can only understand itself through possession and it needs to possess other people as objects to not ‘lose contact with the world’ (1993, 40). In this, those colonised and rewarded as conforming objects, through ‘meritocracy’, which selects a small number of working class children for middle class jobs, can see others as objects that confirm their status as superior, without realising the whole process dehumanises them. They will feel rewarded as objects unaware of their own reification by feeling affirmed through, if not the possession of others, then at least the control of others as objects.

Against this, Freire argues that people cannot liberate themselves or be liberated by a new leader seeking authority over them, but can be liberated through working with others, to gain subjejecthood through a sense of collective agency. Such agency would have to be dialogic, with people learning together and no-one acting as a new coloniser. The banking approach has to be avoided by radicals for its use makes them oppressors.

While schools are characterised by the banking approach to education there is still some scope, despite neoliberal audit culture, for critical dialogic engagement in universities, especially when students and academics work with political groups outside the university, and of course, there is scope for dialogic engagement between groups of lay agents experiencing socio-economic problems. With this approach to learning all people are treated as subjects and not objects so the problem of reification is removed. The structure of education—and pseudo-dialogue—which reduces people to objects by making them passive things acted upon by an elite claiming authority, is rejected for its intrinsically oppressive nature. A horizontal approach to learning, where dialogic subjects learn from and with other dialogic subjects can begin a move to challenge neoliberalism, the power of corporations and the state serving them.

Defining education and employment in terms of meritocratic selection serves to hide the way liberal capitalism entails the rich getting richer and having control over institutional politics. It also, as importantly, undermines radically critical dialogue by not only ‘blaming the victim’ as regards poverty, but defining all as objects, which can preclude the possibility of recognising others as dialogic subjects. The recent call for a naturalised post-liberal hierarchy suggests that the concentration of resources and opportunities in the hands of a few may make such meritocratic legitimising difficult to sustain, with this opening up a possible turn to authoritarianism. Appeals for a meritocracy and the reification entailed by this need replacing by an approach that can foster dialogue between subjects, which requires the rejection of dialogue-stopping appeals to sources of authority that ultimately entail reification.

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References


