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Snakes and Ladders

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THE CRISIS OF THE MERITOCRACY: BRITAIN'S TRANSITION TO MASS EDUCATION SINCE THE SECOND WORLD WAR
by Peter Mandler.

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THE MERITOCRACY TRAP

by Daniel Markovits.

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ONCE upon a time, the distribution of power and privilege was determined by birth. Now, it is determined by merit. And that, in a nutshell, is the history of the long 20th century.

It may be a parody, but this little narrative encapsulates one of the structuring claims of contemporary public debate. We can argue over the extent to which merit is, in fact, now the chief determinant of reward, but there is remarkably wide agreement that it should be, and that the operation of this principle is part of what defines a properly modern, even progressive, society. This agreement is underwritten by a yet more encompassing principle, typically expressed in statements of the form 'Everyone has the right to realise their full potential.' Quite apart from the now common inflation of the quasi-legal language of 'rights', there is a curious emptiness to this claim. It seeks to be at once egalitarian, relativist and positive. 'Everyone' has this right; no one can say what another's 'full potential' might be; 'realising' it, whatever it is, on this universal scale will be a good thing. Yet has anyone ever realised their full potential? Could it be that in realising my potential, I might get in the way of you realising yours? And what if my potential is to become the most successful mass murderer in history?

The label most commonly used to refer to this cluster of assumptions is 'meritocracy'. As an ideal, it exacts allegiance, or lip-service at least, from across the political spectrum. 'The Britain of the elite is over,' Tony Blair proclaimed on taking office in 1997. 'The new Britain is a meritocracy where we break down the barriers of class, religion, race and culture.' Like so much New Labour discourse, this strikes the upbeat note of a motivational talk, while the assumption that the structuring features of social experience should be seen as 'barriers' indicates an underlying individualism. Where cliché led, could Theresa May be far behind? 'I want Britain to be the great meritocracy of the world,' she declared in 2016, 'a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow.'

As usual, there is little mention in all this of the people who don't 'succeed', but the clear implication is that, however grim their fate, they 'deserve' it: after all, everyone gets a 'fair chance', so it's nobody's fault but your own if you don't take advantage of the 'opportunities' presented to you. We are asked to believe in a world in which individual agents are in full

possession of undivided selves, unshaped by social determinants, and able to realise outcomes simply by willing them strongly enough. It is assumed that there is an uncomplicated thing called ‘talent’ or ‘ability’, and that some people have more of it than others. It is also assumed – pretty much as a fact of nature, it seems – that some people will make more ‘effort’ and work ‘harder’ than others. Meritocracy proposes to rearrange the world (shouldn’t take long) so that, for those who combine ability and effort, every day is Christmas Day.

At the same time, in much recent social science, unmasking the sham of ‘equality of opportunity’ has become a familiar five-finger exercise. Study after study suggests that where people get to in life is largely determined by where they start. But the very fact that it is so easy to assemble the evidence for this truth gives the literature on the topic a slightly tired, stale character. Journalists and politicians alike may express amazement and outrage at each fresh revelation that advantage is cumulative and self-perpetuating, yet sociologists and radical social theorists cannot fall back on saying ‘I told you so’ each time. Challenging – let alone reshaping – the individualist dogmas that underwrite the discourse of ‘opportunity’ is an uphill struggle, however, not least because it means departing from some of the commonsense axioms about human agency and fairness that we all draw on in our everyday social interactions. We may be forced by the evidence to acknowledge that our society is not in any genuine sense a meritocracy, but at the same time we cannot easily give up the psychological and ethical assumptions on which claims about equality of opportunity are based.

But what is a ‘genuine sense’ of meritocracy? When, in 1958, Michael Young put the term into general circulation with the publication of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (he did not, as is often assumed, coin the term), the suffix pointed to an analogy with democracy or aristocracy as forms of rule or government. It suggested that people with ability didn’t just realise their potential: they ran the place. And ability was understood, here, largely as a matter of measurable IQ, regarded as an innate and fixed quality – a notion that was held in greater esteem in the 1950s than it is now. In Young’s dystopian satire (it’s striking how often both its satirical and dystopian aspects are now overlooked), life has become an enlarged version of the eleven-plus. Those who are ‘clever’ go on to take the top jobs; the rest are confined to their subordinate positions on merit.

As Young recognises, the very explicitness of this sifting operation is likely to generate resentment in all those being told they are, comparatively speaking, ‘stupid’. If you feel you are being unfairly discriminated against or are the victim of corruption, you may be angry and resentful, but your self-respect can remain intact – indeed, in some cases it can be enhanced. But in a pure meritocracy the losers, who are the majority, cannot apply that balm: the sense of being written off by the accepted rules of the system festers. Young’s book projects a future in which this smouldering discontent finds political expression. So, nothing relevant to our present situation there, then.

The term ‘meritocracy’ soon slipped its original moorings and became used more loosely to indicate any set of social arrangements in which outcomes were, notionally, determined by ability (effort is a more recent emphasis), not by the traditional mechanisms of rank, nepotism, inherited wealth and so on. Contrary to the spirit of Young’s minatory sketch, it has become an overwhelmingly positive term, bound up with what it is to be ‘modern’. The implicit narrative of progress that the term now encodes has proved to be astonishingly impervious to counter-evidence. As Jo Littler puts it in *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (2017), the idea functions as ‘a neoliberal justice narrative’. Such narratives ‘recognise the egalitarian deficit as a meritocratic deficit and prescribe competitive neoliberal meritocracy as the solution, which in turn produces more inequality’. In other words, the mass of counter-evidence is interpreted as showing that we need to install more effective mechanisms of competition if we are to achieve a ‘genuine meritocracy’, though this only compounds the problem.

Our social imagination is partly constituted by our ruling metaphors, and the key metaphor of the age of meritocracy is ‘the ladder’. As David Cameron put it in 2013: ‘You help people by putting up ladders that they can climb through their own efforts.’ But this may not paint quite as inviting a picture as Cameron hoped. Ladders are confining modes of ascent, which don’t leave much room for choice: there is no overtaking and the direction of travel is fixed, rung by rung. Ladder-speak tends to ignore the fact that ladders are used for descending as much as ascending, and has nothing to say about what happens when someone on the way down meets someone on the way up. And of course there will always be some people who prefer to take the lift. Where, in any case, are all these competitors in the Great Ladder-Climbing Championships trying to get to? The metaphor suggests a once-and-for-all ascent: you climb a ladder to get somewhere; ladder-climbing is not a way of life.

The question about the direction of travel arises again with the closely linked notion – also a kind of metaphor – of ‘social mobility’. I have argued before in these pages (8 April 2010 ([/the-paper/v32/no7/stefan-collini/blahspeak](https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/no7/stefan-collini/blahspeak))) that social mobility is a vacuous and incoherent policy goal, at bottom individualist and competitive, heavily invested in the myth of self-making. Its function in social narratives, as with the ladder, is largely to celebrate escape – in practice, escape from the working class to the middle class. What’s more, if a few are to move up, then many must be left behind – and there is silence about the inevitability that some will move down. Only by doing better than everyone who’s stuck in their original social stratum can you be upwardly mobile: if the conditions of existence for the whole of the working class were transformed for the better, it wouldn’t count as social mobility.

The frequently repeated claim that ‘social mobility has ground to a halt’ in the last couple of decades is an example of historical ignorance compounding confused thinking. In the mid 20th century, especially in the years between 1945 and 1980, there was a transformation in the occupational structure of most of the advanced economies whereby a large number of blue-collar jobs were replaced by white-collar jobs. Several processes were at work here: deindustrialisation, the growth of the service economy, the increase in the public sector, and so on. At the same time, the school-leaving age was progressively raised and the expansion of higher education began. This complex of changes has deposited in popular memory the idea that those who came to maturity in these years were ‘socially mobile’: that they rose to a higher position in society than their (working-class) parents. And it was of course true that these changes, along with rising prosperity and better public services, did improve the lives of large sections of the population, though the class position of the majority remained little altered in relative terms. But the experience of these historically specific conditions has been transmuted into an assumption that ‘social mobility’ (understood exclusively as moving ‘upwards’) is a natural and continuing feature of a properly functioning society.

At the same time, and as part of the same ideological framing, popular belief in the possibility of life-transforming opportunity seems to be little dented by the sobering facts of social analysis. The British Social Attitudes survey of 2009, the year after the financial crash, revealed that only 14 per cent of respondents thought that family wealth was ‘important to getting ahead’, while a later Rowntree survey indicated similarly that only 14 per cent of respondents disagreed with the proposition that ‘there is enough opportunity for virtually everyone to get on in life if they really want to.’ Hence the curious disjunction: the public culture deafeningly proclaims the virtues of effort and ambition and enjoins individuals to ‘unlock their potential’, while all the evidence suggests that the class structure, understood as a set of objective relations rather than subjective attitudes, is in fact largely immobile.

In a so-called meritocracy, the dominant determinant of outcomes appears, in principle, to be education, the mechanism whereby ability is recognised and validated. But the hard truth is that education overwhelmingly reproduces advantage rather than restructuring it; the most effective way to address inequalities in education, is to address inequalities in society. However, the myth of mobility through education survives partly because in some cases it is not a myth. There have long been individuals from less advantaged social backgrounds for whom education has been the route to advancement ('the scholarship boy' was one of the most celebrated, and most obviously gendered, of the tropes used to represent this possibility). This, too, is an important truth, not simply to be disparaged as 'elite recruitment'. But the fact that such individual stories stand out is an indication that education does not work in this way for the majority.

PETER MANDLER's book *The Crisis of the Meritocracy* does not directly address these conceptual issues, but instead draws from official statistics, social surveys, longitudinal studies and similar sources in an effort to answer one specific historical question: how should we understand the great growth in educational provision in Britain between 1945 and the present? He believes that most attempts to account for this development have placed too much emphasis on politics, policies and ideology – what economists might see as the 'supply' side of the equation. Against this, he emphasises the 'demand' side, the pressure from parents and children for more educational opportunity. Fundamental social changes, he argues, ranging from increased white-collar employment prospects to the decline of deference, have helped to raise people's expectations.

Mandler's book is valuable not least for its careful correction of a number of constantly repeated, but misleading or untrue, assertions about Britain's recent educational history. He is alert to the ways in which actual provision, at every level, has nearly always been more diverse than both policymakers and their critics appreciate. For example, it is often assumed that the move away from the post-1944 selective system in secondary education began with the Labour government's directive to this effect in 1965, but as Mandler points out, by the end of 1963, 'no fewer than 92 of 129 English LEAs had initiated plans to end selection at eleven.' He also makes clear that many of the measures that have propelled or at least accommodated expansion came as much from the right as from the left: Tory voters whose children didn't pass the eleven-plus were among the most forceful critics of selection in the 1950s and 1960s; as secretary of state for education in the early 1970s, Margaret Thatcher oversaw the establishment of more comprehensives than any minister from either party; Keith Joseph initiated moves towards replacing the old divide between O levels and CSEs with GCSEs to be taken by all, a key step in expanding sixth forms and increasing university admissions; and it was under Tory governments that the number of universities was nearly doubled in 1992 and, more recently, that the cap on student numbers at higher education institutions was removed.

In Mandler's usage, meritocracy is, essentially, the view that the education system should select by ability, as tested by some form of open competition, resulting in deliberately differentiated trajectories and destinations. Although this notion was originally contrasted with more traditional arrangements in which birth and inherited advantage had been allowed to determine outcomes, in the period since 1945 the contrast has been, so far as education is concerned, with what Mandler calls 'democracy', meaning, roughly, a commitment to high-quality provision for all. These two principles aren't necessarily in conflict. One could support high-quality provision for all while accepting that some will distinguish themselves by their ability and go on to reap additional rewards from it. Indeed, it's hard to imagine an education system, however egalitarian, that wouldn't have some meritocratic evaluation built into it, just as it would be hard to imagine any complex society that didn't attempt to match more intellectually demanding roles with demonstrated abilities. But, broadly speaking, Mandler sees 'democracy' as having triumphed in

educational provision in the second half of the 20th century: more and more people wanted more and more education of a higher and higher standard – and that was what they got.

Mandler is keen to insist that the parents who have pressed for more educational provision at all levels have not done so in a competitive spirit. They merely want ‘the best for all’. He shares this ideal: ‘Just because the labour market appears to be a zero-sum game, that’s no reason to make education work that way as well.’ Indeed not, especially if we can stop thinking of education exclusively in terms of preparation for the labour market. But since the availability of some material rewards and all positional goods is limited, and since education is now treated as the overridingly most significant route to acquiring them, many parents do in fact think in competitive terms. As ever, generalisation is perilous, but surely most of those parents who move house in order to be in the catchment area for a ‘better’ school or who pay for hours of private tutoring for their children are not doing so to uphold an ideal of social solidarity. If in the 1960s middle-class parents could have been guaranteed that their children would get into an expanded but still strictly limited number of grammar schools, many might well have supported such a policy.

Mandler’s focus is exclusively on state education. A striking fact, which he mentions but does not pursue, is that over the past 75 years the proportion of children educated in private fee-paying schools has remained remarkably stable, at around 6 or 7 per cent. There have been some minor short-term fluctuations caused by ups and downs in prosperity, changes in the character of state education, shifts in social attitudes and other such forces, but overall the line on the graph has been unwavering. The existence of these schools has always complicated the claim that we live in a meritocracy, since it has meant that the children of the old social elite and, increasingly, the new financial elite have run the race on a different track from everyone else. But it should also complicate the story about democracy in education, for much the same reason. A significant number of the most influential and vocal parents aren’t greatly exercised about state education because they know their children will never need it. One reason university entry has become such a social flashpoint in recent times is that these parents struggle with the fact that they can’t directly exercise the power of the purse at this crucial stage in their children’s education.

Where higher education is concerned, the unheralded hero of Mandler’s book is ‘the trend’. In the 1960s social scientists and commentators, seeking to identify the various forces propelling expansion, fastened onto the distinction between ‘the bulge’ and ‘the trend’. The bulge was a purely demographic phenomenon: as the children of the postwar baby boom grew up there would be a need for more schools, and possibly more university places. But the bulge didn’t necessarily entail any change in the patterns of distribution of education: it simply meant that the numbers in the existing patterns would be larger (and also limited in time, as the bulge passed through the system). ‘The trend’ was something different: this was the long-term tendency for higher proportions of the population to stay on for more years of education. The graph wasn’t a perfectly straight line: after more than twenty years of growth it faltered in the 1970s when it seemed that the numbers going on to higher education might have peaked or even be in decline, but they picked up with a vengeance in the mid-1980s and have continued strongly ever since. Although Mandler’s emphasis on this sustained trajectory is salutary (and should remind us why the coalition’s replacement of public funding with high fees in 2012 was never likely to dampen demand for long), politics and policies have also played a large part, not least in changing the character of the universities that received students in these ever increasing numbers.

Mandler writes in the dispassionate idiom of scholarly history, but it becomes clear that his sympathies lie with ‘ordinary’ people who, as he sees it, simply want a better life for their children, and he writes most empathetically about their resistance to being fobbed off with anything perceived as ‘second best’. This sentiment was to the fore in the hostility to secondary modern

schools; it may be said to have influenced the fate of the polytechnics; and it continually resurfaces in response to various proposals about vocational education. People's sensitivity to being patronised or written off is at work here at least as much as any hard-headed calculation of potential benefits. Where the discrimination operates under cover of a notional equality, as in the range of institutions now classified as universities, there seems to be less systematic or organised public objection. More generally, the simultaneous increase of egalitarian sentiments and actual inequality has been a striking feature of recent decades, but evidently not every form of inequality is perceived as unfair, and some forms, including some that may be highly consequential, are hardly noticed at all.

Although Mandler is far too sophisticated a historian to present a crudely whiggish story of steady progress, there is an unmistakably sunny and confident tone to his book. He gently patronises the 'fury' and 'fixations' of critics, especially on the left, and shows various 'panics' to be baseless or exaggerated. What 'ordinary' people wanted, he argues, has largely come to pass. But there are one or two questions to be asked about aspects of his story. For example, he speaks in positive terms about moves made by the Tories since the 1980s, and especially since 2010, to introduce more 'choice' and create more of a 'market' in education, noting impatiently that in many cases 'a brittle defensiveness had been the left's response' to these measures. Discussing recent policies that have removed most secondary and many primary schools from the jurisdiction of LEAs and turned them into 'academies', he writes that 'Britain has always had an unusually decentralised system,' and that these changes 'only took this a step further, devolving control to individual schools'. But 'control' may be too bland or even ambiguous a term here: would we say that, because we used to have local gas boards, all that privatisation has done is to continue this pattern by 'devolving control' to the local office of individual utility companies? 'Advocates of the LEA system,' he continues, 'have found it difficult to explain why sporadic voting for local councillors was more "democratic" than participation on school governing bodies or other identification with a neighbourhood school.' Actually, it isn't in the least difficult to explain why the established processes of local government (even when elected on a relatively low turnout), in which a public authority is responsible for the education of all children in the relevant area, are more democratic than the unaccountable power of the distant executives of a for-profit academy chain, supplemented by the voluntary participation of a few self-selected parents.

Mandler gives a similarly upbeat account of the formation of academy chains: 'There were technical functions that still needed to be performed on a larger scale than the individual school, and new institutions have had to be devised to fulfil them – thus academies have formed "multi-academy" chains to provide central services.' Put like this it sounds jolly sensible of those disinterested, self-determining academies to club together. But one could tell the story a little differently by looking at the political economy of a process in which private capital, seizing opportunities created by central government, extracts profit by providing what had been a community service, using corporate power to take over more and more schools, and in some cases legally appropriating public assets and property for private gain. Mandler speaks approvingly of 'an idea of democracy that doesn't pit all against all but respects everyone's desires for steady improvement and equal treatment by the state'. But, as his account constantly reveals, such an idea doesn't operate in a vacuum: there may be powerful forces in play that generate some very undemocratic outcomes, and anyway what if 'everyone's desires' are neither so autonomous nor so harmonious as Mandler's formulation suggests? Politics in the broader sense, including the operation of pressures that help determine desires in the first place, would then reappear at the centre of the story.

This becomes pressingly evident when we return from history to contemporary discourse celebrating the 'triumph of meritocracy'. The processes now usually referred to as 'neoliberalism' have remorselessly individualised this story as they individualise everything else. You are the

author of your fate, so you must begin by asking yourself what you want. ‘Social mobility’ is what results when enough individuals clearly identify their goals and then successfully pursue them. In sport it’s a commonplace of pre-match punditry to say that the result will come down to which team ‘wants it most’, and something similar now applies, it seems, to social competition. There should be no limit to your dreams: you can get whatever you want if you try hard enough. You just have to be ‘passionate’ about it. This bizarrely voluntarist language is the ruling trope of the age, but it raises so many questions. How are wants formed? How do we know what we want, and will getting what we want always turn out well? Where does ‘effort’ come from and why do some people try ‘harder’ than others? As Littler observes, this is ‘a psychologising discourse which vest[s] not only power but also moral virtue in the very act of hope, in the mental and emotional capacity to believe and aspire’.

As part of her taxonomy of the ‘popular parables’ that sustain the myths of mobility, Littler also points to the confluence in contemporary public culture of two apparently opposite tendencies: first, the attempt by the very wealthy to pass themselves off as ‘ordinary’; second, the recent extension of celebrity status to CEOs and other business leaders. Both these trends have the effect of discouraging interrogation of persisting structures of advantage and disadvantage. Popular attitudes are on the whole pretty indulgent to the wealth of celebrities: sometimes they’re ‘special’, they’ve ‘earned’ it; at other times they are prized for being ‘down to earth’ and ‘really quite ordinary’. What’s more, the mechanisms of celebrity culture rely on exposure, not achievement, and to that extent the validation of celebrity is one in the eye for oppressive ideas of ability or intelligence. The ‘top jobs’ may seem to be relentlessly filled by those who were ‘good at school’, but that isn’t a background widely shared among celebrities. That’s another reason the star, when seen close up or off-duty, is loved for being ‘just like us’ – an observation not commonly made about, say, judges or professors.

One indication of the anti-intellectualism lurking in a lot of the celebration of individual success today is the tendency to emphasise effort rather than ability (in contrast to Young’s original conception). Those who fairly easily sail to the top through conventional channels don’t make good news fodder; better are the tales of obstacles overcome and dreams realised by people of only moderate talents. It is noticeable that the more right-wing and populist notions of meritocracy are slightly queasy about attaching too much importance to intellectual ability as the key form of ‘merit’, tending to put an emphasis on ‘passion’ and ‘commitment’. Intellectual ability is occasionally gawped at, but it is at least as often resented. Judging from the media alone, the conclusion would be that we live in an ‘effortocracy’ rather than a meritocracy.

The truth is, surely, that attitudes towards opportunity and outcomes are a tangle of inconsistent prejudices. In addition to a fundamental unsteadiness about what should count as ‘merit’, there is also confusion about how and to what extent such merit should be rewarded. Is it its own reward? Do we want the most talented people to have the best of all other benefits, and if so why? Or, conversely, does someone whose circumstances or abilities condemn them to a disagreeable, worthless job therefore ‘deserve’ to be, say, paid a lot more than someone who is in the opposite position?

It is an open question whether, or to what degree, people feel the need for explicit legitimation of the most marked inequalities of reward. Studies suggest that people tend to be more sensitive to minor income differentials between themselves and others in broadly similar situations than they are to the huge differentials between themselves and people from different backgrounds and other walks of life. The evidence also suggests that most people are radically under-informed about the actual incomes of high earners. Some seem to think that cabinet ministers and FTSE 100 CEOs are both part of an ‘elite’ who receive similar remuneration; in reality, where the former earn roughly five times the average wage, the latter earn something like 120 times that amount. But then silly-

money salaries seem to have become accepted as facts of nature, like bad weather or stiff joints, something to be put up with and shrugged off.

But should we regard the following as facts of nature? In 2017 Walmart paid a median wage of around \$18,500; some of its full-time workers had to rely on public assistance and food banks to get through the week. That same year, Walmart's CEO was paid 1118 times that median wage. It is, shall we mildly say, not easy to understand how such a grotesque differential could ever be justified. In the UK and in the US, we are constantly told that the distribution of rewards simply reflects a potent mix of ability and effort, not inherited advantage, nepotism, corruption or any of the other bad old methods. But even were that a true explanation of why particular people benefit (and of course it isn't), it couldn't account for the extent to which they benefit. Even if one thought that the superhuman talents of the occasional genius merited such astronomical pay, this line of reasoning collapses in light of the fact that in 2017 the average pay of the CEOs of every S&P 500 corporation in the US was nearly \$14 million, while in the UK nearly 19,000 people are paid more than a million a year. A lot of contemporary fantasy and denial is condensed in the advertising slogan 'Because you're worth it.'

ALTHOUGH economic developments in the US and the UK are driven by many of the same basic forces, Daniel Markovits's book demonstrates the way the different cultural traditions of the two societies have resulted in different responses to the 'crisis of meritocracy'. In a detailed study of the way wealth and privilege are now transmitted across generations in the US, Markovits argues that 'the elite' (more of that in a moment) has reinvented itself. Once there was an aristocracy, marked out by descent, inheritance, leisure and conspicuous consumption. Now there is a meritocracy, based (ostensibly) on talent and hard work. A culture of long hours and unremitting effort has accompanied the neoliberal remaking of advantage: there are still a few idle rich, but the majority of exceptionally wealthy people in the US are victims of an epidemic of overwork. However, members of this new elite have in turn become a caste. Already wealthy parents invest resources and time in intensively preparing their children to get into elite colleges, from which they are funnelled into elite jobs (often subsidised by parental support in the early years), where they work ferociously hard, become very wealthy themselves, and then transmit the same advantages to their children.

At first sight, much of this seems to be restating the long obvious fact that advantage is cumulative. It's what, in our old-fashioned English way, we refer to as 'class'. It has always been harder to talk about class in the US, where part of the ideological function of the American Dream and related myths has been to obscure the brute facts of comparative social and economic advantage. It is a further complication that the common American usage of 'middle class' refers to more or less everyone between those in real poverty at the bottom and the super-wealthy at the top. The great majority of those who would be categorised as 'working class' in the UK (even if some of them might now favour some other self-description) are termed 'middle class' in the US, which tends to obscure patterns of inequality and vulnerability.

The novelty of Markovits's analysis, as he sees it, lies in his argument that it is the successful working of meritocracy, not its failure, that generates the huge inequalities now deforming American society. Those who win out in the relentless competition for education and employment are indeed talented, and they work extremely hard. They are a genuinely meritocratic elite – but that, Markovits insists, is the problem. The new elite has successfully legitimated itself, but its members have condemned themselves to a culture of overwork, while making everyone else feel that they have in some sense failed. (Young's shadow can be hard to escape when writing on this topic.)

Markovits emphasises that it pays to think strategically from an early stage:

Someone who wants an elite income – or, critically, even just an income sufficient to buy his children the schooling on which their own eliteness depends – must do one of a narrowly restricted class of jobs, heavily concentrated in finance, management, law and medicine. Fewer than one in one hundred jobs, and virtually none in middle-class occupations – teaching, for example, or journalism, public service, or even engineering – pays even close to elite wages.

The inclusion of medicine in this short list reflects the peculiarly dysfunctional state of healthcare in the US; in the UK, studying medicine is not usually the route to anything like the returns enjoyed by hedge-fund managers or corporate lawyers, even though some doctors can earn a lot from private practice. More generally, this passage underlines four things. First, that an enormous gap has opened up between the returns from these occupations and those from every other; second, that a narrowly specified form of educational success is the route into these occupations; third, that an income of this magnitude is necessary to guarantee that one's children have access to such an education; and, fourth, that enabling one's own children to profit from this system is seen as a natural and legitimate human purpose.

It is revealing that inequalities of expenditure on education in the US, from pre-school onwards, have increased even faster than other indices of inequality: the most competitive pre-schools in New York City admit just 5 per cent of applicants, 'making them harder to get into than Harvard and Yale'. This lavishing of resources and attention on the children of the wealthy is inevitably at the expense of everyone else's children. As Markovits puts it: 'Helicopter parenting is just superordinate labour applied to the project of reproducing status in a meritocratic regime.' Thus, 'investments in human capital, made while parents are still alive, have replaced bequests of physical and financial capital as the dominant means for conveying elite status down through the generations' – a form of wealth transmission that has the further advantage of escaping taxation.

It is hardly surprising, given the elite's heavy investment in the hurdle race, that, once its members are in a position to do so, they sweat their assets – i.e. work very hard to extract as high a return as possible from the cultural and intellectual capital they have accumulated. Goldman Sachs has renamed its personnel department Human Capital Management. That says it all. Corporate capitalism does not employ 'people' – those messy, contradictory, needy, whole human beings for whom work is just one among many activities. It manages 'human capital': invests it, moves it to where it is most profitable, disposes of it at the most advantageous moment. Lives are things that people have; capital has rates of return.

Technology and wider social changes have, Markovits argues, exacerbated all this, with the result that 'middle-class jobs' (in the American sense) are dying out. The small cadre that runs everything has the technological means constantly to monitor the productivity of its workers, and many of those workers are doing the shit jobs that automation hasn't yet replaced. This may draw the contrast too starkly, but there is obviously a lot of truth in it. One of the saddest casualties of this transformation is public service. High-status roles that once came with a relatively high salary are now, by corporate standards, ludicrously underpaid. In the US the chief justice of the Supreme Court earns roughly \$270,000 per year, while the 'most profitable law firms pay their average partners over \$5 million annually, or roughly twenty times as much (and the signing bonus paid to former law clerks at the Supreme Court, who are perhaps two or three years out of law school, is now \$400,000).' Those who make careers as teachers, public health workers, officials in federal agencies or in local government have fallen far, far behind most of their contemporaries who have gone into the lucrative parts of the private sector.

The Meritocracy Trap is full of riveting and sobering detail, but there does seem to be an unacknowledged tension between two strands of its argument. On the one hand, Markovits

repeatedly claims that meritocracy works and that's the problem. The winners are selected for ability and effort, but this locks them (and their children) into a remorseless cycle of overachieving, while damaging the prospects and self-esteem of everyone else. But, on the other hand, what the bulk of the book's evidence shows is that, in fact, those who succeed do so because of parental advantage. Yes, the top law firms recruit from the top law schools, which recruit from the top colleges and so on, but, as Markovits shows, the main determinants of who gets into these highly selective institutions are social advantages that start in the womb. Everything suggests that meritocracy is the camouflage adopted by self-sustaining dynastic advantage in an age of democratic sentiment. The dynasties in question are not the old quasi-aristocratic families (though, as it turns out, they do rather well in the new world of ruthlessly competitive careers), but, even so, a relatively tiny segment of the population is managing to transmit advantage from generation to generation.

Markovits is very keen to emphasise that much the greater part of the wealth of today's top 1 per cent comes from their labour, not from capital. 'The traditional way of thinking about the conflict between the rich and the rest – as a battle between capital and labour – no longer captures what is really going on. Instead the dominant source of individual top incomes lies in superordinate labour.' But this is true only if one takes a misleadingly individualist approach: it may be the case that no single hedge-fund manager 'owns' the vast concentration of capital at the firm's disposal, but it is still the power of such vast concentrations of capital that structures 'the conflict between the rich and the rest'. After all, not everyone who works extremely long hours is a multi-millionaire. In the income tax returns of financial and corporate high-fliers, the greater part of their income will be classified as 'earned' rather than 'unearned', though these categories soon blur when we consider that 'over the past twenty years, roughly half of all CEO compensation across the S&P 1500 has taken the form of stock or stock options.' But, as ever, radical critique depends on moving the starting point of the analysis further back. Yes, a private equity fund manager gets the greater part of his or her income from their 'compensation package', but even leaving aside the way getting such a job in the first place may have depended on the benefits of parental capital, we have to recognise that the sector as a whole can give itself such astronomical returns only because of the amount of capital it controls. The no less hard-working finance officer of a small neighbourhood charity may get a relative pittance because the charity doesn't command the resources that would enable it to pay more.

In the US, as Markovits sees it, meritocracy has worked and is perceived to have worked, yet when it works it produces an unacceptable outcome. In Britain, he says in a postscript to the UK edition of *The Meritocracy Trap*, meritocracy is seen as a fig-leaf for traditional advantages: it doesn't really work in the first place – the posh jobs still go to the posh people. In his view, Britain remains hung up on the persisting power of old money and traditional status, and so the debate about meritocracy can't coherently account for the formation of a new elite, based around top jobs in management, finance, medicine and law. More generally, he thinks the debate in Britain is handicapped by its antique approach to social class, which is distorted by the idea of there being an upper class as well as a middle and a working class. There is some truth in this. Popular social analysis in Britain may still be obsessed by the traditional markers of status associated with the old governing class, leading it to neglect the reality of the new financial oligarchy. The press prefers photos of public schoolboys in straw boaters or Oxbridge undergraduates in punts to proper analysis of the ways wealth and power have been reconfigured in the last thirty or forty years. But even though the more serious contributors to the British debate may be more focused than their American analogues on the hidden continuities of advantage, in both countries the conventional terminology of social classification can be as much of an obstacle as it is a help to social analysis.

In my view, this is particularly true of references to 'the elite'. One of the most striking (and depressing) features of recent political debate has been the constant emphasis on, and hostility to,

a supposedly condescending or indifferent elite. But this, other failings aside, runs together at least two distinct social groups. On the one hand, it takes aim at ‘the highly educated’, and the social attitudes supposedly associated with them. This is a cultural category largely, and most visibly, made up of those who work in the arts, the media, publishing, higher education, NGOs etc, hardly any of which are really well paid. On the other hand, there are those in the top 0.5 per cent of the income distribution, most of whom are in the upper echelons of the financial and corporate worlds: these are the people who have reaped the financial rewards of globalisation and who have the power to shape the economy and society by their decisions. Moreover, members of this social group live lives that are increasingly segregated from the experience of the bulk of the population: they use private medicine, private education, private forms of transport, and they live in socially concentrated (sometimes literally gated) communities.

Although a lot of popular hostility is directed at the first group, with its visible markers of ‘educated’ social attitudes and cultural tastes, it is the decisions taken in boardrooms and fund managers’ offices that have the real impact on most people’s lives – decisions about whether the return on capital will be greater if certain branches are closed, certain work practices introduced, and so on. Talk of the elite obscures far more than it illuminates: instead of going along with the use of such terms, we should be asking questions about who gets what and why. The traditional focus on the nation-state when thinking about these issues may be inhibiting in this respect. The operation of capital is increasingly global, and concentrating on a home-grown elite can distract from the role of, say, Russian and East European oligarchs, Middle Eastern royalty, and South and East Asian business dynasties, none of whom are products of the supposedly meritocratic domestic system.

EVEN WHEN the illusions of meritocracy have been stripped away, some hard questions remain, not least for people on the left. One of them concerns the unit we call ‘the family’. Even the most committed progressives, who will vote or campaign or organise or write against any number of expressions of injustice, may be unable or unwilling to address the fundamental unfairness of the advantages they pass on to their children. Yet political activism is not like carbon-offsetting: you can’t make up for the injustice you are implicated in at home by supporting causes elsewhere. There is no easy resolution of these tensions. Accepting that it is natural to do everything you can to give your own children a competitive edge, even while denouncing other forms of inequality, is part of what legitimates meritocracy and allows it to transmit dynastic advantage.

Another question the left has always had difficulty addressing is how to deal with high abilities, especially intellectual abilities (however we define these and however we think this comes about). As a society, we have some straightforward instrumental reasons for wanting to develop such abilities to the full, but we are often queasy about providing the conditions in which they flourish, fearful that it will be at the expense of the less talented or will encourage unhealthy forms of social division. And we have no clear idea how such abilities should be rewarded, sometimes taking the view that the exercise of a gift is its own reward, at other times wanting some way of signalling society’s endorsement of valuable forms of human achievement. Some of these confusions find an outlet in a left-wing anti-intellectualism, an unlovely mixture of high-minded principle and sour resentment. It is right to insist that the currently vaunted version of meritocracy is a sham; it’s much harder to know how we should nurture and reward outstanding intellectual or creative abilities without ending up with some equally undesirable distribution of power and advantage.

There are also some hard questions to be faced about the reasons behind the imperviousness of many popular attitudes to correction by radical social analysis. Most people seem able to accept considerable inequality in outcomes if they believe that the procedures that lead to these outcomes are in some broad formal sense ‘fair’; that is, they don’t probe too much into what

determines the distribution of advantage before the selection procedure begins. Perhaps most of us are inclined, at least some of the time, to think that ability and effort are the things most 'deserving' of differential rewards. And many people are more bothered, it seems, by the thought that some individuals may be 'getting something for nothing' (in the form of benefits, for example) than the thought that some individuals are paid a thousand times as much as others. There may be no entirely coherent or justifiable basis for these views, but their persistence makes it difficult to build support for fundamental change, just as ingrained notions of what one should be entitled to do for one's children set narrow limits on what are considered acceptable forms of redistribution.

Moreover, like lottery players more generally, many of us seem to prefer to fantasise about 'making it' within the existing system than to accept the overwhelming evidence that the odds are rigged against us. Almost everybody may have, objectively, an interest in changing the system, but some combination of fatalism, distraction, selfishness and good old-fashioned false consciousness may make it unlikely that people will come together to effect it. One might have thought that our current form of casino capitalism would provide propitious conditions for the growth of socialism, but, other difficulties aside, this may be to underestimate the lure of the casino. The outcomes for individuals in a casino are largely a matter of luck (though, of course, the overall outcome is rigged in favour of the house), but many people may intuitively prefer to see luck, rather than, say, ability, govern the outcomes in life. If everything depends on ability, most of us will know by a certain age that we cannot significantly improve our situation and may come to resent the more talented (Young's insight, essentially). However, if everything depends on luck, then we can all feel we're in with a chance – even if, as the evidence insists, it doesn't and we're not.