



Johansson, M. (2018) The ladder of opportunity and other myths of meritocracy debunked. Organization, (doi:10.1177/1350508418784394).

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/168576/>

Deposited on: 11 September 2018

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow\_  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Author version of Johansson, M. (2018) The ladder of opportunity and other myths of meritocracy debunked. *Organization*, DOI: 10.1177/1350508418784394.

### **The ladder of opportunity and other myths of meritocracy debunked**

In December 2017 it was reported that the Social Mobility Commission, an independent body charged with monitoring social mobility in the UK, faced a crisis as all its members resigned (Pickard, 2017). The reason cited was a lack of progress towards a 'fairer Britain'. At the same time the current government envisions the country as a 'great meritocracy', as set out in a speech by the Prime Minister in 2016: 'a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow' (GOV.UK, 2016). It is precisely this presumption of hard work and talent paying off that Jo Littler examines in this book, in which she encourages an interrogation of the meritocratic assumptions that underpin ideas of social mobility.

Similar tensions can also be noted in the context of organizations. Metaphors such as glass/class ceilings, glass slippers, and snowy peaks shed light on existing structural hindrances to the advancement of particular groups. Against such structural accounts stands the myth of meritocracy – also with its associated metaphor: the ladder – with the message that social and organizational advancement hinges on innate individual talent, drive and aptitude, which will be recognized and justly rewarded. Using a cultural studies approach, Littler sets out to examine 'what [meritocracy] is and what it does' (p. 11), viewing it both as a social system and as ideological discourse. The book delivers a timely commentary amidst reports of increasing inequality, classed differences in educational attainment, growing poverty, and the pulling away by the 1% in terms of wealth and control over resources; all while a meritocratic rhetoric has gained traction in a neoliberal landscape where competition is key.

The book is structured in two parts: the first, 'Genealogies', explains the origins and different strands of meritocracy and its relation to social and cultural theory, and political discourse. The second part, 'Popular parables', introduces key tropes and case studies to analyse the machination as well as point toward the potential destabilisation of a meritocratic ideology. The introduction clearly outlines what Littler sees as the fundamental problems of meritocracy – from endorsing a competitive, hierarchical system to functioning as 'an ideological myth to obscure and extend economic and social inequalities' (p. 7). Following on from this, the first chapter provides a useful overview of the emergence and development of the notion of meritocracy in the UK, going beyond Michael Young's oft quoted *The Rise of the Meritocracy* published in 1958 to attribute the birth of the concept to industrial sociologist Alan Fox. Littler then compellingly charts the U-turn that meritocracy has managed to make in the decades following on from the 1950s, from a concept rooted in radical socialist critique to a feted neoliberal principle.

The book includes a number of examples situated in the cultural/creative industries, outlining the classed and racialized composition of the sector and discussing how reality TV and talent shows contribute to the circulation of meritocratic myths. As the cultural industries were originally hailed as exemplary meritocracies (Banks, 2017), they provide a pertinent choice of focus. Littler incisively discusses the unequal patterns of access and progression in relation to gender, race and class, connecting with recent academic and public debates which have pointed to the lack of diversity in the cultural industries (e.g. Eikhof, 2017; Saha, 2018). The proffered

solution to these circumstances comes in the shape of 'neoliberal justice narratives' which according to Littler do acknowledge intersectional inequalities; however, they promote market-based solutions and urge individuals to 'climb harder up the ladder' (p. 69), the message being most insistently and cruelly communicated to those on its lowest rungs. The existing egalitarian deficit becomes reframed as a meritocratic one which is to be solved through competitive neoliberal meritocracy, which, as the book argues, is the very problem.

Part 2 is dedicated to examples which illustrate how the meritocratic social system and ideology is reproduced and disrupted, particularly media representations of the wealthy elite; the gendering of work through the popular 'mumpreneur' paragon; and the racialization of merit as exemplified by the #damonsplaining case. In brief, Littler shows how the elite can maintain their privilege through meritocratic discourses which position them as ordinary in their extraordinariness, whether they are celebrity CEOs of 'humble beginnings' or benevolent philanthropocapitalists. Meanwhile, the mumpreneur is the gendered embodiment of the professed empowered entrepreneur who elegantly manages to combine childcare with economic productivity. The #damonsplaining chapter examines the racialization of merit but also shows how the meritocratic myth can falter and be disrupted as its contradictions become too apparent. In all, the second part provides engaging and compelling examples of how the meritocratic ideology functions in different spheres of economic, social and cultural life.

An interesting facet of the book is its examination and repeated return to language, specifically how the 'language of equality of opportunity has been used to justify rampant and increasing social inequality' (p. 27). Another interesting theme circulates around how the meritocratic ideology strives to create particular affective attitudes. Specifically, there is an exhortation to 'believe in yourself' and to invest mental and emotional capacity in aspiration and the will to compete. Unwillingness to do so is framed as behaving irresponsibly and hence as bringing failure on yourself, ignoring the fact that the resources needed to engage in aspiration are unevenly distributed. Aspiration in turn becomes rhetorically associated with 'hard work', and a lack of either becomes framed as a moral failure. Just doing the hard work is not enough; it also has to be invested with aspirational sentiment. Littler points to how, especially in a populist context, the focus on feeling leads to merit becoming conflated with passion: 'successfully emoting about your 'passion' and 'drive' starts to replace ability or merit – or to become the new merit' (p. 95). Hence, not only has meritocracy performed a U-turn in terms of its desirability, but the very meanings of merit and its manifestations are shifting.

What of alternatives then? Meritocracy works against collective forms of provision and social reproduction. And yet, it is precisely these forms that must be brought to the fore in striving for a more equitable society. Addressing economic inequality, reducing discrimination and increasing socialised provision are some of the broad measures put forward, as is the recommendation to figuratively topple the ladder onto its side to re-imagine it in terms of more democratic alternatives.

Overall, this is a well-researched and compelling book. It shows the many ways in which this seemingly progressive yet insidious idea and its material manifestations have seeped into contemporary life. While popular discourse frames meritocracy as immutable, indisputable and factual, Littler demonstrates, through revealing its permutations and variety of guises and uses, that this is not the case. She thereby shows its craftiness in covering up 'its neutrality as a

fiction' (p 159), while also pointing to how the fiction can be disrupted. And, importantly, she tells us that there are alternative ways of organizing and living.

## References

Banks, M. (2017) *Creative justice: Cultural industries, work and inequality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Eikhof, D. R. (2017) Analysing decisions on diversity and opportunity in the cultural and creative industries: A new framework. *Organization*, 24(3): 289-307.

GOV.UK (2016) Britain, the great meritocracy: Prime Minister's speech. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech>. Accessed 3.4.2018.

Pickard, J. (2017) Theresa May's Social Mobility Commission walks out. *Financial Times*, 3.12. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/e4426dce-d808-11e7-a039-c64b1c09b482>. Accessed 3.4.2018.

Saha, A. (2018) *Race and the cultural industries*. Cambridge: Polity Press.