

The Fall of the Meritocracy

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In 1958, my father, Michael Young, published a short book called *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2023: An Essay on Education and Equality*. It purported to be a paper written by a sociologist in 2034 about the transformation of Britain from a feudal society in which people's social position and level of income were largely determined by the socio-economic status of their parents into a modern Shangri-La in which status is based solely on merit. He invented the word *meritocracy* to describe this principle for allocating wealth and prestige and the new society it gave rise to.



The essay begins with the introduction of open examinations for entry into the civil service in the 1870s—hailed as “the beginning of the modern era”—and continues to discuss real events up until the late 1950s, at which point it veers off into fantasy, describing the emergence of a fully-fledged meritocracy in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. In spite of being semi-fictional, the book is clearly intended to be prophetic—or, rather, a warning. Like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is a dystopian satire that identifies various aspects of the contemporary world and describes a future they might lead to if left unchallenged. Michael was particularly concerned about the introduction of the 11+ by Britain's wartime coalition government in 1944, an intelligence test that was used to determine which children should go to grammar schools (the top 15 per cent) and which to secondary moderns and technical schools (the remaining 85 per cent). It wasn't just the sorting of children into sheep and goats at the age of eleven that my father objected to. As a socialist, he disapproved of equality of opportunity on the grounds that it gave the appearance of fairness to the massive inequalities created by capitalism. He feared that the meritocratic principle would help to legitimise the pyramid-like structure of British society.

In the short term, the book achieved its political aim. It was widely read by Michael's colleagues in the Labour Party (he ran the party's research department from 1945 to 1951) and helped persuade his friend Anthony Crosland, who became Labour Education Secretary in 1965, that the 11+ should be phased out and the different types of school created by the 1944 Education Act should be replaced by non-selective, one-size-fits-all comprehensives. Crosland famously declared: “If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to destroy every f***ing grammar school in England. And Wales and Northern Ireland.” Today, there are only 164 grammar schools in England and sixty-eight in Northern Ireland. There are none in Wales.

But even though my father's book helped to win the battle over selective education, he lost the war. The term "meritocracy" has now entered the language, and while its meaning hasn't changed—it is still used to describe the organising principle Michael identified in his book—it has come to be seen as something good rather than bad. [1] The debate about grammar schools rumbles on in Britain, but their opponents no longer argue that a society in which status is determined by merit is undesirable. Rather, they embrace this principle and claim that a universal comprehensive system will lead to higher levels of social mobility than a system that allows some schools to "cream skim" the most intelligent children at the age of eleven.[2]

We are all meritocrats now

Not only do pundits and politicians on all sides claim to be meritocrats—and this is true of most developed countries, not just Britain—they also agree that the principle remains stillborn. In Britain and America there is a continuing debate about whether the rate of inter-generational social mobility has remained stagnant or declined in the past fifty years, but few think it has increased.[3] The absence of opportunities for socio-economic advancement is now seen as one of the key political problems facing Western democracies, leading to the moral collapse of the indigenous white working class, the alienation of economically unsuccessful migrant groups, and unsustainable levels of welfare dependency. This cluster of issues is the subject of several recent books by prominent political scientists, most notably *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (2015) by Robert Putnam.

Unlike my father, I'm not an egalitarian. As Friedrich Hayek and others have pointed out, the difficulty with end-state equality is that it can only be achieved at too great a human cost. Left to their own devices, some men will inevitably accumulate more wealth than others, whether through ability or luck, and the only way to "correct" this is through the state's use of coercive power. If the history of the twentieth century teaches us anything, it is that the dream of creating a socialist utopia often leads to the suppression of free speech, the imprisonment of a significant percentage of the population and, in some extreme cases, state-organised mass murder.

Having said that, I recognise that a lack of social mobility poses a threat to the sustainability of liberal democracies and, in common with many others, believe the solution lies in improving our education systems. There is a consensus among most participants in the debate about education reform that the ideal schools are those that manage to eliminate the attainment gap between the children of the rich and the poor. That is, an education system in which children's exam results don't vary according to the neighbourhood they've grown up in, the income or education of their parents, or the number of books in the family home. Interestingly, there is a reluctance on the part of many liberal educationalists to accept the corollary of this, which is that attainment in these ideal schools would correspond much more strongly with children's natural abilities. [4] This is partly because it doesn't sit well with their egalitarian instincts and partly because they reject the idea that intelligence has a genetic basis. But I'm less

troubled by this. I want the clever, hard-working children of those in the bottom half of income distribution to move up, and the less able children of those in the top half to move down.

In other words, I think the answer is more meritocracy. I approve of the principle for the same reason my father disapproved of it, because it helps to secure people's consent to the inequalities that are the inevitable consequence of limited government. It does this by (a) allocating wealth and prestige in a way that *appears* to be fair; and (b) creating opportunities for those born on the wrong side of the tracks, so if you start with very little that doesn't mean you'll end up with very little, or that your children will. If you think a free society is preferable to one dominated by the state, and the unequal distribution of wealth is an inevitable consequence of reining in state power, then you should embrace the principle of meritocracy for making limited government sustainable.

The challenge posed by behavioural genetics

However, there's a problem here—let's call it the challenge posed by behavioural genetics—which is that cognitive ability and other characteristics that lead to success, such as conscientiousness, impulse control and a willingness to defer gratification, are between 40 per cent and 80 per cent heritable.^[5] I know that many people will be reluctant to accept that, but the evidence from numerous studies of identical twins separated at birth, as well as non-biological siblings raised in the same household, is pretty overwhelming. And it's probable that in the next few years genetic research scientists will produce even more evidence that important aspects of people's personalities—including those that determine whether they succeed or fail—are linked to their genes, with the relevant variants being physically identified. The implication is that a society in which status is allocated according to merit isn't much fairer than one in which it's inherited—or, rather, it is partly inherited, but via parental DNA rather than tax-efficient trusts. This is an argument against meritocracy made by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice* (1971): You've done nothing to deserve the talents you're born with—they're distributed according to a "natural lottery"—so you don't deserve what flows from them.^[6]

It's worth pausing here to note that Rawls accepts that not all men are born equal, genetically speaking. Some do better out of the "natural lottery" than others and that, in turn, has an impact on their life chances. This is far from universally accepted by liberal commentators and policy-makers, most of whom prefer to think of man as a *tabula rasa*, forged by society rather than nature. Indeed, this is the thinking behind government programs like Home Start, which aim to transform the life chances of disadvantaged young children by improving their environments. The fact that so much left-wing political thought rests on this assumption is the main reason the Left has reacted with such hostility to all attempts by geneticists and psychologists to link differences in intelligence to genetic differences.

Now, Rawls's argument isn't a knock-down objection to meritocracy. For one thing, it's too deterministic. Great wealth doesn't simply "flow" from an abundance of natural gifts. A considerable amount of effort is also involved, and rewarding that effort does *seem* fair, even if some people are born with stronger willpower and a greater aptitude for hard work than others. Nevertheless, there's a "gearing" difficulty—because some people are more gifted than others, the same amount of effort will reap different rewards, depending on their natural endowments.

There's another, more fundamental problem with Rawls's argument, which is that it conflates desert with entitlement. A person may not *deserve* his or her wealth in a meritocratic society, but that doesn't mean they're not *entitled* to it. That's a separate question that turns on how it was accumulated. As Robert Nozick points out in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974), provided a person's acquisition of wealth hasn't involved violating anyone else's rights, they're entitled to keep it and bequeath it to their children. The standard that Rawls judges meritocracy by is unrealistically high. Throughout history, people's status has rarely, if ever, been *deserved*. Even supposing it was possible to reach agreement about how to measure desert, it would require an all-powerful state to ensure that wealth and prestige were distributed according to that metric and, as with end-state equality, we'd end up paying too high a price in terms of liberty.[7]

Putting aside the issue about whether a meritocratic society is any *fairer* than the one we live in at present—or fairer than an aristocratic society—it's hard to argue that it isn't more efficient. All things being equal, a country's economy will grow faster, its public services will be run better, its politicians will make smarter decisions, diseases are more likely to be eradicated, if the people at the top possess the most cognitive ability.[8]

The ossification problem

However, there's a practical difficulty with meritocracy that I think is harder to deal with than any of the philosophical points made by Rawls, and that is the low probability that meritocracy will produce a continual flow of opportunities over the long term. On the contrary, it may eventually lead to them drying up. Suppose we do manage to create the meritocratic education system referred to above. It would produce a good deal of upward and downward social mobility to begin with, but over the long term, as the link between status and merit grows stronger, you'd expect to see less and less inter-generational movement. Why? Because the children of the meritocratic elite would, in all likelihood, inherit the natural gifts enjoyed by their parents. In time, a meritocratic society would become as rigid and class-bound as a feudal society. Let's call this the ossification problem.

This is precisely what happens in the dystopian future described in my father's book. The sociologist narrator writes:

By 1990 or thereabouts, all adults with IQs of more than 125 belonged to the meritocracy. A high proportion of the children with IQs over 125 were the children of these same adults. The top of today are breeding the top of tomorrow to a greater extent than at any time in the past.

The elite is on the way to becoming hereditary; the principles of heredity and merit are coming together. The vital transformation which has taken more than two centuries to accomplish is almost complete.

Most people think of this as a wholly theoretical danger that won't arise until some distant point in the future, if then. The conventional wisdom among social commentators in Britain and America is that their societies can't possibly be meritocratic because of the low levels of social mobility. But a lack of movement between classes is only evidence of this if you assume that natural abilities are distributed more or less randomly across society. What if that's not true? It could be that two things have been happening in the advanced societies of the West that have been obscured by the intense focus among policy-makers on the impact of environmental factors on children's life chances. First, our societies could be more meritocratic than they're generally given credit for; and, second, the "vital transformation" described by my father, whereby the meritocratic elite is becoming a hereditary elite, could already be under way.^[9]

Let's examine the two parts of this hypothesis in turn.

How high is the correlation between IQ and socio-economic status?

The view of most liberals is that the correlation between IQ and socio-economic status in the West isn't very high. "Once you get past some pretty obvious correlations (smart people make better mathematicians), there is a very loose relationship between IQ and life outcomes," writes the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks in *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement* (2011). Daniel Goleman, the author of *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ* (1995), thinks that IQ accounts for no more than between 4 and 10 per cent of career success. However, this is at odds with the scientific research. As the social scientist Tarmo Strenze says in the introduction to his 2006 meta-analysis of longitudinal studies on the topic, summing up decades of research:

Although it is sometimes claimed in popular press and textbooks that intelligence has no relationship to important real-life outcomes, the scientific research on the topic leaves little doubt that people with higher scores on IQ tests are better educated, hold more prestigious occupations, and earn higher incomes than people with lower scores.^[10]

In *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994), Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray argue—pretty convincingly—that the correlation between intelligence and socio-economic status has become stronger in America since the 1950s as access to higher education has become more competitive and the economy has become more knowledge-based, particularly at each end of the IQ distribution curve. They don't claim that a person's IQ is the sole determinant of whether they succeed or fail, only that it's an increasingly important factor. Using a variety of evidence, they show that cognitive ability is a better predictor of achievement in school and occupational status than the standard environmental factors singled out by liberal policy-makers.^[11]

At the bottom of American society, according to Herrnstein and Murray, is a class of people they describe as “very dull”. Members of this group possess IQs of 80 or below, often struggle to complete high school, and are either unemployed or working in low-paying jobs. They analyse the data thrown up by the National Longitudinal Survey of Labour Market Experience of Youth (NLSY), a study of 12,686 people, 94 per cent of whom were given an intelligence test, and conclude that IQ is a better predictor of low socio-economic status—and the associated problems of poverty, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependency, criminality and drug abuse—than any competing variable, including parental socio-economic status. According to their analysis, someone with an IQ of 130 has a less than 2 per cent chance of living in poverty, whereas someone with an IQ of 70 has a 26 per cent chance.

At the pinnacle of American society, by contrast, there is a “cognitive elite”. Typically, members of this group possess IQs of 125 and above, have postgraduate degrees from good universities and belong to a handful of “high-IQ professions”, such as accountants, lawyers, architects, chemists, college teachers, dentists, doctors, engineers, computer scientists, mathematicians, natural scientists, social scientists and senior business executives. According to Herrnstein and Murray:

Even as recently as midcentury, America was still a society in which most bright people were scattered throughout the wide range of jobs. As the century draws to a close, a very high proportion of that same group is now concentrated within a few occupations that are highly screened for IQ.[12]

A British sociologist called Peter Saunders—who, like the fictional sociologist in my father’s book, is a celebrant of meritocracy—echoes many of the findings of *The Bell Curve*. Saunders argues that in Britain cognitive ability is over twice as important as class origins in influencing class destinations. He bases this, in part, on an analysis of a 1972 study of social mobility carried out by the sociologist John Goldthorpe and his colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford, which involved a nationally representative sample of 10,000 men. The fact that there’s a strong correlation between the socio-economic status of fathers and sons within this cohort doesn’t mean Britain is un-meritocratic, according to Saunders. He shows that if you factor in the men’s IQs, the level of mobility is almost exactly what you’d expect in a perfectly meritocratic society. In *Social Mobility Myths* (2010), he writes:

The social mobility histories of the 10,000 men interviewed for Goldthorpe’s study in 1972 are almost precisely what we would have expected to find had they and their fathers been recruited to their class positions purely on the basis of their intelligence.

Since Herrnstein and Murray published *The Bell Curve*, more evidence has emerged that there’s a strong correlation between IQ and socio-economic status in America. Tino Sanandaji, a research fellow at the Research Institute of Industrial Economics, has drilled down into a dataset tracking a representative sample of the US population and discovered that those with IQs above 120 typically earn twice as much as those with average IQs.[13] Christopher F. Chabris, a professor of psychology at Union College,

estimates that a random person with above-average intelligence has a two-thirds chance of earning an above-average income, while a random person of below average intelligence has only a one third chance.[14]

Many people will recoil from this hypothesis because they'll read it as a justification of inequality—a form of social Darwinism.[15] After all, if our society is on the way to becoming a fully-fledged meritocracy, doesn't that mean the resulting distribution of wealth and power is justified? The answer is: not when you factor in the heritability of the traits that are linked with socio-economic status. As Rawls points out, no one *deserves* their natural abilities—and, for that reason, the closer the link between IQ and socio-economic status, the less defensible inequality becomes. I happen to think there are other, pragmatic justifications of inequality—namely, the terrible human cost of trying to bring about end-state equality—but that's not contingent on this particular hypothesis or the more general claim that many of the differences in people's personalities are linked to genetic differences. Even if all men were *tabulae rasae* and they all started out on a level playing field, they would still end up in different places, if only because some would be luckier than others. Any attempt to correct that would inevitably involve unacceptable levels of state coercion. The truth is, there's nothing inherently right-wing—or anti-egalitarian—about the conclusions of Herrnstein, Murray, Saunders and others. If anything, the claim that there's now a strong link between IQ and status in the advanced societies of the West, seen against the background of behavioural genetics, is an argument for *more* redistributive taxation, not less.

Has the meritocratic elite become a hereditary elite?

What about the second part of the hypothesis—that the principles of meritocracy and heredity are coming together? Even if you accept that the developed world is more meritocratic than it's generally given credit for, it doesn't follow that "the top of today are breeding the top of tomorrow", to use my father's phrase. Is there any evidence that the children of today's cognitive elite will become the cognitive elite of tomorrow? Yes, according to Herrnstein and Murray.

Herrnstein first put forward this idea—that the cognitive elite was becoming a hereditary elite—in a 1971 essay for the *Atlantic* called "IQ", later expanded into a book called *IQ in the Meritocracy* (1973). His argument can be summed up in a syllogism: If differences in mental abilities are inherited, and if success requires those abilities, and if earnings and prestige depend on success, then social standing will be based to some extent on inherited differences among people:

*Greater wealth, health, freedom, fairness, and educational opportunity are not going to give us the egalitarian society of our philosophical heritage. It will instead give us a society sharply graduated, with ever greater innate separation between the top and the bottom, and **ever more uniformity within families as far as inherited abilities are concerned**. Naturally, we find this vista appalling, for we have been raised to think of social equality as our goal. The*

vista reminds us of the world we had hoped to leave behind—aristocracies, privileged classes, unfair advantages and disadvantages of birth ... By removing arbitrary barriers between classes, society has encouraged the creation of biological barriers. [My emphasis.]

Herrnstein and Murray make the same point in *The Bell Curve* when discussing falling social mobility:

Most people at present are stuck near where their parents were on the income distribution in part because IQ, which has become a major predictor of income, passes on sufficiently from one generation to the next to constrain economic mobility.

And Murray returns to this theme in *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010* (2012). “The reason that upper-middle-class children dominate the population of elite schools,” he writes, “is that the parents of the upper-middle class now produce a disproportionate number of the smartest children.” By way of evidence, he points out that 87 per cent of college-bound seniors who scored above 700 in their SATs in 2010 had at least one parent with a college degree, with 56 per cent of them having a parent with a graduate degree. He concludes: “Highly disproportionate numbers of exceptionally able children in the next generation will come from parents in the upper-middle class, and more specifically from parents who are already part of the broad elite.”^[16]

Why should this be happening, given that IQ, like many other heritable characteristics such as height, regresses to the mean? Herrnstein and Murray think a large part of the explanation is the increasing tendency of people to select their partners according to similar levels of intelligence, thanks to assortative mating or homogamy. This is a well-documented phenomenon whereby humans are more likely to mate with those who have the same characteristics as them, particularly IQ. Up until the 1950s, the impact of assortative mating on the stratification of society was kept in check by the limited opportunities for highly intelligent men and women to meet each other. However, as the best universities have become more and more selective, and as women have begun to be admitted in equal numbers, these opportunities have increased. If male and female members of the cognitive elite don't pair up in college, they pair up afterwards in the high-paying firms and rarefied social environments that they gravitate towards. The result is that those on the far right-hand side of the IQ distribution curve have become much more likely to mate with each other and produce highly intelligent children. Admittedly, not quite as intelligent as their parents, on average, but intelligent enough to make them more likely to gain admittance to this exclusive club than the children of parents who aren't members of the cognitive elite. Regression to the mean still takes place, but it happens more slowly because both parents are highly intelligent—slowly enough to create an ossification problem.^[17]

Herrnstein and Murray confine their discussion to America, but there's reason to think the same thing is happening in the UK. David Willetts, the former Conservative universities minister, believes the rise in assortative mating among university graduates

helps explain the apparent fall in inter-generational mobility in Britain since the mid-twentieth century. As he puts it in *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Took Their Children's Future—and Why They Should Give It Back* (2010):

If advantage marries advantage then we must not be surprised if social mobility suffers ... increasing equality between the sexes has meant increasing inequality between social classes. Feminism has trumped egalitarianism.

Can meritocracy survive?

Now, don't misunderstand me. However meritocratic most liberal-democracies are, they're far from being fully-fledged meritocracies. The evidence suggests that at present the correlation between IQ and educational outcomes is weaker for children from disadvantaged backgrounds than for their peers, with environmental factors playing a bigger part.^[18] Consequently, if schools become more meritocratic, disadvantaged children with above-average IQs will benefit—and there are still plenty of them who are underachieving at present.^[19] There's also no reason to think social mobility will grind to a halt if the correlation between IQ and socio-economic status ever approaches 100 per cent, even allowing for assortative mating. In *Coming Apart*, Charles Murray estimates that there will always be 14 per cent of children in the top 5 per cent of the IQ distribution curve who are the offspring of parents with below-average IQs. Admittedly, that's not much when you consider that the remaining 86 per cent will have parents with above-average IQs, but it's still sufficient to prevent complete ossification—and many more people on the left-hand side of the curve will produce children with IQs that place them on the right-hand side, even if they're not in the top 5 per cent. So there would still be *some* upward social mobility in my father's meritocratic dystopia, albeit not a great deal of bottom-to-top.

The problem is, it might not be enough. In a post-script to *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, we learn that the sociologist narrator has been killed in a riot at Peterloo in 2034. In the end, the new social order he describes isn't sustainable because there's too little mobility in a mature meritocracy. Those at the bottom of the pyramid don't simply resent having to eke out a living in menial, low-paying jobs, while the elite live in luxury; they resent being told that they deserve their inferior status. They also dislike the fact that their children have very little chance of rising to the top. The upshot is that they join forces with a dissident element in the ruling class and revolt, overthrowing the meritocratic elite in a bloody coup.

Could this happen in the advanced societies of the West? Is it fanciful to detect traces of this beginning to happen already in the "Occupy" movements, with their rhetoric against "the one per cent" and the popularity of insurgent, left-wing political parties in Greece and Spain? Let's assume for the sake of argument that it could and it would lead to all the unspeakable horrors that most other egalitarian revolutions have resulted in. What can we do to prevent it? How can this shortcoming of meritocratic societies be corrected without straying too far from the principle of limited government?^[20]

One solution is a guaranteed basic income. This was an idea first floated at the beginning of the sixteenth century which is currently gaining some traction in various forms on the Left and Right of American politics. It has the merit of addressing the problem posed by the falling value of unskilled labour, as well as the disappearance of blue-collar jobs caused by increasing mechanisation, not to mention the replacement of some white-collar workers by intelligent machines, which the soothsayers of Silicon Valley tell us is imminent.[21] True, it would probably involve increasing taxes for higher-rate taxpayers, and that's unlikely to appeal to conservative-minded voters, but perhaps some of them might become more relaxed about redistributive taxation once they realise how closely a person's success is linked to the hand they're dealt at birth that they've done nothing to deserve. It also has the virtue of replacing the patchwork quilt of means-tested government welfare programs, thereby reducing bureaucracy. A basic income would combine higher taxes with *less* government, a compromise that some conservatives might be prepared to make. A modified version of it, guaranteeing a basic income to those unable to support themselves, was endorsed by Hayek in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (1973):

So long as such a uniform minimum income is provided outside the market to all those who, for any reason, are unable to earn in the market an adequate maintenance, this need not lead to a restriction of freedom, or conflict with the Rule of Law.

Progressive eugenics

But that isn't the solution I want to explore here. I'm more interested in the potential of a technology that hasn't been invented yet: genetically engineered intelligence.[22] As with so many of the ideas explored in this article, this crops up in my father's book, where it takes the form of "controlled mutations in the genetic constitution of the unborn ... induced by radiation so as to raise the level of intelligence". This technology is still in its infancy in 2033, with successful experiments only carried out on "the lower animals", but another version of it may be available sooner in the real world—within the next five or ten years, if the scientists are to be believed.

I'm thinking in particular of the work being done by Stephen Hsu, Vice-President for Research and Professor of Theoretical Physics at Michigan State University. He is a founder of BGI's Cognitive Genomics Lab. BGI, China's top bio-tech institute, is working to discover the genetic basis for IQ. Hsu and his collaborators are studying the genomes of thousands of highly intelligent people in pursuit of some of the perhaps 10,000 genetic variants affecting IQ. Hsu believes that within ten years machine learning applied to large genomic datasets will make it possible for parents to screen embryos *in vitro* and select the most intelligent one to implant.[23] Geoffrey Miller, an evolutionary psychologist at New York University, describes how the process would work:

Any given couple could potentially have several eggs fertilized in the lab with the dad's sperm and the mom's eggs. Then you can test multiple embryos and analyze which one's going to be the smartest. That kid would belong to that couple as if they had it naturally, but it would be

the smartest a couple would be able to produce if they had 100 kids. It's not genetic engineering or adding new genes, it's the genes that couples already have.

It's worth repeating this last point, because it deals with one of the main reservations people will have about this procedure: these couples wouldn't be creating a super-human in a laboratory, but choosing the smartest child from the range of all the possible children they could have. Nevertheless, this could have a decisive impact. "This might mean the difference between a child who struggles in school, and one who is able to complete a good university degree," says Hsu.[24]

My proposal is this: once this technology becomes available, why not offer it free of charge to parents on low incomes with below-average IQs? Provided there is sufficient take-up, it could help to address the problem of flat-lining inter-generational social mobility and serve as a counterweight to the tendency for the meritocratic elite to become a hereditary elite. It might make all the difference when it comes to the long-term sustainability of advanced meritocratic societies.

At first glance, this sounds like something Jonathan Swift might suggest and, of course, there are lots of ethical issues connected with "designer babies". But is it so different from screening embryos *in vitro* so parents with hereditary diseases can avoid having a child with the same condition? (This is known as a pre-implantation genetic diagnosis.) I don't mean that a low IQ is comparable to a genetic disorder like Huntington's, but if you allow parents to choose which embryo to take to term, whatever the reason, you've already crossed the Rubicon. And screening out embryos with certain undesirable genes is legal in plenty of countries, including Britain.

In an article for *Nautilus*, Stephen Hsu argues that making this new technology widely available will be essential to prevent it being exploited by the privileged few, thereby exacerbating inequality:

Almost certainly, some countries will allow genetic engineering, thereby opening the door for global elites who can afford to travel for access to reproductive technology. As with most technologies, the rich and powerful will be the first beneficiaries. Eventually, though, I believe many countries will not only legalize human genetic engineering, but even make it a (voluntary) part of their national healthcare systems. The alternative would be inequality of a kind never before experienced in human history.[25]

Hsu isn't being paranoid. Some rich people, like the movie star Jodie Foster, have already used artificial insemination to try and maximise their children's IQs utilising the sperm of Nobel Prize-winners. If high-achieving couples in London, Paris and New York are prepared to make their children listen to Mozart in the hope of boosting their intelligence, even though there's no evidence it has any effect, they wouldn't hesitate to make use of a technology that actually worked.[26]

Hsu's solution is to make it freely available to everyone, but that would only help to prevent it making existing inequalities even worse. After all, if people from all classes used it in exactly the same proportions, all you'd succeed in doing would be to increase the average IQ of each class, thereby preserving the gap between them. Wouldn't it be better to limit its use to disadvantaged parents with low IQs? That way, it could be used as a tool to reduce inequality.[27]

This technology might actually be more effective than anything else we've tried when it comes to tackling the issue of entrenched poverty, with the same old problems—teenage pregnancy, criminality, drug abuse, ill health—being passed down from one generation to the next like so many poisonous heirlooms. In due course, why not conduct a trial in a city like Detroit and see if it works? It has become a cliché to point out that the disadvantages of being brought up in a low-income family are apparent when a child is as young as eighteen months, so it shouldn't take long to see if increasing the IQs of children from deprived backgrounds makes an impact.[28] It would be inexpensive, too, so wouldn't involve a massive hike in taxation. "The cost of these procedures would be less than tuition at many private kindergartens," says Hsu.

In a sense, what I'm suggesting is a form of redistribution, except the commodity being redistributed is above-average intelligence rather than wealth. This is a way of significantly reducing end-state inequality that should be acceptable to conservatives (at least, non-religious conservatives) because it doesn't involve the use of coercive state power. Participation would be entirely voluntary. Let's call this policy "g-galitarianism". (For those unfamiliar with the jargon, "g" is commonly used by psychologists and geneticists to stand for "general factor of cognitive ability" and is often used as a synonym for "IQ". It was first given this designation by Charles Spearman, a British army officer, at the turn of the last century.)

A lot of the resistance to this idea will come from a visceral dislike of anything that smacks of eugenics, for understandable historical reasons. But the main objection to eugenics, at least in the form it usually takes, is that it involves discriminating against disadvantaged groups, whether minorities or people with disabilities. What I'm proposing is a form of eugenics that would discriminate *in favour of* the disadvantaged. I'm not suggesting we improve the genetic stock of an entire race, just the least well off. This is a kind of eugenics that should appeal to liberals—progressive eugenics.[29]

There's one more thing that should make this idea attractive to the Left. The reason liberals are so hostile to the concept of IQ—and particularly the claim that it helps to determine socio-economic status, rather than *vice versa*—is because they have an almost religious attachment to the idea that man is a piece of clay that can be moulded into any shape by society. After all, it's only if human beings are infinitely malleable and not bound by their inner nature that the various utopias they dream of can become a reality, from William Morris's *Earthly Paradise* to the New Jerusalem of my father's Labour Party. This catechism was drilled into Soviet schoolchildren, who were taught to memorise the slogan: "Darwinism is the science of biological evolution; Marxism of social evolution."

And the Left is constantly finding “scientific proof” of this magical thinking, such as the work of the anthropologist Margaret Mead, who wrote: “We are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions.”

This is why so many on the Left feel a moral obligation to rubbish the work of hereditarians like Hans Eysenck, Arthur Jensen, Peter Saunders, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. From their quasi-religious viewpoint, any suggestion that important aspects of people’s personalities have a genetic basis is heresy.

But the new technologies thrown up by genetic research will mean they no longer have to deny this obvious truth. If it becomes possible to select human embryos according to their possession of genes associated with certain character traits, such as intelligence, the Left’s utopian political projects can be resurrected. Margaret Mead was right after all: human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, you just have to start a lot further back. It is not through changing the culture that we will be able to solve the chronic social problems besetting the advanced societies of the West, but through changing people’s genes.

Towards the end of *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray conclude that nothing much can be done about the cognitive stratification they claim to have identified and which they predict will get progressively worse:

Taken together, the story of attempts to raise intelligence is one of high hopes, flamboyant claims, and disappointing results. For the foreseeable future, the problems of low cognitive ability are not going to be solved by outside interventions to make children smarter.

But they didn’t foresee a future in which it will be possible to screen embryos for intelligence. A workable solution to the problem they identify, and one my father believed would bring about the end of meritocracy, could soon be at hand.

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[1] My father wrote about this in 2001, a year before his death: “I have been sadly disappointed by my 1958 book, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. I coined a word which has gone into general circulation, especially in the United States, and most recently found a prominent place in the speeches of Mr Blair. The book was a satire meant to be a warning (which needless to say has not been heeded) against what might happen...” ‘Down with meritocracy’, *The Guardian*, June 29, 2001.
<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment>

[2] See 'Comprehensive schools and social mobility', Vikki Boliver and Adam Swift, *Renewal*, Vol 19, No.2. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2010.01346.x/full>

[3] For a summary of this debate in the UK, see David Goodhart, 'More mobile than we think', *Prospect*, December 20, 2008, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/moremobilethanwethink>; and in the US, James Surowiecki, 'The Mobility Myth', *The New Yorker*, March 3, 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/03/03/the-mobility-myth>

[4] In his testimony to the House of Commons Education Selection Committee in 2013, the behavioural geneticist Robert Plomin pointed out that creating a more meritocratic education system in England wouldn't lead to less variation in GCSE results, as some politicians believe. Rather, variations would just be more closely linked to genetic differences.

[5] This means that between 40% and 80% of the variation in these characteristics in any given population can be accounted for by genetic differences in that population.

[6] This point is reiterated by Gordon Marshall and Adam Swift in a paper called 'Merit and Mobility: A reply to Peter Saunders', *Sociology*, vol. 30, 1996: "It is particularly apt to ask whether an inherited characteristic—genetically-determined intelligence—is an appropriate basis for reward at all. A crucial issue here would seem to be the distinction between those attributes for which the individual can claim responsibility and those which are his or hers merely by chance. If someone possesses particular talents or skills merely as a result of the natural lottery then it is not clear how justice is served by rewarding such possession."

[7] Rawls's whole argument in *A Theory of Justice* takes it for granted that, in the absence of people deserving their wealth, then it properly belongs to everyone, collectively, and it's for them, i.e. the state, to decide how to distribute it. But an individual's claim to his own property shouldn't be trumped by that of the state, and it's hard to imagine anyone freely consenting to live in a society in which it is, even from behind Rawls's veil of ignorance. In the absence of anyone, individually or collectively, having a claim on something based on desert, the default position should be that it belongs to the person who owns it, provided it has been acquired without violating anyone else's rights.

[8] Lani Guinier, a professor at Harvard Law School, has written a book called *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America* (2015) that has been widely interpreted as a critique of meritocracy. However, Guinier makes no objection to meritocracy *per se*, but claims that SATs and other psychometric tests only detect one type of cognitive ability when, in her view, admissions to Ivy League universities and the higher professions should be based on other, more "democratic" cognitive virtues, such as an aptitude for problem solving, independent thinking and creative leadership. However, there's no reason to think these abilities are less heritable than those measured in SATs and the like, so Rawls's objection still stands.

[9] My father believed that the first part of this hypothesis was true in 1965. In that year, he wrote a paper with John Gibson, a Cambridge geneticist, entitled 'Social Mobility and Fertility'. One of the claims made in this paper is that "the higher the occupational status, the higher the measured intelligence (IQ for short)".

[10] Tarmo Strenze, 'Intelligence and socioeconomic success: A meta-analytical review of longitudinal research', *Intelligence* 35 (2007) 401-426. <http://emilkirkegaard.dk/en/wp-content/uploads/Intelligence-and-socioeconomic-success-A-meta-analytic-review-of-longitudinal-research.pdf>

[11] In his book *A Question of Intelligence* (1992), the journalist Daniel Seligman claims the correlation between income and IQ in America is ~0.5.

[12] For a discussion of the controversy generated by *The Bell Curve*, see Christopher F. Chabris, 'IQ Since *The Bell Curve*', *Commentary*, August 1, 1998. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/article/iq-since-the-bell-curve/>

[13] Tino Sanandaji, 'David Brooks and Malcolm Gladwell wrong about IQ, income and wealth', *Super-Economy*, April 1, 2011. <http://super-economy.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/iq-income-and-wealth.html>

[14] Christopher F. Chabris, 'The Mind Readers: In search of success, do we overvalue intelligence and undervalue emotion, intuition and social cues?', *The Wall Street Journal*, March 5, 2011. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704005404576176923998708008>

[15] That is how Stephen Jay Gould's interpreted *The Bell Curve* in his *New Yorker* review: "[It] rehashes the tenets of social Darwinism as it was originally constituted. 'Social Darwinism' has often been used as a general term for any evolutionary argument about the biological basis of human differences, but the initial 19th Century meaning referred to a specific theory of class stratification within industrial societies, and particularly to the idea that there was a permanently poor underclass consisting of genetically inferior people who had precipitated down into their inevitable fate. The theory arose from a paradox of egalitarianism: as long as people remain on top of the social heap by accident of a noble name or parental wealth, and as long as members of despised castes cannot rise no matter what their talents, social stratification will not reflect intellectual merit, and brilliance will be distributed across all classes; but when true equality of opportunity is attained smart people rise and the lower classes become rigid, retaining only the intellectually incompetent." 'Curveball', *The New Yorker*, November 28, 1994. <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~chance/course/topics/curveball.html>

[16] Murray's thesis is disputed by Andrew Hacker, a teacher of political science and maths at Queen's College, in his review of *Coming Apart* in *The New York Review of Books*: "We know that well-off and otherwise accomplished parents can give their children a good start, or at least try. So the next question is how these presumably favored offspring fare as adults. Such studies as we have suggest that early advantages don't

always last. Tom Hertz, an economist at American University, found that of children raised in families in the top income quintile, only 38% were still there as adults. Ron Haskins at the Brookings Institution, also following top-quintile youngsters, was surprised to find that only a little over half (53%) obtained college degrees." 'The White Plight', *The New York Review of Books*, May 10, 2012.

[17] According to *The Economist*, the percentage of American men with university degrees who married women with university degrees increased from 25% to 48% between 1960 and 2005. 'An hereditary meritocracy', *The Economist*, Jan 24, 2015.
<http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21640316-children-rich-and-powerful-are-increasingly-well-suited-earning-wealth-and-power>

[18] Steven Hsu, a theoretical physicist at Michigan State University, sums up the research on this point: "In the absence of deprivation, it would seem that genetic effects determine the upper limit to cognitive ability. However, in studies where subjects have experienced a wider range of environmental conditions, such as poverty, malnutrition, or lack of education, heritability estimates can be much smaller. When environmental conditions are unfavorable, individuals do not achieve their full potential..." 'Super-Intelligent Humans are Coming', *Nautilus*, October 16, 2014.
http://nautil.us/issue/18/genius/super_intelligent-humans-are-coming

[19] According to a 2015 Sutton Trust report, 36% of bright English boys and 24% of girls from disadvantaged backgrounds underachieve in their GCSEs, compared with 16% of boys and 9% of girls from better off homes. <http://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Missing-Talent-final-june.pdf>

[20] In *The Bell Curve*, Herrnstein and Murray think that increasing cognitive stratification may eventually lead to a "custodial state" in which a majority of the poor are forced by the state to live in "a high-tech and more lavish version of the Indian reservation".

[21] See Frederico Pistino, *Robots Will Steal Your Job, but That's OK: How to Survive the Economic Collapse and be Happy* (2012).

[22] This is discussed at length in Frank Salter's article on eugenics in the May issue of *Quadrant*. 'Eugenics, Ready or Not', *Quadrant*, May 11, 2015.
https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2015/05/eugenics-ready/#_edn42

[23] Geoffrey Miller quoted in an interview with Aleks Eror, 'China is Engineering Genius Babies', *Vice*, March 15, 2013. <http://www.vice.com/read/chinas-taking-over-the-world-with-a-massive-genetic-engineering-program>

[24] See John Bohannon, 'Why are some people so smart? The answer could spawn a generation of superbabies', *Wired*, July 16, 2014.
<http://www.wired.com/2013/07/genetics-of-iq/>

[25] Stephen Hsu, 'Super-Intelligent Humans are Coming', *Nautilus*, October 16, 2014.
http://nautil.us/issue/18/genius/super_intelligent-humans-are-coming

[26] Frank Salter draws attention to this danger: "Positive eugenics would give the kiss of immortality to wealthy lineages because it would allow parents to choose offspring whose talents are greater than chance would allow." 'Eugenics, Ready or Not', *Quadrant*, May 11, 2015. https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2015/05/eugenics-ready/#_edn42. It's also raised by Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2014).

[27] Stephen Hsu has an answer to this. He suggests making the technology freely available to everyone, but offering more expensive IVF to the less able so they could choose from, say, 100 embryos instead of 20.

[28] Liberals who deny that there's any genetic basis to intelligence shouldn't have a problem with this trial since, according to their logic, the *in vitro* procedure I'm proposing won't have any effect on IQ. That doesn't mean they won't object, of course. Herrnstein points out this inconsistency in the Appendix to *IQ in the Meritocracy*: "Thus, the very same people one day abhor the idea of tampering with people's genes may, the next day, vigorously deny the conclusion that human society involves genetic factors."

[29] Peter Singer, the professor of bioethics at Princeton, may be receptive. He wrote a short book called *A Darwinian Left* (1999), arguing that the left should embrace Darwinism. However, it may not appeal to all liberals. Jeremy Rifkin, author of *The Biotech Century: The Coming Age of Genetic Commerce* (1998), cites a version of the proposal I'm making as an example of how the science of genetics may be perverted: "In the next 10 or 20 years we could have eugenics with a smiling face. We will no longer require the lower classes to have fewer babies; we will just have them have better babies as we learn to do gene therapy."