

The Meritocracy Against Itself

The Case Against Meritocracy

[nytimes.com/2018/12/08/opinion/sunday/wasps-meritocracy-ross-douthat.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/08/opinion/sunday/wasps-meritocracy-ross-douthat.html)

By Ross Douthat - December 7, 2018

This week I briefly trended on Twitter — a bracing experience for any columnist, because it means that you’ve done your job of provocation a little bit too well.

In my particular case the provocation was [a column](#) about the phenomenon of George H.W. Bush nostalgia, which I suggested reflected a general nostalgia for some of the aristocratic virtues of the old WASP establishment, and a disappointment with the meritocracy that has risen in its place.

This argument was read by certain readers (and a few social media non-readers) as a paean to white privilege, even a brief for white supremacy. In these misreadings, there was an assumption that to praise, in any way, the elite that predated the modern meritocracy is to reject racial diversity, minority and female advancement, in favor of permanent white rule.

That’s not my view. Rather I think ideals of diversity and meritocracy are two different ways of shaping an elite, which can advance together but which are just as often separable, or even in tension with each other.

And I would separate them. I think it was a good and necessary thing that the American upper class diversified, and that more African-Americans and Jews and Catholics (like myself) and women now share privileges and powers once reserved for Protestant white men.

[This week on “The Argument” podcast, listen to Ross debate his nostalgia for WASPs with editorial board member Mara Gay.]

But I think that same upper class was unwise to abandon an aristocratic self-conception in favor of a meritocratic one. On the evidence we have, the meritocratic ideal ends up being just as undemocratic as the old emphasis on inheritance and tradition, and it forges an elite that has an aristocracy’s vices (privilege, insularity, arrogance) without the sense of duty, self-restraint and noblesse oblige that WASPs at their best displayed.

Here it’s important to stress that a WASP was not just any white Protestant or upper-crust American of the pre-1960s past. The term properly refers to a specific kind of American elite, mostly from the Northeast, mostly high-church Protestants, concentrated in a few cities (Boston, Philadelphia, New York, plus some Midwestern and Californian outposts), generally associated with the Republican Party (with occasional defectors like F.D.R.), who dominated a particular set of fields (academia, finance, foreign policy) and shared the code of service and piety and manners that defined the elder Bush’s career.

The WASPs were distinct from other white elites — including the planter class that ruled the South, the regional elites that emerged as the frontier moved westward, the immigrant tycoons who challenged WASP power in the East. Their importance rested, to borrow from a WASP acquaintance’s email this week, on being “primus inter pares” — first among equals, with a particular kind of power in a particular set of institutions, and an ability to set a tone for the American upper class that was adopted by other groups when they ascended.

And ascend they often did, because the older American system was both hierarchical and permeable, with room for actual merit even without a meritocratic organizing theory.

Those advancing groups included non-Anglo-Saxons, and eventually non-Protestants and non-whites. In the middle of the 20th century, you could find elite Catholics who imitated WASPishness — think of William F. Buckley Jr. or the Kennedys. You could even find WASPish African-Americans: The oldest summer colony for black Americans, and not coincidentally a place where the somewhat WASPy Barack Obama liked to hang out in the summer, sits on the shores of the WASP isle of Martha’s Vineyard.

These imitations existed in the shadow of racial apartheid and residual anti-Catholicism. But their example suggested that an aristocratic spirit was transferable to a more diverse elite, that there could be Catholic and African-American and Jewish aristocrats — like, say, the family that has long stewarded this newspaper — who could adopt the WASP establishment’s upper-class virtues without the ethnic and religious chauvinism.

But then the WASPs themselves decided to dissolve their own aristocracy, and transform their once-Protestant universities into a secular mass-opportunity system — a more democratic way of education, in which anyone with enough talent could climb the ladder, and personal achievement and technical expertise would be prized above all else.

This was meritocracy, the system that we now take for granted. And for several reasons it didn’t work as planned.

First, meritocracy segregates talent rather than dispersing it. By plucking the highest achievers from all over the country and encouraging them to cluster together in the same few cities, it robs localities of their potential leaders — so that instead of an Eastern establishment negotiating with overlapping groups of regional elites (or with working-class or ethnic leaders), you have a mass upper class segregated from demoralized peripheries.

Second, the meritocratic elite inevitably tends back toward aristocracy, because any definition of “merit” you choose will be easier for the children of these self-segregated meritocrats to achieve.

But even as it restratifies society, the meritocratic order also insists that everything its high-achievers have is justly earned. “He was born on third base and thought he hit a triple,” Ann Richards famously quipped of George H.W. Bush; well, the typical meritocrat is born on third base, hustles home, and gets praised as if he just hit a grand slam.

This spirit discourages inherited responsibility and cultural stewardship; it brushes away the disciplines of duty; it makes the past seem irrelevant, because everyone is supposed to come from the same nowhere and rule based on technique alone.

As a consequence, meritocrats are often educated to be bad leaders, and bad people, in a very specific way — a way of arrogant intelligence unmoored from historical experience, ambition untempered by self-sacrifice. The way of the “best and the brightest” at the dawn of the technocratic era and the “smartest guys in the room” decades later, the way of the arsonists of late-2000s Wall Street and the “move fast and break things” culture of Silicon Valley.

Or even to some extent the way of Donald Trump, who is white and technically a Protestant but not, *not* any kind of WASP, combining instead the worst of meritocratic self-deception (the rich kid with a Wharton degree posturing as a self-made man) and the worst of the populist reaction that it summons up.

Diversity, despite what many liberals want to think, does not provide a solution to this problem. A diverse elite may be good in its own right, as a matter of justice and representation. But nothing about being a woman or a minority makes you immune to meritocracy’s ruthless solipsism. Just ask Elizabeth Holmes or the slipping-from-grace Sheryl Sandberg, exceptions to the Silicon Valley boys’ club whose trajectories prove the meritocratic rule.

Which is why it’s worth looking backward and forward at the same time as we contemplate what’s wrong with our elite. I don’t want to bring back the WASPs; if I had the magic wand to conjure a different elite, it would be a multiracial, multilingual Catholic aristocracy ruling from Quebec to Chile. (Hey, you asked.)

But I do want to raise the possibility that an aristocracy that knows itself to be one might be more clear-sighted and effective than an aristocracy that doesn’t, and that the WASPs had at least one clear advantage over their presently-floundering successors: They knew who and what they were.



The West at an Impasse

[nytimes.com/2018/12/19/opinion/meritocracy-populism-political-stalemate.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/19/opinion/meritocracy-populism-political-stalemate.html)

By Ross Douthat - December 18, 2018

In France, where the extraordinarily unpopular Emmanuel Macron presides over a country roiled by populist protests, a leading politician of Macron's centrist party was asked in a televised interview what policy mistakes his peers had made: "We were probably too intelligent, too subtle," he [told](#) the interviewer, whose eyebrows danced with disbelief.

Around the same time a Hungarian newspaper ran an [interview](#) with Radek Sikorski, the former foreign minister of Poland and a member of a centrist party that has been swept aside by the populists who currently rule in Warsaw. Asked to explain the chaotic European situation, he cited a recent Atlantic essay by his wife, the Washington Post columnist Anne Applebaum, which portrayed populism as, in part, a revolt by the resentfully unsuccessful against "meritocracy and competition." The centrist alternative to populism, he suggested, was embodied by Macron, who won the French presidency on "positive ideas" rather than "what is worst in us."

"Macron's poll numbers are breaking negative records," the interviewer dryly noted.

While I read both of these exchanges, my Kindle was open to "The Rise of the Meritocracy," written in 1958 by the British civil servant Michael Young. The book coined the term in its title, and Young's neologism was soon adopted as a compliment, a term of praise for a system of elite formation that relied on SAT tests and resumes and promised rule by the most intelligent rather than the well-bred.

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But Young had something more dystopian in mind. His book, a work of fiction that purported to be a work of history and political analysis written in the middle of the 21st century, envisioned a world whose classes were increasingly segregated by talent and intelligence, in which the brainy, standardized-test-acing elite became an increasingly intolerable version of the old aristocracy, leading eventually to riots and populist revolutions in the then far-distant future of 2034.

I went back to Young's book because I've been writing recently (to [some controversy](#)) about the faults of [our own meritocracy](#). What I found there was a prophecy that fit the contemporary Western political landscape remarkably well, even if the populist revolts have arrived a little early.

The book's fictional author is a pompous sociologist who believes absolutely in the meritocratic system, which has produced an elite "more brilliant" than any in the past. He also believes in its essential stability, because the nature of meritocracy itself ensures that the populists threatening revolt simply aren't as smart or as capable as the new elite that rules them:

Behind the shift and turn of current politics is the underlying fact with which I opened my essay. The last century has witnessed a far-reaching redistribution of ability between the classes in society, and the consequence is that the lower classes no longer have the power to make revolt effective. For a short moment they may prosper through an alliance with the odd and passing disillusion of a section of the upper classes. But such *déclassé* people can never be more than an eccentric minority — the Populists have never been more than that as a serious political force — because the *élite* is treated with all the wise distinction that any heart can desire. Without intelligence in their heads, the lower classes are never more menacing than a rabble, even if they are sometimes sullen, sometimes mercurial, not yet completely predictable. If the hopes of some earlier dissidents had been realized and the brilliant children from the lower classes remained there, to teach, to inspire, and to organize the masses, then I should have had a different story to tell. The few who now propose such a radical

step are a hundred years too late.

His point here, expressed with maximal elitism and arrogance, is that meritocracy essentially co-opts the talented people who in a different world would be leaders in their local communities, their regions, their social classes, pulling them all up into a national elite and weakening every rival power center in the process.

Because Young is a satirist, this authorial pride gets its comeuppance: We learn in a postscript that the author of the book was killed in a populist riot, leaving his manuscript unfinished.

But the book doesn't tell us if the populists are able to prove its writer wrong by making their revolt "effective" — if they're able to take power as well as instigate violence, and if they can actually govern once they've overthrown the pompous mandarins.

The evidence of our own era suggests that they might not be so capable. It suggests, in fact, that when meritocracy loses credibility and legitimacy, the result is a political impasse. The official elite becomes too arrogant and self-deceiving and unpopular to govern effectively, but the populist alternative is much as Young's narrator describes — disorganized, ill-led, susceptible to snake-oil salesmen and vulnerable to manipulation by factions within the upper class.

In this situation, which is ours, the meritocrats have no mandate and no sense of why the public hates them — believing, with Sikorski and the Macron apparatchik, that their governance was wise and just and there's nothing wrong with meritocracy that can't be fixed with more of it. But the populists have no competence and no coherent program, and so all their revolt can win is stalemate.

Different versions of this impasse exist in Britain, France and the United States. In the British version the forces of populism won a stunning victory in the Brexit referendum but lacked real leaders (save hacks and opportunists) and a clear plan for pushing forward (save implausible promises). The result is Theresa May's shambolic attempt to deliver the impossible, a job she's graced with because nobody else wants it — save Jeremy Corbyn, whose left-populism seems entirely unready for power in its own way.

In France the "gilets jaunes" protests have brought populist fury from France's peripheries into the heart of Paris and wrecked Macron's centrist-technocratic plans. But as a political force the protest movement remains essentially inchoate, now pulled toward the far left and now toward the far right, awaiting leadership and vision. Which, judging by the equally dismal approval ratings of Macron's rivals, is something that French politics is unlikely to supply.

In the United States the populists theoretically hold the White House, under a president who promised to be a traitor to his class. Except that these promises were mostly just a con job, the Trump inner circle is a parliament of opportunists, and his administration's policy agenda has been steered by the Republican Party's business elite rather than by the voters who elected him.

Each case is a variation on the same theme, a slightly different intimation of the meritocratic endgame that Michael Young foresaw 60 years ago. A governing class that has vaulting self-confidence and dwindling credibility, locked in stalemate with populist movements that are easily grafted upon and offer more grievances than plans.

In theory the impasse can be overcome. That's what statesmanship is for — to bridge gaps between complacent winners and angry losers, to weld populism's motley grievances into a new agenda suited for the times, to manifest an elitism that is magnanimous instead of arrogant.

But can the system we have really produce such a statesman? The next one we find will be the first.