

Meritocracy and its discontents

Not everybody is happy with the talent elite

IN "THE RISE OF THE MERITOCRACY", published in 1958, Michael Young, a British sociologist and Labour Party activist, conjured up an image of a society obsessed with talent. The date was 2034, and psychologists had perfected the art of IQ testing. But far from promoting social harmony, the preoccupation with talent had produced social breakdown. The losers in the talent wars were doubly unhappy, conscious not only that they were failures but that they deserved to be failures. Eventually they revolted against their masters.

The rise of the talent elite has bred resistance, which started on the right. T.S. Eliot, a 20th-century poet and critic, argued that choosing people on the basis of their talents would "disorganise society and debase education". Edward Welbourne, a Cambridge don, dismissed IQ tests as "devices invented by Jews for the advancement of Jews". But after the second world war the resistance spread leftward. Leftists argued that meritocracies were not only unpleasant but unjust. If "talent" owed more to nature than nurture, as many social scientists insisted, then rewarding people for talent was tantamount to rewarding them for having privileged parents.

This resistance has occasionally boiled over into outright rebellion. Young's book was an opening shot in a successful war against the 11-plus, a British school examination that divided children between a gifted elite destined for academic grammar schools and those consigned to run-of-the-mill secondary modern schools. The

1960s saw widespread student revolts against selection and elitism.

There are plenty of signs that another backlash is on the way, from John Kerry's complaints about American companies outsourcing jobs to a rash of riots in China. Much of this resentment focuses on growing inequalities. People complain that these are straining the bonds of society to breaking point: a new aristocracy of talent is retreating into golden ghettos and running the global economy in their own interests. "The talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues," said the late Christopher Lasch, an American historian, in one of the best analyses of the trend. The logic of talent wars is meritocratic: the most talented get the most rewards. But the reality of democracy is egalitarian: the people can use their political power to defeat the bell curve.

In some ways things are worse than they were when Young wrote his book. Inequalities are much wider-in both America and China they are returning to edrly 20th-century levels-and the talent elite has gone global. Young's rebels can now add patriotism (or bigotry) to egalitarianism. Manuel Castells, a sociologist, complains that "elites are cosmopolitan, people are local". Samuel Huntington, a political scientist, argues that "a major gap

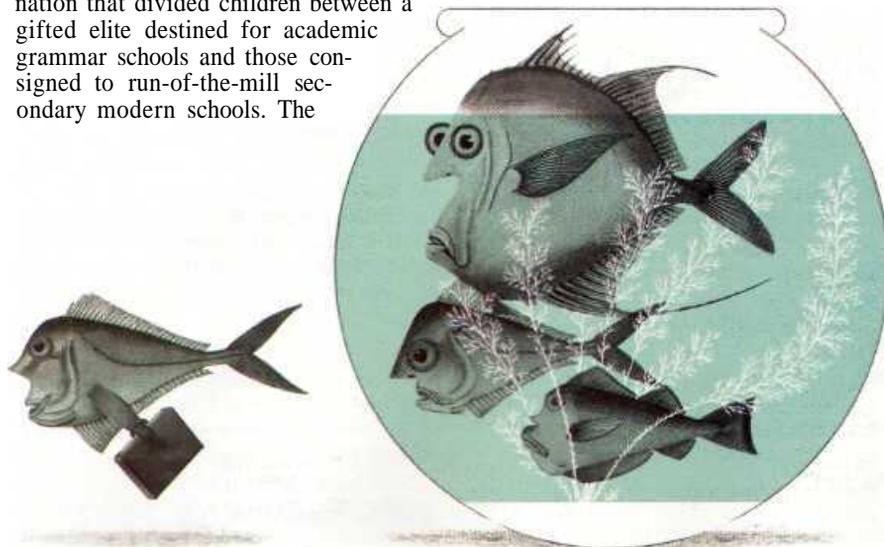
is growing in America between its increasingly denationalised elites and its 'thank God for America' public." On American television personalities such as Lou Dobbs and Bill O'Reilly beat the populist drum against those cosmopolitan elites. In China people denounce returning emigres as "bananas" (yellow on the outside, white inside). Across much of the developing world the targets of choice for rioters are rich ethnic minorities and foreigners.

But in other ways things have got much better. The number of winners now is much larger than it was in 1958. In Young's day, the meritocrats concentrated on spotting recruits for Oxbridge and the senior civil service. The rest were labelled failures. Since then, America and Europe have created a mass higher education system, and developing countries are determined to follow suit. When Young was writing, China and India were trapped in poverty. Today they are growing so fast that they, too, are suffering from talent shortages.

Moreover, some problems could prove self-correcting. Many talented people not only create jobs and wealth, they turn their hands to philanthropy, as Bill Gates and Warren Buffett have done. The growing returns to education create incentives for people to get themselves educated, producing a better-trained workforce as well as upward mobility. In China families spend more on education than on anything else, despite the one-child policy. Multinational companies routinely promote local talent in the developing world, putting an ever more multi-ethnic face on the global talent elite. Overheated talent markets prompt companies to move production elsewhere-to Mysore rather than Bangalore, say, or Austin, Texas, rather than Silicon Valley.

Above all, there is something appealing about the meritocratic ideal: most people are willing to accept wide inequalities if they are coupled with equality of opportunity. In America, where two-thirds of the population believe that everyone has an equal chance to get ahead, far fewer people favour income redistribution than in Europe.

Growing wealth also means that society can reward a wider range of talents. "I



▶ must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy," wrote America's second president, John Adams, and they in turn must study those subjects so that their children can study "painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain". These days, sports stars and entertainers can make millions. There are also ample rewards for all sorts of specialised talents, from the gift of bringing history to life (all those well-paid TV historians) to the ability to produce a perfect soufflé (the best-paid chef in America, Wolfgang Puck, earned \$16m last year). It sometimes seems that there is no talent so recondite that you cannot make a living out of it. Takeru "Tsunami" Kobayashi earns more than \$200,000 a year as the world's hot-dog eating champion: he can eat more than 50 in 12 minutes.

Making it palatable

The backlash is not inevitable, then. But it is sensible to take steps to prevent it. One popular answer is affirmative action, an idea that is making headway even in that last redoubt of old-fashioned meritocracy, the French establishment. However, experience in America—which introduced the practice in the 1960s—suggests that it raises a host of problems. In practical terms, many "affirmative-action babies" fail in highly competitive environments. On a more philosophical note, why should the children of rich blacks be given a head start over the children of poor whites? The biggest problem with affirmative action, however, is that it comes too late. The best way to boost the life-chances of poor people is to intervene much earlier in life—to set them on the right path in kindergarten and primary school and reinforce those lessons in secondary school.

Progressive taxation can help. For much of the post-war period most rich countries taxed talent too heavily, causing bright flight. But today, in America at least, the danger is the opposite. The Bush administration is trying to reduce taxes on both earned income and inherited wealth at a time when the talented are reaping huge rewards: American CEOs earn 300 times more than the average worker. This threatens to turn the children of the rich into playboys and playgirls and widen inequalities to unacceptable levels.

The best way to head off a backlash is to give everybody a fair chance. This means investing in childhood nutrition and pre-school education. It also means repairing

the lowest rungs of the educational ladder. Developing countries need to continue the march towards universal primary education: failure to do so will exacerbate skill shortages as well as widen inequalities. Developed countries need to toughen up their schools. In the 1960s too many schools were lowering standards in the name of child-centred education and shifting the emphasis away from science and mathematics. The chief victims of this were underprivileged children who could not rely on their parents to make up for the

deficiencies of their schools.

The success of advanced economies is increasingly dependent not on their physical capital but on their capacity to mobilise their citizens' brainpower. The rise of a global meritocracy offers all sorts of benefits, from higher growth in productivity to faster scientific progress. It can boost social mobility and allow all sorts of weird and wonderful talents to bloom. The talent wars may be a source of trepidation for companies and countries. But they should also be a cause for celebration. •

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