Beyond Merit-Blindness: On the Materiality of Merit

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Educational theorists and social theorists have for decades pointed out the detrimental effects of meritocracy. Meritocracy has been so copiously critiqued that the phrase "the myth of merit" easily rolls off the tongue. As early as 1984, Landon Beyer notes that

> Rather than seeing the school as an essentially apolitical and meritocratic institution, which provides for social and economic mobility by giving students a fair chance at enjoying the wealth and advantages of our society . . . critical investigations have sought to uncover the ideological dimensions of aspects of school life.[1]

Thus, since the 1980s, educators have been documenting ways to counter the effects of social reproduction, hegemonic ideology, and, in particular, the mistaken belief in meritocratic educational opportunity.

In this paper I would like to question the way educational theorists have gone about critiquing merit. When I say we have gone about it in the wrong way, I do not mean that meritocracy should not be subject to critique. Nor do I mean to say that meritocracy cannot be detrimental, that merit is not as bad as some people say. I mean rather that the *status* of merit under critique needs to be reformulated. Merit's status, a status that has heretofore been referred to mainly as ideology and discourse, needs to be re-considered. Meritocracy, I will argue in this paper, is not primarily ideological or discursive. It is, rather, material. Merit matters in the sense that there is a lot of *matter* to merit. Merit matters not just because people mistakenly believe in merit. Merit matters because techniques of merit are material, and they continue to order bodies in schools and universities. Merit continues to order bodies in spite of the decades that have passed since belief in merit was first debunked as a false belief.

What I will argue in what follows is that, contrary to popular educational

theory, meritocracy is not a myth. It is, rather, a real apparatus. Meritocracy is, as Sara Ahmed has noted, a system that does work.[2] And because merit is an apparatus, I will argue that treating meritocracy as a myth does more harm than good. Merit *matters* in education, and we would do well to realize that merit is material. This paper will be ordered as follows. I begin with the decades-old treatment of meritocracy-as-myth. Continuing, I will propose, following Barbara Stengel, Sara Ahmed, and Michel Foucault, that meritocracy is a system, an apparatus. Then, I will offer an example as to how a revised critique of merit, a critique that considers the *status* of merit, can lead to educational change. Finally, I will argue against what I call "merit-blindness." I will highlight the ways in which educational theorists have unwittingly created a discourse of "merit-blindness" that is not structurally dissimilar to the unfortunate tendency toward favouring "colour-blindness."

THE WHITE MYTH OF MERIT

Barbara Applebaum has identified "three seemingly good antiracist discourses that white students often engage in . . . the discourse of colour-blindness, the discourse of meritocracy and the discourse of individual choice."[3] Applebaum notes that especially the paired discourses of meritocracy and color-blindness act symbiotically to shore up White identity. Applebaum explains the effects of meritocratic discourse on White identity as follows:

> The discourse of meritocracy functions to marginalize certain groups of people by allowing whites to direct attention away from their own privilege and to ignore larger patterns of racial injustice. The assumption that people get ahead as a result of individual effort or merit conceals how social, economic and cultural privileges facilitate the success of some groups of people but not others. Moreover, it allows the privileged to see themselves as innocent bystanders rather than participants in a system that creates, maintains and reproduces social injustice.[4]

Thus, a presumption of meritocracy not only hides inequity, in the sense that educational sociologists have identified in the field of reproduction theory.

Discourses of meritocracy, moreover, insulate privileged, White identity positions by enabling White racial denial. When one's success or failure cannot be deemed to be due to one's racial identity, but is rather deemed to be due to one's hard work and tenacity, then privilege itself insulates one from being an actor in systems of social injustice. Applebaum shows that White identity benefits from discourses of meritocracy in the sense that White identity gets posited as inconsequential through such discourses.

The discourse of meritocracy has direct links to the discourse of color-blindness—both of which are related to Whiteness. "The colour-blind framework makes it more likely that white students will see the opportunity structure as open and institutions as impartial or objective in their function," notes Applebaum.[5] Thus, the tendency toward color-blindness at a personal level—the tendency to proclaim *not* to notice color—is *enabled* by the idea that hard work is all that matters. Connections such as these—where color-blindness discourse is linked to meritocracy discourse, and where each discourse shores up White identity position—these connections have been very influential in research on White teacher identity. Research in teacher education has been able to take the broader sociological insights of reproduction theory and map them onto White teacher identity. Reproduction theory identifies that the illusion of meritocracy yields complacency in an unjust society. Teacher education studies further identify that the illusion of meritocracy yields a personal indifference to race by educators who nevertheless reside in a racist society.

Applebaum's description of meritocratic discourse invokes what I call the "myth of merit" critique. Drawing on the work of sociologists Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller's "The Meritocratic Myth," Applebaum elsewhere shows the ways in which White teachers and students articulate a belief in merit.[6] White teachers and students believe in this myth. They espouse it as an ideal. And thinkers such as Applebaum have rightly shown that such a belief should be exposed. Merit is a myth. It doesn't work and never has. My argument in this paper is not that meritocracy should *not* be called out as an ideological myth. In one sense, it is perfectly true that meritocracy functions as an ideological myth. However, the workings of meritocracy are not *strictly* ideological. Here is where

I want to build on the work of Applebaum and others.

THE MERITOCRATIC SYSTEM

Meritocracy works as an ideology, first, in the sense that it hides in-equities behind a veil of benevolent common sense. Meritocracy in this first sense includes the ways that White teachers think about who succeeds and why they succeed. But meritocracy also works as an ideological *apparatus* in the sense that it is a system that brings practices to bear on people. These practices themselves hide the detrimental workings of merit in the sense that they *produce* the segmentations and visibilities that ensconce merit practices. In this second sense of ideology, meritocracy is also a *working thing*—more than a set of beliefs or ways of thinking. In this second sense, it is wrong to say that merit is *just* a myth or *just* a way of wrong thinking. This is the *matter* of merit that is too often overlooked in educational theory and especially in the ways that merit is denounced as a myth that pre-service teachers would do well to understand *as myth*. To put this in terms of claims that White teachers tenaciously hold onto the ideology of meritocracy, it is no doubt true in the first sense of meritocratic ideology that White teachers *do* hold onto this mindset of meritocracy. However, in the second sense of merit—as a set of practices—meritocracy lives in more tangible places than in the heads of White teachers.

Barbara Stengel has noted the systematicity I argue for in this pa-per. For Stengel, "The radical question is not whether our present system of schooling is equitable with respect to merit but whether it can be educational when merit is woven into the system?"[7] Stengel's "woven into the system" is a crucial insight. The problem is not *only* that merit is an incorrect ideology that gets manifested in education, ignoring privilege and injustice. Although, as Applebaum and others have correctly shown, this ideological stance is certainly true also. Merit is not *only* an understanding that teachers and students bring to education. Merit is, moreover, fundamental to the ways that education has been engineered and practiced.

Sarah Ahmed, in her book *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, has also articulated the systemic aspects of merit that I am introducing in this paper.

Ahmed writes,

> Meritocracy is a term that is much used by universities because
> it helps justify their own selections—past, present, and future.
> Meritocracy is the fantasy that those who are selected are the
> best. A fantasy can be a system. When diversity workers ques-
> tion who is here, or who is promoted, they are questioning
> the system. Meritocracy is useful as an answer to a question
> about the system because it allows the system to recede from
> view. An answer can be a recovery: how you recover or cover
> over what has come into view by coming into a question. A
> system is about the assistance given to individuals, as I have
> already noted; to fit the requirements is to have a path cleared.
> When a system disappears from view, the assistance given by
> that system also disappears. The selected can then reappear
> as unassisted by the system. This is how diversity often comes
> up: diversity as how some receive an assistance that they would
> not have to receive if they were the best; how the best would
> not be selected; diversity as the lowering of standards, as if
> diversity and merit are two different tracks, two different ways
> of entering the organization. The use of meritocracy teaches us
> how those who are selected define the best around themselves.[8]

Meritocracy is an ideology, to be sure. But an ideology can also be a system. As
Ahmed puts it, "A fantasy can be a system."[9] Meritocracy, in addition to being
a myth, is also a set of procedures that functions as ideology. What I mean
by this is that, just as ideology functions as common sense to preclude people
from questioning a particular mindset, a particular way of thinking, so, too, a
set of procedures can function as ideology, precluding people from questioning
a particular outcome. An example is this: I once asked a colleague if it wouldn't
be better, and more equitable, if we were to stop giving marks in our Faculty
of Education. To this, my colleague replied that, in theory, she agreed that giv-
ing marks is inequitable. However, she objected to my suggestion on systemic
grounds. She noted that, if we were to stop giving marks, then there would be

no way for the Faculty to adjudicate who "deserves" particular student grants and who does not "deserve" them. This is precisely the *systemic circularity* that Ahmed articulates in her book: "A system is about the assistance given to individuals. . . . When a system disappears from view, the assistance given by that system also disappears."[10]

FOUCAULT AND THE MATERIALITY OF MERIT

Michel Foucault's work on "discipline" considers the organizational, training, measurement, analytic, and individuating practices of schools, military barracks, prisons, and factories as these organizations grew in importance from the eighteenth century onwards.[11] I discern in Foucault's disciplinary work a material perspective on the workings of educational institutions that helps demonstrate how one might further understand the materiality of meritocracy. For Foucault, the transition from the pre-modern "soul" to the modern "soul" is precisely a transition into a complex set of material practices that reconstitute subjectivity. This is in historical contrast to an earlier, Cartesian orientation where subjectivity is seen as pre-given, with material practices being carried out on the pre-given subject.

Foucault says this about the modern soul:

This is the historical reality of the soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision, and constraint (*DP*, 29).

Foucault's argument is that subjectivity arises by means of human practices rather than the other way around. I argue, along these same lines, that the *practices* that have enabled twenty-first century meritocracy—practices such as individuating, normation, making human attributes visible for objectification—have brought meritocracy into being, rather than the other way around. This idea deserves repeating: *Practices bring meritocracy into being rather than the other way around.* For example, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* demonstrates that, beginning in the eighteenth century, procedures of discipline and surveillance were put in place that, while clearly predating discourses of what we now know as liberalism or

neo-liberalism, created the substrata upon which such discourses operate. Two aspects of Foucauldian "disciplinary machinery" that especially shed light on the materiality of meritocracy for teachers and students in schools are the practices of individuation and normation (*DP*, 143).

INDIVIDUATION

For Foucault, the change from premodern life to modern life, an epochal break that he identifies as commencing in the eighteenth century, is characterized by an ever-increasing tendency to differentiate each individual from all others. A simple example of this in today's educational institutions is the student number. Tracking individuals by student number enables each person to be situated as distinct from all others. Foucault notes that "by assigning individual places it made possible the supervision of each individual and the simultaneous work of all" (*DP*, 147). In its basic workings, individuation offers institutions, whether they be schools, factories, military barracks, or prisons, the ability to keep track of people at what Foucault calls the "atomic" level since boundaries between individuals became well enough demarcated that one can watch over who accomplishes a particular task and who does not accomplish a particular task. Foucault's famous image of the panopticon depicts prisoners in their individual cells. Each prisoner is individualized, and the prison architecture as a whole enables each person to be easily marked as separate from every other.

> Foucault notes the important shift from what he calls "ascending" individuation *before* the modern period to "descending" individuation that continues to this day. In the pre-disciplinary regime, the ceremonies that mark the power relations in their very ordering, the monuments or donations that bring survival after death, the ostentation and excess of expenditure, the multiple, intersecting links of allegiance and suzerainty, all these are procedures of an "ascending" individualization. In a disciplinary regime, on the other hand, individualization is "descending." (*DP*, 192-193)

This shift, from ascending to descending, is central to the very idea of meritoc-

racy and to the workings of educational institutions as they currently operate. Descending "individualization," as Foucault's translator writes, or what might also be called "individuation" means that everyone is marked and categorized, not just famous or important individuals. It means, moreover, that those who are less "successful," less "meritorious," are scrutinized more meticulously than those who perform well. To put this in terms of educational individuation, students who do *not* perform well according to the school's norms for achievement are often documented and observed *more* thoroughly than those who *do* perform well. A clear example of this is the phenomenon of individual educational plans for students with disabilities. More often than not, students with disabilities are "double documented."

My argument is that individuation, as a systemic practice "assigning individuals places," is central to the practice of assigning merit to some individuals rather than others (*DP*, 147). I do not aim here to describe completely Foucault's analysis of modern individuation but rather to note that meritocracy depends heavily on the material practices noticed in Foucault's historical analysis. Meritocracy could not be practiced, or perhaps it is better to say that the myth of meritocracy could not be espoused, if there were not techniques established by which one person, one atom, can be pitted against another. And further, the meritocratic justification for who gets rewarded and who does not could not function without specific protocols to justify the reasons that some individuals do not deserve reward. As one example among others, one might think about the intense "double documentation" of students with disabilities. Such a material practice ensures there is documentation, or "legitimization," to use the above-mentioned sociological term, to prove that students with disabilities should not be rewarded in a meritocratic system.

NORMATION

Another practice featured in Foucault's presentation of disciplinary society is normation. Foucault writes,

> The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in
> the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educa-

tor-judge, the social worker-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behavior, his aptitudes, his achievements. (*DP*, 304)

The effect of normation is that each person falls somewhere on the grid of what is normal and what is not normal. What is not normal may be "exceptional," or it may be "less" than normal. And as Foucault points out, it is the educational, medical, and therapeutic leaders who help to assign each person to a place in relation to normal.

Using Foucault's concept of normation to think about meritocracy, it is useful to point out that the history of liberal meritocracy in schools is closely linked to the bell curve of normal distribution and its assumptions about human capacity. Ansgar Allen points out the interesting fact that normation, or the bell curve, was used as a heuristic by the architects of twentieth-century education. Yet, the bell curve ended up promoting two very different kinds of meritocracy, which Allen names "early" and "late" meritocracy. In early meritocracy, the normal curve was used as a heuristic to judge students' "innate" capacities. Students were tested using IQ tests to determine where they resided on the bell curve of intellect, and they were channelled into more "academic" streams or more "vocational" streams accordingly. In early meritocracy, one was judged to merit a higher educational stream if one had the "innate" capacity to obtain a higher score on IQ examinations.

In contrast, late meritocracy uses the same framework, the bell curve, but rewards not those who score high on an IQ test but rather those who obtain a higher spot through performance. As Allen points out, early meritocracy promoted the view that "every child 'should be made the subject of special study' and then recommended [the child] to prepare for a particular type of occupation for which he or she 'seems by mental constitution best adapted.'"[12] In contrast, late meritocracy introduced competition into the scheme of normation, promoting the idea that meritocracy rewards those who achieve to a greater extent along with, or in spite of, "mental constitution."[13] "As a strategic organising principle," Ansgar Allen argues, "competition is a post-disciplinary

late twentieth-century device. Competition was to be transformed from a limiting factor to be levelled at all costs, to a principle of organisational and personal enhancement."[14] What is interesting for the purposes of this paper is that the material application of the bell curve sets the stage for two very different *discursive* forms of meritocracy. Nevertheless, each clearly depends on the same basic disciplinary application. Meritocracy, past and present, both rely upon the same technique of normation. They both rely upon the heuristic of the Bell curve.

This genealogy of early and late meritocracy, where one type of discipline, normation, enables the formation of two very different ideological forms is, I propose, a reminder that it is not enough to expose meritocracy as a "myth." Meritocracy as it is known today derives from an early form where "to merit" meant that one had *innate* qualities that had *worth*. As loathsome as early meritocracy might seem at present, late meritocracy is cut from the same material cloth of normation. This understanding of materiality and the forms of consciousness that derive from material practices are the essence of Foucault's disciplinary project and of his genealogical understanding of history. While the scope of this paper does not lend itself to delving into Foucault's genealogical method in any depth, it is important in passing to note that the importance of the material, disciplinary aspects of meritocracy are certainly underscored by the genealogical realization that various forms of meritocracy *have relied upon the same disciplinary techniques*. From this perspective of shifting consciousness hovering on the bedrock of material practices, the most reasonable way to produce change is to agitate the material practices themselves.

INTERFERING WITH SYSTEMS OF MERIT

At this point I would like to give an example of taking action in the face of meritocratic systems. Notably, this sort of action-taking entails understanding the systemic processes that produce merit thinking. It entails taking subversive action not only to *realize* that meritocracy is a wrong ideology but also to identify and combat the systems that recede from view while enacting the myth of meritocracy. Going back to Ahmed's words, there are times when "a system disappears from view." It is important to combat these disappearances.

I have for twelve years been involved with a non-profit organization that puts developmentally disabled people in everyday university classrooms. The organization is called *STEPS Forward: BC Initiative for Inclusive Post-Secondary Education.* The motivating social justice idea behind *STEPS Forward* is that everyone has a right to a university education, regardless of ability. Of course, most universities have meritocratic *systems* that separate those who are qualified to apply for university from those who are not qualified. And, in the particular case of people with developmental disabilities, the practice of separating those who qualify to apply from university from those who do not is clearly reminiscent of when "a system disappears from view." For example, the common use of IEPs (Individualized Educational Plans) is, at face value, a method by which students with developmental disabilities are offered extra "support" in high school classrooms. However, in British Columbia, as in many other provinces and states in North America, the implementation of an IEP entails segregating practices that disqualify a high school student from receiving a high school diploma that is acceptable for application to university. In other words, in the name of "helping" students with developmental disabilities, systems are in place that bar some students from applying to university. Universities require transcripts with specific qualifications. Sometimes, while neither students nor their parents are made aware of the fact, students with developmental disabilities do not meet the qualifying standard for university application.

At *STEPS Forward*, this gatekeeping system was identified decades ago as a barrier to participation in university life. *STEPS Forward* quickly realized that placing students with developmental disabilities in university classrooms would require a reworking of the application processes. It would require a reworking of meritocratic systems, systems that had "disappeared from view." As a result, the activists at *STEPS Forward* long ago decided not to depend upon merit apparatuses to serve the needs of students with developmental disabilities. Instead, the organization routinely begins their association with a university by aiming squarely at the systemic status of merit. *STEPS Forward* routinely requests, at the onset, that a university write a "memorandum of agreement" enabling *STEPS Forward* to designate specific students with disabilities as deserving of university

admission—with or without the qualifications "usually" deemed necessary in order to secure admission. *STEPS Forward* begins with the presumption that *systems* of merit need to be reworked before the ill effects of meritocracy can be counteracted. And universities respond, signing memoranda of agreement with *STEPS Forward*. In truth, what university would not respond to a call for inclusion? Or, more precisely, what university would not want to respond to a call for inclusion once the inequity of its meritocratic system is exposed? Students associated with *STEPS Forward* attend courses they would never be "qualified" to attend had these memoranda not been signed.

BEYOND MERIT-BLINDNESS

In conclusion, I would like to advocate for the sorts of systemic interventions described above, the interventions that *STEPS Forward* has enacted. And I would like to offer a warning against what might be called "merit-blindness." In educational theory, meritocracy has for decades been understood as a belief system held by White teachers and students, a belief system that must be debunked. The underlying recommendation is that White teachers must acknowledge meritocracy as the myth it is in order to dismantle the institutional oppressions of racism and privilege. However, as I have argued in this paper, merit gets enacted through real practices. Merit does not reside only in the minds and discourses of White people. It resides in systems, in apparatuses.

Against this backdrop of ontological difference, I want to make a claim that might at first sound off-putting. I want to claim that thoughtful, progressive educational theorists have been guilty of something discursively analogous to participating in a color-blind discourse. The ignorance that we have practiced is embedded in the following statement: "People should realize that meritocracy is a myth because privileged outcomes can be best eliminated if we stop focusing on the false promise of an equal playing field." Like color-blind attestations, such a statement also derives from a lack of awareness about the steadfastness of institutional and personal systems—in this case, systems of merit.

People who wrongly espouse color-blindness, espouse this: "I believe that to get beyond racism, people must ignore race." But when it comes to

meritocracy, "we" educational theorists have practiced an analogous ignorance, namely, "I believe merit is a myth because I believe education will be more just if we stop focussing on the false promise of equality." I would call such a stance "merit-blindness." Merit-blindness is strikingly similar to a "color-blindness" stance. Such an attestation, like the attestations of colour-blindness, derives from good intentions, but it demonstrates a lack of awareness about the steadfastness of institutional systems. We who have espoused merit-blindness, have espoused this: "I believe to get beyond inequality, we must ignore merit thinking." While wishing one's way out of racialized life is certainly a White fantasy, wishing one's way out of meritocracy is no less unworkable. To go back to Ahmed's statement, "A fantasy can be a system." Merit, and all its complicity with color-blind thinking, is such a fantasy. But it is also such a *system*.

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