
DESTINED FOR EQUALITY

THE INEVITABLE RISE OF WOMEN'S STATUS

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Excerpts ...

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educated women who joined the labor force garnered more resentment than promotions. Too many barriers still prevented fair treatment and advancement. Equally, many educated women who had forgone employment to raise children must have harbored their own resentments, part of a bitter legacy for their daughters. Many young women graduating from college in the 1960s were daughters of these frustrated women and had good reasons to avoid repeating their mothers' experiences.

By admitting women, the higher education system unintentionally inflated the pressure against other social institutions that discriminated against women. Colleges have received and deserved much criticism because they often succumbed to gender bias. They typically favored male students, they discriminated against female professors, and their curricula were riddled with the bigoted assumptions of sexual prejudice. Still, they moved toward gender equality faster than most other societal institutions and played a leading role in women's rising status.

Propelled by the modern economic and political orders, the educational system fostered individualism. As schools and colleges grew, educational credentials supplanted family trees as the master keys giving access to high-status positions. Educational credentials became a primary means of legitimating authority in organizations, required even of those with property.²⁴ This change ultimately favored women's advancement.

MERITOCRATIC NORMS

Arguably, the most important ideas benefiting women's status were ideas embedded in the dominant ideology. The economic, political, and educational systems each fostered meritocratic ideas. Meritocratic ideas comprise the assumptions, beliefs, and arguments suggesting that advancement and rewards are and should be based on people's skills and achievements. What you do, not who you are, decides what you get. These ideas are the moral embodiment of institutional individualism. They are also logically and practically inconsistent with the practice of status inequality.

That ideas and practices produced by the those controlling the primary institutions in society should largely contradict a primary form of social inequality seems paradoxical. It has become a commonplace

assumption that the dominant ideology in a society reflects the interests and understandings of the dominant groups. Meritocratic ideas fit this expectation. They did not arise from the system of sex inequality or from a reaction against it. They grew from the new economic and social order that developed in the nineteenth century. Yet they inherently clashed with gender inequality.

The word *meritocracy* was born in a book of satiric science fiction written by British sociologist Michael Young and published in 1957.²⁵ The term quickly entered the popular lexicon and won a special place in the social sciences. Its meaning broadened, however, from the book's concern with a ruling class chosen by merit (an aristocracy by achievement) to mean a system in which able and talented people are rewarded and advanced.

In modern American culture, meritocratic practices and ideology are so pervasive that their predominant influence is self-evident. While it is difficult to trace the spread of meritocratic conventions, some practices institutionalized during the past 200 years clearly illustrate the change. In business, the adoption of rule-governed promotional practices signaled the victory of meritocratic standards. Often accompanied by the creation of personnel departments, promotion standards considered such criteria as seniority, job performance evaluations, examinations, and credentials. Since the early twentieth century, when these were being championed from diverse sources, they spread steadily throughout the economy, instilling in all the expectation that expertise and experience were the legitimate criteria for promotions. The government civil service systems begun around the turn of the century were a self-conscious and highly public effort to instill meritocratic standards by the state. The American military's use of tests and their efforts, often faulty, to apply meritocratic standards became particularly well known during World War II. The accumulation of various entitlements from the first pension programs to the expansion of the welfare state from the Great Depression onward embraced meritocratic standards in a quiet way. The educational system's adoption of grades, a standardized means of comparatively evaluating students' performances, signaled their meritocratic leanings in the nineteenth century. The spread of standardized tests and particularly of college admissions examinations in the twentieth century accompanied a complete embracing of meritocratic standards. In universities, the gradual shift toward highly competitive hiring and tenure-review

practices, stressing strict evaluation of scholarly accomplishments, erected one bridge between the meritocratic procedures in education and those in the economy.

By exhorting those controlling opportunities and rewards to treat everyone equally and impartially, meritocratic ideas conflicted with sex inequality in two ways, making it harder, both practically and morally, to justify refusing women the opportunities granted men. As pragmatic guides, meritocratic ideas promoted a belief that organizations became more effective if they hired and advanced people who did jobs best. They altered how people framed organizational interests in ways that made gender seem increasingly irrelevant. As moral guides, meritocratic ideas promoted a belief that personal merit should decide who wins good things in life. They altered how people judged the allocation of positions and rewards in ways that made discrimination against able women seem increasingly unfair.

Those who fostered meritocratic ideas within the evolving organizational contexts did not intend to influence beliefs about sex inequality or to benefit any lower-status group. On the pragmatic plane, they used merit as a tool for rational, efficient administration. On the ideological plane, they advocated meritocratic norms to legitimate their authority. Yet, once unleashed, meritocratic beliefs took on a life of their own, leaping over their original boundaries. Rather than being a tool wielded by administrators, they became imperatives limiting their actions. Rather than legitimating authority, they questioned inequality. Under the strong, critical light of meritocratic standards, the justifications for restricting women's opportunities seemed unconvincing facades.

The rise of meritocratic ideas did not eliminate the ideological defense of gender inequality, but it transformed and weakened it. Ideas legitimating gender inequality had to explain why women should take most responsibility for children and caring for the home, why women should not hold positions with status and power, and why women should defer to male authority. To survive, the rhetoric legitimating sex inequality had to adapt to meritocratic premises. Rather than simply declaring that the gods willed women and men to do different things, the ideology legitimating inequality in a meritocratic environment had to say something about women's and men's abilities and aspirations. A revised rhetoric suggested that women and men had different roles because they had different skills and desires. Women

were not being denied positions they deserved. Either they did not want men's positions, or they were not as good as men. For example, some ideas claimed that women were better at mothering and enjoyed it more than did men while men were better at the impersonal or mechanical activities of employment. Such ideas implied that a sexual division of labor was both practical and fair.

While this perversion of meritocratic ideas could be a powerful tool for justifying the common difference in women's and men's roles, it foundered when it tried to justify aspiring women's exclusion from good positions. Once merit became a criterion, legitimating arguments became vulnerable to pervasive evidence that many women had merit but were still rejected. This Achilles' heel impaired every effort to legitimate status inequality through meritocratic ideals.

The significance of meritocratic ideas to gender inequality's decline rested in part on two special characteristics. Unlike many other ideas that would favor more egalitarian practices, meritocratic ideas achieved almost universal acceptance. In this overwhelmingly capitalist nation, the idea that opportunities should go to those who were most talented and who made the greatest effort gained near reverence. Of course, talent and effort were open to dispute. Every time women sought to improve their circumstances, they made meritocratic arguments. Every time, those opposing them largely accepted the validity of meritocratic criteria but challenged women's suitability. However, once merit was reduced to specified talents, achievements, or efforts, it was often possible to assess empirically in ways that were hard to control through ideology. Of course, gender bias could be integrated into what purported to be the most impartial tests, standards, or means of assessment. Still, in most arenas even the most biased means of judging merit were hard pressed to show that most men were better than most women. Moreover, some men with economic or political power fully accepted meritocratic standards as a pragmatic guide to effective action, committing themselves to a perceptual framework that could challenge their prejudices.

The predominance of meritocratic principles in modern society is irrefutable. The contradiction between those principles and discrimination against women based on status inequality and prejudice is self-evident. The paradox to explain is why and how the major structures of social power created the ideological doctrines and practices challenging exclusionary status rights of those in power.

Businessmen adopted meritocratic ideas with considerable enthusiasm, believing them an ideal fit to their ideological, social, and practical circumstances. Initially, private property's inviolability within capitalism ignored merit. Capital produced more capital. Wealthy men begot wealthy sons. Those owning the capital could do as they wished with it. Nonetheless, merit-based claims crept into businessmen's beliefs. Appeals to the role of merit arose from businessmen's efforts to elevate their social status and to control their employees. The dogma legitimating the modern economy built on a claim for unfettered liberty to use and transfer privately owned capital. Successful businessmen needed to justify their accumulation of wealth through the market. They sought recognition for their accomplishments from others with status. They also wanted secure, stable control over their employees. Over time, businessmen found that principles of merit seemed to help solve all these needs.

As parvenus in a market economy, the rising class of businessmen naturally favored ideas that associated success with merit. A successful class lacking an honored status, rising businessmen tried to translate their economic achievements into claims of moral worth. Meritocratic ideas supplied businessmen with just what they needed to stake a claim for acceptance in society's higher circles when old wealth still regarded them as upstarts. In their clearest ideological formulation, these claims coalesced to defend a perspective known as social Darwinism in the second half of the nineteenth century.²⁶ Society, according to this world view, was a competitive struggle in which people's fates were determined objectively and fairly. If one man had more talent and drive than another, then he would gain more power, status, and privileges. The competitive struggle was an impartial judge, and its decisions were inherently fair.

Social Darwinism's contribution to critical or subversive thought is easily overlooked. When it was directed at lower-status groups, it was largely used to defend the status quo. According to social Darwinism, all people had to bear individual responsibility for their fate. Since social selection processes accurately and consistently rewarded the deserving, those with less money, particularly those in businessmen's employ, should accept their circumstances without rancor or dispute. If they railed against their fate, they were denying the truth that they were inferior. In particular, social Darwinists argued that women's inferior status revealed their inferior abilities. However these ideas

were used, they always implied that rewards *should* equal a person's abilities, effort, and contribution. Social Darwinists abused science and truth by claiming that the social order always did award merit where deserved. Still, their moral claims implied that the distribution of rewards could be fair if, and only if, merit decided who got more and who got less. Having hinged their authority and the validity of their policies on the rule of merit, social Darwinists found they could not dictate how others evaluated worthiness. More than this, many of those who influenced the allocation of positions and rewards truly believed the meritocratic assumptions and were placed in a quandary if evidence seriously challenged the accommodation they had between their prejudices and their meritocratic principles.

Social Darwinism was an upstart's ideology, and its idealization of merit served every successive wave of upstarts. The moral standard promoted by social Darwinism was a profound belief in the justice of rewarding merit. Ultimately, social Darwinism withered, poisoned by the false claim that the most successful people were also always the most deserving. Yet its moral ideal, tying rewards to merit, flourished.

Businessmen's affinity for meritocratic ideas reflected not only their common acquisition of social status through economic success, but also the practical and political strategies induced by their common administrative goals. In the first half of the twentieth century, as businesses grew larger, they adopted rational hiring and promotion practices. They sought to impose administrative rationality. They aimed to reduce conflict, lessen disorder, and increase control over workers. Capitalists won tangible profits by using these rational standards to boost their employees' productivity.²⁷

With hundreds, even thousands, of employees, an employer could hope to retain control only by installing a system of rules. These rules had to govern the relations between supervisors and subordinates. The rules also had to define the relationships between rewards, sanctions, and actions. Rules governing hiring and promotion sought to protect employers' interests. The rules generally balanced two criteria: merit and seniority. Employers relied on seniority, which rewarded loyalty and experience, to resolve choices when the candidates were equivalent from the employers' perspective. Seniority was a safe criterion for positions that had little discretion and little impact on the quality of work done in other positions. Employers stressed merit much more when filling higher status positions in which a poor employee could

prove costly. By asserting merit's role in deciding promotions, employers and others running organizations promoted competition among aspiring employees, each of whom sought to show that he (rarely she) could further the organization's interests better than others could.

These administrative innovations promoted meritocratic ideas even when they embraced discriminatory practices, which were ubiquitous. The rules governing promotions and job evaluation systems introduced by employers commonly incorporated gender biases, both flagrant and subtle. For example, they openly assumed that the existing segregation between male and female jobs was natural, good, and unavoidable. Less obviously, but potentially more problematically, they assumed that skills associated with male jobs were inherently more difficult and more valuable. These assumptions meant that promotion procedures were normally discriminatory. Even when biased, however, such practices established the legitimacy of meritocratic principles and opened their own discriminatory assumptions to criticism.

Businessmen promoted meritocratic ideals both through their ideological claims for legitimacy and status and through their practical strategies for bureaucratic control. Although market capitalism sustains economic inequality while expanding material wealth, it breeds an ideological commitment to meritocratic standards. Successful people and dominant classes must try to legitimate their ascendancy. In market capitalism, the competition for success is so pervasive that appeals to meritocratic ideals are almost unavoidable when businessmen justify themselves. Large, complex organizations also induce businessmen to adopt strategies for control that have similar, possibly more important, influence. To meet this goal, organizations commonly have to rely on merit in allocating positions and rewards.

The state's contribution to ideals of merit paralleled the influence of business. The government was concerned with legitimacy and control. By extending citizenship status, the state added weight to the idea that all people should be judged by the same standards. By intruding more into people's lives through government bureaucracies following rationalized and legalistic principles, the state reinforced the idea that uniform rules should guide institutional behavior.

Like other modern states, the U.S. government promoted meritocratic ideals by extending citizenship. The government enlarged citizenship and extended it to more people to satisfy the needs of business, to preserve its own legitimacy, and to ease the discontent of potentially

disruptive subordinate groups. The men who designed the American system of government did not want universal equality; they envisioned a nation of independent property owners and businessmen. In successive phases, however, the logic of modern political organization induced the state to extend to other groups legal equality, the right to vote, and guarantees of social welfare. By giving citizenship rights to more people and enlarging the scope of citizenship, the state directly promoted the individualistic tendencies of modern society. As they became full citizens, wage-earning men, women, and minorities gained individualistic legal, political, economic, and social rights.

As the state enacted policies enhancing citizenship, it also created an ideal that implicitly promoted merit. This ideal of citizenship grew by reducing civil inequalities and by spreading rights and opportunities more equally among people. As citizenship evolved, the culture presented to the public mind ever more colorful images of individual rights. The symbols accumulated over time, as generations of Americans reread key passages from the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and the twentieth-century Pledge of Allegiance. These sacred texts evoked the goals of liberty, justice, and equality. Individualistic symbols were central to the doctrines legitimating the American state. People often disregarded the contradictions between these ideas and discriminatory practices, but their disregard did not abolish the contradictions' effects. Expanding citizenship rights made it progressively tougher to convince most people that the nation's historic ideals justified castelike inequality.

As it grew, the state produced large bureaucracies to administer its programs. These organizations created and applied what Max Weber long ago termed rational-legal principles.²⁸ Law defined the organization's mission, for example to promote commerce or education. Bureaucratic officials then elaborated its mission through rules. These rules governed each state organization's relations to those that it regulated, helped, or otherwise affected. As bureaucratic government activities grew more extensive, increased exposure to bureaucratic rules swayed people to believe that universal standards should govern opportunities and rights.

Civil service systems embodied rules that served as prototypes. In the United States, governments at all levels established merit procedures during the Progressive Era to stop political influence over hiring

and firing in government agencies. These civil service systems employed ever more people over time. They wielded power through the law's force and the state's moral influence. In harmony with citizenship and bureaucratic rationalization, civil service systems added the state's considerable authority to the growing importance of ideas promoting meritocratic expectations.²⁹

The government's influence on people's lives grew steadily. People had contact with government rules and government officials ever more often—when they paid taxes, when their jobs became subject to laws about overtime or minimum wages, when they received a traffic ticket, when their children attended school, when they served on a jury, when they served in the military, and when they collected benefits for the unemployed, the elderly, or the poor. As the state expanded its activity and its powers, it extended its application of rational-legal principles. Even as people learned to disdain bureaucratic rules and behavior, they also came to expect that people working in and representing state bureaucracies were bound by those rules.

The state fostered meritocratic ideals both through its extension of citizenship rights and through the expansion of government bureaucracies. The modern state promoted ideals of merit because it instituted rule-bound relations that applied to the whole populace. These replaced the casual, personal, or family relations of property-owning men. The state grew in parallel to the economy. As that wage economy grew, the state assimilated ever more people into the polity by widening citizenship rights. People gained a sense of membership and entitlement that enlarged as government activities grew. The ideas of membership and entitlement made violations of meritocratic principles ever harder to defend.

The educational system directly influenced people's ideas about merit only when they were young, but it potentially had a more intense influence than either the economic order or the political order. Schools followed merit equally as a practical strategy and as an ideal. Meritocratic standards gave teachers (and schools) an expertise they could hold over parents and children. They also served both to motivate and to control children. Meritocratic standards combined with standardized curricula allowed educators to avoid chaos.³⁰ Once schools grouped children together, teachers displaced tutors. Soon educators faced a need to organize schooling so they could teach many pupils effectively. As the state became involved in education, especially

through the creation of public schools, pressure increased to give education a common content across schools. In response, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, educators gradually standardized what students were taught, defined standards for adequate scholastic performance, and adopted standardized grading schemes to label varying performances.³¹

The meritocratic aspects of modern education met opposition from the prevailing cultural biases of sex-role stereotypes. While education had a general meritocratic orientation, educators consciously and unconsciously treated boys and girls differently. As diligent substitutes for parents, schools selectively reinforced children's conformity to these stereotypes. Educational materials portrayed *good* men and women faithfully following the stereotypes. In the mid-twentieth century, for example, secondary school images depicted boys seeking to be star athletes while girls hoped to become popular cheerleaders. In the background, however, girls and boys still vied to prove themselves in never-ending competitions over the same grades in the same classes. Indeed, we can wonder if the stress on male high school athletics did not, in part, develop to compensate for boys' inability to dominate scholastic activity.

Schools encouraged meritocratic beliefs as they used standardized grades applied by impartial criteria. Usually, teachers applied standard criteria to rank students' work. Better work got better grades. Grades won advancement. These methods for evaluating school work instilled meritocratic ideals in both sexes. These effects were all heightened when boys and girls went to school together, so the general acceptance of coeducation in America increased education's meritocratic impact.³² Even when teachers' biases corrupted their assessments, so that they applied different criteria to girls and boys, they could not hide two fundamental truths from children. First, many girls could equal or surpass boys in competitions decided by academic prowess. Second, schools' reliance on grades, tests, and formal standards conferred legitimacy on meritocratic judgments.

Schools, particularly coeducational schools, put the idea of male intellectual superiority to the test. It failed. In schools, girls and boys' experiences vividly belied beliefs in unequal intellectual potentials. Contradicting myths, girls did as well as boys. Often girls did better. These experiences did not prevent people from claiming that men were smarter or better at mental tasks. As these claims gradually became

more inconsistent with people's experience, however, they became more vulnerable to challenge. The more that selection processes in firms and other organizations emphasized schooling, the more that women's educational achievements challenged the legitimacy of discrimination.

The meritocratic ideals developed in the economic, political, and educational systems did not supplant the ideas linked with women's inferior status (or other forms of inequality) but grew up inexorably alongside them. Meritocratic norms did not cause privileged people to reject their self-interested beliefs and justifications for inequality. They did not end people's efforts to evade meritocratic standards that would penalize them. Nor did they cause the economic, political, and educational systems to dedicate themselves to realizing a meritocracy. Many people, particularly men, argued that women were inherently less able than men. All women, they suggested, were less intelligent, less rational, poorer leaders, and less dependable than all men. Meritocratic ideals did not sap men's motives to pursue and justify their self-interests. Nor did they turn men's interests upside down.

Nonetheless, meritocratic standards (bolstered by rationalization and egalitarianism) *did* increasingly influence ideology. They helped shift men's and women's interests by altering both the practical and moral terrain. One hundred fifty years ago, most people found women's dependent status obvious, natural, and unexceptional. People candidly affirmed women's inherent inferiority to men. They openly, casually declared women's rightful place in the home. They spoke of men's patriarchal control as we might discuss parents' authority over young children.³³ Discrimination against women was not hidden, defended, or even given much thought. The rise of meritocratic principles helped change all this. Meritocratic ideals gave women ideological symbols to which they could attach their discontent arising from discrimination and unequal opportunity. Meritocratic ideals also weakened men's belief that discriminating against women was just. Weakening that belief lessened the likelihood that men's actions would consistently, unthinkingly reinforce women's secondary status.

Meritocratic doctrines came from institutions whose leaders explicitly embraced male dominance but unwittingly set loose ideas that contradicted status inequality. Following their inherent developmental logic, the educational, economic, and political systems marched dog-

gedly down a road toward meritocratic ideals. The men who led this advance commonly used corrupted interpretations of merit to justify continued discrimination against women. Yet meritocratic norms were weapons that could easily fall into the hands of the enemy. Like scientific processes, meritocratic processes have empirical tests that prejudiced practitioners found hard to deny continuously. At this meritocratic road's end, ideas useful for building a case for keeping women in their place were hard to find.

FROM THE AUTHORITARIAN FAMILY TO THE INDIVIDUALISTIC FAMILY

The family may be the last place where most people would look for signs of individualism or for sources of women's rising status. Often, social practices and relationships seem defined as individualistic to the degree that they are unlike family relationships. Over the past century, most critics of women's lower status have cited the family as one cause, sometimes as the principal cause. Unquestionably, women largely experienced gender inequality through their family roles. Nonetheless, over time the family has become more individualistic and, through this transition, more conducive to gender equality.

The family as we understand it today, bound mainly by sentiment and governed by mutual consent, is a recent historical creation. We now think of the family as a private place of intimate relations, in contrast to public domains, with their formal distant relations, such as economic arenas where we hold jobs or buy goods.³⁴ The economic and political changes that permeated society were the root causes of the family's altered role in social organization.³⁵ While the family has shown considerable capacity to adapt to a changing social environment, it has little capacity to induce changes in that social environment, and it has not been an engine of change in the manner of the economic or political orders. The family has been limited to a small group of people associated by current and past reproduction patterns, by personal intimacy, or by common residence and communal sharing.³⁶ With its limited scope, the family could not independently generate a path of cumulative change. Yet, as the family adapted to the powerful forces transforming society, its increasing individualism made it too an instrument of change.

Although individualism is often conceived as arising in opposition