

Meritocracy: A Post-War Conceptual History

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Abstract

By using the tools of conceptual history and ideology studies, this thesis traces the changing meaning of meritocracy in post-war Britain. In doing so it uses the concept as a lens through which to explore broader questions of intellectual politics, from the rise of the 'affluent society' to the onset of national 'decline'. Meritocracy traversed the political spectrum: for social democrats it was a suitable 'stop-gap' that would lead to gradually greater equality in the future; for conservatives it was a satisfactory end state which preserved a democratically legitimate social elite. Over the course of the late 1950s and the 1960s, however, the concept became overburdened with ideological baggage. In the late 1960s, faced with student protests, the rise of a nascent identity politics highlighting the implicit biases of the meritocratic social order, as well as burgeoning sociological evidence that the principles of meritocracy had failed to deliver greater equality, classlessness, economic growth or redistribution, the concept fragmented. The collapse of the meritocratic moment not only threatened the survival of the concept but also those ideological formations, namely Revisionist Social Democracy and Middle Way Conservatism, which had elevated meritocracy to privileged positions in their respective morphologies. While these ideologies struggled to formulate alternative distributive principles, new ideological constellations emerged which privileged different criteria. The most significant of these was the market. The market proposed solutions to the central tensions and conceptual problems which emerged out of meritocracy's demise in the late 1960s. This thesis therefore tells a story about the way market principles displaced those that were ascendant during Britain's 'meritocratic moment'.

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Abbreviations

British Broadcasting Company.....	BBC
Central Intelligence Agency.....	CIA
Centre for Policy Studies.....	CPS
Congress for Cultural Freedom.....	CCF
Conservative Political Centre.....	CPC
Department of Economic Affairs.....	DEA
Educational Priority Areas.....	EPA
Institute of Economic Affairs.....	IEA
International Monetary Fund.....	IMF
Social Democratic Party.....	SDP
Tory Reform Committee.....	TRC

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Introduction: Mapping Meritocracy – Words, Concepts, Ideologies

‘Words strain, crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.’

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*¹

The idea of meritocracy, commonly understood as a society where positions of wealth, power and status accrue to individuals on the basis of ‘merit’ or ‘talent’, has been characterised as an ‘essentially underdefined’ concept whose ‘sparkle’ simultaneously ‘captures the imagination’ and ‘distracts analytical attention.’² Yet this ‘potent yet highly elusive phenomena’ lies at the heart of post-war British history and continues to play a central role in contemporary political, economic and cultural debates.³ Despite, or perhaps because of its cryptic nature, meritocracy is a concept which shapes our understanding of the past, intrudes on our present and stretches out into our future. Scrutiny of the concept has largely been confined to a branch of liberal political philosophy associated with questions of desert, social justice and luck.⁴ Alongside this has grown an equally extensive sociological tradition which has evaluated Britain’s meritocratic credentials by measuring, amongst other indicators, rates of social mobility, levels of inequality and the scale of wealth redistribution.⁵ Historians, however, have been slow to explore meritocracy’s origins and to interrogate how conceptions of merit impinged on a whole range of questions in post-war Britain, from the welfare state to race and gender, the Cold War to consumerism. The pressing need to historicise the concept has been recognised by the historian and peer Lord Hennessy. In a short book published in 2014, Hennessy identified meritocracy as ‘one of the qualitative measures of post-1958 British society’, a measure which captured the experience of his own

¹ T.S. Eliot, ‘Burnt Norton from Four Quartets’, in his *T.S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (London, [1943] 2014), p. 121.

² A. Sen, ‘Merit and Justice’, in K.J. Arrow, S. Bowles, & S.N. Durlauf (Eds.), *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality* (Chichester, 2000), p. 5; D. Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: Or, The Tyranny of Just Deserts* (London, 2019).

³ P. Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy* (London, 2014), pp. vi-vii.

⁴ A brief selection includes: J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA., [1971] 2009); R.H. Frank, *Success and Luck: Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy* (Princeton, NJ., 2016); T. Mulligan, *Justice and the Meritocratic State* (New York, 2018).

⁵ A brief selection includes: P. Saunders, ‘Might Britain be a Meritocracy?’, *Sociology*, 29/1 (1995), pp. 23-41; M. Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London, 2015), pp. 322-29; T. Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2017), pp. 527-29; S. Friedman & D. Laurison, *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged* (Bristol, 2019).

journey 'climbing the post-war ladders of opportunity.'⁶ Hennessy acknowledged that meritocracy could be 'dropped into conversation in a way that is easily understood' whilst simultaneously highlighting the word's complex etymology and conceptual slipperiness. His slim volume urged a 'brave young social and political historian' to consider writing a 'work of special social cartography mapping meritocracy in Britain since the passage of the 1944 Education Act.'⁷ This thesis represents a response to Hennessy's timely clarion call.

A history of meritocracy, however, does not map neatly onto conventional accounts of post-war Britain. Bookended by 1945 and 1979, these narratives are characterised by the rise of 'consensus' politics in the aftermath of the Second World War, its destabilisation in the 1970s, the Thatcherite revolution of 1979 and the emergence of a new, neo-liberal settlement.⁸ Even a cursory glance at meritocracy's past serves to complicate this interpretation. A history of merit could begin in Imperial China, the revolutionary United States or Napoleonic France.⁹ The concept's British history has been traced back to the rise of a professional class in the nineteenth century or the Northcote-Trevelyan Civil Service Reforms of 1854.¹⁰ Even in a narrower, etymological account the dates 1945 and 1979 hold little significance for meritocracy. The term was not coined until 1956 and, considering its centrality to the rhetoric of New Labour and more recently Theresa May's conservatism, it appears to have survived the onset of Thatcherism in the late 1970s.¹¹ If an etymological or conceptual history of meritocracy does not align with conventional understandings of political change in post-war Britain, to complicate matters further it fails to map neatly onto common assumptions about political contestation. Until the 1990s it was argued that political disagreements between Britain's post-war parties or ideologies were contained within the framework of consensus. This was characterised by the welfare state, Keynesian demand management, corporatism, a

⁶ Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy*, p. vi.

⁷ Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy*, p. 36, vii, 38.

⁸ P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975); D. Kavanagh & P. Morris (Eds.), *Consensus Politics from Attlee to Major* (Oxford, 1994); For the Thatcherite settlement see for example: S. Jenkins, *Thatcher and Sons: A Revolution in Three Acts* (London, 2007); G. Fry, *The Politics of the Thatcher Revolution: An Interpretation of British Politics, 1979-1990* (Basingstoke, 2008).

⁹ B. A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (London, 2013); J.F. Kett, *Merit: The History of a Founding Ideal from the American Revolution to the 21st Century* (London, 2013); R. Blaufarb, *The French Army 1750-1820: Careers, Talent, Merit* (Manchester, 2002).

¹⁰ H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880* (London, 2nd Ed., 2002); B. O'Toole, *The Ideal of Public Service: Reflections on the Higher Civil Service in Britain* (London, 2006), pp. 46-106.

¹¹ J. Beck, *Meritocracy, Citizenship and Education: New Labour's Legacy* (London, 2008); E. Shaw, *Losing Labour's Soul?: New Labour and the Blair Government 1997-2007* (London, 2017), pp. 166-189; J. Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (London, 2018), pp. 80-96; T. May, 'Speech: Britain, The Great Meritocracy', (09/09/2016), <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/britain-the-great-meritocracy-prime-ministers-speech>.

mixed economy and a shared desire for economic growth.¹² Revisionist accounts, however, challenged this notion of consensus, highlighting the extent of policy divergence between the two main parties and, in doing so, sought to delineate different ideological formations applying variegated means and seeking distinct ends.¹³ This resulted in what Dean Blackburn has termed a 'historiographical stalemate'.¹⁴ Yet these revisionist accounts, like those they were challenging, still relied on the same historical agents, namely political parties, intellectual groupings or significant individuals. By taking a concept which traversed the political spectrum like meritocracy it is possible to uncover disagreements between apparent ideological allies, as well as the areas of agreement between ostensible belligerents. A history of meritocracy, therefore, challenges the apparent oscillation between collectivism and libertarianism which was said to characterise twentieth-century Britain.¹⁵

Through its capacity to complicate well-established narratives of political change and contestation, a history of meritocracy has much in common with recent historiographical trends which seek to destabilise conventional understandings of modern Britain.¹⁶ These are histories alive to political contingencies, the paths not taken or the 'lost futures' of post-war Britain.¹⁷ Most of these accounts have prioritised decentering Thatcherism by shifting narratives of the 1970s away from what Lawrence Black has described as 'an arc towards neoliberalism'.¹⁸ By focusing on the growth of individualism in the early 1970s, for example, Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson have identified the 1960s as the decade in which the 'post-war settlement began to appear, from various angles, deeply problematic.' Here, the 1970s becomes more than merely a 'crisis point between social democracy and neo-

¹² Addison, *Road to 1945*; S.H. Beer, *Modern British Politics* (London, 1982).

¹³ M. Kandiah & H. Jones (Eds.), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-1964* (Basingstoke, 1996); S. Kelly, *The Myth of Mr Butskell* (Aldershot, 2002).

¹⁴ D. Blackburn, 'Reassessing Britain's Post-War Consensus: The Politics of Reason 1945-1979', *British Politics*, 13 (2018), pp. 195-214.

¹⁵ For example, see: Beer, *British Politics*; W.H. Greenleaf, *The British Political Tradition, Volume Two: The Ideological Heritage* (London, 1983).

¹⁶ In particular see: M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010); G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009); J. Lawrence, *Me Me Me: The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019).

¹⁷ For 'Lost Futures' see: R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* [Trans. K. Tribe] (New York, 2004); For examples of post-war British histories emphasising contingency, see: J. Vernon, 'The Local, the Imperial, and the Global: Repositioning Twentieth-Century Britain and the Brief Life of Its Social Democracy', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21/3 (2010), pp. 404-18; A. Davies, *The City of London and Social Democracy: The Political Economy of Finance in Britain, 1959-1979* (Oxford, 2017); G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019).

¹⁸ L. Black, 'Review Essay: An Enlightening Decade? New Histories of 1970s Britain', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012), pp. 174-86.

liberalism.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Guy Ortolano's recent work encourages historians to consider the overlap and interplay between the forces of social democratic consensus and those of neo-liberal revolution.²⁰ While undoubtedly over the course of the post-war period a broad social democratic conception of politics was displaced by the priorities of market liberalism, Ortolano's exploration of the New Town Project, particularly the planning and construction of Milton Keynes, highlights how the concepts of 'individualism, consumerism, homeownership, investing, and more were all stirring long before their apotheoses in Thatcher's 1980s.'²¹

On this reading 1945 and 1979 are less permanent settlements and more moments of deferral. Here, diverse ideological actors could cohere around a common epistemological framework, while deferring the long-term consequences of certain policy decisions.²² As Stephen Brooke has written about the 1980s, the Thatcherite settlement was 'not so much half-formed as asymmetrically formed, unfolding in different directions and surprising ways.' In a description that could equally be applied to 1945, he notes that 'it is contradiction, not consensus or hegemony, which might be the real legacy of the 1980s.'²³ In many ways these acts of deferral relied on particular future-oriented concepts, like meritocracy, which, owing to their vagueness could be loaded with different aspirations, expectations and ideological baggage. From the vantage point of a new decade it appears that accounts of post-war British history, narratives of contestation and change, as well as an overarching chronological framework, are in flux. Unlike revisionist challenges, however, it recognises that political parties are 'unreliable vehicles' and are not the 'supreme arbiters of the value of political ideas.'²⁴ Instead it seeks to explore questions of political change and contestation through the lens of one particular concept, namely meritocracy. While there has been a slight uptick in recent years in the number of scholarly accounts which place concepts at their centre – from Ben Jackson's work on equality to Emily Robinson's analysis of progressive politics – conceptual history still remains the 'stranger at the feast' when it comes to histories of post-war Britain.²⁵ Until relatively recently political historians of modern Britain treated

¹⁹ E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & N. Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the Crisis of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/2 (2017), pp. 268-304.

²⁰ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*; Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress*.

²¹ Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress*, pp. 18-19.

²² Blackburn, 'Reassessing', p. 18.

²³ S. Brooke, 'Living in New Times: Historicising 1980s Britain', *History Compass*, 12/1 (2014), p. 25, 26.

²⁴ D. Blackburn, 'Still the Stranger at the Feast? Ideology and the Study of Twentieth Century British Politics', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 22 (2017), pp. 8-9.

²⁵ B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left* (Manchester, 2007); E. Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain* (London, 2017). Other examples include: T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2008); R. Carr, *One Nation Britain: History, the Progressive Tradition, and Practical Ideas* (Abingdon, 2016); D.

the notion of ideas, concepts and ideologies with profound scepticism, often regarding them as optional influences on public policy and leaving their analysis to political theorists.²⁶ In the last couple of decades, however, historians have increasingly come to contribute to an 'ideational turn' by integrating political ideologies into their accounts of twentieth-century Britain.²⁷ While scholars are much less likely to regard ideas as epiphenomena of political life, there remains much to learn from the tools of conceptual history and ideology studies.

Conceptual history is most closely associated with the work of Reinhart Koselleck, a German philosopher and historian who edited the lexicon of historical concepts known as the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.²⁸ Koselleck's method sought to explore concepts with an equal emphasis on both the synchronic (specific context) and diachronic (changing meaning over time) aspects of conceptual analysis.²⁹ His reception in Britain has been relatively limited, in part because his analysis stems from a German hermeneutical approach, associated with the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, which conflicted with a more empirical Anglophone tradition.³⁰ The British approach to conceptual history has largely been dominated by the Cambridge School and, in particular, the work of Quentin Skinner.³¹ Skinner is interested in analysing conceptual change through a focus on how different historical agents, usually significant political philosophers like Machiavelli or Hobbes, perform rhetorical redefinitions of concepts.³² This approach places the excavation of authorial intention at its centre. To decode this intention, the conceptual historian is required to trace the relationship between a given

Ussishkin, *Morale: A Modern British History* (London, 2017). For reviews of the field consider: M. Freeden, 'The Stranger at the Feast: Ideology and Public Policy in Twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1/1 (1990), pp. 9-34; D. Blackburn, 'Still the Stranger', pp. 116-30.

²⁶ Freeden, 'Stranger', p. 10.

²⁷ M.M. Blyth, '"Any More Bright Ideas?" The Ideational Turn of Comparative Political Economy', *Comparative Politics*, 29/2 (1997), pp. 229-50; A. Gofas & C. Hay, 'The Ideational Turn and the Persistence of Perennial Dualisms', in their *The Role of Ideas in Political Analysis: A Portrait of Contemporary Debates* (Abingdon, 2010), pp. 3-10.

²⁸ The introduction and prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* have been translated into English, see: R. Koselleck & M. Richter, 'Introduction and Prefaces to the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 6/1 (2011), pp. 1-37.

²⁹ For outlines of Koselleck's approach to conceptual history, see: M. Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 26-57; M. Bevir, 'Begriffsgeschichte', *History and Theory*, 39/2 (2000), pp. 273-84; R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing, History, Spacing Concepts* [Trans. T.S. Presner], (Stanford, CA., 2002), pp. 20-37.

³⁰ H. White, 'Foreword', in Koselleck, *Practice of Conceptual History*, p. ix; N. Olsen, 'Carl Schmitt, R. Koselleck and the Foundations of History and Politics', *History of European Ideas*, 37/2 (2011), pp. 197-208; N. Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 183-84.

³¹ G. Browning, *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 67-88; For a more variegated history, see: S. James, 'J.G.A. Pocock and the Idea of the "Cambridge School" in the History of Political Thought', *History of European Ideas*, 45/1 (2019), pp. 83-98.

³² Q. Skinner, *From Humanism to Hobbes: Studies in Rhetoric and Politics* (Cambridge, 2018).

utterance and a wider linguistic context. In this sense Skinner is more interested in sudden conceptual changes, whereas Koselleck explores the 'slower march of time.'³³ Shifts in conceptual usage require social explanation at the level of social life itself, hence Skinner's focus on significant philosophers and political theorists where these movements can be traced in detail. In contrast to Koselleck, Skinner frequently highlights his suspicion of any general theory about the mechanisms of social transformation, especially those in which Time itself appears as an agent of change.³⁴

Despite their significant differences, especially regarding the importance of temporality in constructing conceptual meaning, it is in their mutual hostility to ahistorical or apolitical understandings of concepts that Koselleck and Skinner share a common approach.³⁵ This can be characterised as one which seeks to analyse concepts in both a diachronic and a synchronic capacity and emphasises their essential contestation. These overlaps between Skinner and Koselleck have been utilised by the likes of Michael Freeden to develop a morphological approach to ideologies.³⁶ Freeden's approach contrasts sharply with Marxist interpretations, where ideology is considered a temporal product of class power as well as an Anglo-America tradition where it is evaluated in functionalist terms as a closed, doctrinaire and dogmatic system of thought.³⁷ For Freeden ideologies are ubiquitous phenomena and can be characterised as ideational formations consisting of political concepts. Whether analysing liberalism, socialism or conservatism, all of these ideologies share a common unit: 'the political idea in its sophisticated form as political concept.'³⁸ Any study of a political concept is therefore also a history of the ideologies which attempt to define its meaning. By exploring the intersection between Skinner, Koselleck and Freeden it is possible to identify four key principles to conceptual history which loosely govern the approach of this thesis:

³³ Q. Skinner, 'Rhetoric and Conceptual Change', in K. Palonen (Ed.), *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* (Jyväskylä, 1999), pp. 60-73.

³⁴ The key difference between Skinner and Koselleck lies in the former's 'almost paradoxical contention' that the transformations the conceptual historian hopes to chart 'will not strictly speaking be changes in concepts at all' but 'changes in the use of the terms by which concepts are expressed.' See: Q. Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory*, 8/1 (1969), p. 37; Skinner, 'Rhetoric', pp. 63-64. Where Skinner is interested in uncovering the intentions of important individual historical agents, Koselleck is more concerned with a structural perspective which attempts to establish the aggregate meaning of a particular concept. This distinction has led the likes of Kari Palonen to describe Skinner's approach as 'rhetorical' and Koselleck's as 'temporal'. See: K. Palonen, *Politics and Conceptual Histories: Rhetorical and Temporal Perspectives* (London, 2016), pp. 63-78.

³⁵ The differences between the Cambridge School and Koselleck's conceptual approach have been overstated. As Skinner himself acknowledged, 'Koselleck and I both assume that we need to treat our normative concepts less as statements about the world than as tools and weapons of debate.' Skinner, 'Rhetoric', p. 62.

³⁶ M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1998).

³⁷ See for example: D. Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (New York, [1960] 2000); M. Seliger, *The Marxist Conception of Ideology: A Critical Essay* (Cambridge, 1979).

³⁸ Freeden, *Ideologies*, p. 48.

(i) *There is a distinction between words and concepts*

Firstly, it is important to distinguish between words and concepts. Clearly linguistic utterances – whether in a text or other speech act – provide important markers through which historians can access the past meaning of concepts. Yet narrow etymological accounts fail to tell us much about the political function of concepts. In part this is because narrowly tracing the frequency of a particular word soon becomes bogged down with supplemental meanings, i.e. accounts searching for the history of the political concept ‘revolution’ would include agents using the word to mean ‘an instance of revolving.’ More importantly, a narrow etymological account of this nature would fail to analyse the rich array of equivalent terms which agents may use to refer to a concept, perhaps because a particular word is not available to them yet. A good example here is Thomas Dixon’s work on the origins and trajectory of ‘altruism’ in Victorian England. Dixon makes the case for exploring terms like ‘charity’, ‘benevolence’ and ‘philanthropy’, charting synonyms and near-synonyms in order to fully grasp the contemporary meaning of a particular concept.³⁹

Concepts, therefore, cannot simply be read-off from the corresponding word used to describe them. While a concept is tied to a word (or multiple words) it is at the same time more than this linguistic expression. Concepts can be identified via multiple linguistic utterances and must retain multiple meanings in order to be classified as a concept. They are also defined, as will be explored below, by their essentially contested nature. For Koselleck a word becomes a concept when the ‘full richness’ of a ‘social and political context of meaning’, in which, and for which, a word is used, is taken up by the word.⁴⁰ Whereas the likes of Gadamer and Heidegger claimed that language implicitly contained the totality of experience, Koselleck argued that ‘as a historian’ he could not limit his approach to the domain of ‘what was in fact said’ but had to consider ‘that which could be said.’⁴¹ In Skinner’s words, this means decoding ‘what conventionally recognisable meanings, in a society of *that* kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate.’⁴² Conceptual history, therefore, while impossible to separate entirely from the linguistic realm will inevitably incorporate epistemic concerns. This has major implications for how we approach political concepts. As Skinner has shown through his exploration of the poet John Milton and the concept of ‘originality’, it is possible for a historical agent to deploy a particular concept without using the corresponding word. Skinner highlights Milton’s desire to write about ‘things

³⁹ Dixon, *Invention*, p. 38.

⁴⁰ Olsen, *History in the Plural*, p. 172.

⁴¹ R. Koselleck, J.F. Sebastian & J.F. Fuentes, ‘Conceptual History, Memory and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 2 (2006), p. 126.

⁴² Skinner, ‘Meaning’, p. 49.

unattempted yet in prose or rhyme' and claims that this shows originality to be of central importance to understanding his work, despite the fact that the word 'originality' did not enter the lexicon until a century after the poet's death.⁴³ Declaring an agent to be deploying a particular concept without evidence of the corresponding word can be difficult to navigate. The historian must be wary of anachronism, of seeing their own preoccupations reflected back and decoding intention where there is none.⁴⁴ To avoid mistakenly assigning conceptual usage to a particular agent where there is no evidence of a corresponding word, historians must possess a significant grasp of the social, political and cultural context in which linguistic expressions and concepts are formed, deployed and received.

(ii) Concepts acquire meaning in particular contexts

A second principle is that concepts only acquire meaning in concrete historical contexts. This is the synchronic component of conceptual analysis. Contextual study exposes the range of meanings available to particular historical agents when they deploy political concepts. This is a significant point at which the approaches of Skinner and Koselleck overlap. As Niklas Olsen has noted, Koselleck's synchronic approach can be simplified to two key assumptions: firstly that the central political and social experiences of an epoch can be deciphered through an analysis of its key concepts; and secondly that concepts are created in historically concrete situations by different historical actors to meet the variegated ends of the political actors using them.⁴⁵ While context does not determine whether an agent will choose to deploy one interpretation of a concept over another, it is the 'ultimate framework' for the range of meanings available.⁴⁶ Skinner's emphasis on contextual understanding helps us to avoid reifying concepts and ascribing false intentions to particular historical agents. For example, without an awareness of context we may define equality in terms of outcome and mislabel those using the term in a more limited sense as socialists or proto-socialists.

A range of meanings are available to any given historical agent because political and social concepts are essentially contested.⁴⁷ This means that any historical agent can never express the full range of meaning that a particular concept possesses without revealing fatal contradictions. As Michael Freeden notes, all social and political concepts contain more parts than can be used in any given instance. Freeden uses the example of

⁴³ Q. Skinner, 'Language and Political Change', in T. Ball, J. Farr & R.L. Hanson (Eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 7-8.

⁴⁴ Skinner, 'Meaning', pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵ Olsen, *History in the Plural*, p. 86.

⁴⁶ Skinner, 'Meaning', p. 49.

⁴⁷ Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, pp. 56-60. For a good overview, see: D. Collier, F.D. Hidalgo & A.O. Maciuceanu, 'Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11/3 (2006), pp. 211-46.

equality: 'in employing the concept of equality I cannot advocate for equality of distributive outcomes and need at the same time.' Political actors, however, must make decisions. Their choice is 'wholly historical and contextual' and it is not 'culturally arbitrary but logically arbitrary'.⁴⁸ In this sense a focus on context reveals a battle to decontest the meaning of a particular concept or set of concepts. A focus on the synchronic at the expense of the diachronic, however, still leaves a massive gap in our understanding of concepts. While a focus on context can help elucidate the limits or conditions for what is sayable at a certain time and place, it cannot account for how and why these limits change. This is only possible by exploring how the meanings of concepts change over time.

(iii) Concepts can acquire and shed meaning over the course of time

While a synchronic investigation of concepts can elucidate the range of meanings open to a particular historical agent at any given time, it is through diachronic analysis – the changing meaning of a concept over time – that we can explain how this range of meanings are ruptured or transformed. For Skinner, Koselleck and Freeden there is a 'genealogy of all of our evaluative concepts to be traced' and in tracing their evolution conceptual historians shall uncover not merely 'reflections' but 'one of the engines of social change'.⁴⁹ In short, the way we choose to apply inherited conceptual vocabularies is important but so is the way in which we reappraise and change our social and political world by changing our use of language. As Michael Freeden argues, the problem with an emphasis on the diachronic at the expense of the synchronic is that 'we can never nail down the intricate meaning of political concepts once and for all.' The conceptual historian needs synchronic tools to 'cope with the ubiquity of conceptual indeterminacy' rather than trying to force an 'artificial determinacy on an unwilling subject matter' to foster the illusion of 'fixed universalizable meanings.' Skinner points to a couple of ways conceptual historians can explore how vocabularies 'wrinkle and slide.' On the one hand we might identify how the changing frequency of a word points to the emergence or disappearance of certain social or political behaviours, for example the disappearance in contemporary English of a vocabulary to describe and commend an ideal of gentlemanly conduct. On the other, we could consider the capacity of certain vocabularies to encourage particular acts of appraisal and how this alters in direction or intensity over time. As Skinner notes by way of example, a study of the word 'shrewd' or 'shrewdness' would have to consider how this term, initially deployed during the Renaissance to

⁴⁸ M. Freeden, 'Conceptual History, Ideology and Language', in W. Steinmetz, M. Freeden & J. Fernandez-Sebastian (Eds.), *Conceptual History in the European Space* (New York, 2017), p. 123.

⁴⁹ Skinner, 'Rhetoric', p. 63.

condemn certain actions, was appropriated, adapted and transformed to become a laudatory social characteristic.⁵⁰

It is in the area of diachronic analysis, however, that historians have been slow to incorporate the insights of conceptual history. Firstly, while Skinner's emphasis on intentionality is useful for avoiding lapses into anachronism, historians also need to be alert to unintentionality.⁵¹ While a given author may have a particular intention in expressing a concept, they cannot guarantee that readers or interpreters of their text or speech act will share their meaning. Political historians should therefore engage directly with misunderstandings and misinterpretations, evaluating how these receptions of concepts work to transmogrify conceptual meaning. Paul Ricoeur refers to the capacity of a concept to contain unknown additional meanings as a 'surplus of meaning'.⁵² Ricoeur's work has encouraged conceptual historians to engage as much with the consumption as with the production of ideas.⁵³ Secondly, historians need to be more willing to incorporate time horizons and temporality into their approach to concepts.⁵⁴ Historical agents think and act under assumptions about the past and the future which historians must work harder to excavate and reconstruct. Paul Pierson's work encouraging social scientists to construct 'moving pictures' rather than 'snapshots' is a useful starting point for future research. In short, Pierson argues, 'history matters' and many of the key concepts needed to underpin analyses of temporal processes (path dependence, unintended consequences, critical junctures etc.) have received only fragmented and limited discussion.⁵⁵ Finally, as will be touched on below, historians require a clearer understanding of conceptual morphology. Internally complex concepts, such as democracy, are made up of a range of other concepts (liberty, equality, etc.) which all have a recognisable social and historical life of their own.⁵⁶ There has been too little attention paid to what Michael Freeden describes as the 'micro-conduct of the conceptual environment.' One way of exploring the changing meanings of a concept like democracy is to explore the continuous flux in the ranking order of significance of its major conceptual components. In diachronic terms, conceptual historians need to be more

⁵⁰ Skinner, 'Rhetoric and Conceptual Change', p. 64, 65-66.

⁵¹ M. Freeden, *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of Practice* (Oxford, 2013), p. 301.

⁵² P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX., 1976).

⁵³ R.C. Holub, *Reception Theory* (Abingdon, [1984] 2003), pp. 147-63.

⁵⁴ R. Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories* [Trans. S. Franzel & S. Hoffman] (Stanford, CA., 2018), pp. 3-9.

⁵⁵ P. Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton, NJ., 2004), pp. 2, 5-6.

⁵⁶ Freeden, *Ideologies*, pp. 60-61.

willing to consider the different speeds at which concepts mutate over time and to analyse their mutation, not as a stable whole, but rather as semantic fragments.⁵⁷

(iv) Concepts are the building blocks of political ideologies

Complex political concepts, especially those with a long historical life, possess their own internal morphology and can be characterised as 'super concepts'.⁵⁸ This is not to give a concept like democracy any superior status over other concepts but serves to recognise its internal complexity. Democracy acts as a host to a number of supplementary concepts – accountability, equality, liberty etc. – which all have a separate and recognisable history of their own. Concepts, however, are not endowed with neutral meanings. The internal morphology of democracy, for example, results in an essential contestability of its conceptions, i.e. the relative weighting different historical agents will give to equality over liberty or participation over accountability. This semantic battle to define the meaning of a concept – a consequence of essential contestability and the process of contestation – is never finished. While conceptual historians work in a world where, in order to gain the upper hand in ideological competition, complex meanings of concepts are often manipulated or silenced, this does not mean other possible interpretations disappear. Yet if concepts are essentially contested does this mean there is nothing universally 'true' we can say about a concept such as democracy? No feature which consistently marks it out over historical time and space? As Michael Freeden argues, the essential contestability of political concepts is not a 'cloak for relativism' and does not 'allow for infinite variety of unfixity'.⁵⁹ Concepts contain both ineliminable and quasi-contingent features. The former are ineliminable not in a logical sense, but simply in that an 'empirically ascertainable cultural commonality' ascribes to them certain features.⁶⁰ All known usages of the concept deploy these ineliminable components and they aid conceptual communicability and intelligibility.

The battle to decontest the meaning of concepts is undertaken by ideologies. Ideologies – conservatism, socialism, liberalism etc. – are packages of decontested concepts. These concepts form the core, adjacent and peripheral morphology of an ideology. The core concepts are the ineliminable feature of ideologies, and all known usages of a particular ideology employ it, e.g. the core concept of socialism is equality. Core concepts, however, cannot carry the ideology by themselves. Without additional categories the core will remain vacuous. This is the role of adjacent concepts which are usually logically or cultural contingent, e.g. at particular historical junctures socialism has elevated the

⁵⁷ Freeden, 'Conceptual History', pp. 121-22, 125-26.

⁵⁸ Freeden, 'Conceptual History', pp. 121-22; Freeden, *Ideologies*, pp. 60-61.

⁵⁹ Freeden, *Ideologies*, p. 67.

⁶⁰ Freeden, *Ideologies*, pp. 62-63.

concepts of freedom or community into adjacent concepts. Finally, adding a vital gloss to the ideology are peripheral concepts. These concepts are usually characterised by shorter time horizons, e.g. for socialists, changing models of public ownership could be classed as a peripheral concept. In their attempt at 'semantic domination', ideologies are the 'bridging mechanism' between contestability and determinacy, converting the variety of conceptual options into the 'monolithic certainty' which is an unavoidable feature of a political decision and the basis on which political identity is formed.⁶¹ Yet ideologies do not 'own' political concepts and the battle to decontest their meaning, by its very nature, will never end. In approaching ideological competition in post-war Britain the association of particular concepts with certain ideologies – Revisionist Social Democracy and equality, Thatcherism and freedom – has obscured the fact that ideologies will display most, if not all, of the major political concepts within their system. Thatcherism, therefore, possessed a conception of equality, Bennite socialism a vision of freedom. By highlighting the appropriation of a concept by an ideology, conceptual historians must evaluate the consequences of this appropriation for both the meaning of the concept and the character of the ideology. Conceptual history, therefore, can be broken down into the study of the components of a concept, the concept itself and a system of concepts or ideology.

Meritocracy is an ideal concept through which to explore the possibilities of conceptual history. By applying the four principles listed above it is possible to uncover a clearer sense of meritocracy's history, its shifting morphology and the political function it performed for post-war Britain's most significant ideological traditions. Firstly, we can clearly distinguish between the concept of meritocracy and the corresponding word. Whether it was Thomas Carlyle's plea for Britain to be governed by a true 'Aristocracy of Talent!', H.G. Wells's eulogy to the Fabian expert in the form of the intellectual 'Samurai', or even Winston Churchill's assumption that the French Revolution established 'I trust for ever, the conception of *la carrière ouverte aux talents*', the concept of meritocracy has a long and complicated British history.⁶² While these synonyms and near-synonyms – to which could be added at various historical junctures terms like 'brain worker' or less elegantly 'the new model bourgeoisie' – have their own distinct etymological and conceptual history, they also served to describe overlapping social and political phenomena: a growing emphasis on efficiency and economic performance; the threat to

⁶¹ Freedman, *Ideologies*, pp. 76-82.

⁶² T. Carlyle, *Past and Present, Book One* (London, 1843), p. 39; H.G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia* (London, 1904); W. Churchill, 'Speech at the Annual Conference of the Scottish Unionist Association, 18th May 1951', in his *Stemming the Tide: Speeches 1951 and 1952* (London, 1953), p. 83.

social harmony posed by a burgeoning class politics; and the desire to maintain social, cultural and political elites in an increasingly democratic age.⁶³ The word 'meritocracy' first appeared in print in 1956 although it was two years later that the term was catapulted into the lexicon with the publication of Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.⁶⁴ Young was a British sociologist and former Head of the Labour Party Research Department who decades later reflected on the fact that he had not expected the word to stick. 'The twentieth century', he claimed, 'had room for the word.'⁶⁵ While the concept clearly predated Young's interpretation, the creation of the word 'meritocracy' itself was a significant moment in its conceptual history. It gave political agents a shared conceptual language with which to communicate about a set of socio-political trends and eventually swallowed up competing synonyms.

In many ways, however, rather than marking the beginning of meritocracy's story, 1958 signalled the start of its demise. While *The Rise of the Meritocracy* exposed its dystopian potential, by providing a single term around which discussions of classlessness or equality of opportunity could cohere Young helped to concretise the concept. Political agents felt free to discard Young's warnings and soon the term became loaded with aspirations, expectations and ideological baggage. Meritocracy, like other concepts, can be characterised by its essential contestability: for some the concept served as a means to encourage greater competition, incentives and ultimately inequality; for others meritocracy offered the promise of a socially just, classless and egalitarian future. As the concept was pulled across a broad ideological canvas it eventually snapped with significant and far-reaching consequences for Britain's intellectual politics. By distinguishing between words and concepts we can therefore excavate a more complex history of meritocracy, one which starts long before the creation of the word in 1958. Hence why, despite the recent interest in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, a history of Young's 'touchstone book' does not adequately historicise the concept he named.⁶⁶ While treating 1958 as a significant date, this thesis traces the history of the *concept* and

⁶³ R.H. Tawney, *The Acquisitive Society* (New York, 1920), pp. 161-79; C. Curran, 'The New Model Bourgeoisie', *Crossbow* (October-December, 1962), pp. 20-24.

⁶⁴ M. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (London, [1958] 1961).

⁶⁵ M. Young, 'Introduction to the Transaction Edition', in his *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (New Brunswick, NJ. [1958], 1994), p. xii.

⁶⁶ For recent interest in Young and *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, see for example: K.A. Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (London, 2018), pp. 137-84; S. Leonard, 'The Fall of the Meritocracy', *The New Republic* (05/09/2019), <https://newrepublic.com/article/154692/meritocracy-trap-overworked-elites-book-review>. Young's text has also been interpreted by some as holding the key to explaining the vote to leave the European Union in 2016, see: D. Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London, 2017); M.A.P. Bovens & C.W. Anchrit, *Diploma Democracy: The Rise of Political Meritocracy* (Oxford, 2017).

therefore explores elements of meritocracy's pre-history as well as those political agents who discuss questions of merit without using the word itself.

If the distinction between words and concepts encourages us to trace a meritocratic pre-history prior to 1958, an awareness of the intellectual, political and cultural context in which a particular historical agent operates will help to avoid anachronism. Histories of modern Britain which discuss the role of meritocracy often place education at the centre. Tony Judt, for example, associates the rise and fall of meritocracy with the fortunes of the tripartite model.⁶⁷ Peter Mandler describes a similar process, declaring meritocracy to be a 'short-lived and inherently unstable' concept in the public discourse of education.⁶⁸ The problem with this approach, however, is that meritocracy was able to outlive educational changes like comprehensivisation. Social democrats like John Vaizey, one of the most significant educational sociologists and economists in post-war Britain, argued vehemently for both comprehensives and the concept of meritocracy.⁶⁹ In short, this massive institutional shift to common schooling was motivated by one vision of a meritocratic social order, while those seeking to preserve tripartism were motivated by another. Here we have conceptual stretching in action. While education is an important lens for discussions of meritocracy, often a battleground where differing notions of equal opportunity, classlessness and social justice play themselves out, as Guy Ortolano has argued it is possible to speak of a broader 'meritocratic moment' between the end of the Second World War and the late 1960s.⁷⁰ Here, the concept of meritocracy was attached to a whole range of issues: whether it was reversing the perception of economic and cultural decline, achieving higher levels of economic growth or distributing rewards in a manner which would preserve social harmony, the concept appeared to offer a way out of significant ideological binds for both socialists and conservatives. It is only by excavating and reconstructing the intellectual, political and cultural context of post-war Britain that meritocracy's full range of meaning can be uncovered.

While meritocracy became entangled with a vast array of issues in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the nature and scale of the concept's reach was significantly transformed over time. Over the course of these decades new conceptual components were added to meritocracy's morphology, a process Peter Hennessy compares to a train running throughout post-war society and 'taking on extra passengers and baggage by the decade.'⁷¹ Yet what Hennessy neglects is the passengers getting off and the baggage which is lost in the course of a journey. A central argument of this thesis is that the

⁶⁷ T. Judt & T. Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), p. 112.

⁶⁸ P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 24 (2014), p. 9.

⁶⁹ J. Vaizey, *Britain in the Sixties: Education for Tomorrow* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 18, 62.

⁷⁰ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 16.

⁷¹ Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy*, p. 2.

concept of meritocracy was gradually hollowed out over the course of the late-twentieth century. Meritocracy underpinned a moment of ideological deferral in the immediate post-war decade, serving to temporarily reconcile equality and liberty and offering a vision of a classless, efficient and socially just future. For many political agents this future appeared to be on the horizon, requiring gradual steps in the right direction in order to be realised. Meritocracy served as the perfect staging post: for social democrats a suitable stop-gap leading to gradually greater equality in the future; for conservatives a satisfactory end state which preserved a democratically legitimate social elite. Over the course of the late 1950s and the 1960s, however, the concept became overburdened with divergent ideological baggage. In the late 1960s, faced with student protests, the rise of a nascent identity politics highlighting the implicit biases of the meritocratic social order, as well as burgeoning sociological evidence that the principles of meritocracy had failed to deliver greater equality, classlessness, economic growth or redistribution, the concept fragmented. The collapse of the meritocratic moment not only threatened the survival of the concept but also those ideological formations, namely Revisionist Social Democracy and Middle Way Conservatism, which had elevated meritocracy to privileged positions in their respective morphologies. While these ideologies struggled to formulate alternative distributive principles, new ideological constellations emerged which privileged different criteria.

On the surface, however, the concept appears to have survived the collapse of the meritocratic moment, playing an important role in both the ideologies of Thatcherism and New Labour. Thatcher herself claimed to 'believe in merit' and to 'belong to the meritocracy', while Blair declared that his remodelled Labour Party should not be described as 'crypto-Thatcherites' or 'old-style socialists' but as 'meritocrats'.⁷² As the likes of Skinner, Koselleck and Freeden warn, the persistence of a *word* does not mean or reflect the persistence of the same *concept* across time and space. While certain semantic fragments survived in the arid 1970s others were left behind, and the concept of meritocracy which emerged at the end of the decade was significantly hollowed out. It could no longer answer the same range of political questions nor serve as a vehicle for ideological aspirations. In its place stood the market, a powerful distributive logic which appeared to remedy the defects of the meritocracy. If the problem with the latter was that it could never be certain whether inequality stemmed from 'internal qualities or external conditions', the market 'rendered its origins diffuse'.⁷³ Just as meritocracy had done in the immediate post-war decade, the market underpinned the deferral of the

⁷² W. Henry, 'Interview with Margaret Thatcher for *The Sun*' (28/02/1983), *Margaret Thatcher Foundation* [THCR 5/1/1E/47, F49]; M. White, 'Party Politics: Blair Sets Out His Faith', *The Guardian* (14/05/2001), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/may/14/election2001.uk>

⁷³ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 252.

1980s. A thin version of meritocracy, shorn of its radical implications, survived but served to bolster market-generated social outcomes. Hence we can speak of a transition in Britain's intellectual politics over the course of the twentieth century from the principles of merit to those of the market, a transition characterised by an unconventional chronology and containing uncusomary ideological combatants.

What emerges from this diachronic and synchronic analysis of meritocracy is a clearer understanding of the important space occupied by the concept in the morphologies of Revisionist Social Democracy and Middle Way Conservatism. This thesis, therefore, is not simply a history of meritocracy but of the ideologies which try at different historical junctures to control its meaning. In a similar vein to a concept like democracy, meritocracy can be classified as a 'super concept' and of possessing a complex internal structure made up of other political concepts with historic and social lives of their own. As well as tracing those parts of a concept which are added or removed over the course of time, conceptual history must also attempt to evaluate the relative weighting assigned to these internal components. In meritocracy's case we can identify several important conceptual components which help to constitute the concept. Firstly, it is no coincidence that the term meritocracy entered into our lexicon at the moment when the relationship between social classes appeared in flux. Class is, at least in part, concerned with how different social groups can place demands upon capital on the basis of the labour they can perform. Exploring changing notions of 'merit' can help us to think about how social class was understood and how the phenomenon of class was politicised. Secondly, meritocracy was underpinned by a professional ethic. At the core of this sensibility was a respect for expertise and a belief that expert knowledge was a social good. In order to trace this history, we need to think about how professional skills and attributes are conceived and how they are awarded meanings. Merit intervenes here in quite obvious ways. Why was it that the professional worker came to be regarded as a social good who was the bearer of 'merit'? And why was it that some skills and talents came to be valued more than others? Finally, in seeking to align rewards and individual or collective merit the concept also contained a significant distributive element. We can use meritocracy to explore the way in which the allocation of wealth, status and responsibility are justified in post-war Britain. As Thomas Piketty's work has highlighted, 'every human society must justify its inequalities.' The search 'for a distribution of wealth acceptable to the majority of people is a recurrent theme in all periods and all cultures.'⁷⁴ Post-war Britain was no different. Piketty is right that these distributive questions can never be 'solved', and therefore debates about 'who gets what' are in some senses eternal. Yet the urgency with which these questions intruded on intellectual politics in the post-war

⁷⁴ For Piketty, 'in today's societies these justificatory narratives comprise themes of property, entrepreneurship and meritocracy.' T. Piketty, *Capital and Ideology* (London, 2020), p. 1, 576-77.

period makes a study of this particular historical moment unique and imperative. By tracing the meaning of meritocracy we can determine whether distributive questions were becoming more or less important in political thinking, and how certain objectives – whether those of equality, efficiency or freedom – obtained salience.

Tracing meritocracy, a concept with a complex internal morphology and which formed such an important part of a vast array of ideological constellations, could produce enough material to serve several volumes of analysis. These volumes could range over topics as diverse as consumerism, the Cold War, poverty, education, philosophy, business management and industrial democracy; they could analyse sociological and psychological literature on the nature of intelligence, work science and social mobility or explore cultural representations of meritocracy in films, TV and novels; an even larger project could attempt to trace popular understandings of merit or talent using the tools of social history. This thesis, however, is interested in meritocracy's relationship with Britain's post-war intellectual politics. In a similar vein to Ben Jackson's work on equality it prioritises the conceptual history, with the links between meritocratic ideals and policies designed and implemented to achieve meritocracy discussed as a secondary concern.⁷⁵ It is not, therefore, a study of the changing nature of sociological knowledge or psychological studies of intelligence and is interested in these questions, like those listed above, when they impinge on the thought of certain political agents. In this sense the approach is constructivist. It does not seek to prove whether Britain became more or less meritocratic in the post-war years but to excavate what political agents thought meritocracy was at certain historical junctures. In the process, of course, these agents drew on academic research – whether on rates of social mobility, the scale of inequality or the levels of poverty – which provide insights into social reality. While this thesis largely observes this research through the lens of the political agents consuming, selecting and modifying it, these interpretations can still contribute to a more empirically-minded sociological or historiographical tradition.

In short, this thesis pursues the questions and observes the answers of post-war intellectuals and political actors. It follows a cast of characters which allows the reader to trace how the political thought of certain individuals changes over the course of the entire post-war period. Language, however, only makes sense as a group activity and political ideologies are group oriented.⁷⁶ To comprehend a particular ideology is also to understand the groups that fashioned them. In all of these ideological groupings key individuals can be identified and explored, but equally striking are the social contexts in

⁷⁵ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Freeden, *Ideologies*, p. 108, 117.

which they operated.⁷⁷ This thesis, therefore, does not privilege certain types of political thinking, by placing the work of philosophers like John Rawls, for example, above active political agents like Margaret Thatcher. Rather it is interested in 'the way a society puts its political ideas to work.'⁷⁸ In doing so it explores and analyses the conceptual thinking of a range of groups and individuals previously considered marginal or peripheral to discernible political hierarchies. Historians and political theorists should be more willing to search Britain's intellectual undergrowth to uncover its ideological and conceptual diversity. Political thinking can be uncovered from a whole host of sources and this thesis largely makes use of published party documents, books, periodicals and pamphlets. This is, where necessary, supported by archival material. Of particular interest are those spaces where conceptual concerns could be expressed and debated. This includes those journals and periodicals of explicitly political groupings (*Crossbow*, *Socialist Commentary* etc.) as well as those which reflected a broad swath of ideological opinion (*Encounter*, *New Society* etc.) and which allow areas of consensus to be uncovered. Conceptions of merit in the immediate post-war decades and beyond were imbued with implicit, and often explicit, biases, especially in relation to gender and race. The conceptual silence surrounding these questions tells its own story. Failure to incorporate these categories into their visions of a meritocracy was a significant blind spot for the vast majority of political agents and would have profound consequences when these biases were made explicit in the late 1960s. While this 'nascent identity politics' forms an important part of the second half of the thesis, the interrelationship between gender, race and meritocracy deserves a fuller, more closely examined study.⁷⁹

A history of meritocracy could be explored thematically, individual chapters analysing the themes of class, professionalism and distributive logic or the role of education, work and the family. The problem here, however, is finding space to diachronically or synchronically compare the different component parts of meritocracy, to explore their interaction and relative weighting. For this reason the thesis is structured chronologically with each chapter loosely anchored to a certain year or 'flashpoint'.⁸⁰ These flashpoints begin with a brief sketch of a particular moment which is used to illustrate the broader themes of the chapter. Chapter One, for example, begins in 1944 with a letter from the socialist intellectual R.H. Tawney to the President of the Board of Education R.A. Butler.

⁷⁷ Freeden, 'Stranger', p. 22.

⁷⁸ Freeden, *Ideologies*, p. 107.

⁷⁹ This study would have to build on pre-existing scholarship, see: N.K. Warikoo, *The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions and Meritocracy at Elite Universities* (London, 2016); Littler, *Against Meritocracy*, pp. 96-149; G. Crozier, 'Race and Education: Meritocracy as White Middle Class Privilege', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 39/8 (2018), pp. 1239-46; C. Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (London, 2019).

⁸⁰ This approach is taken from Savage, *Identities and Social Change*.

What becomes clear from Tawney and Butler's shared agreement over the outline of the 1944 Education Act was that different ideological traditions supported a meritocratic reordering in education for divergent ends. For Tawney, once immediate needs were satisfied, unjust material inequalities eradicated and significant redistribution achieved the egalitarian seeds of the 1944 Act could truly begin to flower. If conservatives were more likely to seek to limit the extent of this assault, politicians such as Butler still sought an education system which prioritised a particular conception of equality of opportunity as part of a broader endorsement of meritocracy. A meritocratic education system preserved inequality, making it more amenable to post-war conditions, prevailing conceptions of social justice, and secured individual liberty, allowing every member of the community to climb, or fall, to their 'proper place'. Meritocracy's appeal, however, extended far outside a narrow educational sphere, and the Butler Act, therefore, provides a useful window into the onset of what Guy Ortolano has described as the 'meritocratic moment' in post-war British history. While it may well have been a contingent commitment, meritocracy remained useful in deferring or reconciling a whole series of conceptual tensions and policy challenges. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the origins of this deferral and to highlight the conceptual components which shaped the meaning of meritocracy throughout the post-war period. Many of the social processes which became attached to the concept – whether the rise of a 'new' middle class or the expansion of the professions – have longer histories which reside outside the scope of this thesis. While at times this chapter reaches back into the interwar period, it argues that the Second World War acted as a catalyst, serving to press these issues more firmly and urgently on to Britain's intellectual politics. In this new meritocracy 'expertise rather than property or capital' would be the coin of the realm, defined as a 'set of skills transmitted through education to the capable individual.' The 'promise was equality of opportunity' rather than outcome, and the bargain was that these experts would employ their talent and training in order to benefit the nation as a whole.⁸¹

1958 was the year in which the word meritocracy entered the political, social and cultural lexicon of post-war Britain with the publication of Michael Young's satirical, dystopian novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Chapter Two examines the birth of the word, analyses Young's text and its reception and argues that it should be read, not as a warning, but as a condemnation of meritocracy's pre-existing dominance. In short, the concept of meritocracy existed long before the word to describe it. For Young, the rising meritocrats threatened to destroy his idealised vision of the stable, ordered working-class family and community. This vision of a meritocratic society stemmed, therefore, from Young's rather unique ideological morphology and placed him on the periphery of

⁸¹ Ortolano, *Two Cultures Controversy*, p. 16.

Britain's mainstream intellectual politics. If concepts are recognised as not belonging to any particular ideology, political party or individual agent – but instead are considered as eternally contested phenomena – then Young's vision, in spite of his creation of the word, should be considered by historians as one interpretation among many. This chapter introduces the two dominant ideological constellations of post-war Britain: Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives. It explores how these ideologies overlapped at the point of meritocracy and how the concept underpinned an 'epistemological consensus' which valued empiricist reasoning. A meritocratic social order was an ideal 'partial end', a pattern of opportunities and rewards which was flexible enough to allow for tweaks and modifications when, and if, the empirical evidence changed. To understand meritocracy's broad ideological appeal, this chapter demonstrates how the concept intervened in a variety of social, cultural and intellectual debates in the late 1950s. It begins with an analysis of the 'Opportunity State' and the process of 'embourgeoisement' which, it was claimed, was transforming working-class voters into middle-class ones. While the decade is often portrayed as a 'golden age' of social mobility, it was also a period where the discipline of sociology, particularly studies of social stratification, revealed the persistent impact of class on social outcomes. Studies by sociologists like A.H. Halsey and D.V. Glass, underlined the limited educational opportunity offered by a tripartite division of schooling, and are often interpreted as posing important challenges to the concept of meritocracy embodied in the Butler Act. Instead, this chapter argues we should read these sociological studies, and the broader shift towards comprehensive schooling, as reflecting an expansion of the meritocratic ideal rather than as part of the concept's retreat. For politicians and intellectuals such as Crosland, Gaitskell and Vaizey the frustrations and injustices of a socially immobile society far outweighed those of a mobile one. Middle Way Conservatives evaluated post-war Britain's egalitarian credentials differently and, unlike Revisionists, in considering the 'Opportunity State' to be close at hand, were much more wary of the warnings contained in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.

The changing nature of social class in the 1950s, the notion of embourgeoisement and classlessness, was said to herald a new age of political contestation defined by the 'End of Ideology'. In analysing these debates, the second part of this chapter traces the consequences of post-ideological politics on the concept of meritocracy. If class politics involved sharp, often irrevocable conflicts between clear-cut productive classes against a background of scarcity, status politics concerned non-economic discontents which emerged from a position of general affluence. Judgements of relative status were to be less harmful than the injustices of class and required a particular type of elite, one meritocratically selected, possessed of specialist expertise and underpinned by a professional ethic. Britain in the late 1950s, however, remained under the control of a

secretive Establishment, a closed, amateurish and class-ridden magic circle whose decisions were irrational, opaque and unaccountable. In contrast, the 'New Men' were said to be future-oriented and to make decisions rationally, sensitively and democratically. They would develop planning instruments to rationally control the nation's economic destiny and mediate between the forces of Labour and Capital through the mechanisms of the corporate state. In doing so they would use their expertise for the common good, and were motivated not by the vulgar pursuit of status or rewards, but by the professional satisfaction of a job well done. The most important challenge for these professional meritocrats was to use their expertise to deliver higher levels of economic growth. The final section of this chapter explores how both conservatives and social democrats increasingly came to rely on the panacea of growth to resolve distributive tensions in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Chapter Three begins in 1963 and the publication of *Suicide of a Nation?*, a special issue of the journal *Encounter*, and the high watermark of the declinist literature which would dominate the 1960s and 1970s. While the 1960s represents the decade in which meritocracy acquired its fullest meaning, speaking to a variety of ideological tensions and contradictions, in responding to national decline it was also the period in which it was loaded with aspirations and expectations. The decade was therefore the point on which the history of meritocracy turns. Decline shattered some of the fundamental assumptions which encouraged Britain's mainstream ideologies to cohere around the concept, in particular the notion of an abundant future characterised by an expanding middle class and economic growth. This chapter demonstrates that it was when meritocracy reached its zenith in the middle of the 1960s that, rather paradoxically, the concept's inherent contradictions and fragility were exposed. Whether in disputes over an incomes policy or the future of education, the concept could not survive the collision with political reality. Meritocracy became overburdened with often contradictory aspirations over the course of the decade. In responding to the intellectual politics of decline, meritocracy was stretched over an ever-expanding ideological canvas – for some political actors a means to greater equality, for others a more dynamic, competitive economy characterised by larger incentives and material inequalities; for some a mechanism to transcend class, for others a means by which the talented could be absorbed into middle-class existence – a process which, by the start of the 1970s, was to have profound consequences both for the concept and for the ideologies which had elevated it to such an important place in their respective morphologies.

The conceptual stretching, which characterised meritocracy's history in the mid-to-late 1960s, bewildered and fragmented the dominant ideological traditions of Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy. Chapter Four considers how the

meritocratic moment collapsed, analysing the role played by the rise of a nascent 'identity politics', stagnating economic growth, the competing claims of 'producer groups', and concerns over the unaccountable power of civil servants, experts and welfare state professionals. While it is highly questionable whether Britain could ever be classified as a meritocracy in the post-war period, what is of interest to the intellectual historian is the fact that by the end of the 1960s many academics, commentators and politicians thought Britain had established a meritocratic social order and that it had failed to deliver the goods. These 'goods', of course, were a diverse, and often contradictory, set of outcomes – from improved economic efficiency to greater social equality – depending on one's ideological morphology. The demise of meritocracy, accompanied by the fragmentation of both Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy, created space for new ideological constellations on both the Left and Right. The Bennite Left, for example, offered both greater scrutiny and accountability of bureaucratic power (with the civil service a particular target) as well as an extension of the state in order to enact an 'irreversible shift in the balance of wealth power in favour of working people.' The New Right shared much of Benn's antipathy for the principles underpinning meritocracy. While the Bennite critique led towards a distributive model which privileged class identity, the New Right claimed that the failures of meritocracy proved that the state could not promise too much and certainly did not have the right, or the ability, to mediate between conflicting distributive claims. By focusing on conceptual and ideological change, rather than simply the continuity or discontinuity of certain words, it is possible to explore the relationship between merit and market with greater clarity. The language of merit survived the 1970s and 1980s, but the concept which emerged and was utilised frequently by New Labour was fundamentally altered by its engagement with Thatcherism and its entanglement with the market. Over the course of the 1970s the concept was gradually hollowed out; it no longer spoke to the wide array of ideological tensions as it had in the immediate post-war years. As a consequence the post-war social imaginary fragmented and historical agents sought out alternative grounds for making social, cultural and political claims.

While a history of post-war Britain must be alive to contingencies and lost possibilities, what Koselleck describes as 'history in the plural', it must also grapple with the question of *why* Thatcherism and market logic triumphed over its ideological and conceptual competitors. Chapter Five grapples with this question and highlights the role of the market in generating solutions to the distributive crisis of the 1970s. The market operated as a landing ground for a diverse array of ideological positions – from 'conservative moralists' like Rhodes Boyson to 'permissive liberals' like former Liberal Party leader Jo Grimond and even extending to ex-social democrats like John Vaizey or Paul Johnson – in large part because, much like meritocracy had done in the immediate

post-war years, it could glue together a series of concepts which usually sat in tension. While the Left may not have adopted the language of this impersonal market they nevertheless subscribed to something like its logic and therefore played a role in securing its ascendance. For Thatcherites, the market spoke to concerns about authority and freedom. By removing the state's responsibility for justifying inequality, Thatcherism sought to restore legitimacy to the distribution of rewards, a legitimacy which was said to have collapsed in the symbolic Winter of Discontent. The idea, for example, that the state should and could regulate incomes, maintain a set of employment differentials based on competing notions of 'skill', 'function' or 'effort' and contain wage claims within a rationally defined criteria – at the heart of incomes policies or the Social Contract – gradually ebbed away as a solution to Britain's economic problems over the course of the late 1970s and early 1980s. For others the market represented an egalitarian response for 'New Times'. Where the meritocracy stood condemned on the charge of implicit biases in relation to class, gender or race, the decisions of the market were said to be impersonal, anonymous and open to all regardless of background or identity. If critics targeted the lack of accountability over the power wielded by the professionals staffing the meritocracy, the market had an answer: decisions about the distribution of rewards would be democratically decided according to the laws of supply and demand. If there was always someone else accountable for the personal judgements of the meritocracy, in the impersonal market, it was argued, you only had yourself to blame.

While Thatcherites frequently underlined their support for equality of opportunity, their conception was shorn of the potentially radical implications which underpinned the meritocratic moment. To restore authority and legitimacy to social outcomes, Thatcherites sought to unburden the state from its role in discriminating between merit and advantages of upbringing or background. Equality of opportunity here was to be delivered via the market. The pre-existing advantages, privileges or capital individuals brought to this market would not impact on the social outcomes it delivered. While the market might reward those with higher I.Q.s or a larger collection of academic credentials this was of secondary importance. The ability to satisfy the law of supply and demand, or the needs of the consumer, was the most important arbiter. The link between merit and reward was severed. This conception of equality of opportunity had major consequences for meritocracy. While Thatcherites and social democrats occasionally utilised the language of meritocracy to bolster social outcomes, on the whole they found themselves culturally and logically restricted from restoring the concept as an adjacent principle in their respective morphologies. Ultimately, however, just as the meritocratic settlement of the post-war period can be characterised as a moment of deferral, so can the rise of the market. The market did not arrive fully formed as a concept in the late 1970s, it had to be explained, decontested and filtered through a

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diverse range of ideological morphologies. While it served as the most appealing mechanism through which to distribute rewards, reconcile equality and liberty and legitimise inequalities in the 1980s and beyond, it failed to fundamentally 'solve' these perennial questions.

Chapter (1) 1944: The Rise of the Meritocracy

'One of the objects of the educational changes must be to find out the best brains in the community, to give them the fullest opportunities and to allow them to earn the highest rewards.'

Austen Albu¹

'...in Society there must be a system of classes based on talent. In industry there must be full promotion based on merit.'

David Clarke²

(1.1) Introduction: The Butler Act

On the 21st of December 1943 R.H. Tawney, arguably one of the most significant intellectual influences on Labour's education policy and the Party's broader political philosophy, wrote to the President of the Board of Education, the Conservative R.A. Butler to thank him for sending a copy of the new Education Bill. The Bill, which received Royal Assent in August 1944 and is commonly known as the Butler Act, has been characterised as one of the most significant pieces of legislation in twentieth-century British history, a 'lasting monument' to the sacrifices of war and a 'foundation stone for a society at peace.'³ The Act provided 'education for all', charging local authorities with providing primary and secondary schools as well as provisions for nursery and post-secondary, or 'further', education.⁴ Most authorities adopted a tripartite system which involved sieving children at the age of eleven via selective testing and then distributing them to either grammar, technical or secondary modern schools. Passed before the end of the War and the Labour landslide of 1945, the Act is seen as highlighting the widespread agreement over education policy between the Parties and heralding the onset of a period of political consensus.⁵ Tawney, in his letter to Butler, certainly appears to vindicate this interpretation, praising the Bill as opening a 'new era in English

¹ A. Albu, 'The Organisation of Industry', in R.H.S. Crossman (Ed.), *New Fabian Essays* (London, 1952), p. 131.

² D. Clarke, *The Conservative Faith in the Modern Age* (London, 1947), p. 30.

³ C.H. Batteson, 'The 1944 Education Act Reconsidered', *Educational Review*, 51/1 (1999), p. 7; G. McCulloch, *Educational Reconstruction: The 1944 Education Act and the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon, [1994] 2011), p. 6.

⁴ For the provisions of the Act see, 'Education Act 1944', <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/contents/enacted> (Accessed: 05/02/2017)

⁵ See, for example: P. Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975), p. 14, 166; P. Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-1951* (London, 1992), p. 155.

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education.⁶ He was not without criticism, however, and identified the retention of fees in Direct Grant Schools as a 'concession to what are little more than vulgar prejudices.' These fees would 'perpetuate a division within public secondary education based not on education, but on social grounds' and were especially regrettable when the rest of the Bill was 'so good.' Tawney remained thankful to Butler for sending him the Bill and 'still more, for the Bill itself.'⁷

On the surface at least, Tawney's warm embrace of Butler's provisions appears surprising, considering the Act's meritocratic reputation. For Peter Hennessy the themes of 'Establishment and meritocracy have been bound increasingly closely in Britain since Rab Butler's Education Bill received royal assent', while Tony Judt characterised 1944 as the birth of Britain's '*generation meritocratique*'.⁸ Tawney has long been considered the doyenne of a particular branch of 'ethical' or Christian socialism which neglected a meritocratic interpretation of opportunity in favour of the concept of equal fellowship.⁹ In the aftermath of the Great Depression, he attacked the illusion that equality of opportunity could be successfully realised in a materially unequal society with a, now famous, tadpole analogy:

It is possible that intelligent tadpoles reconcile themselves to the inconveniences of their position, by reflecting that, though most of them will live and die as tadpoles and nothing more, the more fortunate of the species will one day shed their tails, distend their mouths and stomachs, hop nimbly on to dry land, and croak addresses to their former friends on the virtues by means of which tadpoles of character and capacity can rise to be frogs.¹⁰

Tawney was clearly cognisant of how the doctrine of equality of opportunity could degenerate and become the basis for new forms of inequality, a 'decorous drapery' which hid the harsh facts of a new form of subordination.¹¹ It is only by anatomising the concept of meritocracy in the twilight of the Second World War, by attempting to recover its meaning without the corresponding word, that the apparent contradiction in Tawney's advocacy for the meritocratic Butler Act can be successfully explained.

⁶ R.H. Tawney, 'Letter to R.A. Butler', (21/12/1943), *Conservative Party Archive*, Bodleian Library [RAB/2/3/3], p. 1.

⁷ Tawney, 'Letter', p. 2.

⁸ P. Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy* (London, 2015), p. 56; T. Judt & T. Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), p. 112.

⁹ N. Dennis & A.H. Halsey, *English Ethical Socialism: Thomas More to R.H. Tawney* (Oxford, 1988); N. Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics: Retreating Visions* (London, 2nd Ed., 2004), pp. 24-26; For a critical approach to this categorisation, see: T. Rogan, *The Moral Economists: R.H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson and the Critique of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ., 2017), pp. 16-50.

¹⁰ R.H. Tawney, *Equality* (London, 1931), p. 142.

¹¹ R.H. Tawney, 'The Choice before the Labour Party', *The Political Quarterly*, 3/3 (1932), p. 26.

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Tawney was far from alone in his advocacy of the Bill. The Labour Party's 1945 General Election manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, contained only a few sentences on education.¹² Largely put together by the Head of the Labour Party Research Department, Michael Young, the manifesto noted the 'important step forward' heralded by the Act and promised to raise the school leaving age to 16 at 'the earliest possible moment', introduce suitable further education and provide 'free secondary education for all.'¹³ The fact that the likes of Tawney, as well as the Labour Party more broadly, were content to define their educational objects in terms of facilitating a particular conception of equality of opportunity serves to elucidate some of the assumptions about intelligence shared by policymakers and other historical agents in the immediate post-war period. These assumptions largely stemmed from the work of Cyril Burt which argued that intellectual development progressed as if it were governed by a single central factor or 'general intelligence.'¹⁴ The 1943 Norwood Report, for example, claimed that an individual child's predisposition to a particular type of educational training and instruction could be clearly identified and this in turn provided a clear steer towards a tripartite system of provision.¹⁵ As Ken Jones has highlighted, the Report 'imagined an entire mental and emotional universe for its groupings, each of which as it were lived on different worlds.'¹⁶ The Butler Act and the tripartite system cemented Norwood's assumptions, identifying intellectual differences as an intrinsic feature of the social order and naturalising them in the process. Reflecting on post-war changes in education from the vantage point of the early 1970s, the civil servant and social scientist Maurice Kogan highlighted how policy-makers felt intelligence testing had reached a 'high state of technical competence' in the early 1940s. Crucially, these instruments were, he argued, 'intended to reinforce the egalitarian doctrines of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s by enabling the abilities of the underprivileged to be identified and nourished.' The devices were there to help establish the widely shared aim of an 'Opportunity State'.¹⁷

As Burt's falsifications gradually came to light and greater sociological knowledge revealed the implicit class-biases of the selective system, the notion of an isolatable

¹² The Labour Party, *Let Us Face the Future* (London, 1945), <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1945/1945-labour-manifesto.shtml> (Accessed: 03/04/2018).

¹³ Despite its historical significance, upon reflection Young was not happy with the manifesto: 'It wasn't well written, but nor did it need to be.' He aimed for 'Beveridge plus Keynes plus socialism' and importantly 'it worked – the entire programme was put into action.' P. Hennessy, 'Michael Young and the Labour Party', *Contemporary British History*, 19/3 (2005), p. 282; M. Young, 'Epilogue', in his *Social Scientist as Innovator* (Cambridge, MA., 1983), p. 253.

¹⁴ D. Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945-1951: Tales of a New Jerusalem* (London, 2008), p. 563.

¹⁵ J. Nuttall, *Psychological Socialism: The Labour Party and Qualities of the Mind and Character, 1931 to the Present* (Manchester, 2009), p. 56; For the connections between eugenic thought and education policy in the years leading up to the War, see: C. Hanson, *Eugenics, Literature, and Culture in Post-War Britain* (London, 2013), pp. 13-38.

¹⁶ K. Jones, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 21.

¹⁷ M. Kogan, 'Introduction', in his *The Politics of Education: Edward Boyle and Anthony Crosland in Conversation* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 22.

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'general intelligence', the tests used to identify this, and the tripartite system they underpinned, gradually came to be seen as distinctly unjust and characterised as largely conservative creations. Yet, as Kogan highlights, in the 1940s the understanding of intelligence embodied in reports like Norwood could lead in radical directions. It promised, for example, to deliver a more educated elite, a long-cherished goal of socialists like Tawney. As Lindsay Paterson has claimed, 'the idea of selection by measured merit came to be thought of as a socialist policy, the only fair and educationally respectable response to invidious selection by wealth or nepotism.'¹⁸ Tawney's Christian pessimism logically restricted him from adopting the view of an optimistic rationalist in which nurture could always overcome the defects of nature. For Tawney differences of natural endowment were obscured by the privileged access to education obtained by certain classes.¹⁹ As Tawney's letter to Butler made clear, he was challenging division in education, not on the basis of education or ability but on 'social grounds.' Movement towards a more meritocratically selected, educated elite represented significant progress on the hereditary or nepotistic leadership which socialists felt had governed early-twentieth century Britain. Yet the Butler Act, largely characterised by historians as a conservative measure which was deployed to neuter more egalitarian ambitious, also involved significant radicalism on the part of conservatives.²⁰ As Peter Mandler has argued, conservatives had long considered education in relation to elite training not elite selection.²¹ Selection, it was widely assumed, was largely a product of hereditary processes and propped up an ascriptive class system. The Butler Act, however, acknowledged that talents and skills were dispersed unevenly across class divides. It committed the state, admittedly in a minimalistic fashion, to identify and encourage individuals to be socially mobile, with significant consequences for conservative understandings of the function and character of the middle classes.

While the 1944 Act was undoubtedly designed to identify those working-class children capable of benefitting from a rigorous liberal education and providing them with access to this heritage, it would be an anachronistic simplification to claim that socialist or conservative policymakers and intellectuals were solely interested in the concept of equality of opportunity in education merely as a means to greater upward social

¹⁸ L. Paterson, *Social Radicalism and Liberal Education* (St. Andrews, 2015), p. 143.

¹⁹ Paterson, *Social Radicalism*, p. 94; M. Carter, *T.H Green and the Development of Ethical Socialism* (Exeter, 2003), pp. 178-79.

²⁰ Butler brought suspicious or hostile conservatives onside by claiming the Act preserved an 'elite culture.' He recognised, however, that the post-war environment demanded significant measures to open educational opportunities up to a greater segment of the populace, see: R.A. Butler, *The Art of the Possible: The Memoirs of Lord Butler* (London, 1971), p. 86.

²¹ P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the RHS*, 24 (2014), p. 10.

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mobility.²² Here, Britain's education system, it was argued by the likes of English-American poet W.H. Auden, reflected its class system (rather than vice versa) and genuine reform would remain a 'highbrow' and 'unreal' pursuit until broader societal shifts in attitudes to work occurred.²³ In the midst of war and a politics driven by the overriding concern to restore Britain's productive capacity, educational experience did not appear to be the ultimate or the most pressing explanation for social stratification as it would by the end of the 1950s.²⁴ As Labour's Education Minister from 1945 to 1947, Ellen Wilkinson claimed

Not everyone wants an academic education. After all, coal has to be mined and fields ploughed, and it is a fantastic idea that we have allowed so to speak, to be cemented into our body politic that you are in a higher social class if you add up figures in a book than if you plough the fields and scatter the good seed on the land.²⁵

The politics of production placed this ambition within reach. As the Labour M.P. and self-proclaimed 'backbench technocrat' Austen Albu argued, against a backdrop of full-employment, strong trade unions and rising wages 'the prestige of the manual worker rises also; instead of being the forgotten man, he (or she) finds himself the subject of continual publicity due to the general interest in the level of industrial production.'²⁶ In this sense Labour intellectuals consistently maintained that educational distinctions between technical, academic and manual skills would become gradually redundant once greater material equality was achieved. Conservatives could also endorse elements of this programme. For Butler the crucial aim of the education policy in 1944 was to provide diverse educational provision tempered by social cohesion. As Elizabeth Sundermann has argued the Act provides a brief window into a particular historical moment where policymakers felt 'men, women and children had a way forward' that was not based on 'increased professionalisation and material wealth, but on a philosophy of life-long learning and a sense of education as related to Christian-civic humanism.'²⁷ The notion of parity of esteem, deliberately deceptive or implausibly utopian from the vantage point of the 1960s, was a logical and widely held ambition.

²² Paterson, *Social Radicalism*, pp. 163-64.

²³ See for example: W.H. Auden & T.C. Worsley, *Education Today and Tomorrow* (London, 1939), p. 41; J. Parker, *Labour Marches On* (Harmondsworth, 1947).

²⁴ Although over the course of the immediate post-war decade increasing numbers of socialists were beginning to connect education reform with higher economic growth. See, for example: M. Young, *Labour's Plan for Plenty* (London, 1947), p. 115.

²⁵ E. Wilkinson, *Education* (21/06/1946), Quoted in: L. Beers, *Red Ellen: The Life of Ellen Wilkinson, Socialist, Feminist, Internationalist* (London, 2016), pp. 441-42.

²⁶ Albu left an unpublished memoir entitled, 'Backbench Technocrat', see: A. Albu, 'Backbench Technocrat' (Unpublished, 1976), *Papers of Austen Albu*, CCC, Box 15; A. Albu, 'Full Employment: Social and Political Effects', *The Monthly Journal* (March, 1944), p. 80.

²⁷ E. Sundermann, *For God and Country: Butler's 1944 Education Act* (Newcastle, 2015), p. xi.

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What becomes clear from Tawney and Butler's shared agreement over the outline of the Act was that different ideological traditions supported a meritocratic reordering in education for divergent ends. The Butler Act attracted this agreement, much like the Beveridge Report, on the basis of its 'ideological ecumenicalism.'²⁸ While the idea of transforming post-war Britain into a meritocracy was therefore instigated on the basis of diverse ends and with different expectations and aspirations, the 1944 Education Act symbolised the extent to which both conservatives and social democrats shared – and were willing to support policies on the basis of – certain meritocratic principles. Crucially, this transformation was seen as just that: a radical process which involved a significant assault on hereditary privilege, power and advantage. Following Attlee's triumphant General Election victory in 1945, Labour Party intellectuals considered the socialist society within reach and in this sense an analysis of the Butler Act serves to reveal the time horizons under which politicians and intellectuals such as Tawney and Young operated. As the latter argued, 'the approach to socialism must be gradual' in order to preserve democracy, and this explained why the 1945 manifesto 'did not embody 100% socialism.' A socialist society, he claimed, 'may be attained by 1960, not by 1950.'²⁹ Tawney's letter to Butler, and his endorsement of a Bill that entrenched the status of a grammar school education, highlights the extent to which many Labour Party intellectuals had adopted a type of epistemological conservatism. They considered society 'as it was' and this led them to endorse gradualist policy prescriptions. Once immediate needs were satisfied, unjust material inequalities eradicated and significant redistribution achieved, then the egalitarian seeds of the 1944 Act could truly begin to flower. If conservatives were more likely to seek to limit the extent of this assault, the likes of Butler still sought an education system which prioritised a particular conception of equality of opportunity as part of a broader endorsement of meritocracy. A meritocratic education system preserved inequality, making it more amenable to post-war conditions, prevailing conceptions of social justice, and secured individual liberty, allowing every member of the community to climb, or fall, to their 'proper place'.

The Butler Act, however, was rendered obsolete almost as soon as it was published. As the notion of a meritocracy began to take root – placing a greater emphasis on objectively judged credentials as the basis for upward social mobility into stable, well-rewarded employment in the professions – education was a resource which could no longer be rationed for the few. Perhaps, therefore, we should characterise meritocracy in

²⁸ As Ben Jackson has argued in relation to the Beveridge Report, in a passage which can equally be applied to Butler's 1944 Act: 'the ideological ecumenicalism of the Report was its greatest short-term strength, in that it prescribed measures that could be supported on the basis of varying conceptions of social justice, and accordingly commanded widespread political enthusiasm.' B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left* (Manchester, 2007), p. 139.

²⁹ Young, *Plan*, pp. 10-11.

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a similar way to Peter Mandler: as a fundamentally 'short-lived and inherently unstable' concept, a compromise which attracted fleeting support but was quickly undone in the immediate post-war decades as both Parties came to endorse comprehensive schooling.³⁰ Meritocracy, however, outlived the Butler Act's tripartism. To fully understand the range of meaning meritocracy possessed in the immediate post-war decades we need to step back from a focus on education, the concept's conventional historiographical habitat. The range of questions to which meritocracy provided a potential answer can help to explain the widespread ideological attachment to the concept in post-war Britain, an attachment which helped it to outlive transformations in education policy. Tawney's letter to Butler therefore serves as a useful window into the onset of what Guy Ortolano has described as the 'meritocratic moment' in post-war British history. This moment was a period characterised by the rise of the welfare state, the mixed economy and a defence establishment all managed, as never before, by specialised experts. In this new meritocracy it was to be 'expertise', defined as a set of skills transmitted through education to the capable individual, rather than property or capital which would offer the key to advancement, authority and success.³¹ The promise was equality of opportunity rather than outcome and the bargain was that these experts would employ their talent and training in order to benefit the nation as a whole.

Tawney's letter to Butler demonstrates how two distinct ideological traditions could conceptually overlap at the point of meritocracy. While it may well have been a contingent commitment, meritocracy remained useful in deferring or reconciling a whole series of conceptual tensions and policy challenges. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the origins of this deferral and to highlight the conceptual components which shaped the meaning of meritocracy throughout the post-war period. Many of the social processes which became attached to the concept – whether the rise of a 'new' middle class or the expansion of the professions – have longer histories which reside outside the scope of this thesis. While at times this chapter reaches back into the interwar period, it argues that the Second World War acted as a catalyst, serving to press these issues more firmly and urgently onto Britain's intellectual politics. It begins by exploring the importance both conservatives and socialists placed on meritocracy in the face of a class system in flux. The concept promised a means to escape the narrow confines of class politics and to enhance the electoral appeal of both major Parties. As we explored above, the notion that talent, skill and merit were dispersed unevenly across Britain's class divide was widely shared by the start of the 1940s. Both conservatives and socialists

³⁰ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I', p. 9.

³¹ G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 16, 18.

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could agree, for reasons of efficiency and social justice, that these talents, skills and merits deserved or needed the opportunity to be realised. While the former saw meritocracy as a means to ensure the talented working-class individual could become middle-class, the latter did not consider these distinctions as forming the basis of a fixed or self-perpetuating class identity. Meritocracy offered to open-up positions of power on the basis of equality of opportunity or proved competence and, in the process, to restore authority and legitimacy to Britain's elite. The second part of this chapter analyses how both conservatives and socialists came to place their faith in 'humane technocrats' to manage political change. The dominant cultural figure of this moment was no longer the risk-taking, individualist entrepreneur but the dedicated, rational professional utilising their expertise for the public good. At the heart of this phenomenon was the 'managerial revolution.' The separation of ownership from control, it was argued, had rendered capitalism benign and produced a new breed of professional managers, meritocratically selected and rewarded, with a responsibility to the wider community. Finally, while Tawney's letter to Butler highlights the contingent agreement about a meritocratic pattern of opportunities, at its core meritocracy should be considered as a distributive logic. The priority of socialists was to eradicate functionless wealth, while conservatives sought to distance themselves from the perceived failure of laissez-faire market mechanisms in the interwar years. Both traditions therefore overlapped in the immediate post-war period over the desirability of a meritocratic pattern of rewards.

(1.2) A 'Third England'

The incorporation of the concept of meritocracy, which came to dominate mainstream ideologies in post-war Britain by the end of the 1950s, initially reflected the desire of both social democrats and conservatives to reconfigure their conceptual frameworks to incorporate the social, political and economic transformations they perceived the War to have engendered. Central to this was the nature of capitalism and the notion of social class. Ideologies were forced to respond to the social consequences of war, the advent of new technological developments which were transforming the organisation of industry and conceptions of skill, as well as the rise of new social groups which challenged conventional notions of occupational status and hierarchy. It is no surprise, therefore, that the concept of meritocracy took on a central importance when Britain's class system was largely felt to be in a state of flux. Mainstream ideologies increasingly came to unite around a social hierarchy divided by an individual's function, evaluating his (and it was almost always 'his') ability to contribute to the productive capacity of the national community and the notion of a public good. Against the backdrop of a 'politics of production' the range of skills and talents considered meritorious were broad and to be

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found dispersed unevenly across class boundaries.³² As was discussed in relation to the Butler Act, from the perspective of the immediate post-war decades this meritocratic reconstruction of Britain's class system on the basis of skill, ability or function was seen to entail radical consequences.

In 1949 the Conservative M.P. Angus Maude and the journalist Roy Lewis published their first book, *The English Middle Classes*.³³ The book, initially entitled *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Classes*, sought to evaluate the state of Britain's middle class after the impact of the Second World War and the Labour Party's landslide victory in the 1945 General Election. Echoing Mike Savage's analysis of Mass Observation accounts, Maude and Lewis identified the increasing visibility and power of the manual worker in post-war Britain as producing a strong anti-working class feeling amongst members of the traditional middle class.³⁴ *The English Middle Classes* highlights a hierarchy in flux, characterised by a middle class 'squeezed by inflation, by shortages and by the redistribution of wealth and incomes' working longer hours while 'the working class apparently got more for doing less.' The social stability secured by a strong and thriving traditional middle class was perceived to be under threat, 'oppressed from above and from below – by a new black market plutocracy and by the rapacity of the workers.'³⁵ Crucial for Maude and Lewis's pessimistic analysis of middle-class existence in post-war Britain was the rise of an indeterminate stratum, a class of brain workers who felt their skills entitled them to positions of national leadership. This group, the authors lamented, were increasingly the electoral focus of the Conservative and Labour Parties alike.³⁶ Labour's General Election victory was heralded at the time, and has subsequently been characterised by historians, as a 'People's Victory'.³⁷ Against the urgent need to restore Britain's productive capacity in the aftermath of war, the manual worker was set to undergo an unprecedented rise in political significance and national prestige. Yet the Party's 1945 victory also relied heavily on appealing to 'middle opinion', allowing Labour to win votes from around thirty-percent of those employed in 'middle-class occupations'

³² For the concept of the 'politics of production', see: C.S. Maier, 'The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy after World War II', *International Organisation*, 31/4 (1977), p. 615; P.J. Maguire, 'Patriotism, Politics and Production', in P.J. Maguire & J. Woodham (Eds.), *Design and Cultural Politics in Post-War Britain* (London, 1997), pp. 29-45; D. Edgerton, *Britain's War Machine: Weapons, Resources and Experts in the Second World War* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 123-57.

³³ A. Maude & R. Lewis, *The English Middle Classes* (London, 1949).

³⁴ M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 74-75.

³⁵ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, pp. 93-94.

³⁶ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 79, 81, 82; P. Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics and Philosophy of Inequality* (London, 2011), p. 76.

³⁷ See: S. Fielding, 'What Did "The People" Want? The Meaning of the 1945 General Election', *The Historical Journal*, 35/3 (1992), pp. 623-39.

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and capture marginal seats in the South, particularly in London's suburbs.³⁸ This coalition, however, did not prove stable. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm was to note over thirty years later in his influential Marx Memorial lecture 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?', 1945 should be characterised not as the triumph of the working class, but as the start of its decay.³⁹ As the Labour Government began to eliminate the most pressing material needs, encourage aspiration and social mobility, and increasingly focus its electoral appeal to rising meritocrats, it was said to have undermined the basis of its own support. This interpretation was central to the embourgeoisement theories prominent in the mid-to-late 1950s as social democrats attempted to grapple with Labour's three consecutive General Election defeats and increasing working-class support for the Conservatives.⁴⁰ While the Party would still attract two-million middle-class voters in 1950, this paled in comparison to the Conservatives 6.5 million working-class voters.⁴¹

British socialists had always aimed for more than a 'worker's state'. They sought a classless Britain, a society which transcended the arbitrary, irrational and wasteful nature of a class system characterised by functionless wealth, nepotism and the hereditary principle. For Michael Young, it was 'the virus of class' which had done 'more than anything else to instil poison into British society.'⁴² Yet, much like conservatives, socialists had to recognise that the nature of capitalism had changed. For Evan Durbin, Labour M.P. and forerunner of the Revisionist movement of the early 1950s, this new capitalism had led to changes in the nature of class which greatly weakened the Marxist case for a proletarian revolution. Britain's political democracy was too valuable, it was argued, to risk rapid social change.⁴³ The Labour M.P., and future intellectual guru of 'Revisionism', Anthony Crosland agreed. In his *New Fabian Essay* contribution of 1952 he argued that Britain at the end of the 1940s was best characterised, not as a capitalist society, but by 'Statism', a type of economic system defined by a large amount of state control. In contrast to the 'classical Marxist picture' of 'two tightly-knit homogenous social classes ranged clearly against each other', Britain was increasingly characterised by a 'very complicated class structure' with an increasing proliferation of 'middle groups'.

³⁸ J. Stevenson, 'The United Kingdom', in S. Salter & J. Stevenson (Eds.), *The Working Class and Politics in Europe and America 1929-1951* (Oxford, 1984), p. 149.

³⁹ E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Forward March of Labour Halted?', in M. Jacques & F. Mulhern (Eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* (London, 1981), pp. 1-19.

⁴⁰ See, for example: C.A.R. Crosland, *Can Labour Win?* (London, 1960); M. Abrams & R. Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth, 1960); F. Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society: Family, Life and Industry* (London, 1961).

⁴¹ R. McKibbin, *Parties and People: England, 1914-1951* (Oxford, 2010), p. 187.

⁴² Young, *Plan*, p. 18.

⁴³ E. Durbin, *The Politics of Democratic Socialism: An Essay on Social Policy* (London, 1940); E. Durbin, *What Have We to Defend? A Brief Critical Examination of the British Social Tradition* (London, 1942), pp. 35-60; G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History* (London, 3rd Ed., 1997), pp. 188-93.

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This ensured that 'most of the unbearable social tensions which afflicted capitalism will have disappeared' as had a 'uniquely delineated ruling class' and a 'clearly defined class struggle'.⁴⁴ By rejecting class struggle as undesirable and unnecessary, social democrats like Crosland were therefore forced to engage in a difficult balancing act between the fundamental concepts of equality and liberty.

Central to this condition of 'Statism', Crosland argued, was the 'rise of the technical and professional middle class', a sociological trend 'likely to continue'.⁴⁵ Britain's intellectual politics throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century was increasingly pre-occupied with theorising about 'the technicians and the so-called black-coated workers', the 'nephews and great nephews of Mr Polly' or the 'parents of the C1s and the more qualified of the C2s of later pollsters'.⁴⁶ As Maude and Lewis argued, by the 1930s 'there came into being an intermediate class, as yet neither middle-class nor working-class, but becoming increasingly middle-class as its prospects improved'.⁴⁷ This was J.B. Priestley's 'Third England' and Orwell's 'necessary people'.⁴⁸ The latter, in his 1941 essay 'The Lion and The Unicorn', made a passionate plea for an 'intelligent Socialist movement' to capture the votes and the allegiance of these people who are 'most at home in and most definitely of the modern world'.⁴⁹ For Orwell this included 'the technicians and the higher-paid skilled workers, the airmen and their mechanics, the radio experts, film producers, popular journalists and industrial chemists.' The rise of these occupations was the product of advanced capitalism which, since the end of the First World War, had encouraged the 'upward and downward extension of the middle class' and had begun to create something that had 'never existed in England before: people of indeterminate social class'.⁵⁰ This process had happened on such a scale, accompanied by the spread of 'middle-class ideas and habits' among an increasingly affluent working class, as to make 'the old classification of society into capitalists, proletarians and petit bourgeois...almost obsolete.' Until now the 'suffocating stupidity' of left-wing propaganda, Orwell argued, had 'frightened away whole classes' of these 'necessary people'.⁵¹ Orwell's appeal can be placed in a long line of attempts by socialist and Labour Party intellectuals to create a 'coalition of the functional.' This explicitly recognised that productive usefulness was not confined to one particular class and sought to detach 'socially valuable' occupations from a distinctly middle-class political orbit and ally them with notions of skill found in the

⁴⁴ C.A.R. Crosland, 'The Transition from Capitalism', in Crossman, *New Fabian*, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁵ Crosland, 'Transition from Capitalism', p. 42.

⁴⁶ D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair* (London, 2nd Ed., 1999), p. 20.

⁴⁷ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 79.

⁴⁸ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London, 1934); G. Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn (1941)', in his *Why I Write?* (London, 2014), p. 69.

⁴⁹ Orwell, 'Lion', pp. 44-45.

⁵⁰ Orwell, 'Lion', pp. 44-45, 42.

⁵¹ Orwell, 'Lion', p. 42, 69.

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working class. For the future Minister of Education Ellen Wilkinson, the Labour appeal to the middle classes should be rooted in attracting 'the most socially valuable section.'⁵² Like Orwell this included 'the inventors, the organisers, the technicians' who, for Wilkinson, were 'indispensable to any planning of the machine age.' A truly revolutionary appeal to the middle class would not be based on security wages or pensions but focus on uniting technician and worker against the 'superfluous parasites on the economic system.'⁵³ These groups were to be privileged, therefore, on their ability to contribute to the public good.

While historians have often discussed the rise of a distinct welfare state professional in this period, Orwell and Wilkinson highlight a socialist desire to appeal to a technical or expertise-centred identity which would increasingly find a home in the middle class. The twentieth century in Britain saw the emergence and growth of a new technical middle class, a growth much faster than the also expanding old professional middle class of doctors, lawyers or the administrative civil servants.⁵⁴ This new class has received too little attention from historians in large part because the majority were not elite enough to figure in elite studies and were too elevated to be captured by those focused on white-collar trade unionism. For Mike Savage these middle-class technical identities emerge from disputes with older cultural formations and a rejection of the gentlemanly embrace of the interwar years which was seen to be out of keeping with the 'meritocratic tenor of post-war Britain.'⁵⁵ From a scorn towards practical skill and an insistence on cultural hierarchy in the 1930s, there was 'an increasing embrace of merit, technique and skill as the markers of managerial and leadership capacity.' In the immediate post-war decades there emerged a desire to distinguish oneself from a 'certain kind of high-powered intellectual, identified with purely arty concerns' and instead to defend a vision of intellectuality which was allied with 'technique, practical application, political commitment, skill and science.'⁵⁶ This appeal reaches down into the world of skilled manual labour while also proving flexible enough to appropriate aspects of the professional and academic educated identities. As Savage argues, and as will be discussed throughout this thesis, in the ensuing decades these technocratic identities increasingly lose their affiliation to skilled manual work and become increasingly credentialist in orientation. Over the course of the post-war period the middle classes no longer saw class in ascriptive terms – i.e. a position in society into which an individual is

⁵² E. Wilkinson, 'Socialism and the Problem of the Middle Classes', in G.E.G. Catlin (Ed.), *New Trends in Socialism* (London, 1935), p. 213.

⁵³ Wilkinson, 'Problem of the Middle Classes', p. 215.

⁵⁴ D. Edgerton, *Warfare State: Britain, 1920-1970* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 172-73.

⁵⁵ Savage, *Identities*, p. 67.

⁵⁶ Savage, *Identities*, p. 235, 83.

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simply born (or not) – but rather considered the class hierarchy as something to be navigated by strategically mobile individuals.⁵⁷

Maude and Lewis were resistant to this idea that the middle classes were simply a destination for a socially mobile, technical, expertise-centred identity. The class structure, the authors argued, served to

knit society with order and cohesion, providing a graduated slope down which the standards of the highest might descend to the lowest, and providing the spur of ambition to urge the best from below into positions of responsibility and influence [...] the moment a man rose into them [the middle classes], influences were at work to civilise and change the recruit and fit him and his descents for new purposes – for service to the community as a whole.⁵⁸

A meritocratic middle class threatened this structure. If the middle class existed to 'conserve and transmit the stored experience of the whole nation in the arts of community and statecraft' meritocracy held little reverence for tradition.⁵⁹ The middle classes, the authors argued, were not simply a 'salaried' or an 'organising or managerial cadre' because neither of these groups possessed social power or independence. This rising salariat became 'ambitious to differentiate itself from those it believed its inferiors, and to emulate those it conceived its superiors.' Citing the work of Guy Chapman, Maude and Lewis were concerned that the ambitious brainworker was governed by a 'naïve' perception that emulation and distinction involved accumulating ever-greater material possessions, making them 'ready victims to the producer and the salesman.'⁶⁰ The naivety of these socially mobile individuals formed the basis of Maude's critique of the rampant consumerism of the affluent society in the 1950s and 1960s. More concerning for Maude and Lewis, however, was the increasing connection between the middle classes and the state. The independence of the traditional middle class preserved freedom and encouraged a plurality of tastes, with private wealth allowing the middle classes to 'reward and encourage those whom the State ignores or dislikes.' Without this, judgements of taste, culture and the ultimate value of a group or individual's contribution to the social good would accrue solely to those capable of appealing to the state. For Maude and Lewis

To be ruled by a narrow, homogenous caste is, in the end, to be misruled. To be ruled by a single interest, even though it is not a hereditary caste, may be

⁵⁷ Savage, *Identities*, p. 225, 226.

⁵⁸ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, pp. 105-06.

⁵⁹ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 278.

⁶⁰ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 79; G. Chapman, *Culture and Survival* (London, 1940), p. 194.

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as bad [...] to be ruled by an official interest, or an intellectual interest, would be equally, if not more unpleasant [...] A great part of the strength, and of the value, of the middle classes in English political life has been their ability to set off, within themselves, intellect against money, common sense against intellect, and a tradition of gentility against all three. Therein lies the great advantage of a social class over a body of experts, or an elite chosen by means of examination and intelligence tests.⁶¹

The plurality of the traditional middle class – the fact that access was not based on money or intellect alone – was the vital source of its stabilising function. This function was threatened by a vision of meritocracy which restricted access to middle-class status to one characteristic or set of characteristics, namely intelligence or technical competence. More importantly, for Maude and Lewis the threat of a broad meritocracy being replaced by a narrow one was more acute than ever largely thanks to the increasing reliance on the state to facilitate and encourage meritocratic judgements. *The English Middle Classes*, however, should be read as a piece of pessimistic sociology or as an account of how Britain's class system – and particular its middling orders – had been transformed by a combination of war and the reforms of a Labour Government. As Maude and Lewis noted, the idea that within the middle classes 'significant new groupings are taking place, and giving rise to new loyalties and new ways of life, is undeniable.'⁶² In short, these changes had already taken place and – being conservatives – Maude and Lewis felt that prospects for reversing them were slim. As later chapters will explore, Maude was largely confined to the peripheries of post-war conservatism until the rise of Thatcherism where his critiques of meritocracy would find new resonances.

The views of Maude and Lewis were, therefore, increasingly marginalised in the post-war period. A distinctly progressive strand of conservatism which sought to reconcile conservatives to the transformed political, social and intellectual circumstances of the post-war moment gradually began to capture the Party. Whereas all conservatives thought it was impossible and undesirable to eliminate distinctions of class, this progressive strand did advocate for a system that would better reflect meritocratic differences. As Dean Blackburn has argued, post-war conservatism increasingly sought to achieve balance between the classes in order to preserve the vitality of the social organism. This led them at certain historical junctures, particularly the immediate decade after the end of the War, to ensure that divisions of class were, as far as

⁶¹ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 107, 109.

⁶² Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 25.

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possible, related to disparities of ability.⁶³ For political operators such as David Clarke, Director of the Conservative Research Department from 1946 to 1951, 'so long as there is variety of quality and ability, and it is of nature that it should be so, so long will there be differentiation in classes.'⁶⁴ An important figure in the intellectual rise of the Middle Way Conservatism associated with Harold Macmillan, Quintin Hogg and Rab Butler which came increasingly to dominate Party thinking in the immediate post-war decades, Clarke argued that there was 'an underlying unity in the brotherhood of man which over-rides classes.'⁶⁵ Conservatives, however, had lost sight of this unity. Cub Alport, Director of the Conservative Political Centre between 1945 and 1950, had long urged his Party to embrace a truly 'national faith' and welcomed the Party's defeat in the 1945 General Election as an opportunity to construct one.⁶⁶ Only a conservative, it was argued, could put the interests of the organic nation above the twin evils of selfish individualism and class envy.⁶⁷ For David Clarke, the Labour Party's appeal to class identity would naturally degenerate into envy and lead to the building up of artificial 'barriers between man and man', threatening social harmony.⁶⁸

The construction of a meritocratically selected hierarchy of skill, expertise and talent, therefore, represented a necessary concession to the egalitarian impulse of the post-war world. As Clarke argued, 'a distinction there might be and there always will be between classes' but the more 'that distinction is founded on ability, the more will it be bridged by respect.' In short, British society 'must be a system of classes based on talent.'⁶⁹ Clarke's advocacy for a meritocratic class structure highlights the extent to which, at certain junctures, a 'meritocratic impulse' compelled progressive conservatives to endorse policies that were designed to erode, rather than preserve, material inequality. For important figures like Clarke, Alport and Macmillan, it was a meritocracy – with its connection to notions of technical skill rooted in the working and middle classes – which would restore authority and utility to Britain's fragile class system. Paradoxically, therefore, in the immediate post-war decades meritocracy was considered as a means to bolster the authority of the class system *and* to transcend it. While both conservatives and social democrats felt distinctions of talent were required to aid the nation's productive capacity, conservatives saw meritocracy as a means by which more talented

⁶³ D. Blackburn, '"For We Shall Prejudice Nothing": Middle Way Conservatism and the Defence of Inequality, 1945-1979', *Political Studies*, 64/Supp.1 (2016), p. 166.

⁶⁴ Clarke, *Conservative Faith*, p. 8; A. Beichman, 'Hugger-Mugger in Old Queen Street: The Origins of the Conservative Research Department', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 13/4 (1978), pp. 671-88; L. Black, 'Tories and Hunters: Swinton College and the Landscape of Modern Conservatism', *History Workshop Journal*, 77/1 (2014), p. 199.

⁶⁵ Clarke, *Conservative Faith*, p. 9.

⁶⁶ C. Alport, *A National Faith* (London, 1938); M. Garnett, *Alport: A Study in Loyalty* (Chesham, 1999), p. xviii.

⁶⁷ Dorey, *British Conservatism*, pp. 51-52.

⁶⁸ Clarke, *Conservative Faith*, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Clarke, *Conservative Faith*, pp. 14-15, 29.

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working-class individuals could become middle-class whereas social democrats, initially at least, did not consider these distinctions as forming the basis of a fixed or self-perpetuating class identity.

(1.3) The Humane Technocrats

Restoring authority to Britain's mutating post-war class system would require new leaders and new conceptions of leadership. As Maude and Lewis argued, Britain in the post-war world has 'no aristocracy, no upper class to take the lead.'⁷⁰ For Orwell, 'one of the dominant facts in English life during the past three quarters of a century has been the decay of ability in the ruling class.' England, he claimed, 'is a family with the wrong members in control.'⁷¹ It was clear that in the post-war world the aristocracy was no longer an elite which demanded unthinking loyalty but, as sociologists like Edward Shils argued, should be considered as a thoroughly modern group whose social function should be evaluated according to rational criteria.⁷² For conservatives the principles of aristocracy still retained some value. In a foreword to a collection of speeches by Viscount Hinchinbrooke, an influential progressive conservative, the political scientist Ernest Baker argued that while mentioning 'the aristocratic principle' might have been 'irrelevant in 1870' it 'is perhaps not irrelevant to-day.'⁷³ If 'Toryism' can represent, in its measure, 'the principle and idea of aristocracy' which, he noted, 'is something entirely different from plutocracy', it will be 'serving the nation and adding a 'thread that is needed to the general life of national society.'⁷⁴ Similarly, Cub Alport wanted to encourage the development of a broad aristocracy, like the one he considered existed before 1914, which would exchange privilege for the duty of public service.⁷⁵

Meritocracy was a useful concept here. It offered to open up leadership positions on the basis of equality of opportunity and proved competence, restoring authority and legitimacy to Britain's elites. This leadership was now to come from the expert who would help to construct and staff a meritocratically selected and rewarded elite motivated by what Harold Perkin has described as a 'professional ideal' or 'ethic'.⁷⁶ In

⁷⁰ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 289.

⁷¹ Orwell, 'Lion', p. 31, 54.

⁷² E. Shils, 'The Intellectuals (I): Great Britain', *Encounter* (April, 1955), pp. 5-16; Savage, *Identities*, pp. 70-71.

⁷³ E. Baker, 'Foreword', in Vis. Hinchinbrooke's, *Full Speed Ahead! Essays in Tory Reform* (London, 1941), p. v.

⁷⁴ Baker, 'Foreword', p. v.

⁷⁵ Alport, *National Faith*.

⁷⁶ H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London, 2nd Ed., 2002), pp. 116-23; A. Maude & R. Lewis, *Professional People* (London, 1952), pp. 46-71; T. Parsons, 'The Professions and Social Structure (1939)', in his *Essays in Sociological Theory* (New York, [1954] 2010), pp. 34-39; A. Abbott, *The System of Professions: An Essay on the Division of Expert Labour* (London, 1988), pp. 9-20.

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Perkin's words the twentieth is not 'pace FDR, the century of the common man but of the uncommon and increasingly professional expert.'⁷⁷ The reforms of the Attlee Government – from nationalisation to healthcare, defence policy to education – leaned heavily on these professional experts. In the words of Paul Addison, the Labour Government's reform programme 'originated in the thought of the upper-middle class of socially concerned professional people, of whom Beveridge and Keynes were the patron saints.' For Addison the rise of the 'humane technocrat' during the Second World War 'provided a patriotic compromise' between socialism and conservatism, satisfying the formers 'desire for social amelioration' without 'in any way attacking the roots of exploitation and injustice.'⁷⁸ The importance of scientific and technical specialists, in particular in the burgeoning industrial-military sector, as well as the expanding needs of the welfare state and its administration, created a social, political and cultural landscape upon which professional credentials, skills and expertise became increasingly dominant.

It is possible, however, to expand on Addison's insights further and to explore how the notion of the 'humane technocrat' became increasingly connected to the concept of meritocracy in post-war Britain. As we saw above in the writing of George Orwell or the political thought of David Clarke, Britain's intellectual politics, including representatives from socialist and conservative ideological traditions, cohered around the notion that experts and technicians should be granted greater authority and access to positions of national leadership previously reserved for members of a particular social class. Professional hierarchies, in theory, reached further down the social pyramid and could be extended to include increasing numbers from a greater variety of occupations.⁷⁹ As the likes of Selina Todd and Peter Mandler have shown, there was briefly 'more room at the top' in post-war Britain rather than any substantial shift towards greater equality of opportunity.⁸⁰ For a brief historical moment, therefore, it appeared as if the tension between liberty and equality could be comfortably resolved. The immediate post-war period can be characterised as one in which the notion of expertise and expert knowledge increasingly came to be seen as a social good. A time in which the professional ethic – with its emphasis on career hierarchies of specialised occupations, selected according to meritocratic principles and rewarding trained and credentialed expertise – came to replace the gentlemanly ethos of the early-twentieth century.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Perkin, *Professional Society*, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Addison, *Road to 1945*, pp. 276-77.

⁷⁹ Perkin, *Professional Society*, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁰ S. Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class, 1910-2010* (London, 2014); P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation (III): Social Mobility', *Transactions of the RHS*, 26 (2016), pp. 1-23; See also some of the contributors to: C. de Bellaigue, H. Mills & E. Worth, "'Rags to Riches?' New Histories of Social Mobility in Modern Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 16/1 (2019).

⁸¹ Savage, *Identities*, pp. 67-69, 216; Perkin, *Professional Society*, pp. 288-89.

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Rather than blood and lineage, in post-war Britain skill and expertise were to become coins of the realm.⁸²

This professional ideal was based on trained expertise and selection by objective merit, a selection made not by the free market but by the 'judgements of similar educated experts.'⁸³ Here, the ideal citizen had risen by native ability (with support from educational institutions) to master a skilled service which was considered vital to their fellow citizens. This was a society based on human capital created by education and enhanced by strategies of social closure or the 'exclusion of the unqualified.' The status and income of the professional depended less on the market than on his power to persuade society to set an agreed value on his service. Conflict in the professional society takes the form of competition between rival interest groups which become increasingly mediated in twentieth-century Britain through the state. These professional hierarchies were, in theory at least, more democratic and egalitarian than, what Perkin considers, the 'class society' which preceded them.⁸⁴ For Perkin, the quarter century after the end of the Second World War saw the culmination of all the trends leading to an increasingly professionalised society: the creation of a mixed economy controlled on both sides by professional managers, the completion of a welfare state which was run by professional administrators deploying expert knowledge, and the notion that affluence was creating a more classless, socially mobile population. While it is possible to take a more constructivist approach than Perkin, the notion of Britain as an increasingly professional society clearly impacted on how intellectuals in the post-war period considered questions of merit. Sociological evidence of the late 1930s and 1940s emphasised the professional's complex formal knowledge, their skill and the ethical approach they adopted to their work.⁸⁵ As W.H. Wickwar noted in 1936, the emergence of new professions was transforming the notion of the professional from a 'fee-taking adviser of individuals' to 'salaried servants of the community.'⁸⁶ Increasingly Britain was a society which accepted in principle that ability and expertise were the only socially respectable justification for recruitment to positions of authority and responsibility and in which every citizen had a right to a national minimum.

In 1952, three years after the publication of their book *The English Middle Classes*, Maude and Lewis released a second volume of pessimistic sociology entitled *Professional*

⁸² Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 18.

⁸³ Perkin, *Professional Society*, p. xxiii.

⁸⁴ Perkin, *Professional Society*, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁵ E. Freidson, *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalisation of Formal Knowledge* (Oxford, 1986), p. 29.

⁸⁶ W.H. Wickwar, *The Social Services* (London, 1936), pp. 132-33.

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People. Here, the authors analysed the uncertain position of the professional man or woman in post-war Britain. The fear for these professionals, Maude and Lewis argued, was not their own future status or material comfort but the loss of a 'valued culture', complicated or subtle 'technique' and 'a tradition of self-examining integrity and self-forgetful service which is believed to be irreplaceable.'⁸⁷ Traditional professions, the law or medicine for example, were governed by a spirit or code which emphasised 'the contract between practitioner and client.' Professionals should form the 'guardians of a tradition, humane and Christian, of study and service to their fellows.' Instead they risked becoming either 'workers with special skills' more elaborate perhaps but not particularly different from 'the skills of the lathe-setters or the draughtsmen' or 'officials' who use 'their techniques to modify the conduct and experiment with the reactions, of the salariat and proletariat.'⁸⁸ In a similar vein to *The English Middle Classes*, *Professional People* was a sociological attempt to explore how the professions had already changed. The identity of these professionals, as Mike Savage has emphasised, was a key battleground in the 1930s and 1940s. While historically they had one foot in a gentlemanly camp, they could also exemplify more technical skills and hence act as an important rallying cry for a 'respectable and culturally legitimate technical group.'⁸⁹ In this sense Maude and Lewis's work is useful as a text to explore the transition from one conception of the professional society to another. Both conservatives and socialists agreed that, as Austen Albu argued, the age of the craftsman was over. Britain was now exporting goods containing a 'high proportion of brains and technical skill' requiring the application of technology and science to the process of manufacturer, not relying on the 'tradition' or 'superstition' deployed in craft industries.⁹⁰ The Conservative M.P. John Boyd-Carpenter agreed with Albu's analysis. For Boyd-Carpenter, conservatives foresaw an industrial future in which the dominant feature 'is high quality production based on units of moderate size, staffed by skilled men who know what they are about.'⁹¹

Professional People was in part a response to this 'upwards, downwards and outwards' expansion of the professions. Post-war Britain was an environment, they argued, where the 'common man...is not content to be common.'⁹² While this urge for the respectability and status of the white collar job was nothing new, in fact in *The English Middle Classes* the authors assigned this process an important stabilising function, not every member of the working class was 'clever enough, well-enough educated, or possessed of enough capital (either of finance or of patience) to qualify as a member of a learned profession.'

⁸⁷ Maude & Lewis, *Professional People*, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Maude & Lewis, *Professional People*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Savage, *Identities*, p. 79.

⁹⁰ A. Albu, 'The Future of British Exports', *The Listener* (17/07/1952), p. 87; Albu, *Backbench Technocrat*, pp. 8-9.

⁹¹ J. Boyd-Carpenter, *The Conservative Case* (London, 1950), p. 30.

⁹² Maude & Lewis, *Professional People*, p. 7.

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In the egalitarian environment of post-war Britain, however, 'the next best thing is to upgrade whatever job one happens to be doing to the formal status of a profession.'⁹³ The expansion and 'democratisation' of the professions was a process which had been underway since the beginning of the century. In their influential 1933 book *The Professions* the social scientists Alexander Carr-Saunders and Paul Alexander Wilson outlined how the process of professionalisation was gradually providing 'opportunities for specialised training' to an ever greater proportion of the population and predicted Britain could therefore look forward to a system of careers open to trained and tested talent:

This should be a factor making for social stability since it tends to reduce social injustice. Advancement to responsible positions would be more by reason of proved competence and experience than by luck, influence and pushfulness; this should lead to greater efficiency.⁹⁴

In a similar vein to Carr-Saunders and Wilson, the likes of Anthony Crosland characterised the process of professionalisation as creating a growing cushion of intermediate classes between workers and capitalists. This process was seen as a natural corollary of capitalism's transformation into 'statism' and as providing a measure of stability to a class system in flux.⁹⁵ Here, more professionals would be required to deliver on the needs of an increasingly modern and complex society. As Chris Renwick has argued, the process of professionalism was built on the idea that there was a deep – and, especially as theories of intelligence increasingly came to alter common understandings of nature versus nurture in favour of the latter, a theoretically bottomless – pool of skill and ability in society.⁹⁶ Developing this human resource was seen as increasingly critical to delivering higher levels of economic growth and, in turn, fostering social harmony.

There was a limit, however, to how far both conservatives and socialists thought this process could go in the immediate post-war decade. While for Maude and Lewis professional employment was 'probably five times as great as it was a hundred years ago', there was 'an absolute limit' to the field of recruitment set by the 'normal human intelligence curve.' Socialist intellectuals adopted similar interpretations, even if it led them in different directions to Maude and Lewis. As was noted in relation to the Butler Act, in the post-war period socialists and social democrats increasingly adopted a type of epistemological conservatism. In approaching the apparent deprivation of character and intelligence amongst the nation's citizens, socialist intellectuals had to consider both how

⁹³ Maude & Lewis, *Professional People*, pp. 7-8.

⁹⁴ A.P. Carr-Saunders & P.A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford, 1933), pp. 494-95.

⁹⁵ Crosland, 'Transition from Capitalism', p. 42.

⁹⁶ C. Renwick, 'Movement, Space and Social Mobility in Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 16/1 (2019), p. 20.

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to remedy that deprivation and how to operate within the constraints it imposed.⁹⁷ Between the 1940s and the 1970s, as Jeremy Nuttall has argued, these intellectuals increasingly sought to compensate for this lack of intelligence by placing central power in the hands of 'publicly spirited experts' who would take decisions on people's behalves.⁹⁸ The Labour Government's commitment to utilising expertise – whether in economic planning, the design and administration of the welfare state, or in the rise of a new industrial-military complex – was at the centre of the delicate balancing act between liberty and equality which made the concept of a meritocracy so appealing. As Durbin argued, the ruling class were to be castigated not for their elite function, but for the fact their economic privileges were 'not acquired by the possession or exercise of great talents, but by the accident of birth.'⁹⁹ A socialist society 'as much as any other', the Fabian Society agreed, 'must have leaders.' These leaders would not be confined to a 'narrow class pre-selected on account of ancestry or an environment of wealth, but from the whole people, on the basis of the widest possible diffusion of opportunity from the years of childhood right into adult life.' They would be 'men and women chosen for their special ability to occupy the key positions of social administration and control.'¹⁰⁰ Meritocracy therefore served as a staging post. A meritocratic system, while preserving disparities of income, status and authority, would reflect and reward public service performed in the interests of the common good.

A vital space in these debates about leadership was taken-up by discussions about the consequences of the so-called 'managerial revolution'. Debates over the rise of the manager engulfed transatlantic politics in the 1940s and was most explicitly and influentially outlined in James Burnham's 1941 book *The Managerial Revolution*.¹⁰¹ For Burnham, an American, ex-Trotskyist, political theorist and philosopher, the world was undergoing a social revolution characterised by three features: a drastic modification in the make-up and nature of institutions; rapid changes in the dominant beliefs or ideologies; and a recasting of the group of men who held top positions and access to the levers of power and privilege.¹⁰² The society which was to emerge from war would not be capitalist: this system was already in decline and was fatally weakened by its failure to address mass unemployment, to manage imperialism and to halt the impotence of

⁹⁷ See, J. Nuttall, 'Labour Revisionism and Qualities of Mind and Character, 1931-1979', *The English Historical Review*, 120/487 (2005), p. 674.

⁹⁸ Nuttall, *Psychological Socialism*, p. 58.

⁹⁹ Durbin, *What Have We to Defend?*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁰ Fabian Society, *A Word on the Future to British Socialists* (London, 1942), p. 20.

¹⁰¹ S. Brooke, 'Atlantic Crossing? American Views of Capitalism and British Socialist Thought, 1932-1962', *Twentieth Century British History*, 2/2 (1991), p. 117; Jackson, *Equality*, pp. 155-63; J. Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution* (Harmondsworth, [1941] 1962).

¹⁰² Burnham, *Managerial*, pp. 16-17.

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bourgeois modes of thought.¹⁰³ Nor, however, could this fledgling social order be described as socialist. Largely drawing on the Russian example, Burnham argued that the abolition of private property had not, instantaneously, or by itself, produced socialist social relations. Crucially, however, in an analysis that would be repeated elsewhere, and have profound effects on how political thinkers from diverse ideological backgrounds evaluated the nature of work, production and efficiency, Burnham claimed that due to changes in industrial technique and organisation the workforce was becoming increasingly divided.¹⁰⁴ Increasing numbers of individual tasks required relatively less skill but at the same time a small percentage required vast amounts of training and expertise. The proletariat 'by themselves', it seemed, could no longer run the productive machine of contemporary society.¹⁰⁵ The function of the managers was becoming more distinctive, specialised and crucial to the whole process of production and this served to seal off those who performed these functions as a separate ruling group or class.

That the managerial revolution was sociological fact was rarely disputed by socialists or conservatives. The notion of a separation between the control and ownership of capital had informed socialist thinking in the 1930s and was integral to the perception that capitalism had undergone a transformation in the aftermath of the War which made Marxist analyses or prescriptions redundant.¹⁰⁶ For the Labour M.P. and member of the Keep Left group Ian Mikardo, the growth of the joint stock company clearly 'resulted in a divorce of ownership from management and faced the workers with a new class of professional managers who lived by the salaries they earned from their work and not from their ownership or part-ownership of the equity.'¹⁰⁷ Yet, as Ben Jackson notes, different ideological constellations consumed elements of Burnham's thesis in a variety of ways.¹⁰⁸ For the emerging Bevanite wing of the Party, as well as certain intellectuals in the Keep Left Group, the managerial revolution could be ameliorated only through greater industrial democracy. As Labour M.P. and Keep Left founder Richard Crossman argued, for example, 'the main task of socialism to-day is to prevent the concentration of power in the hands of either industrial management or the state bureaucracy.'¹⁰⁹ The most dominant interpretation of Burnham, however, came from what would become known as the Revisionist Social Democrats. This involved adopting Burnham's core

¹⁰³ Burnham, *Managerial*, pp. 39-43.

¹⁰⁴ For similar analyses, see: T.N. Whitehead, *Leadership in a Free Society* (New York, 1936); F.J. Roethlisberger, *Management and Morale* (New York, 1941); P. Drucker, *The New Society: The Anatomy of Industrial Order* (New York, 1950).

¹⁰⁵ Burnham, *Managerial*, pp. 56-57.

¹⁰⁶ Berle and Means' argument regarding the separation of ownership and control was particularly influential, see for example: A. Berle & G. Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New York, 1932); D. Jay, *The Socialist Case* (London, 1937), pp. 194-95; Durbin, *Democratic Socialism*, p. 136; Rogan, *Moral Economists*, p. 102.

¹⁰⁷ I. Mikardo, 'Trade Unions in a Full Employment Economy', in Crossman, *New Fabian*, p. 144.

¹⁰⁸ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 155.

¹⁰⁹ R.H.S. Crossman, 'Towards a Philosophy of Socialism' in his *New Fabian*, pp. 28-29.

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insight of a transfer of power within industry from owners to managers and combining it with a 'hefty dose of social democratic triumphalism'.¹¹⁰ As Ben Jackson notes, the Revisionists increasingly argued that it was correct to see scale and complexity as the cause of inequality, but that this could be remedied through the activity of the state under the control of a Labour Government.¹¹¹

Conservatives were often as divided by the bureaucratic-managerial turn in post-war British society. For Maude and Lewis the managerial revolution demonstrated that socialism had 'accepted the concept of a large (and privileged?) class of technicians and organisers recruited from the best brains.' While Burnham had given the 'general idea' a 'middle-class mystique', the theory 'expressed a reaction from the classless ideal, and amounts to a reaffirmation of the view of society as essentially hierarchical'.¹¹² Maude and Lewis were deeply sceptical and actively hostile to Burnham's interpretation. They felt that a powerful new group of managers would sever middle-class independence and force this stabilising force to rely increasingly on the state. Again, however, Maude and Lewis's interpretation of managerialism was located on the peripheries of post-war conservatism. As the Conservative M.P. and member of the Tory Reform Club Quintin Hogg argued, conservatives 'agree that in certain respects' Britain was 'conforming fairly closely to the managerial type.' Although, he claimed, this was not a fundamentally political judgement.¹¹³ This increasing dominant strand of progressive conservatism sought, on the whole, to provide the growing managerial class with greater authority. As Rab Butler explained at a Conservative Political Centre conference 'Management in Industry' in 1948

To-day it is the social purpose of industry which is emphasised – the idea that industry exists and works for the benefit of the whole community [...] I am convinced that the future of Britain is in the hands of industrial management and that the prime responsibility for the saving of Britain does not lie with the politicians or economists but with the managers [...] We have all heard a great deal about the managerial revolution. I believe that the real managerial revolution is the new conception of responsibility within industry and of responsibility of management to the nation as a whole.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 156. Crosland did not agree with Burnham that the rise of the managers constituted a social revolution as, he claimed, they 'largely have the same social origins and social attitudes as the entrepreneurs whom they replace.' Crosland, 'Transition from Capitalism', p. 38.

¹¹¹ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 157.

¹¹² Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*, p. 276.

¹¹³ Q. Hogg, *The Case for Conservatism* (Harmondsworth, 1947), p. 55, 56.

¹¹⁴ R.A. Butler, 'Management in Industry', in A Report of the Principal Speeches at the Conference Organised by the CPC at Church House, Westminster in April 1948, *Papers of Harold Macmillan*, Bodleian Library [MS Macmillan Dep. C 991/Fds. 172], p. 5.

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Butler's notion that the manager had a 'social purpose' or a 'responsibility to the nation' largely stemmed from the process of professionalisation which management was said to have undergone in the 1930s and 1940s. As Daniel Ussishkin has argued, the 'new expertise of management' was situated beyond the traditional political and social division of owner and worker. The work of Frederick Taylor – or Taylorism – became increasingly popular and called for a 'mental revolution' which consisted of an acceptance that management was the domain of experts who were committed to political neutrality.¹¹⁵ Here, Britain's ideologies overlapped. While socialists had always been hostile to the alienation implicit in Taylor's scientific workplace management, the likes of Austen Albu were increasingly receptive. Even before the conclusion of the War, Albu noted that Taylor had shown that 'human effort can be planned and measured' and that Taylorism was being widely adopted 'especially in mass-production industries.'¹¹⁶ As a result, 'management itself has become more specialised' and 'has been developing into a separate profession.' In a similar vein to Butler above, this meant that 'the higher ranks of these officials have great responsibility and exert considerable influence on the policies of their firms.'¹¹⁷ The entrepreneurial capitalist owner had been superseded by the meritocratic, responsible and rational manager governed by a professional ethic.

(1.4) A Meritocracy of Rewards

The professionalisation of management, the notion that the manager required training, credentials and, most importantly, involved expertise, was shared across the ideological divide in post-war Britain. This expertise was characterised as a social good, improving efficiency, workplace relations and nullifying class conflict. With ownership and control increasingly diverging, the individual entrepreneur motivated by the desire for profit was replaced by the professional motivated by an ethic of public service. The transformation of capitalism this shift reflected had radical consequences for how Britain's ideologies considered distributive questions. Conservatives and socialists alike shared, to varying degrees, the perspective of former Labour Minister of Food and ex-Communist Party intellectual John Strachey who argued in 1952 that what was essential about the post-war climate was

¹¹⁵ D. Ussishkin, *Morale: A Modern British History* (London, 2017), pp. 107-109; For more on Frederick W. Taylor see: R. Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency* (New York, 1997).

¹¹⁶ A. Albu, 'Full Employment Will Need New Types of Managers', *Picture Post* (28/10/1944), p. 25. Albu described how he developed a reputation as a 'social technologist' and a 'planner, the middle class intellectual' who 'embodies the managerial revolution in action.' Albu, *Backbench Technocrat*, V, p. 1.

¹¹⁷ Albu, 'Full Employment...New Types of Managers', p. 25.

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[...] that the distribution of the national income has ceased to be a largely automatic function of the way the economy works [...] and has become something which is consciously, politically settled by the community's own decisions. That is itself a revolution.¹¹⁸

In order to alleviate the immediate suffering and devastation caused by war, the overriding priority for the Labour Government between 1945 and 1951 was to distribute in accordance with the principle of need. The egalitarian ethos of the War and the post-war Government's policy of 'fair shares' for all produced a 'remarkable redistribution of income and social esteem to the working class.'¹¹⁹ As Michael Young noted, however, even if the national income was fairly shared out 'according to the priorities of need', the standard of living for Britain's citizens would be far too low. Not only were the slices of the national cake unequal, 'but the whole cake was too small.'¹²⁰ The political environment of post-war Britain was, therefore, dominated by the 'politics of production'. With British industrial capacity in tatters and a significant balance-of-payments crisis, increasing the size of the national cake, rather than deciding how it was to be divided, was seen as a condition of national survival. As John Boyd-Carpenter argued, conservatives believe that it is much more important 'to increase the absolute size of the slice of the national cake which each individual receives than to secure a mathematically exact division of an ever diminishing cake.'¹²¹ In a similar vein, the Fabian Society lamented the 'fashionable' theory that 'the problem of production has been solved, and that the sole remaining need is to find ways of distributing the people the wealth they are well able to produce.'¹²² In kick-starting the British economy the question of differentials and incentives would loom large. As will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Two, economic growth would temporarily resolve the tension between liberty and equality, serving as a panacea for distributive strife and a palliative for potential class conflict. While Labour and Conservative Party political actors looked to growth for different reasons – the former because it promised to eliminate poverty and offered the opportunity for a more far-reaching egalitarianism in the future, the latter because rising living standards strengthened the connection between effort and reward and preserved social harmony – they increasingly united around a programme for a more rational and efficient economic system.

In dividing the national cake and distributing rewards it was clear that socialists and social democrats were not advocating for complete equality of income nor conservatives

¹¹⁸ J. Strachey, 'Tasks and Achievement of British Labour', in Crossman, *New Fabian*, p. 188.

¹¹⁹ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 151.

¹²⁰ Young, *Plan*, p. 20.

¹²¹ Boyd-Carpenter, *Conservative Case*, p. 8.

¹²² Fabian Society, *A Word*, p. 7.

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seeking a return to market-determined social outcomes. It was in formulating an alternative that Britain's post-war ideological traditions overlapped, for different reasons, at the point of meritocracy. In part both conservatives and socialists imagined that a state-sanctioned meritocracy provided a mechanism through which contributions to the public good could be recognised and rewarded. This was reflected in the growth of an increasing complex corporate state over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s to weigh competing distributive claims to the nation's resources. As Harold Perkin notes, professionals could not rely on market valuations but demanded that society accept their own valuation, guaranteed by exclusive education and certification. Rewards were negotiated in the wider societal market or prestige and the social value placed on their service rather than by the sale of their labour in the economic market place.¹²³ Again, while it is possible to question how far the laws of supply and demand were circumvented in the post-war world, the idea that professionals could make rational judgements about merit and its relative reward appealed to both progressive conservatives and radical social democrats because it allowed claims of social justice to be recognised. Whereas conservatives would later express reservations or even outright hostility to the notion of social justice, in the immediate post-war period it appeared that the state could and should play a role in distributive questions. Even before the conclusion of war, Quintin Hogg sought the creation of an inter-party committee who would produce an agreed programme of minimum requirements 'sufficient to satisfy all doubts that, whatever party held power after the War, certain measures of social justice could be regarded as secure.'¹²⁴ As his Party dithered in response to the Beveridge Report Hogg went further, arguing that 'so long as there remain people who cannot have enough to eat, the possession of private property is a humiliation and not an opportunity.' It was clear that if the government 'did not give the people social reform, they are going to give you social revolution.'¹²⁵

Conservatives remained resistant, however, to the notion that the profit motive had become expedient. As the Hayekian Conservative M.P. and future Lord Coleraine, Richard Law argued, 'to weaken or destroy' the profit motive was to 'take away the

¹²³ Perkin, *Professional Society*, p. 16; For a longer history of this thinking on the British Left, see: Jackson, *Equality*, p. 39. In 1949 the sociologist T.H. Marshall identified a similar phenomenon in his famous Alfred Marshall Lecture on 'Citizenship and Social Class.' As Marshall noted there existed in post-war Britain, a 'universal right to real income which is not proportionate to the market value of the claimant.' Marshall's analysis combined a belief in the inequality of incomes based on merit modified by an underlying equality of real income in services based purely on membership of society. See: T.H. Marshall, 'Citizenship and Social Class (1950)', in J. Manza & M. Saunderson (Eds.), *Inequality and Society* (New York, 2009), p. 153.

¹²⁴ Q. Hogg, Cited in: R. Carr, 'How to Put "The People First": Conservative Conceptions of Reform Before and After the Second World War', in B.W. Hart & R. Carr (Eds.), *The Foundations of the British Conservative Party: Essays on Conservatism from Lord Salisbury to David Cameron* (London, 2013), p. 190.

¹²⁵ *Hansard*, 17/02/1943, [Vol. 386/Col. 1818]

mainspring which energises the machine and, at the same time, to make competition meaningless – because, in practice, men do not compete except for a prize.¹²⁶ These views were clearly not confined to the laissez-faire fringes of the post-war Conservative Party. In *Conservative Faith*, David Clarke attacked socialists for characterising 'the making of profits' as 'anti-social and immoral.' Conservatives, he argued, 'believe that to seek profit is a legitimate and worthy motive.'¹²⁷ The same was true of the progressive Tory Reform Committee (TRC) led by Viscount Hinchinbrooke and supported by Quintin Hogg and future Chancellor of the Exchequer Peter Thorneycroft. 'Profit or loss', they argued, 'gives a clear indication of what people want to buy and provides a check on the efficiency of its production and distribution.' Yet this did not mean that profit was always an unqualified social good. While the TRC claimed that profit was the 'only practical criterion available' the group did not 'accept private profit as the sole test of public advantage.'¹²⁸ With a modified form of capitalism placing new responsibilities on industry and its managers, there was clearly a boundary to be drawn between legitimate and illegitimate profits. For Clarke, conservatives were opposed to the 'immoral' acquisition of excessive profits which 'are gained by exploiting the difficulties of the community' or by 'withholding from the community beneficial inventions.' Profit should be a sign of 'greater responsibilities and a mark of achievement.'¹²⁹ It was clear to progressive conservatives like Clarke and Hogg, therefore, that the free market could not deliver social outcomes or inequalities which were deemed democratically legitimate in post-war Britain. As the TRC argued, while it 'deliberately insisted on the need for an expanding economy' in the 'distribution of that wealth' it was not 'content to rely upon the blind working of the law of supply and demand.' This was because 'social justice requires that basic human needs should be ascertained and that it should be a first charge upon society to meet them.'¹³⁰ Even, Richard Law felt that

[...] an industrial society will not hold together if the distribution of wealth is left only to the operation of market forces. While we can admit that the more skilled player is entitled to take more out of the pool than the less skilled (for otherwise the game becomes meaningless), we should regard it, very properly, as intolerable if he were to end up with all the chips at his end of the table.¹³¹

Hogg and Law, representing two very different ideological strands of conservatism, overlapped in their view that the outcomes generated by the free market would not

¹²⁶ R. Law, *Return from Utopia* (London, 1950), pp. 110-11.

¹²⁷ Clarke, *Conservative Faith*, p. 23.

¹²⁸ Tory Reform Committee, *Forward by the Right! A Statement* (London, 1943), p. 10.

¹²⁹ Clarke, *Conservative Faith*, p. 24.

¹³⁰ Tory Reform Committee, *Forward*, p. 16.

¹³¹ Law, *Return*, p. 111.

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distribute rewards fairly. While Law sought to preserve the price mechanism and reluctantly ally it with progressive taxation, even he recognised the limitations or social conditions which would be placed on the pursuit of profits in post-war Britain.¹³²

The priority for socialists was to eradicate functionless wealth.¹³³ In *A Word on the Future*, the Fabian Society expressed its contempt for the man who was able to work but who either draws an income 'for which he does not work' or 'by using the power of monopoly, to draw an income beyond the value of his work.'¹³⁴ Similarly, Orwell attacked 'the class of mere owners who live not by virtue of anything they produce but by the possession of title-deeds and share certificates.'¹³⁵ In order to reflect the changed nature of capitalism, the separation of ownership from control and the rise of a new managerial class, technocratic social democrats like Austen Albu sought to rationalise the distribution of wealth. In a similar vein to Hogg and Clarke, this involved recognising the limitations of the profit motive. Albu, for example, used his contribution to the *New Fabian Essays* in 1952 to reflect on the 'unworthy and inefficient' nature of profit as an incentive to industrial activity. It was unworthy because 'it was subject to control by no code of ethical or professional conduct' and inefficient 'because it was incapable of dealing in any reasonable order of priority with the urgent human and social needs of society.'¹³⁶ In post-war Britain

[...] leaders of industry defend their institutions with talk of service to the community; and profit, in place of being an end in itself, has become expedient. It is now time to take them at their word, to destroy the ambivalence of their position, and to bring the open, legal form of our economic institutions into line with the true functions they perform.¹³⁷

The purpose of Albu's contribution was to show how this could be achieved 'without the disruption of existing working communities which are rational in form and which are not in themselves anti-social.' A rejection of profit, however, did not necessarily mean Albu sought an extension of public ownership. For Albu, as well as other technocratic Revisionists, the more radical prescription was to use rational social science – whether in

¹³² Law, *Return*, p. 105.

¹³³ For socialists, as differences of income became more aligned with notions of service they would become increasingly less significant. See, for example: Crosland, 'Transition from Capitalism', pp. 64-65; Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought*, pp. 19-21, 47; M. Francis, *Ideas and Policies under Labour, 1945-1951: Building a New Britain* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 179-80.

¹³⁴ Fabian Society, *A Word*, p. 14.

¹³⁵ Orwell, 'Lion', p. 74.

¹³⁶ Albu, 'Organisation', p. 124.

¹³⁷ Albu, 'Organisation', pp. 141-42.

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the form of psychology, sociology or the emerging field of management studies – to transform the relationship between manager, technician and worker.¹³⁸

An important part of this rationalisation involved considering the individual motivations or incentives to work in the transformed capitalism of the post-war world. As Ben Jackson has highlighted, the socialist Left believed that the War had fostered a stronger sense of solidarity between different social groups and had popularised an egalitarian solution to the problem of a fair distribution of sacrifice and reward. This 'organicism discourse' brought to the fore motives of social services previously suppressed by pre-war capitalism.¹³⁹ In 1944, Albu identified 'public interest and the development of individual responsibility' as the motivating forces 'that must take the place of the old harsh, purely economic incentives or of the present patriotic desire to win the War.'¹⁴⁰ Identifying and rewarding this service to the community clearly led in egalitarian directions. As another *New Fabian Essays* contributor and future founder of the Social Democratic Party Roy Jenkins argued, while no system of distribution 'will exactly equate reward with service, a nearly equal one comes much nearer to so doing than does a grossly unequal one.'¹⁴¹ Yet socialists like Jenkins and Albu were not arguing for exactly equal incomes or equality of outcome. In utilitarian terms, incentives were required to boost production which would in turn produce a bigger cake from which all could take larger slices.¹⁴² In the midst of general affluence the significance of material incentives would gradually wither away. For Orwell it was

no use at this stage of the world's history to suggest that all human beings should have *exactly* equal incomes. It has been shown over and over again that without some kind of money reward there is no incentive to undertake certain jobs. On the other hand the money reward need not be very large [...] there is no reason why ten to one should not be the maximum normal variation. And within those limits some sense of equality is possible.¹⁴³

Orwell reveals the time horizons under which socialists operated in the post-war world, highlighting the willingness to defer difficult questions of 'who gets what' but remaining confident in the egalitarianism of an affluent future. Democratic socialism could not be delivered overnight. As the Fabian Society argued, the Labour Party 'must be content for the time being to regulate the profit system, rather than abolish it.' While 'in the long

¹³⁸ Albu, 'Organisation', p. 142, 127-28; Albu, *Backbench Technocrat*, V, p. 1.

¹³⁹ Jackson, *Equality*, pp. 136-38.

¹⁴⁰ Albu, 'Full Employment: Social and Political Effects', p. 80.

¹⁴¹ R. Jenkins, 'Equality', in Crossman, *New Fabian*, p. 71.

¹⁴² For a more critical analysis of the relationship between the British Left and utilitarianism in this period, see: B. Jackson, 'The Uses of Utilitarianism: Social Justice, Welfare Economics and British Socialism, 1931-1948', *History of Political Thought*, 25 (2004), pp. 523-35.

¹⁴³ Orwell, 'Lion and the Unicorn', p. 76.

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run' it may be 'practicable' to 'dispense altogether with these incentives and rely on the spirit of public service' the time for that 'is not yet.' This would require 'at least a generation which has grown up under the new order, and has been educated in its spirit.'¹⁴⁴

It was here then that a meritocratic distribution of rewards became shared currency amongst Britain's mainstream ideological traditions. Conservatives assumed that disparities of material wealth and status were immutable products of the natural order and, because they were not evenly distributed among individuals, some would always obtain greater material rewards than others. While technocratic social democrats like Albu sought a system that would reward those displaying technical competence, he shared the conservative notion that, to some degree, inequalities of endowment were immutable. In his 1951 pamphlet, *Socialism and the Study of Man*, Albu shared Hogg's rationale that a meritocracy of rewards would reduce social conflict

If the individual is to be helped to think and behave rationally he must also feel that there is a real relation between the rewards which society offers to those who accept its values and his own work [...] When there is a great contrast between ends and means, between values proclaimed and values practiced, between individual merit and reward in accordance with those values, frustration often turns into impotent resentment.¹⁴⁵

The job of the state was to reconcile the 'emotional desire for significant status' with the 'varying capacities of individuals.' This involved providing a level of equality of opportunity and 'taking care that everyone is doing work which is best suited to their abilities.'¹⁴⁶ In short, the state should 'find out the best brains in the community, to give them the fullest opportunities and to allow them to earn the highest rewards.'¹⁴⁷

Meritocracy – with its promise to preserve inequalities and differentials but make them democratically legitimate and open to all – served as a key concept of deferral in the post-war world. While it failed to fundamentally 'solve' perennial distributive questions, against the backdrop of an ever-expanding economy it allowed Britain's ideologies to push potential solutions into an increasingly affluent and productive future.

¹⁴⁴ Fabian Society, *A Word*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁵ A. Albu, *Socialism and the Study of Man* (London, 1951), p. 19.

¹⁴⁶ Albu, *Socialism and the Study*, p. 19. It is important to note that while this position may seem profoundly utopian, Albu identified as an explicitly anti-utopian thinker who sought to deploy the tools of social science to uncover individual needs, drivers and capacities. As he was to describe himself in *Backbench Technocrat*: 'I became a Socialist, at first idealistic and utopian; but I had been educated as an engineer and I soon found myself interested in the how rather than the why or the what of socialism.' Albu, *Backbench Technocrat*, Preface, p. 1.

¹⁴⁷ Albu, 'Organisation', p. 131.

(1) 1944: The Rise of the Meritocracy

The connections between a meritocratically selected and rewarded elite, public service and socially useful expertise were, by the mid-1950s, accepted by both mainstream ideologies as reflective of certain transformations in the nature of capitalism to which Britain's elite must adapt, as well as desirable changes in themselves which would deliver greater economic growth, social justice and stability to the social order. The professional meritocrats, an outgrowth of this humane capitalism, were characterised as uninterested in the pecuniary motivations of the past and were said to eschew the competitive scramble for profits in the name of public service. As the next chapter will demonstrate, these trends would only accelerate as the concept of meritocracy reached its conceptual zenith during the 1950s, assuming an increasingly important conceptual space in the morphology of the decade's most significant ideological constellations: Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy. With economic growth secure and an abundant future on the horizon, intellectuals and political actors began to shift their focus towards a politics of consumption. By transforming distributional politics into a positive sum game, growth navigated the long-standing tension between equality and liberty. The professional meritocrats, it was argued, would deliver ever greater growth and in the process create an affluent society where distinctions of status, in contrast to the injustices of class, would be considered marginal threats to social harmony. This overlapping conservative and social democratic interpretation of the professional meritocracy, at the heart of an epistemological post-war consensus, ensured that when Michael Young sought to highlight the contradictions of an 'Opportunity State' in 1958, his satire was readily misunderstood or largely ignored. Regardless of Young's intentions, the coining of the word 'meritocracy' mapped onto pre-existing associations, explored in this chapter, between a socially mobile professional class and the public good.

Chapter (2) 1958: The Meritocratic Moment

'Would a meritocracy, in any case, be such a disaster? It seems to me that it would at least have the value of being built on the assumption that knowledge and skill are important. This is an advance over the cult of the stupid, which is still so dominant in this country [...]'

John Vaizey¹

'What we have to do is both to seek and guard against a meritocracy at one and the same time.'

Geoffrey Smith²

(2.1) Introduction: The Rise of the Meritocracy

The year is 2034. Riots have broken out and the Ministry of Education has been ransacked, the Chairman of the Trade Union Congress has dodged an assassination attempt, and strikes led by transport workers and domestic servants engulf Britain. The Prime Minister, in his statement to the House of Lords, blames administrative failures, but the country appears on the brink of collapse. And so begins Michael Young's dystopian novel, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Published in 1958 and told in the form of a fictional sociology PhD thesis, Young's satire envisions a society in which wealth and status are allocated to individuals on the basis of their intelligence. This meritocratic system produces a scenario where the 'talented' individuals in the elite meritocracy are showered with rewards and 'the stupid' (as the book's fictional author describes them) are forced into a life of drudgery as street cleaners or domestic servants. These dystopian trends often see *The Rise of the Meritocracy* grouped alongside more illustrious fiction, from Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* to Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*.³ There is no doubt that *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is a 'touchstone book', a text which historians, social scientists, commentators and politicians go back and consult to try and make sense of the 'vectors, forces and contingencies as they, for better or

¹ J. Vaizey, *Britain in the Sixties: Education for Tomorrow* (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 18.

² G. Smith, 'Facing the Public Schools Issue', *Crossbow* (January-March, 1964), p. 59.

³ D. Bell, 'Introduction', in M. Young (Ed.), *Social Scientist as Innovator* (Cambridge, MA., 1983), p. xv; R. Dore, 'Man of Merit', in G. Dench, T. Flower, & K. Gavron (Eds.), *Young at Eighty: The Prolific Public Life of Michael Young* (Manchester, 1995), p. 174.

worse, play out.⁴ Yet in comparison with the disturbing visions of Huxley or Vonnegut, Young is often credited with a unique foresight. The fictional thesis at the text's centre is seen as charting a path which consecutive generations of political leaders have deliberately followed or unwittingly stumbled down.⁵ Over the course of twentieth-century Britain, we are told, Young's nightmarish future has gradually come true.

The Rise of the Meritocracy should therefore be classified as one of the most misunderstood books in post-war Britain, a powerful warning which went unheeded. As Young himself argued in 2001, 'much that was predicted has already come about.' Writing in response to the thick veneer of meritocratic rhetoric which coated New Labour's 'Third Way', Young argued that the book was 'meant to be a warning (which needless to say has not been heeded).'⁶ He should not, however, have been surprised at the concept's misuse in post-war Britain. Upon its release, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was received with 'puzzlement' and Young's harsh and pessimistic concerns about the 'Opportunity State' worried away by those he might have expected to be most sympathetic.⁷ Explaining why the dystopian elements of Young's speculative future could be ignored or silenced and tracing how the word meritocracy became a widely-shared vision of a progressive future is therefore clearly a key aim of this thesis and this chapter in particular. It is not, however, the whole story. As we explored in the last chapter, the *concept* of meritocracy, if not the word, had a long history and had already been embraced by Britain's mainstream ideologies. A more productive way of reading *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is as an exposure of this embrace, an example of the concept's importance to the increasingly dominant post-war ideological constellations of Revisionist Social Democracy and Middle Way Conservatism. While Young was clearly well-connected with the former, he chafed under the constraints of party politics and his emphasis on fellowship, community and the family often placed him at odds with close Revisionist friends like Anthony Crosland.⁸ *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is very much Michael Young's book, reflecting his concerns and preoccupations – whether the declining importance of the family or the significance of sociology – as well as his own political journey from the centre to the periphery of party politics over the course of the 1950s.⁹

⁴ P. Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy* (London, 2014), p. 28.

⁵ For example, see: K.A. Appiah, 'The Myth of Meritocracy: Who Really Gets What They Deserve', *The Guardian* (19/10/2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/oct/19/the-myth-of-meritocracy-who-really-gets-what-they-deserve> (Accessed: 20/10/2018).

⁶ M. Young, 'Comment: Down with the Meritocracy!', *The Guardian* (29/06/2001), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment> (Accessed: 04/07/2016)

⁷ P. Barker, 'A Tract for the Times', *Political Quarterly*, 77/1 (2006), p. 38.

⁸ For the connections between Young and Crosland, see: B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left* (Manchester, 2007), p. 167, 169, 172-75;

⁹ For Young's political commitments, see: A. Briggs, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur* (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 66-110; L. Butler, 'Michael Young, the Institute of Community Studies

(2) 1958: The Meritocratic Moment

As we saw in the last chapter, the intellectual politics of the 1940s and early 1950s were dominated by discussions of Britain's changing social structure, of the national need to identify talented individuals and, regardless of their class background, encourage them to climb the ladder of opportunity. While these themes permeated debates about the transformation of capitalism, the 'managerial revolution' and increasing professionalisation, intellectuals and political agents lacked a common linguistic currency to describe the changing phenomenon they observed around them. The creation of the word 'meritocracy' therefore represents a significant moment in the concept's post-war history. Despite his doubts about how he put the word 'meritocracy' together – fusing Latin and Greek terms much to the chagrin of a friend and classical scholar – Young acknowledged that 'the twentieth century had room for the word.'¹⁰ Considering the legacy of Young's dystopian vision, it may seem paradoxical to characterise the late-1950s as the height of a meritocratic moment. The purpose of this introductory snapshot, therefore, is to highlight some of the reasons the warnings elaborated in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* could be safely ignored by both social democrats and conservatives. Young's vision, its reception and legacy, therefore, serve as a useful illustration of the pre-existing significance of meritocracy, the range of meanings associated with the concept and the increasingly divergent aspirations and expectations with which it was loaded in post-war Britain. An exploration of the reception of the text in 1958 also highlights an important theme of this chapter, namely that those we might expect to be most sympathetic to Young's vision often felt more able to dismiss his warnings as concerns for a distant future.

Young's fictional thesis is divided into two halves. The first explores the 'Rise of the Elites' and the second analyses the 'Decline of the Lower Classes'. The first half explains how Britain in 2033 can be characterised as a 'true meritocracy of talent', a term which, the text's fictional author admits, has obscure origins. The history of the concept, the institutional and intellectual framework for this society, is traced back to the 1870s. It was not until the post-war period, however, that the meritocracy really took root. From the 1960s onwards, and with strong support from socialists, spending priorities began to

and the Politics of Kinship', *Twentieth Century British History*, 26/2 (2015), pp. 203-24; L. Butler, *Michael Young, Social Science and the British Left, 1945-1970* (Oxford, Forthcoming).

¹⁰ M. Young, 'Introduction to the Transatlantic Edition', in his *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (New Brunswick, NJ., [1958], 1994), p. xii. As the likes of Ben Jackson and Jo Littler have noted the word meritocracy first appeared in print in 1956 in the journal *Socialist Commentary*, see: Jackson, *Equality*, p. 172; J. Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (London, 2018), p. 68. Despite this Young can still be credited with coining the word 'meritocracy.' He served on the editorial board of *Commentary*, was a member of its sister organisation the Socialist Union and has described the process of creating the word, see: Young, 'Introduction', p. xii.

(2) 1958: The Meritocratic Moment

change. Teachers were paid the same as their counterparts in industry and children were rewarded with a 'Learning Wage' to keep them in school.¹¹ Underpinning the rise of this new elite was the increased accuracy of intelligence tests as methods of selection. The results of these tests facilitated greater upward as well as downward mobility and the second half of the author's thesis deals with the 'Decline of the Lower Classes'. Following the developments outlined in the first half of the thesis, the author praises the emergence of a 'brilliant class, the five per cent who knows what five per cent means.' Initially inequality of opportunity allowed the idea of human equality to germinate but, with virtually total equality of opportunity, a class, more self-assured and confident than any rising due to kinship ties, emerged to vanquish the myth. The Labour Movement, initially at least, played a central role in these developments and the author claims that many of its leading figures and thinkers placed equality of opportunity at the centre of Labour's vision for a more just society, without realising its potential to produce new inequalities. In the fictional world of Young's author the Labour Movement begins to crumble as working-class parents begin harbouring ambitions for their own children rather than their class as a whole. The Movement sought a new name, the 'Technicians Party' and scrapped its appeal to the working class by focusing solely on what are deemed 'middle-class issues.' The Populists led by a group of elite women and identified as the architects of the May Crisis outlined at the start of the book, were frustrated by these developments. They were 'shaggy young girls from Newnham and Somerville' who 'instead of taking jobs as surgeons and scientists for which their education fitted them' moved to 'Salford and Newcastle to become factory workers.'¹² Some of these women felt aggrieved that they had to temporarily give up their place in the meritocracy to raise children; others rejected meritocratic stratification on ethical grounds.

A significant turning point for the Populists came in 2009 with the release of their Chelsea Manifesto. This manifesto argued that every individual should have the equal opportunity to develop their capacity and to appreciate the beauty and depth of the human experience. In many ways this group of elite women were responding to developments in the fictional Conservative Party. Here, Lord Cecil and his followers seek to reinstate the hereditary principle claiming that, due to the active Eugenics programme, the 'top of today' are already breeding 'the top of tomorrow.' Interestingly, Young's fictional author is vehement in his opposition to the return of this principle. By taking the risk of allowing a 'few stupid children' into the meritocracy the Conservatives would threaten the nation's international economic position and attack Britain's core values. The Conservatives want 'the luxury of inheritance and the luxury of efficiency.'

¹¹ M. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (Harmondsworth, [1958] 1961), p. 21, 63-69.

¹² Young, *Meritocracy*, p. 103, 141, 164.

(2) 1958: The Meritocratic Moment

This, the author claims, is impossible. Towards the end of the book, the author finally tackles the May Affair and the future of the Populist Movement head on. He argues that May 2034, when he will be in Peterloo listening to speeches by leading Populists, will be 'Britain's 1848.' Since he had started writing his thesis the Prime Minister accepted recommendations from the Chairman of the Social Science Research Council and used weather control to bring forward August to quell protests, banned members of the right-wing of the Conservative Party, and reaffirmed his commitment to equality of opportunity. In the face of these measures, the author argues, the lower classes have no power to make revolt effective. The thesis ends with these conclusions. A footnote, however, reveals that the author was killed at Peterloo and notes that the 'failings of sociology are as illuminating as its successes.'¹³

Most reviewers agreed that Young had, in the words of the conservative critic Charles Curran, 'coined a valuable new word', a 'shibboleth' to 'test the tongue of every aspirant to power in contemporary Britain.' Curran identified the cross-party support for a "meritocracy", identifying the 'Opportunity State' as the 'politicians' equivalent to chastity': all of them are in favour of it, he argued, 'from Mr Bevan to Mr Butler, from Lord Hailsham to the League of Empire loyalists.' They disagree, he claimed, 'only about the shortest cut.'¹⁴ For Alan Fox, writing two years after he had used meritocracy in print for the first time, the slogans 'reward for merit', 'career open to talents' or 'equality of opportunity' are 'already deeply embedded in the values of our society.' They are 'the seeds of meritocracy.'¹⁵ Similarly, Dieter Pevsner, the editorial director in charge of Penguin's Pelican editions, identified the similarities between Britain at the end of the 1950s and Young's satire.¹⁶ In this sense it was clear Young had coined a word to describe a concept which required little explanation in post-war Britain. Considering Pevsner's praise, it is surprising to note that he initially rejected the book's reprint as a Pelican. This was partly due to the fact that, like other reviewers, he did not take Young entirely seriously and expected him to be writing 'a similar but much more serious book on the same subject.'¹⁷ *The Economist*, for example, felt that *The Rise of the Meritocracy* had raised the significant problem of how to reconcile 'a belief in *la carrière ouverte aux talents*' with 'human solidarity.' This, its anonymous reviewer claimed, would require 'a lot more reconciling than the French Revolution thought; or the nineteenth-century radicals; or the early-twentieth-century socialists.' Young's fictional text 'evades the task; he does not even seem to recognise it. But he has strikingly demonstrated its

¹³ Young, *Meritocracy*, p. 170, 176, 185, 188-89.

¹⁴ C. Curran, 'The Fable of 2034 A.D.', *Encounter* (February, 1959), pp. 68-70.

¹⁵ A. Fox, 'Top People', *Socialist Commentary* (December, 1959), p. 21.

¹⁶ D. Pevsner, 'Letter to Eunice Frost: Michael Young – *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (28/01/1959)', *The Penguin Archive*, Bristol [File A485]; I am grateful to Dr. Dean Blackburn for this reference.

¹⁷ Pevsner, 'Letter'.

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necessity.¹⁸ A more important factor in Pevsner's initial rejection, however, was *The Rise of the Meritocracy's* 'slightly facetious approach from the distant future.'¹⁹ This reservation was shared in reviews by two of Britain's most prominent cultural critics, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams. They were surprisingly unsympathetic to Young's conclusions, walking around *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, in the words of Paul Barker, like 'hesitant border terriers.'²⁰ In Williams' first contribution since joining the *Guardian* payroll, he compared Young's satire to that of Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal*. While the latter 'could count on a degree of general recognition by his readers that the scheme was open to certain objections', he wished he could be as sure 'Dr Young is equally fortunate.' While it was true the notion of equality of opportunity had become confused in post-war Britain, this was because it had been 'applied in the context of a deeply unequal society.' While an alternative society would place an emphasis on democracy, Williams felt comfortable to worry away Young's concerns, arguing that

I see no evidence in contemporary England of power being closely connected with merit, in any definition. The administrators, professional men, and technicians are increasingly being selected on educational merit, but power is still largely elsewhere [...] The deeper tendency in our society is towards an establishment in which we are all servants. To be an upper servant may be as high really as we can raise our heads. Quite what we are serving remains a mystery.²¹

For Williams, what Young's 'brilliant essay' illuminated was not the dangers of a social class system based on 'merit' or intelligence but that, when it came to the violent conclusion of the book's narrative at Peterloo 'there is no telling which side we and our children will be on.'²² In a similar vein, Richard Hoggart felt Young's dystopia was wide of the mark and 'sufficient only for a good short squib.' Hoggart used his review to pitch a 'more powerful and significant satire' of an unequal society in which "equality", far from being discredited, had formally been allowed to rule in diverse areas of experience

a society so generally prosperous that material differences between people would be exploited only, but intensely, to rouse marginal rivalries; a society which would show little variety, not simply because it would be rigidly stratified according to I.Q.s but because "the bland would lead the bland"; a

¹⁸ Anonymous, 'The New Caste System', *The Economist* (01/11/1958), p. 407.

¹⁹ Pevsner, 'Letter'.

²⁰ P. Barker, 'The Ups and Downs of Meritocracy', in G. Dench et al, *Young at Eighty*, p. 156.

²¹ R. Williams, 'Democracy or Meritocracy?: A Vision of Society in A.D. 2034', *The Guardian* (30/10/1958), p. 10.

²² Williams, 'Democracy or Meritocracy?', p. 10.

(2) 1958: The Meritocratic Moment

society in which a second Peterloo would be unlikely, because the few dissidents, whatever their class or I.Qs would have no common emotional language in which to communicate with almost anyone else.²³

Hoggart's greater fear, elaborated in 1957's *The Uses of Literacy*, was the importation to affluent Britain of an Americanised 'mass culture.' For Hoggart this threatened to install 'a new aristocracy, the monstrous regiment of the most flat-faced' where it is 'assumed that one should not make much of intellectual ability.'²⁴ It was left to conservatives like Curran, therefore, to recognise some of the future dangers highlighted by Young. For Curran the pressures that caused the violent explosion at Peterloo 'were present from the start' and *The Rise of the Meritocracy* demonstrated how they 'would have become lethal at a far earlier stage in reality than they do in Mr Young's fantasy.' These pressures 'begin to mount as soon as the first milestones have been passed on the road to Meritocracy.' The key for Curran was the fact that the development of a meritocratic elite in post-war Britain was part of an explicit bargain struck with the British people

The masses will clearly vote in favour of giving more scope to talent, but they will do so only because, and to the extent that, they are led to believe that this is in their own interests. For they do not seek a Meritocracy. They want a society that protects and care for the untalented many.²⁵

Democratic consent was given to the meritocracy on the basis that it would deliver a higher standard of living for all. This consent, however, could be quickly withdrawn if the meritocrats failed to deliver on their promises. If these 'alphas' get above themselves, Curran claimed, 'they will suffer the fate of the coal-owners and the dinosaurs.'²⁶

The Rise of the Meritocracy and its reception serves, therefore, to reveal the concept's contours in late-1950s Britain, to highlight the areas of overlap and divergence amongst the nation's mainstream ideologies during a period of apparent consensus. Firstly, as the likes of Curran and Fox highlighted, Young had coined a valuable word to describe a set of social trends which they all clearly recognised. In this sense, as this chapter will make clear, Young's satire should not be read solely as a warning which went unheeded but instead as revealing the pre-existing dominance of the concept of meritocracy in post-war Britain. Secondly, significant elements of *The Rise of the Meritocracy's* narrative arc mapped onto dominant social democratic understandings of the concept. Here, time horizons played a significant part in explaining away Young's concerns. In the short-term instigating a meritocracy was a necessary first step in achieving greater equality. For

²³ R. Hoggart, 'I.Q. plus Effort = Merit', *The Observer* (02/11/1958), p. 21.

²⁴ R. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, [1957] 1992), p. 181.

²⁵ Curran, 'The Fable', p. 70.

²⁶ Curran, 'The Fable', p. 72.

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social democrats like John Vaizey and Anthony Crosland, a meritocracy – placing the talented and skilled into positions of leadership and allowing expertise to be utilised in the interests of the public good – would deliver economic growth which could be used to defer difficult distributive questions and temporarily resolve the tension between equality and liberty. Where Young's satire felt fantastic was in its predictions from what Pevsner described as 'the distant future.' Social democrats were confident that state action could halt the meritocracy's slide into dystopia. As Curran's review highlighted, however, conservatives were much more wary of Young's concerns. For Curran the dangers inherent in the meritocracy emerged much quicker than social democrats, or even Young, could imagine. The meritocracy, therefore, rested on a contingent commitment, tolerable only on the basis of democratic consent and its ability to deliver higher economic growth.

This chapter begins by outlining the two ideological formations which placed meritocracy at the heart of an epistemological post-war consensus. While for both Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats meritocracy remained a contingent commitment, it resolved a number of ideological tensions. To understand this convergence, and to successfully explain why Young's interpretation of the concept could be effectively sidelined, requires an outline of the social, political and cultural context into which the word meritocracy emerged in 1958. Debates about the changing nature of class, the experience of social mobility and the widening of educational opportunity dominated the 1950s and 1960s and were bound up in Harold Macmillan's notion of an 'Opportunity State'. While the decade is often portrayed as a 'golden age' of social mobility, it was also a period where the discipline of sociology, particularly studies of social stratification, revealed the persistent impact of class on social outcomes. By drawing on this research, Revisionist Social Democrats emphasised the radical changes required to deliver even a 'weak' interpretation of equality of opportunity and in turn considered Young's warnings as problems to be dealt with by a future generation of political agents. For the likes of Crosland, Gaitskell and Vaizey the frustrations and injustices of a socially immobile society far outweighed those of a mobile one. Middle Way Conservatives evaluated post-war Britain's egalitarian credentials differently and, unlike Revisionists, in considering the 'Opportunity State' to be close at hand, were much more wary of the warnings contained in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In analysing these debates, the second part of this chapter traces the consequences of post-ideological politics on the concept of meritocracy. In a post-ideological age class politics gave way to status politics. Judgements of relative status were to be less harmful than the injustices of class and required a particular type of elite, one meritocratically selected, possessed

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of specialist expertise and underpinned by a professional ethic. Britain in the late 1950s, however, remained under the control of a secretive Establishment, a closed, amateurish and class-ridden magic circle whose decisions were irrational, opaque and unaccountable. In contrast, the 'New Men' of the meritocracy were said to be future-oriented and to make decisions rationally, sensitively and democratically. The most important challenge for these professional meritocrats was to use their expertise to deliver higher levels of economic growth. The final section of this chapter explores how both conservatives and social democrats increasingly came to rely on the panacea of growth to resolve distributive tensions in the 1950s and early 1960s. Growth and merit were interrelated in two important ways: firstly, both conservatives and social democrats increasingly saw a meritocratic pattern of rewards as paving the way to greater growth. Secondly, by helping to lift all boats and thereby ensuring increasingly egalitarian, classless consumption patterns, high economic growth ensured that distinctions made on the basis of merit would not be too sharp or unequal. By using the proceeds of growth to equalise opportunities the distinctions of merit could be made more accurate and socially just over the course of time.

(2.2) Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats

The reception of Young's text reveals the important conceptual space meritocracy occupied amongst Britain's mainstream ideologies. Throughout the twentieth century the Labour and Conservative Parties have governed as intellectual coalitions, hosting a range of different traditions: from guild socialists and corporatists to aristocratic reactionaries and neo-liberal free-marketeers. As will be outlined in this chapter, the word meritocracy emerged in 1958 into a political environment increasingly dominated by two ideological groupings: Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy.²⁷ If the last chapter highlighted the response of the former to the landslide Labour victory of 1945, this chapter traces the increasing dominance of Middle Way disciples like Quintin Hogg, Rab Butler and Timothy Raison over the intellectual currents of post-war conservatism in Britain, a process which reached its pinnacle when Macmillan became Prime Minister in 1957. In responding to the electoral dominance of the Conservatives in the 1950s, Labour Revisionists sought to acclimatise the Party to the affluent society, the growing stratum of socially mobile 'classless' voters, and the need for economic growth, themes crystallised in the publication of Anthony Crosland's *The Future of Socialism* in 1956.²⁸ Alongside other Revisionists like Hugh Gaitskell, John Vaizey and Austen Albu, Crosland positioned Revisionist Social Democracy in opposition to Marxist-inspired modes of

²⁷ D. Blackburn, 'Reassessing Britain's "Post-War Consensus": The Politics of Reason, 1945-1979', *British Politics*, 13 (2018), pp. 195-214.

²⁸ C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 2nd Ed., [1956] 1964).

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reasoning which he believed still dominated the Labour Party and its analysis of social change. Under Hugh Gaitskell's leadership between 1955 and 1963, Revisionists sought to transform Labour, which by the end of the 1950s had lost three consecutive General Elections, from a Party which emphasised the importance of the ownership of the means of production to one which defined socialism in terms of 'social equality'.²⁹

These two ideological traditions are often characterised as overseeing a period of political consensus during the three decades following the end of the Second World War.

Consensus referred to the idea of 'widespread elite agreement on policy goals and broad continuity in government policy' centring on the welfare state, mixed economy and Keynesian demand management.³⁰ After Thatcherism's supposed destruction of this agreement, the notion of a consensus was widely challenged by historians as an illusion which concealed significant differences between the Labour and Conservative Parties in the immediate post-war decades.³¹ Historians, however, may have been looking for evidence of a consensus in the wrong place. Rather than tracing convergence or divergence on questions of economic management or social policy, Dean Blackburn has argued it should instead be sought in a shared epistemology which valued empiricist reasoning.³² This epistemology valued political action which was patient and moderate, recognising that no one political Party had a monopoly on truth. Without the assurance of a prescient doctrine of eternal truth which could anticipate or explain the consequences of political actions, both Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats valued piecemeal reform which could be subjected to empirical observation.³³ These ideologies can both, therefore, be located within a broader progressive tradition, one where a complete rupture – whether made on the basis of moving forward or back in time – would have little claim to the mantle of progress.³⁴ While arguing against a capital levy in the first edition of *The Future of Socialism*, Crosland clearly drew attention to this overlap

The fact is a society like ours is an organic unity – a going concern – one so highly organised and interdependent between its various parts, resting as it does on a balance of tensions, thrusts and stresses, that intervention at one point will have effects at numerous and often unexpected other points. One

²⁹ H. Gaitskell, *Socialism and Nationalisation* (London, 1956), pp. 3-4.

³⁰ D. Kavanagh, 'Debate: The Postwar Consensus', *Twentieth Century British History*, 3/2 (1992), p. 175.

³¹ See for example: H. Jones & M. Kandiah (Eds.), *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (London, 1996).

³² Blackburn, 'Reassessing', pp. 4-5.

³³ Blackburn, 'Reassessing', p. 6.

³⁴ E. Robinson, *The Language of Progressive Politics in Modern Britain* (London, 2017), p. 49.

therefore cannot give it a shock of more than a certain violence without the risk of damage to the entire structure.³⁵

A sudden act of disruption permits no 'breathing space' as the 'old has gone before the new has grown to take its place.' In short, 'one should never monkey about with society too much; if we do, we may find that history has some unpleasant surprises up its sleeve for us.'³⁶ To understand the increasingly affluent society of post-war Britain Revisionists would increasingly come to rely on the emerging field of sociology and in particular the discipline's focus on social stratification.³⁷ While both Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats could evaluate this evidence against different criteria, their ideological impulses encouraged them to seek partial rather than ultimate ends.³⁸ Meritocracy, a concept which traversed both traditions, was an example of such a partial end, a social arrangement which was flexible enough to allow tweaks and modifications when, and if, the empirical evidence changed.

When it came to the distribution of opportunities and rewards, this 'epistemological consensus' – an implicit agreement about the nature, practice and limits of political action – led both Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats in meritocratic directions. The former is often characterised as an ideological formation which was chiefly interested in the concept of meritocracy as a means to secure its core objective of preserving inequality and social hierarchy. While recognising the importance of meritocracy to post-war conservatives, these accounts often replicate the familiar binary between conservatism as an ideology of inequality and socialism as one of equality.³⁹ As was highlighted in the last chapter, however, inequality should be considered a contingent concept in conservatism's ideological morphology.⁴⁰ The core commitment of Middle Way Conservatism was to manage organic change and preserve social harmony.⁴¹ While this led them to reject a stricter egalitarianism characterised by outcome rather than opportunity, a conception which ignored the empirical differences between individuals as well as their varying capacity to contribute to the national good, it also forced them to reject doctrines which allocated rewards without reference to popular notions of social justice or encouraged excessive inequalities of wealth. The adoption of meritocracy by post-war conservatives, therefore, entailed the incorporation

³⁵ C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1st Ed., 1956), p. 314.

³⁶ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1956), p. 314.

³⁷ Jackson, *Equality*, pp. 164-66.

³⁸ Blackburn, 'Reassessing', pp. 8-9.

³⁹ R. Eccleshall, 'The Doing of Conservatism', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5/3 (2000), pp. 275-87; J.W. Müller, 'Comprehending Conservatism: A New Framework for Analysis', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 11/3 (2006), p. 363.

⁴⁰ D. Blackburn, "'For We Shall Prejudice Nothing': Middle Way Conservatism and the Defence of Inequality, 1945-1979", *Political Studies*, 64/Supp.1 (2016), p. 163.

⁴¹ M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford, 1998), p. 332; Blackburn, 'Middle Way Conservatism', p. 163; Robinson, *Language*, p. 41.

of a distributive logic which pledged them to reduce disparities of wealth and equalise opportunities. The concept served as the basis upon which potentially belligerent social groups could be absorbed into a shared national identity, fostering ties of common interest which united the social order.⁴² As this chapter will explore, and was highlighted in the reception to Young's book, conservatives were often more wary of the dangers posed by a meritocracy in the short term than their Revisionist rivals. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* posed significant dilemmas for Middle Way Conservatives, demonstrating how, if taken to its logical conclusion, the concept could destroy the ties of common interest which bound the social order together.

Revisionists were also determined to preserve social harmony, largely because a stable society was one in which the values of liberty and equality could flourish. While we can place equality at the core of Revisionism's ideological morphology, its meaning was mediated by adjacent concepts such as liberty or freedom which distinguished Revisionists from other constellations on the Left.⁴³ The Revisionist's empirical approach to politics encouraged them to adopt a relativist position towards equality, one which was reluctant to spell out a particular arrangement as universally desirable.⁴⁴ The question of 'how much equality' was one which Crosland did not regard

[...] as either a sensible or a pertinent question, to which one could possibly give, or should attempt to give, a precise reply. We need, I believe, more equality than we have now [...] We can therefore describe the direction of advance, and even discern the immediate landscape ahead; but the ultimate objective lies wrapped in complete uncertainty [...] in Western societies change is gradual and evolutionary, and not always either foreseeable or even under political control.⁴⁵

En route to equality socialists may wish to stop before they 'reach some drab extreme' but this was a question which would have to be 're-stated, and thought out afresh, by a younger generation than mine.'⁴⁶ This relativism has often led historians and political theorists to wrest Crosland from his context and associate him with a whole host of egalitarian positions, from a strict equality of outcome to a Rawlsian 'democratic equality', to a limited equality of opportunity in the form of meritocracy.⁴⁷ The latter

⁴² Blackburn, 'Middle Way Conservatism', p. 166.

⁴³ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), pp. 69-76; N. Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics: Retreating Visions* (London, 2nd Ed., 2004), p. 73.

⁴⁴ Blackburn, 'Reassessing', p. 16.

⁴⁵ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 148.

⁴⁶ C.A.R. Crosland, 'About Equality (II) Is Equal Opportunity Enough?', *Encounter* (August, 1956), p. 48.

⁴⁷ R. Plant, 'Democratic Socialism and Equality', in D. Lipsey and D. Leonard (Ed.), *The Socialist Agenda: Crosland's Legacy* (London, 1981), pp. 135-55; Jackson, *Equality*, p. 163.

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appears to be a legacy of certain Bevanite and New Left attacks on *The Future of Socialism* which simplify Crosland's complex engagement with the question of equality in affluent Britain and which in turn have been unwittingly replicated in the historiography.⁴⁸ The notion that Crosland's egalitarianism can be defined by a 'weak' or limited conception of equality of opportunity and therefore Revisionist Social Democrats endorsed a meritocratic social order is to blur together several distinct problems. Firstly, as the likes of Geoffrey Foote, Kevin Hickson and Ben Jackson have argued, Crosland was acutely aware of the long term dangers of a meritocracy, in large part thanks to his personal and professional connection with Michael Young.⁴⁹ Secondly, and more importantly, the argument that Crosland endorsed a meritocracy because he was committed to equality of opportunity simply elides these two positions together. As this chapter will show, with meritocracy reaching its zenith in the late 1950s, the concept was capable of being interpreted in radical directions which committed both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives to significant egalitarian positions in areas such as schooling, poverty and redistribution.

It is, therefore, by taking the concept of meritocracy itself as the object of study – tracing its range of meaning in the late 1950s – that we can still categorise Revisionists like Crosland as meritocrats, while also acknowledging that this statement entails a more radical and complex relationship with equality than has previously been presented. While Revisionists recognised that meritocracy was not a suitable egalitarian end-state they argued that it was a much more appealing social order than a static class-system which restricted mobility and opportunity. As Ben Jackson has argued, Revisionists in the mid-to-late 1950s endorsed a distributive logic, based on a particular reading of socialist theory and history as well as emerging sociological evidence that 'not only acknowledged a meritocratic distribution as an important improvement on existing inequalities, but also emphasised that this objective was not exhaustive as far as social justice was concerned.'⁵⁰ Revisionists sought to ground inequalities on the idea of a rent of ability, understood as a necessary incentive payment to secure the performance of important economic functions.⁵¹ Generating growth was central to the intellectual politics of the late 1950s and early 1960s, for the likes of Crosland the overriding priority which would deliver ever-greater egalitarianism. In this sense Revisionists were willing to make

⁴⁸ As Ben Jackson notes, while the revisionist view of social justice allowed some material inequality, it did so 'on the same basis as earlier egalitarians.' There is little evidence that 'the ideological rivals of the revisionists from the Left endorsed distributive principles that were somehow more egalitarian.' Jackson, *Equality*, p. 176.

⁴⁹ G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History* (London, 3rd Ed., 1997), p. 214; K. Hickson, 'Equality', in R. Plant, M. Beech & K. Hickson (Eds.), *The Struggle for Labour's Soul: Understanding Labour's Political Thought Since 1945* (London, 2004), p. 122.

⁵⁰ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 168.

⁵¹ Reisman, *Anthony Crosland: The Mixed Economy* (New York, 1997), p. 205; Jackson, *Equality*, p. 175.

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meritocratic sacrifices in the short term for the promise of higher growth and therefore a more egalitarian future in the long term. Conservatives and socialists, therefore, possessed distinct criteria for assessing 'merit', diverging reasons for endorsing a meritocratic social order, and differed in how they evaluated the threat a meritocracy could pose in the future. Yet, at the juncture of British history explored in this chapter, it is possible to uncover a degree of convergence which was rooted in shared beliefs regarding the undesirability of gross inequalities of wealth, especially those unrelated to contributions to the national good.

(2.3) The Opportunity State

Speaking in Leicester in March 1957, two months after becoming Britain's fourth post-war Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan outlined 'the philosophy of the Opportunity State'. He could not remember who had invented the phrase but argued that it 'very well expresses the difference, perhaps the most serious difference, between the two Parties.' Conservatives, he claimed, 'believe that unless we give the opportunity to the strong and able we shall never have the means to provide real protection for the weak and old.'⁵² The idea of an 'Opportunity State' brings together the themes of social mobility, classlessness, affluence and economic growth which dominated the intellectual politics of the 1950s and permeate this chapter. While for many Macmillan's rhetoric was more illusion than lived experience, the language of opportunity clearly chimed with the mood of an increasingly affluent public. The Prime Minister's claim that the 'Opportunity State' represented the dividing line between conservatism and socialism, however, neglects the extent to which Revisionists attempted to reorient the Labour Party on issues such as affluence, social mobility and class in the 1950s. The theory of 'embourgeoisement', the notion that the working classes were becoming increasingly prosperous and adopting middle-class values, was central to how Revisionists understood social change in the 1950s.⁵³ For Anthony Crosland Britain was a society in transition, a nation which was becoming increasingly classless but which was simultaneously held back by the deep-roots of class feeling. The Revisionists sought to ground their appeal in remedying the dislocation between the social status and economic status of the 'new rising classes' and

⁵² H. Macmillan, 'Macmillan and the Opportunity State (18/03/1957)', *The National Archives*, [CAB 21/4767], <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/fifties-britain/macmillan-opportunity-state/> (Accessed: 05/09/2018)

⁵³ M. Abrams & R. Rose, *Must Labour Lose?* (Harmondsworth, 1960); F. Zweig, *The Worker in an Affluent Society: Family Life and Industry* (London, 1961).

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to demonstrate that equality of opportunity, despite not representing the limits of their egalitarian ambitions, was a priority which would entail radical change.⁵⁴

The 1950s is often portrayed as a 'Golden Age' of social mobility, a period where the currents of affluence and opportunity were strong enough to carry each and every citizen at least a little further upstream. The historian Eric Hobsbawm remembered post-war life as 'an escalator which, without any special effort, took us higher than we had ever expected to be.'⁵⁵ This 'Golden Age', however, was more apparent than real. While mobility did improve, at least in absolute if not in relative terms, this reflected transformations in the social structure – namely the expansion of the professions which was highlighted in the last chapter – rather than the creation of a genuinely classless meritocracy. As Peter Mandler has highlighted, the impact of education on social mobility was limited, even as it became a key theme in political discourse.⁵⁶ The idea of upward mobility, however, its drivers and consequences, dominated the intellectual politics of late 1950s and early 1960s Britain. The most significant resource for Britain's intellectual politics in exploring the consequences of this mobility was the discipline of sociology.⁵⁷ As Mike Savage has demonstrated, the success of the social sciences was a post-war phenomenon and can be attributed to the discipline's claim to separate the contemporary as a site of social change from the longer term. In the process it contested a 'more historically embedded recognition of the links between past, present and future.' Change could now be detected as immanent within the everyday life of the social fabric making ordinary lives 'ripe for social scientific analysis.'⁵⁸ The popular sociology of Michael Young's *Institute for Community Studies* or Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden's *Education and the Working Class*, appealed to an 'emotional truth' which reached out to the literary tradition of Richard Hoggart or Raymond Williams.⁵⁹ What this type of sociology promised, however, was to wrest these ideas from the world of literature and place them in a context where they could be rendered as 'social truths'.⁶⁰ These social truths were important resources for empiricist traditions like Revisionist Social Democracy and Middle Way Conservatism.⁶¹

⁵⁴ H. Gaitskell, 'Public Ownership and Equality', *Socialist Commentary* (June, 1955), p. 165; R. Jenkins, *The Labour Case* (Harmondsworth, 1959), pp. 98-100.

⁵⁵ E. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002), p. 223.

⁵⁶ P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation III: Social Mobility', *Transactions of the RHS*, 26 (2016), pp. 1-23.

⁵⁷ Jackson, *Equality*, pp. 164-67.

⁵⁸ M. Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010), pp. 133-34.

⁵⁹ B. Jackson & D. Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (London, 1962).

⁶⁰ Savage, *Identities*, p. 181.

⁶¹ C. Lockwood, '"Actions Not Words": The Conservative Party, Public Opinion and "Scientific" Politics, c. 1945-70', *Twentieth Century British History* (2019), pp. 1-27. See also: T. Raison, 'Towards a Tory Sociology', *Crossbow* (October-December, 1963), pp. 45-49.

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The most significant strand of the discipline in the 1950s was that related to social stratification. Mobility surveys catalogued the grave inequality of life chances between individuals born into different classes. The work of David Glass and A.H. Halsey, amongst others, highlighted the increasing importance of educational credentials in post-war Britain and their connection to occupational status.⁶² With greater opportunities for professional employment, higher living standards and a collective national need for a more educated workforce, parents from all classes gradually demanded access to a quality school for their children. This access, however, was shown by sociologists to be deeply conditioned by an individual's class background.⁶³ Whereas in 1944 the Butler Act appeared to be a progressive compromise, delivering historic socialist aims of secondary education for all, by the mid-1950s the tripartite arrangement was seen as a substantial block, rather than facilitator, of equal opportunities.⁶⁴ More significantly for the concept of meritocracy was the challenge this research posed to the notion that equality of opportunity could be delivered by simply identifying measured intelligence at a point in time and distributing educational resources accordingly. Writing in 1962, John Vaizey, Britain's most significant educational economist and a well-connected Revisionist intellectual, argued that

[...] today we know far more about ability and intelligence than we did. So much more, in fact, that it is now clear that the great tradition of belief in equality of opportunity was not only correct – in that there still were great reserves of untapped ability in our society – but that it was even an understatement of what needs to be achieved if all sorts and kinds of abilities are to be developed to the full.⁶⁵

While on the surface these sociological critiques appeared deeply inimical to the meritocratic principles embodied in the 1944 Education Act, their most significant consequence was to create a more efficient system. By removing flaws, improving the sifting mechanism and operating in tandem with an expanded definition of equal opportunities, we should read this research as reflective of the increasing number of hopes, aspirations and expectations placed on meritocracy in the mid-to-late 1950s rather than of the concept's retreat.

This expansion was most vividly reflected in debates about the structure of Britain's schools. The shift towards comprehensive schooling that an expansive definition of

⁶² D.V. Glass (Ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain* (London, 1954); J.E. Floud, A.H. Halsey & F.M. Martin, *Social Class and Educational Opportunity* (London, 1956).

⁶³ Floud, Halsey & Martin, *Social Class*; B. Simon, *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School* (London, 1953).

⁶⁴ B. A. Godwin, 'Second Class Brains', *Socialist Commentary* (October, 1955), pp. 341-42.

⁶⁵ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 12.

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intelligence encouraged is often characterised as reflecting a repudiation of meritocracy amongst politicians, policy-makers and the public in favour of a more egalitarian educational philosophy.⁶⁶ Revisionist Social Democrats were certainly aware that the tripartite division was, in the words of Crosland, the 'most divisive, unjust and wasteful of all the aspects of social inequality.'⁶⁷ By 1953 the Labour Party was officially committed to extending comprehensive schools.⁶⁸ This reflected several different pressures applied to different points of the tripartite division: firstly, policy makers sought a system which could take account of recent discoveries about the nature of intelligence. As John Vaizey argued, 'ability is a continuum, with no sharp division between the two groups of the able and the less able.' By 'manipulating the environment' a great deal of 'apparent stupidity could be eliminated.'⁶⁹ Secondly, structural changes in the economy, the increasing need for technical, scientific and professional skills, required a more educated workforce. For Crosland, in a 'highly complex and professional industrial society', the problem of leadership was not merely about 'correctly distributing' all the 'alpha material' but about making the 'best use of our beta resources also.'⁷⁰ Finally, as access to education became increasingly important to an individual's position in the social hierarchy, demand from parents increased at an exponential rate. As Peter Mandler has argued, education provision was considered, like healthcare, as a universal public service, and parents of all classes 'came to seek the best teachers and schools for their children, just as they came to seek the best doctors and hospitals.'⁷¹ Middle Way Conservatives were increasingly won over to comprehensive schools on this basis, recognising, in the words of Timothy Raison, the 'social disruption' caused by the eleven-plus. For Raison, 'though quality and ambition are important, we must somehow reconcile them with social harmony.' The process of selection, he argued, must be 'less sharp and more strictly education rather than social.'⁷² There existed, therefore, a strong democratic imperative for improving access to good education.

The vision at the heart of the comprehensive school, however, remained a profoundly meritocratic one. Due to their empiricist impulses Revisionists did not think that grammar schools and selection should be completely abolished by government diktat. Speaking in 1959, Gaitskell was clear that Labour would not be framed by the Tories 'as

⁶⁶ N. Annan, *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation* (London, 1990), p. 363; T. Judt & T. Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (London, 2013), p. 112; P. Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I: Schools', *Transactions of the RHS*, 24 (2014), p. 9.

⁶⁷ C.A.R. Crosland, 'About Equality (III) Education and the Class System', *Encounter* (September, 1956), p. 27.

⁶⁸ L. Paterson, *Social Radicalism and Liberal Education* (St. Andrews, 2015), pp. 267-68.

⁶⁹ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 46, 49.

⁷⁰ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 147.

⁷¹ Mandler, 'Educating the Nation I', p. 13.

⁷² T. Raison, *Why Conservative?* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 100, 101-02.

the murderers of the grammar school.⁷³ Revisionists were forced to consider society 'as it was' and therefore, as Crosland argued, 'we do not have a completely free choice, since we inherit an elaborate non-comprehensive school structure which cannot be forcibly diminished.'⁷⁴ While Vaizey thought manipulations in the environment could improve the general intelligence of the population he noted that 'cultural differences will remain important for a great many years to come.'⁷⁵ Comprehensives would be common schools with an equal membership. They would extend to greater numbers of the population an education which allowed them to fulfil their individual talents. This increasingly appealed to Middle Way Conservatives like Raison. While it was imperative for Britain to make 'the best use of our ablest people' it also needed to make the best use of everyone else

Otherwise we shall succumb to the dangers of the meritocracy [...] we must show respect and care for the potential craftsman, just as much as for the potential Fellow of the Royal Society, for the labourer as for the philosopher, even though we recognise that they and their needs are different [...] For all the problems and weaknesses, education today is an area of hope; the educator is like a prospector waiting to tap new seams or gushes of talent.⁷⁶

Both Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats felt it imperative that comprehensives still stream students based on their academic ability. Vaizey, for example, concluded that because of widespread cultural differences it would be 'extremely difficult to educate the backward children from extremely poor homes together with the clever children from professional homes.' While these differences would eventually be remedied, the principles of selection are 'bound to last for twenty years at least.'⁷⁷ Judgements about an individual's intelligence would be removed from an arbitrary, out-dated selection test and passed to a body of professional experts, namely teachers. As Lindsay Paterson has argued, the purpose of comprehensives for the likes of Crosland and Vaizey was to transfer decisions about allocation to the hands of those who could judge on educational grounds alone.⁷⁸ Visions of the comprehensive school, therefore, reflected in microcosm how political actors imagined a meritocratic society: a society which made distinctions of merit, underpinned by a professional ethic and buttressed by rising living standards, a generous welfare floor to protect the vulnerable, and a sense of common citizenship.

⁷³ P. Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell: A Political Biography* (London, 1979), p. 467.

⁷⁴ Crosland, 'About Equality (III)', p. 32.

⁷⁵ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 49.

⁷⁶ Raison, *Why Conservative?*, pp. 107-08.

⁷⁷ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 49, 50.

⁷⁸ Paterson, *Social Radicalism*, p. 270; Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 62.

The sociological mobility studies of the 1950s served to illuminate a society which was delivering only limited social mobility, wasting talent among the working-class thanks to faulty selection methods, outdated concepts of intelligence and a restrictive school structure, and was generally felt to be inhibited due to the prevalence of an oppressive class consciousness which prevented individuals from fulfilling their talents. For Crosland, Britain's social order was characterised by 'a high degree of class-consciousness' and a 'strongly etched class hierarchy.' Subjectively this demonstrated the prevalence of 'strong collective and individual feelings of class position' which are at least 'potential causes of antagonism and resentment.' While Crosland acknowledged that even if 'national classes were to wither away, a status hierarchy of some sort would still exist', the increased social intercourse of the United States demonstrated that by eliminating differences of class feeling

[...] there is less envy and resentment at high incomes, since those who enjoy them are not thought to belong to a different or superior class, or to have inherited them from their parents; less distinctively working-class psychology, either individually or collectively; less belief in inevitable class conflict; and no parallel to the ideology of class betrayal.⁷⁹

This is not to say that Revisionists downplayed the impact of a competitive, mobile, equal opportunity society.⁸⁰ As was highlighted above, Crosland shared a long, personal and political friendship with Michael Young and frequently acknowledged the warnings spelled out in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.⁸¹ The 'competitive ladder' metaphor of society could encourage 'every individual, spurred on by his invidious comparisons and glittering prizes ahead' to 'aim for higher status' and 'because the door to self-advancement seems wide open, think he can attain it.'⁸² This 'restless itch to rise in the social scale', Crosland admitted, could lead to insecurity, a sense of failure and an unhealthy acquisitiveness focused on consumption and money-making.

After reviewing the evidence, however, Crosland found that 'the case often made against the mobile equal-opportunity society both exaggerates the evils and underestimates the compensating gains.'⁸³ Revisionists argued that the potential dangers and damages caused by an immobile society, inhibited by a strong sense of class-consciousness, far

⁷⁹ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 121, 180.

⁸⁰ D. Reisman, *Crosland's Future: Opportunity and Outcome* (London, 1997), p. 62.

⁸¹ For example, see: C.A.R. Crosland, 'Some Thoughts on English Education', *Encounter* (July, 1961), p. 52.

⁸² Crosland, 'About Equality (II)', p. 40.

⁸³ Crosland, 'About Equality (II)', p. 45.

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outweighed those of the Opportunity State.⁸⁴ For Crosland, the absence of equal opportunity and social mobility is 'both a denial of democratic rights, and a positive cause for discontent.'⁸⁵ Roy Jenkins deployed a similar argument in 1959's *The Labour Case*, claiming that while equality of opportunity was insufficient as a 'social or educational aim' it was a 'great deal better than inequality of opportunity.'⁸⁶ For Crosland and Jenkins a lack of mobility, rather than excessive movement, threatened social harmony. As was highlighted above, this harmony was also prized by Middle Way Conservatives. Writing on the eve of the 1964 General Election, Timothy Raison acknowledged that the rise of 'equality today is complex' and posed distinct problems for conservatives. While equality did not mean that the national contribution of the 'bricklayer' and the 'barrister' was equal, or that they should be 'educated side by side' and share the same cultural interests, 'the essence of modern Toryism' should be to help each individual to 'make the fullest use of the talents and qualities which he may possess.'⁸⁷ While at their best 'class standards may embody certain limited qualities',

[...] the fact remains that class distinctions can be the most pernicious and wasteful means of disrupting society which can be imagined. It is not simply that class leads to the politics of envy which has marked the century; nor even that it is the great obstacle in the way of the concept of One Nation. The fundamental injustice of class comes when it deprives any man of the right to make the most of the talents which he may possess.⁸⁸

Hailsham agreed, noting that conservatives should be wary about using the language of class because 'class has come to imply subordination.' The conservative ideal needed to focus on ensuring 'all get true social justice' and that no individual is 'denied the opportunity, or the just rewards of the style of life they aim at for themselves or their children.'⁸⁹ Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives, therefore, often overlapped in their hostility to restrictive forms of class identity which stopped individuals from realising their talents, and agreed that the dangers of an immobile social hierarchy far outweighed those posed by the Opportunity State.

The two ideologies diverged, however, in how they evaluated Britain's meritocratic credentials in the mid-to-late 1950s and early 1960s. In many ways the flourishing sociological literature highlighted above made the dangers of a meritocracy less stark for Revisionists, residing as they did in what appeared in the late 1950s to be the distant

⁸⁴ J. Vaizey, *Education in a Class Society: The Queen and Her Horses Reign* (London, 1962), pp. 5-6.

⁸⁵ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 161.

⁸⁶ Jenkins, *Labour Case*, p. 87.

⁸⁷ Raison, *Why Conservative?*, p. 38.

⁸⁸ Raison, *Why Conservative?*, p. 24.

⁸⁹ Viscount Hailsham [Q. Hogg], *Toryism and Tomorrow* (London, 1957), p. 16.

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future. A good example of this comes from the research of the demographer and sociologist D.V. Glass. In 1949 Glass began a large intergenerational social mobility survey, the results of which were published in 1954 as *Social Mobility in Britain*.⁹⁰ Glass, and his significant number of disciples whom he encouraged as Chair of Sociology at LSE from 1948, was wedded to a 'problem-and-policy' variant of sociological research, combined with a 'piecemeal pragmatism unattached to theory'.⁹¹ At the heart of his research agenda was the phenomenon of inequality and Glass tasked himself with 'charting it, unravelling its inter-tangled pattern and finding means to overcome it.' He has been described as a 'man of the radical Left', committed to a 'sceptical' politics 'free of dogmatism' and motivated, above all, by a 'profound loathing' of Britain's unequal social order.⁹² Clearly Glass's empirical sociology chimed closely with the political aims of Revisionism and the conclusions of *Social Mobility in Britain*, underlying the lack of fluidity, the hindrances of class and the denial of equality of opportunity which characterised the social order of the 1950s, were widely read and cited by Revisionist thinkers.⁹³

Research by the likes of Glass clearly provided a fresh impetus to the Left's case for radical reform of the institutions which structured inequality.⁹⁴ Yet *Social Mobility in Britain* also demonstrates the ways in which the dangers of a meritocracy, described by Young four years after the publication of Glass's research, could be safely dismissed as fantasy. In November 1954 Glass sat down to discuss his new book on BBC Radio with the social scientist and market researcher Mark Abrams.⁹⁵ Abrams had established Research Services Ltd. in 1946 and would become post-war Britain's most influential market researcher. While his role in charting and disseminating cultural trends has been relatively well documented, his influence as a source of sociological knowledge for both the Labour Party and some progressive Conservative groups remains to be explored. In his discussion with Glass, Abrams expressed concern at the fact that education was increasingly the passport to mobility and highlighted the potential for this form of stratification to create new tensions

In the past it was possible to say: "I've succeeded" or "I've failed" even because of luck, luck of birth, and you could resent that or you could say:

⁹⁰ Glass, *Social Mobility*; G. Savage, *The Social Construction of Expertise: The English Civil Service and Its Influence, 1919-1939* (Pittsburgh, PA., 1996), pp. 17-18.

⁹¹ J. Westergaard, 'In Memory of David Glass', *Sociology*, 13/2 (1979), p. 173; A.H. Halsey, *A History of Sociology in Britain: Science, Literature, and Society* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 77-78.

⁹² Westergaard, 'In Memory', pp. 174-75.

⁹³ W.T. Rodgers, 'Social Mobility in Britain', *Socialist Commentary* (October, 1954), pp. 296-97; Jenkins, *Labour Case*, p. 87; Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), pp. 163-64.

⁹⁴ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 165.

⁹⁵ M. Abrams & D.V. Glass, 'Transcript of Discussion (16/11/1954)', *Papers of Mark Abrams*, CCC, [ABMS 5/6]; H. Arbuthnot (BBC), 'Letter to M. Abrams', *Papers of Mark Abrams*, CCC, [ABMS 5/6]

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“Well, no one can do anything about it” [...] But presuming nowadays, if you succeed, the implication is you’ve succeeded because you’re extremely intelligent and if you’ve failed, you’ve failed because you are not intelligent or not good, at taking exams [...] And isn’t that likely to lead to a good deal of tension – both among people and among classes, and a feeling that – “Well, they are now getting their desserts” and if those desserts are bad, they are unworthy in some way.⁹⁶

While Glass acknowledged that this could be a problem, the effects could be mitigated by policies designed to foster a common citizenship regardless of individual I.Q. and to avoid separating those placed in positions of responsibility from the rest of the community. The creation of a ‘caste...an intellectual caste, any more than any other’ should be avoided; these men should not form a ‘separate aristocracy.’ Still, Abrams argued, this was surely a possibility. Britain could become beset by a ‘very different set of class tensions between the people who haven’t got on academically and the people who have.’ Glass felt safe to dismiss Abrams concerns on a number of levels

I don’t think it’s likely to be quite so acute as your example of the high-born and the lowly-born [...] partly because you can’t perpetuate it in the same way [...] the association between the intelligence of the parent and the child is by no means perfect, by no means complete. And there will always be, if you have a very wide educational opportunity – there will be a good deal of movement between generations each time. And therefore, you can’t guarantee to maintain your status and your children’s status as a kind of caste in that sense if a parent has failed to get up the social ladder, he may still hope that his child or one of his children will get up the social ladder; there’s always that kind of chance.⁹⁷

The idea that intelligence would increasingly come to determine an individual’s social position and that this trait could not be passed on from one generation to the next gave Glass faith that the meritocratic elite would remain fluid and open. The notion that socially mobile parents would want to secure advantages for their children or that growing up in more affluent environments would afford these second-generation meritocrats a significant head start did not trouble this formulation. Revisionists shared much of Glass’s analysis. For Crosland, the problem for a ‘stratified society’ with low social mobility is that ‘the ruling elite becomes hereditary and self-perpetuating.’ This, he claimed, ‘must involve a waste of talent.’ While it is clear the likes of Crosland did not consider meritocracy as an ideal socialist end state, by recognising that Britain was still a

⁹⁶ Abrams & Glass, ‘Transcript’, pp. 16-17.

⁹⁷ Abrams & Glass, ‘Transcript’, pp. 17-18.

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long way from even achieving a 'weak' interpretation of equality of opportunity the dangers posed by Young appeared only to exist in the realm of fantasy.⁹⁸ As Crosland argued in *The Future of Socialism* and repeated in *Encounter*, because Britain's economic situation imparted a particular importance to 'efficient selection for the higher posts' and because, 'having developed slowly from a traditional and hereditary society', the notion of 'granting an equal chance to every child' remained a distant goal, equality of opportunity remained 'an essential socialist objective.'⁹⁹ The nation's unique history, as well as the persistence of class and the poor rates of social mobility in the late 1950s, ensured that 'in Britain...whatever may be the case elsewhere, a more equal spread of opportunity would bring some exceptionally notable gains at unusually little risk.'¹⁰⁰

Middle Way Conservatives, on the other hand, considered the risks of a meritocracy more urgent and were more wary of its potential to disrupt social harmony. While they recognised the increasing social need for the specialised abilities of the scientist, the economists, and the other experts, the likes of Raison considered Britain to be reaching a point 'at which equality of opportunity may begin to be a reality.' This could lead to 'the danger pointed out by Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*.' For Raison, the meritocracy could lead to 'serious social tensions' amongst the rejected, especially if the 'gulf between the intellectuals and the technocrats and the rest of the community were to widen.' In this respect, Raison argued, the 'egalitarianism which characterises a good deal of contemporary English intellectual life is likely to be valuable.'¹⁰¹ If equality of opportunity was not the distant prospect Revisionists considered it to be then the dangers posed by a meritocracy to social harmony became more pressing. As the conservative journalist Geoffrey Smith argued:

It is the tensions of a meritocracy from which we are likely to suffer in the future. An aristocracy of brains may be no easier to live with than any other, and it is not an infallible source of comfort to know that one's failure is due to one's own shortcomings rather than the clumsy arrangement of society.¹⁰²

In balancing this tension between, on the one hand, allowing talent to flourish unimpeded by class and, on the other, not unleashing the kind of society outlined by Young, Middle Way Conservatives needed to, in the words of Smith, 'seek and guard against a meritocracy at one and the same time.'¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Crosland, 'Some Thoughts', p. 50; C.A.R. Crosland, 'Public Schools and English Education', in his *Conservative Enemy: A Programme of Radical Reform for the 1960s* (London, 1962), p. 169.

⁹⁹ Crosland, 'About Equality (II)', p. 45.

¹⁰⁰ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), pp. 163-64.

¹⁰¹ Raison, *Why Conservative?*, p. 25.

¹⁰² Smith, 'Facing', p. 59.

¹⁰³ Smith, 'Facing', p. 59.

(2.4) The End of Ideology

The idea of post-war Britain as an 'Opportunity State', a social order where the harmful injustices of class could be banished and replaced by the objective judgements of status was reflective of a broader shift in transatlantic intellectual politics. This was the so-called 'End of Ideology', the notion that modern Western nations were witnessing either the welcome end of the political furies that had shocked the modern world in the first half of the twentieth century or the suppression of vigorous, critical debate in public affairs by the orthodoxies of Cold War liberal anti-communism. As Howard Brick has argued, while the thesis was 'intellectually over-determined' its most dominant form was characterised by a dedication to the promise of the post-war welfare state, a dismissal of free market efficiency and a culturally conservative disposition that was suspicious of disruptive protest movements and avant-garde culture.¹⁰⁴ The most fruitful source of the 'End of Ideology' thesis was the monthly journal *Encounter*. *Encounter* was a product of the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), an anti-totalitarian, European and transatlantic intellectual group which attracted some of the world's most prominent authors, philosophers and scientists and was covertly funded by the CIA.¹⁰⁵ While the Congress was, from its inception in June 1950, an institution created and shaped by the political demands of the Cold War, it was also 'representative of cultural-intellectual concerns held by many in the same period.'¹⁰⁶ Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s *Encounter* successfully presented itself as the 'dominant culture, the bearer of normative cultural and political values and the centre of the zeitgeist.'¹⁰⁷

By the middle of the 1950s these 'normative cultural and political values' were increasingly underpinned by the so-called 'End of Ideology'. While the thesis can be traced back to an article by the American historian H. Stuart Hughes in 1951, theorising about a post-ideological age blossomed after a CCF-sponsored conference in Milan during the autumn of 1955.¹⁰⁸ Entitled 'The Future of Freedom', and organised by Michael Polanyi, Raymond Aron and Anthony Crosland amongst others, the cohering theme in Milan, reported in the pages of *Encounter* by Edward Shils, was said to be the

¹⁰⁴ H. Brick, 'The End of Ideology Thesis', in M. Freeden & M. Stears (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford, 2013), p. 90, 92.

¹⁰⁵ The CCF was officially launched at a conference in Berlin in June 1950. Attendees included Hugh Trevor-Roper, A.J. Ayer, James Burnham, Raymond Aron and Arthur Koestler, see: F.S. Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London, 2000), pp. 73-76. The CCF's CIA funding was revealed in *The New York Times* in 1967 to the shock of many *Encounter* contributors, and the organisation then changed its name to the International Association for Cultural Freedom.

¹⁰⁶ H. Wilford, *The New York Intellectuals: From Vanguard to Institution* (Manchester, 1995), p. 198.

¹⁰⁷ G. Scott-Smith, *The Politics of Apolitical Culture: The Congress of Cultural Freedom, the CIA and Post-War American Hegemony* (Abingdon, 2002), p. 132.

¹⁰⁸ H. Stuart Hughes, 'The End of Political Ideology', *Measure* 2/2 (1951), pp. 146-58; P. Coleman, *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (London, 1989), p. 110.

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collapse of the distinctions between 'left' and 'right'.¹⁰⁹ The debates were dominated by the rise of a mode of political thought 'which recognised no general principles' and 'treated each emerging situation on its merits.'¹¹⁰ As Giles Scott-Smith has argued, the proponents of the 'End of Ideology' considered themselves to be at the forefront of a progressive political discourse.¹¹¹ Daniel Bell certainly felt that if a 'repudiation of ideology' was to be meaningful it had to imply 'not only a criticism of the utopian order but of existing society as well.'¹¹² This empiricist epistemology chimed with how the likes of Crosland sought to approach political problems and Revisionists within the Labour Party, especially when compared to Middle Way Conservatives, contributed significantly to debates about the 'End of Ideology'.¹¹³ Gaitskell, Jenkins, Dennis Healey and Arthur Lewis all attended the Milan conference and Crosland was a member of the organising committee. In the aftermath of Milan, *Encounter* became an increasingly Gaitskellite mouthpiece, especially when Melvin Lasky took over as editor in 1958.¹¹⁴

The notion of a world free from ideologically-motivated political action or conflict had a profound impact on the concept of meritocracy. In the words of Peter Hennessy one of the reasons *The Rise of the Meritocracy* caught on was because the likes of Bell were 'proclaiming that the globe was being reshaped by the end of ideology, and being made increasingly safe for the ever more indispensable gifted and technocratic.'¹¹⁵ In formulations like Bell's, meritocratically selected, professionally trained and recognised administrators would staff the corporate state and would make rational, expertise-driven decisions about the allocation of public resources. They would bring together the formerly antagonistic forces of Labour and Capital – themselves increasingly staffed by professional meritocrats – to rationally discuss industrial problems and to arrive at considered judgements regarding investment and productivity. Through planning instruments they would identify, analyse and evaluate future trends and deliver high rates of economic growth which would serve to nullify any conflicts over relative rewards. The incentives required to stimulate effort and deliver this growth, as well as the differentials between workers, would be rationally decided and underpinned by a shared, democratically-legitimate conception of merit. As Daniel Bell told Mark Abrams in

¹⁰⁹ Scott-Smith, *Apolitical Culture*, p. 145; E. Shils, 'Letter from Milan: The End of Ideology?', *Encounter* (November, 1955), pp. 52-58.

¹¹⁰ Shils, 'Letter', p. 54.

¹¹¹ Scott-Smith, *Apolitical Culture*, p. 140.

¹¹² Bell, *End of Ideology*, p. 16.

¹¹³ Daniel Bell, in particular, was an important connection, see: D. Bell, 'Politics' New Look: A Review of *The Future of Socialism* by C.A.R. Crosland', *New York Post* (23/02/1958); D. Bell, 'The Future of the Left', *Encounter* (May, 1960), pp. 59-61; J. Andersson, *The Future of the World: Futurology, Futurists, and the Struggle for the Post-Cold War Imagination* (Oxford, 2018), p. 54.

¹¹⁴ Coleman, *Liberal Conspiracy*, pp. 184-85.

¹¹⁵ Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy*, p. 31.

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a 1956 discussion on 'The Values of a Mobile Society', the third in a BBC radio series exploring 'Social Class in Britain Today', British society was following America in moving

[...] away from a traditional society based on family, where the family position conferred a certain degree of privilege and where family position allowed one through the inheritance of property to have status, to a society based on skill, where the requirement of having some economic skill becomes the basis of social advancement.¹¹⁶

This was a society where 'a man is judged by his performance, his ability to do his job well and particularly the enterprise itself becomes judged on the basis of its ability to turn out goods efficiently.' Bell's 'post-industrial' society, which he would claim later was 'by logic a meritocracy', imagined a particular type of political leader, one capable of acting as a 'broker between different groups in the society, between the corporate groups and the labour groups.'¹¹⁷ A non-competitive hue coloured the meritocracy, the professional meritocrat would utilise his expertise, free from the prejudices of class, to resolve tensions and ensure efficiency. From the vantage point of just a decade later, the expectations and aspirations placed on the meritocracy in the late 1950s and early 1960s appear profoundly fantastical and it is tempting to simply dismiss these visions as flawed and misguided.¹¹⁸ Historians, however, should approach the 'End of Ideology' in a similar way to questions of merit: in a constructivist spirit which seeks to excavate and reconstruct the ideological assumptions which made it such an appealing doctrine in the late 1950s and early 1960s. While the changes articulated by American intellectuals like Bell or Lipset inevitably pointed back to social facts, these facts required explanation. It was here that the 'End of Ideology' reveals its profoundly ideological assumptions. Meritocracy was intimately bound up in this process. As well as being a marker of the eclipse of an ideological class politics, the concept was seen by most of its adherents as non-ideological; a fundamental component of an objectively defined and empirically observed process of modernisation or post-industrialism to which nations needed to adapt.

¹¹⁶ M. Abrams & D. Bell, 'As Recorded Script: Social Class in Britain Today (Series), Programme Three: The Values of a Mobile Society (10/10/1956)', *Papers of Mark Abrams*, CCC [ABMS 5/4], p. 2.

¹¹⁷ Abrams & Bell, 'Values of a Mobile Society', p. 2, 3; D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York, 1973), p. 409.

¹¹⁸ It is no coincidence, therefore, that when ideological politics was said to have re-emerged in 1968 or the early 1970s, and the ideology of post-ideology was unveiled, that the concept of meritocracy itself was destabilised.

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In order to reap the rewards of a post-ideological age Britain in the late 1950s was said to require a new type of leader and a new style of leadership: professional, specialised, meritocratically selected and recognised, sensitive to the future and, most importantly, cognisant of scientific and technical developments. As the notion of a national economic, cultural and political decline reached apocalyptic levels in the early 1960s, the replacement of amateurs with professionals, 'Old Men' with 'New Men', or aristocrats with meritocrats became a matter of national survival.¹¹⁹ At the height of the meritocratic moment anatomising the nature of Britain's ruling elite became a national pastime and the machinations of an 'Establishment', exercising a special kind of 'soft power', which 'set the tone' and influenced the direction of public policy, dominated concerns about democracy, accountability and leadership.¹²⁰ The notion of an 'Establishment' provided the Left in particular with a target which could incorporate criticism of a whole host of outdated institutions and ideas: from public schools to company directors, the civil service to the hereditary peerage.¹²¹ One of the most influential anatomists of this elite was the journalist Anthony Sampson. Sampson penned *The Guardian's* Penderennis gossip column but his most enduring legacy was the *Anatomy* series.¹²² Containing six books in total, the first of which was published in 1962 and the last in 2004, the series outlined the contours of the elite in modern Britain by interviewing members of important national institutions and evaluating their relative power. In many ways what Young and Hoggart did for the working class, Sampson did for the ruling elite. The first in the series, 1962's *Anatomy of Britain*, highlighted several themes which would recur throughout his journalism in the 1960s:

[...] the impact of the new meritocracy on the old aristocracy; the conflict between professionals and amateurs; the gap between prestige and power and (in Bagehot's phrase) between dignified and efficiency parts; the proliferation of committees; the prevalence of sons-in-law; the obscuring of ends by means; the pressure of conformism; the difficulties of combining democracy with efficiency [...]¹²³

It was quite clear which side Sampson was on in these debates. He had voted Labour at every General Election since 1950 and was clearly sympathetic to the emerging doctrine

¹¹⁹ See for example: C.A.R. Crosland, 'On Economic Growth', *Encounter* (April, 1961), pp. 65-68; D. Howell, 'Toryism Revived: Towards a Conservative Programme – An Economy for Professionals', *Crossbow* (January-March, 1964), pp. 21-25.

¹²⁰ Hennessy, *Establishment and Meritocracy*, p. 2.

¹²¹ T. Balogh, 'The Apotheosis of the Dilettante: The Establishment of Mandarins', in H. Thomas (Ed.), *The Establishment* (London, 1959), pp. 83-126; T. Benn, 'The Fount of Honour (03/01/1964)', in his *The Regeneration of Britain* (London, 1965), p. 89.

¹²² A. Sampson, *The Anatomist: The Autobiography of Anthony Sampson* (London, 2008), pp. 60-61.

¹²³ A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1962), pp. xii-xiii.

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of 'scientific socialism' propagated by the Party in the early 1960s.¹²⁴ The 'menace of the British Conservative nexus', he claimed, was that 'it has retreated into an isolated and defensive amateur world, which cherishes irrelevant aspects of the past and regards the activities of meritocrats and technocrats as a potential menace.'¹²⁵ This nexus appeared to Sampson, as well as many others on the Left, as a direct repudiation of the 'post-war expectations of social reform.' Sampson's affinity with these modest, classless scientists, spoke to a central intellectual and cultural concern of the early 1960s: Britain's failure to come to terms with the scientific revolution. At the heart of critiques of the Establishment and national decline was the so-called 'Two Cultures', a division between the conservative humanities which was said to dominate Britain's elite and the progressive sciences which were excluded.¹²⁶ This was most clearly expounded in one of post-war Britain's most significant intellectual debates between the author and scientist C.P. Snow and the literary critic F.R. Leavis.¹²⁷

For Snow scientists were naturally optimistic, 'inclined to be impatient to see if something can be done: and inclined to think that it can be done, until it's proved otherwise.' Whereas scientists have the 'future in their bones', the traditional culture responds by 'wishing the future did not exist.' It was this traditional culture, for Snow, which, to an extent remarkably little diminished by the emergence of the scientific revolution, 'manages the western world.'¹²⁸ Leavis emerged as the representative of this culture. For him, Snow embodied post-war Britain's adoption of a 'technologico-Benthamite' reduction of human experience to the quantifiable, the measurable and the manageable.¹²⁹ As Guy Ortolano has argued, however, Snow and Leavis did share one thing in common: a commitment to meritocracy. Both Snow and Leavis exuded hostility to inherited privilege and for divergent reasons sought a society in which individuals could achieve positions commensurate with their talents. While the former thought a meritocracy would work through existing institutions to extend prosperity, the latter wanted to foster a critical minority capable of exposing – and opposing – the values embedded within precisely those goals. They both favoured a social order which 'presumed unequal talents but promised equal opportunity.'¹³⁰ Snow was very much an advocate for the dominant understanding of meritocracy explored in this chapter. His 'Two Cultures' thesis explained how the scientific revolution had created vast new

¹²⁴ Sampson, *The Anatomist*, p. 196, 82.

¹²⁵ Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain*, pp. 632-33.

¹²⁶ C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (Cambridge, [1959] 2012); W. Allen, 'The Two Cultures: A Discussion of C.P. Snow's Views', *Encounter* (August, 1959), p. 67.

¹²⁷ G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹²⁸ Snow, *Two Cultures*, p. 7, 11.

¹²⁹ F.R. Leavis, 'Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow', *The Spectator* (09/03/1962); S. Collini, 'Introduction', in *Two Cultures*, pp. 33-34.

¹³⁰ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 81, 89, 251.

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bureaucracies along with a new class of professionals and managers to staff them. This meritocratic society promised higher living standards, educational opportunity and social status to a wider portion of the population than ever before. It required, however, a new elite equipped to manage the forces unleashed by the scientific revolution, professionals who understood themselves, their institutions and post-war society.¹³¹

By the start of the 1960s the power exercised by the Establishment was therefore assailed on two inter-connected fronts. Firstly, it was characterised by the likes of Sampson as secretive and therefore undemocratic and unaccountable. At the end of his *Anatomy*, Sampson reflected on the control of the Establishment over national decision-making, a power 'determined by social networks and assumptions which could override the interests of voters or shareholders' and that 'excluded outsiders through a closed system which communicated through nods and winks or raising the eyebrows.'¹³²

Secondly, and more importantly, it was said to be contemptuous of professional expertise and specialist skills, particularly those related to science. Its decisions, made from the irrational basis of class prejudice or from the outdated assumptions gleaned from a classical education, were characterised as wholly unsuited to the post-ideological age. By occupying important positions of responsibility and leadership, and failing to open these up to 'New Men' and especially scientific 'New Men', the Establishment was said to stifle Britain's capacity to adapt and innovate.¹³³ As John Vaizey argued, Britain was dominated by the 'cult of the amateur': the belief that the practices of 'good-chapmanship and the public school spirit is better than close and reasoned analysis of the situation and a coherent programme for coping with it.' The public schools had fostered a tradition of leadership which is 'extremely inappropriate for the modern world' and which had become 'outmoded by the realities of twentieth-century economics, where detailed knowledge, research, technical flair, and a clear recognition of the toughness of the competition are of greater value.' This was most clear in the City of London and the Civil Service, the two seats of power most to blame for 'the failure to control prices and incomes and to develop growth.'¹³⁴

The meritocracy was a new type of elite, built not on the connections of family but on the basis of skill, knowledge and expertise. As was explored in the last chapter, it would be motivated by a professional ethic whereby the autocratic leadership of the 'old-style capitalist' was replaced by the 'new-style executive' who prides himself 'on being a good committee-man; and subconsciously 'longs for the approval of the sociologist.'¹³⁵ While

¹³¹ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 36.

¹³² Sampson, *The Anatomist*, p. 80.

¹³³ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 34.

¹³⁴ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 23.

¹³⁵ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 19.

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the likes of Richard Crossman, as well as a chorus of voices from the emerging New Left, were deeply critical of the rise of bureaucratic power, Revisionist faith in the transformational impact of the managerial revolution remained strong well into the early 1960s.¹³⁶ For Crosland, 'professional pride and self-realisation' were important motivating factors for modern management and were reflected in the increased participation of corporations in the local community, the goal of a 'fair rather than a maximum profit' and the desire to bask in the 'warm glow which comes from a sense of public duty.'¹³⁷ In short, the professionalisation of business made it more attentive to the needs of the wider community. As John Vaizey argued, 'a profession gives status to a group of people and in return the public are entitled to expect certain standards of behaviour. In return for control, responsibility must be accepted.'¹³⁸

The amateurish Establishment acted without recourse to standards or best practice and was therefore unaccountable to professional bodies or the broader public. For Vaizey, it was clear that 'the leaders of future will rise to the top by their own merit' and that 'today men will only be led by those whom they respect and admire because they have won their right to assert themselves through their own knowledge and skill.' Vaizey was keen to emphasise that 'the clever are better at doing things' and, in a passage which sums up how Revisionists conceptualised the meritocrat, he claimed

I would rather be operated on by a clever surgeon than a nice one; and intelligent people do use their knowledge so that life is able to continue and to improve for others. Would a meritocracy, in any case, be such a disaster? It seems to me that it would at least have the value of being built on the assumption that knowledge and skill are important. This is an advance over the cult of the stupid, which is still so dominant in this country and which ruled America under Eisenhower.¹³⁹

While Vaizey predicted that the prospect of a meritocracy remained a distant one, a meritocratic social order which recognised skill and knowledge would be an improvement on what had gone before. In large part this would be because these meritocrats would use their expertise with the public good in mind. While the idea of an 'Organisation Man' was coined by the American commentator and journalist William Whyte as a critique of the conformity imposed by bureaucratic corporations, for the likes of Crosland and

¹³⁶ M. Barratt-Brown, 'The Controllers: A Research Document on the British Power Elite', *Universities & Left Review*, 5 (Autumn, 1958), pp. 53-61; R. Miliband, 'Who Governs Britain?', *Universities & Left Review*, 3 (Winter, 1958), pp. iii-iv.

¹³⁷ C.A.R. Crosland, 'Insiders and Controllers', in *Conservative Enemy*, p. 85, 89.

¹³⁸ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, pp. 95-96.

¹³⁹ Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 24, 18.

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Vaizey in the mid-to-late 1950s it had much to commend it.¹⁴⁰ These would be professional, socially responsible men who would staff Britain's corporate state. In doing so, and in contrast to later critiques, they would act cautiously, carefully weighing competing claims and courses of action, all the while seeking to minimise risk.

Critiques of the Establishment reveal the extent to which social change in the late 1950s and 1960s was imagined to occur through existing institutions rather than in opposition to them. These institutions, perhaps more proactive and interventionist than in the past, would extend prosperity to all by replacing the conflicts of ideological politics with the management of experts. The notion that a new elite, staffed by meritocratically selected and professionally trained experts, could overcome the conservatism of the civil service or the City of London and transform the potential of the British state was widely shared. While the likes of Vaizey and Crosland did not consider the triumph of the 'New Men' as an ideal end-state, their victory over the aristocratic establishment would, in the long term, help to deliver a more egalitarian society. Utilising their expertise for the common good, the meritocracy would help deliver economic growth and nullify class conflict. The concept was, therefore, born into the post-ideological age; a non-competitive moment where distinctions of merit were rationally-agreed, consensual and democratic. While its judgements may have been perceived to be free from the prejudices of class, the meritocracy imagined by the likes of Snow and Vaizey concealed certain assumptions about race and gender. In Snow's fictional *Strangers and Brothers* series of novels, as well as Vaizey's *Barometer Man*, the 'New Men' were differentiated from the 'Old' by their social origins, specialist skills and their modest, sensitive and unstuffy demeanour.¹⁴¹ In the process the concept of meritocracy was coded as a white, masculine preserve. As Guy Ortolano has argued in relation to Snow, the language of gender was more than simply a claim about, or a reflection of, social realities. It conveyed broader associations regarding the nature of 'scientific (progressive, masculine and generally positive)' and 'literary (reactionary, effeminate and generally negative)' cultures in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁴² While its judgements may be perceived as classless, the masculine vision of a meritocracy was blinded to other forms of prejudice and bias, particularly those associated with race and gender, which would profoundly destabilise the concept in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As ideology 'returned' to politics the judgements of the

¹⁴⁰ W.H. Whyte, *The Organisation Man* (New York, 1956); Crosland, 'About Equality (II)', pp. 41-42; Crosland, 'Insiders and Controllers', pp. 84-85.

¹⁴¹ See for example: C.P. Snow, *The New Men* (London, 1954); J. Vaizey, *Barometer Man* (London, 1966).

¹⁴² Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, pp. 46-47.

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meritocracy were increasingly seen, not as rational or consensual, but as personal and discriminatory.

(2.5) The Panacea of Growth

Guided on rational economic lines by the state, the professional meritocrats eulogised by the likes of Vaizey and Snow would utilise their expertise to staff the welfare state, manage production scientifically and administer corporatism. In doing so they would 'transform the ancient battle between reactionary capitalists and revolutionary workers' into a 'constructive, dynamic relationship, uniting enlightened producers and contented consumers.'¹⁴³ At the heart of this process was economic growth. The search for growth dominated the intellectual politics of the 1950s and 1960s and united the two dominant frameworks for understanding British society in the immediate post-war decades and beyond: affluence and decline. The former was used to denote the shift from a politics of production to one of consumption, a society characterised by material plenty, high incomes and an increasingly accessible range of consumer goods.¹⁴⁴ In Britain, between 1950 and 1966, GDP per capita rose by 40%, official unemployment seldom exceeded 2%, and the proportion of manual workers in the labour force underwent a marked decline.¹⁴⁵ These changes, it has been argued, greatly benefited the Conservatives.¹⁴⁶ At the heart of their three consecutive General Election victories in the 1950s was the notion that the Party had removed the strictures of wartime austerity and ushered in a new age of affluence. As Mark Jarvis has demonstrated, these interpretations underestimate the ease with which Conservatives adapted to the consequences of widespread consumption, particularly the impact of affluence on social and moral behaviour which greatly worried certain Party groupings.¹⁴⁷ The dominant Middle Way tradition, however, saw economic growth as an integral component in their 'levelling up' agenda, helping to create more room amongst the middle class and in turn engendering social values favourable to greater stability and harmony.

¹⁴³ D. Ellwood, *Rebuilding Europe: Western Europe, America, and Postwar Reconstruction* (London, 1992), pp. 94-95.

¹⁴⁴ See for example: J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York, [1958] 1998); R.H.S. Crossman, *Labour in the Affluent Society* (London, 1960); M. Young, 'The Chipped White Cups of Dover (1960)', in *Social Scientist*, pp. 210-32; S. Majima & M. Savage, 'Contesting Affluence: An Introduction', *Contemporary British History*, 22/4 (2008), pp. 445-55.

¹⁴⁵ S. Middleton, 'Affluence and the Left in Britain, c. 1958-1974', *English Historical Review*, 129/356 (2014), p. 107.

¹⁴⁶ See for example: N. Tiratsoo, 'Popular Politics, Affluence and the Labour Party in the 1950s', in A. Gorst, L. Johnman & W. Scott Lucas (Eds.), *Contemporary British History 1931-1961: Politics and the Limits of Policy* (London, 1991), pp. 54-55.

¹⁴⁷ M. Jarvis, *Conservative Governments, Morality and Social Change in Affluent Britain* (Manchester, 2005), p. 14.

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The Left's relationship with this society was more complicated. As Stuart Middleton has argued, the concept of affluence is best understood as a conceptual field within which many of the Left's crucial philosophical and strategic battles were fought during the 1960s. In this sense affluence was not a 'determinate socio-economic condition' but open to various interpretations and social explanations.¹⁴⁸ The most dominant interpretation in the mid-to-late 1950s, however, was that of the Revisionist Social Democrats. Revisionists like Crosland, Jenkins and Gaitskell were profoundly uncomfortable, both personally and politically, with the moral critique of consumption articulated by the likes of Richard Crossman. For Crossman the materialist veneer of affluence hid fundamental structural weaknesses with the British economy.¹⁴⁹ This critique would become more influential as the 1960s progressed and narratives of decline began to loom large. While debates about affluence and decline clearly intermingled and intersected, we can read a broad shift in emphasis from the former to the latter over the course of the mid-to-late 1950s and the early 1960s. The focus of this section is on the earlier period. In the mid-1950s the likes of Crosland could argue that a future of material abundance, underpinned by economic growth, was secure and relatively close at hand. By way of contrast, as 'declinism' began to dominate Britain's intellectual politics in the early 1960s, this growth appeared simultaneously less secure and more urgent.

In the mid-1950s both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives operated under the assumption that increasing levels of economic growth were inevitable.¹⁵⁰ As we explored above, the Conservatives sought to ground their electoral appeal in the creation of an 'Opportunity State' underpinned by widespread affluence, and portrayed higher living standards as the result of sound economic management. For Middle Way Conservatives like Macmillan, Hailsham and Butler in the mid-to-late 1950s, higher growth did not require a revolutionary overhaul or radical tinkering. Britain was on the threshold of joining a civilisation 'which could produce enough and to spare for the entire human race.'¹⁵¹ While critical of distributive elements of the Conservative's economic management, Revisionists did not doubt that modern, welfare-capitalist states were heading for an age of material abundance. Writing in the early 1960s, John Vaizey remained confident that the British economy would become gradually more productive and that growth of real incomes would continue to accelerate. This would place 'within

¹⁴⁸ Middleton, 'Affluence', p. 109.

¹⁴⁹ R.H.S Crossman, 'The Spectre of Revisionism: A Reply to C.A.R. Crosland', *Encounter* (April, 1960), p. 27; Crossman, *Affluent Society*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵⁰ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1956), p. 375, 520; Vaizey, *Education in a Class Society*, p. 13; R.A. Butler, *Our Way Ahead* (London, 1956), p. 11.

¹⁵¹ Hailsham, *Toryism*, p. 12.

striking distance' a society 'which could offer middle-class standards of living to all.'¹⁵² Similarly, in the first edition of *The Future of Socialism*, Crosland emphasised that he no longer regarded

[...] questions of growth and efficiency as being, on a long view of primary importance to socialism. We stand, in Britain, on the threshold of mass abundance; and within a decade the average family will enjoy a standard of living which, whether or not it fully satisfies their aspirations, will certainly convince the reformer that he should turn his main attention elsewhere.¹⁵³

While it was 'natural' to be 'obsessed with production in an age of poverty, privation and hunger', Crosland argued in a review of the Canadian-American economist John Kenneth Galbraith's influential *The Affluent Society*, that it was 'ridiculous to be equally obsessed today, when poverty has given way to affluence.'¹⁵⁴ This was a society that would shift its intellectual focus, away from 'hard work and economic matters' to other, and 'in the long run more important spheres' such as

[...] personal freedom, happiness, and cultural endeavour: the cultivation of leisure, beauty, grace, gaiety, excitement, and all of the proper pursuits, whether elevated, vulgar or eccentric, which contribute to the varied fabric of a full private and family life.¹⁵⁵

This was, therefore, a brief historical window, lasting from the mid-1950s until the early 1960s, in which politicians, intellectuals and social commentators turned their gaze away from 'the politics of production' which dominated the immediate post-war period and debated a shift to the 'politics of consumption.' The problems of the future were to be those of prosperity rather than poverty: from the raised expectations of an increasingly prosperous working class to the bountiful leisure time brought about by technology and automation. Even those who did not share Crosland's optimistic reading of affluence and its consequences felt that material abundance lay just beyond the immediate horizon. While his most vociferous critic in the Labour Party, Richard Crossman, questioned Britain's relative performance when compared to those countries 'which rely on planning and nationalisation', he did not doubt the productive capacity of post-war capitalism. In Crossman's reading of *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith exposed the 'vulgarity', 'wastefulness', 'incompetence', and the 'inherent contradictions of Western capitalism.'¹⁵⁶ After the General Election defeat of 1959, critics of the Revisionist project used affluence

¹⁵² Vaizey, *Education for Tomorrow*, p. 25.

¹⁵³ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1956), p. 515; Reisman, *Crosland's Future*, p. 160.

¹⁵⁴ C.A.R. Crosland, 'Production in the Age of Affluence (1958)', in *Conservative Enemy*, p. 97.

¹⁵⁵ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1956), p. 375, 520.

¹⁵⁶ Crossman, 'The Spectre', p. 27.

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to denote a moral critique of consumption and highlighted the dominance of private over public interests.¹⁵⁷

Crosland rejected these critiques. Economic growth was to be welcomed, first and foremost, because it was democratic. Revisionists like Gaitskell and Crosland rejected what they regarded as the patronising elitism of theorists of manipulation and contrivance.¹⁵⁸ While Crosland shared many of the assumptions which underpinned Galbraith's thesis in *The Affluent Society*, he rejected the idea that advertising served to create the 'wants it seeks to satisfy.'¹⁵⁹ The New Left, he argued, greatly exaggerated the power of advertising, overrating the sophistication of its decisions and techniques.¹⁶⁰ Crosland, like Jenkins and Gaitskell, was therefore comfortable with the materialism produced by higher growth, rejecting the notion propagated by the likes of Hoggart or Williams that the trend towards greater consumption was somehow manipulated, destructive or immoral. He also rejected the idea that capitalism's profit above all else limited the resources available for 'social use.' In doing so, Crosland drew a sharp distinction between public and private goods. The former were those provided collectively (e.g. education, roads or defence) and existed outside the realm of the market. The latter, subject to 'many rigidities and much public regulation', lie in the non-governmental sector and are allocated by the profit mechanism.¹⁶¹ Crucially for Crosland the amount available to spend on public goods was dependent on high growth and 'political decisions about taxation and government expenditure.' Any disparity between the public and the private was not a product of affluence but of the 'political situation and cultural tradition of the country concerned.'¹⁶²

The rapid growth of the post-war period, underpinned by an ever more generous welfare state, had, for both conservatives and socialists, served to eliminate primary poverty in post-war Britain. Political thinkers could now turn, in the words of Crosland, to 'new and more subtle problems, hitherto concealed by a natural obsession with material standards.'¹⁶³ Over the course of this period, Revisionists and a large number of Middle Way Conservatives adopted a relative definition of poverty, one which accepted the

¹⁵⁷ Middleton, 'Affluence', p. 109.

¹⁵⁸ Gaitskell, *Socialism and Nationalisation*, p. 4; C.A.R. Crosland, 'Monopoly, Advertising and the Consumer', in his *Conservative Enemy* (London, 1962), p. 63; Crosland, 'Insiders and Controllers', p. 83; Reisman, *Mixed Economy*, p. 156.

¹⁵⁹ Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, p. 128.

¹⁶⁰ Crosland, 'Monopoly', p. 53, 54, 63.

¹⁶¹ C.A.R. Crosland, 'Public and Private Spending', in *Conservative Enemy*, p. 14.

¹⁶² Crosland, 'Public and Private', p. 14; Crosland, 'Production', p. 101.

¹⁶³ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 59, 97. This, however, was a brief historical window. As Ian Gazeley has argued, poverty was said to have been 'eradicated and then rediscovered in just fourteen years.' I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965* (New York, 2003). The 'rediscovery' of poverty outlined in the work of Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Townsend and the Child Poverty Action Group in the mid-1960s would fundamentally shatter some of these assumptions.

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notion that 'standards of poverty change through time.'¹⁶⁴ In the mid-to-late 1950s, however, Revisionists were keen to emphasise that regardless of how rewards were determined or distributed, higher growth naturally led in an egalitarian direction. In his review of *The Affluent Society*, Crosland was most impressed by Galbraith's emphasis on the egalitarianism of economic growth. For Crosland, 'the higher the average level of real income, whatever its distribution, the greater the subjective sense of social equality.'

A poor man will feel bitterly the contrast between his privation and the lavish expenditures of the rich. But the American worker today, enjoying a car, a deep freeze, and an annual holiday in Florida – what does he care if the rich have candles at dinner, and Matisses, and Chippendale furniture, and expensive jewellery, and even two Cadillacs and an annual holiday at Cannes? He no longer feels deprived; and he no longer feels a bitter sense of inequality.¹⁶⁵

This change in attitudes, 'and the consequent decline in social tension', are due 'essentially to the rapid growth which has made possible his higher standard of living.'¹⁶⁶ Crosland had made a similar point two years previously in the first edition of *The Future Socialism* emphasising that, 'fair shares of austerity are a less good route towards social equality than the wide and plentiful diffusion of consumer goods.'¹⁶⁷ The conspicuous consumption of the old elite was on the way out. The rich were hitting the limit of the post-war 'mass-distribution economy' where modern techniques allowed prestige goods to be 'easily copied' and so lose their 'snob glamour.' For Crosland, 'Bourbon is almost as palatable as Scotch, South African as Spanish sherry, and tinned as fresh asparagus.' The rich could not 'preserve a conspicuous consumption gap even if they desperately wished to.'¹⁶⁸ Not that the new meritocratic elite would engage in such Veblenesque displays of superiority anyway. Conspicuous consumption was giving way to 'conspicuous under-consumption', for the middle and upper classes 'ostentation is becoming vulgar.'¹⁶⁹ The end of envy was clearly a welcome development for Middle Way Conservatives. By creating a sense of equality, widespread affluence propelled by higher growth divided people 'not so much between the haves and have-nots as between haves

¹⁶⁴ Blackburn, 'Middle Way Conservatism', p. 168; Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 89.

¹⁶⁵ Crosland, 'Production', p. 98.

¹⁶⁶ Crosland, 'Production', p. 98.

¹⁶⁷ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1956), p. 518.

¹⁶⁸ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 214. In the First Edition Crosland noted conspicuous consumption did have certain social benefits, with ordinary people said to derive a 'beatific happiness from swooning over the gold-studded adventures of Aly Khan or even Diana Dors, or from standing in the pouring rain to watch a fashionable wedding that they would be very upset if these activities were curtailed.' Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1956), pp. 192-93.

¹⁶⁹ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), pp. 214-15.

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and have-mores.¹⁷⁰ In the pages of *Crossbow*, the conservative economist Kurt Klappholz shared Crosland's analysis that 'further increases in the standard of living will markedly strengthen the tendency towards greater social equality.' While there would always be 'scope for differences in the qualities (rather than in the kinds) of goods consumed' these variations 'give rise to considerably less social inequality than do differences in the kinds of goods consumed.'¹⁷¹

The democratic imperative of growth, its tendency towards classlessness and egalitarianism, and its role in eliminating primary poverty, made economic expansion an attractive political proposition for both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives. Growth would nullify the competition between different sectional interests – whether those of capital or labour – and transform the distributional game into a positive sum one, where all players were winners. In doing so it resolved a fundamental social democratic tension between the concepts of equality and liberty, allowing the former to advance without intruding on the latter. Vaizey summed up this position in relation to education provision. 'By 1980', he was confident that the nation could afford 'a lavish education service, a lavish health service, a lavish road system.' In the short term, however, it would be required to 'make up the appalling leeway.' The key, Vaizey claimed, was to

try to discover how to produce a much better education by using the whole resources of our technological discoveries in such a way that it can be provided lavishly and generously for everybody [...] If this is not so, if I am wrong, if we cannot improve the output of education – then it does seem to me that we have a tough battle on our hands. Because equality will then only come through getting rid of the lavish parts of the education system. And harmful though Eton and King's may be, such a course is fraught with political and educational danger.¹⁷²

Here, Vaizey demonstrates how growth papered over the cracks of a significant distributive tension. He was unwilling, like other Revisionists, to support a strategy where the liberty of a certain social group or class would be significantly restricted or violated in order to advance the cause of a different social group or class. For Vaizey, like Crosland, equality could only be achieved by improving the provision of all. Growth, therefore, rendered the necessary meritocratic pattern of rewards, and the inequalities this would generate, less harmful or invidious as they were accompanied by improved living standards for all.

¹⁷⁰ R.A. Butler, 'Trustees of Posterity', in P. Goldman (Ed.), *Accent on Youth* (London, 1961), p. 9.

¹⁷¹ K. Klappholz, 'The Cost of More Leisure', *Crossbow* (New Year, 1958), p. 18.

¹⁷² Vaizey, *Education in a Class Society*, p. 13, 15.

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We can therefore sketch out how both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives, for different reasons, came to endorse a meritocracy of rewards in the mid-to-late 1950s. By transforming distributional politics into a positive sum game, growth navigated the long-standing tension between equality and liberty. In doing so it encouraged a meritocratic distribution of rewards, one capable of preserving incentives but delivering equality of opportunity. As Ben Jackson notes, Revisionists sought to ground inequalities on the idea of a rent of ability, understood as a necessary incentive payment to secure the performance of important economic functions.¹⁷³ A meritocracy was not to be valued, however, solely on the grounds of efficiency but also as an egalitarian improvement on what went before. In many ways these two ideas were fatally intertwined. The meritocrats would deliver greater economic growth and create an affluent society where distinctions of status and the necessary inequalities they generated would be considered marginal threats to social harmony. The proceeds of growth would improve living standards for all and create an ever-expanding national minimum which, by eliminating poverty, would serve to create a more equal starting line. While distinctions of merit may initially be tainted by existing class advantages, they would become increasingly classless and more equal over time. Revisionists like Crosland and Gaitskell, therefore, argued incomes could and should reflect contributions to the public good. Their primary target was functionless wealth which produced inequalities which were unjust, inefficient and undemocratic.¹⁷⁴ Attacking these forms of privilege in the name of meritocracy provided the concept with an important radical edge which united the Labour Party and the broader Left. In contrast, Revisionists were relatively comfortable with inequalities of income. In part this reflected the assumption that the limits of taxation on earned income had been reached.¹⁷⁵ More significantly, Revisionists considered inequalities of income which reflected meritocratic differences as more just and egalitarian than other criteria of reward. For Gaitskell, an equal society did not mean 'identical incomes or uniform habits and tastes.' What it did mean, however, was a 'classless society'

one in which the relations between all people are similar to those hitherto existing within one social class; one in which though there are differences between individuals, there are no feelings or attitudes of superiority and inferiority between groups; one in which although some jobs are paid more than others, the differentials are based on generally acceptable criteria – skill,

¹⁷³ Jackson, *Equality*, p. 168.

¹⁷⁴ Gaitskell, *Socialism and Nationalism*, p. 4; D. Jay, *Socialism in the New Society* (London, 1962), pp. 190-91.

¹⁷⁵ N. Thompson, *Political Economy and the Labour Party* (London, 1996), pp. 169-70.

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responsibility, effort, danger, dirt etc.; one in which though people develop differently, there is equal opportunity for all to develop.¹⁷⁶

For Gaitskell, few individuals would 'go so far to identify inequality with the existence of unearned income.' It is no longer the private ownership of the means of production which is the target of socialists' ire but 'inequality not related to merit or function which is the real trouble.'¹⁷⁷

Revisionist support for a meritocratic pattern of rewards as articulated by Gaitskell was therefore characterised by three important assumptions. Firstly, that differences of income should not be too large. High incomes, as Crosland argued, were less genuine rents of exceptional ability and more 'artificial rents of a monopolistic character.'¹⁷⁸ Meritocracy was to be valued precisely because, by aligning merit and reward, it would reduce disparities of wealth. Secondly, that these distinctions recognise contributions which benefit the population at large. As was highlighted in the previous section by the likes of Vaizey, the professional meritocrat was motivated by a job well done, not the promise of higher rewards or a shiny new washing machine. Finally, that the proceeds of growth would be willingly redistributed to eliminate the influence of class, level the playing field to allow for genuine equality of opportunity and ensure a progressively meritocratic meritocracy. As Crosland noted, once equality of opportunity and social justice were achieved, and 'the dead hand of inheritance removed', the state could 'lighten the load of taxation on incomes from work, and restore to individual effort and enterprise some of the rewards which the unequal distribution of property now forces us to tax away.'¹⁷⁹ While for some on the Left the meritocracy would gradually wither away after delivering material abundance, replaced by an egalitarian society characterised more by equality of outcome than opportunity, the Revisionists adopted a more relativistic position.¹⁸⁰ As empiricists they were loathe to speculate on the appropriate level of equality in some future society, or to specify any particular distributive arrangement as eternally just or efficient across time and space. This is evident in discussions of relative poverty, a concept born from the idea that, in the words of Crosland, 'there can never be some constant, eternally valid yardstick.'¹⁸¹ The principles of meritocracy emerged from the unique position of Britain in the mid-to-late 1950s and were, therefore, adopted contingently. Meritocracy was a flexible concept, one which could be strengthened, modified or dropped as circumstances changed.

¹⁷⁶ Gaitskell, 'Public Ownership', p. 165.

¹⁷⁷ Gaitskell, 'Public Ownership', p. 166.

¹⁷⁸ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 227.

¹⁷⁹ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 246.

¹⁸⁰ Blackburn, 'Reassessing', pp. 16-17.

¹⁸¹ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 89.

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Middle Way Conservatives shared much of this analysis. They welcomed affluence for its contribution to social harmony, recognised that inequalities could not exceed certain meritocratic parameters and accepted that some redistribution of wealth would be required to establish greater equality of opportunity. A meritocracy of rewards, amidst a general affluence which embraced each citizen, created a democratically legitimate form of inequality, one which recognised differences of skill, ability and talent. For Middle Way Conservatives it was equally important that the qualities of hard work and intelligence should be seen to be rewarded, serving as they did as legitimate inequalities which would bind the social order together. For Hailsham, 'side by side with opportunity in education must go adequate reward for the trained and qualified products of education – for brains, for skill, for equality, for enterprise, for zeal.'¹⁸² The meritocracy could step in where the market had failed and ensure these socially desirable characteristics were adequately rewarded. Like Revisionists, Middle Way Conservatives considered a meritocratic distribution of rewards an essential incentive for growth. It would provide an adequate welfare floor, nullifying the social disruption of poverty and serving the cause of equality of opportunity as well as recognising contributions to the public good. Implicit in the Middle Way Conservative position was the notion that rewards could and should be rationally controlled and administered; that the meritocratic state could adjudicate between competing interests, assess contributions to the social good and distribute rewards accordingly. While conservatives were more likely to limit state intrusions into the family and its ability to pass on advantage, in the late 1950s and early 1960s they recognised that a meritocratic distribution of rewards imposed limits on hereditary mechanisms. For the likes of Hailsham any discussion of a return to the market was synonymous with the politics of the 1930s: mass unemployment, vast inequalities and irrevocable class conflict, all of which threatened social harmony. The market mechanism could not ensure a correlation between an individual's rewards and their contribution to the social good and therefore, in 1950s Britain, would fail to produce democratically legitimate inequalities.

It is a fair characterisation, therefore, to describe this period as a meritocratic moment: a point in post-war history where two dominant ideological formations, born from distinct political traditions, embraced the concept and sought to shape its meaning. While the ideologies of Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy may have overlapped at the point of meritocracy, however, they did so for different reasons. Middle Way Conservatives did not share the progressive egalitarianism which was embedded in Revisionist understandings of the concept and its future. For this reason

¹⁸² Hailsham, *Toryism*, pp. 16-17.

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they were concerned about the threat a greater redistribution of meritocratically earned rewards, central to the Revisionist embrace of the concept, may pose to social harmony. The language of Hailsham, Butler and Macmillan emphasised 'levelling up' not down, and this served as a central theme of the 'Opportunity State'. This language emphasised the desire to avoid any significant erosion of middle-class living standards and sought to blunt the edges of any potential downward mobility produced by a meritocracy. Revisionists also shared this concern for social harmony and, in this sense, the concept only appealed to both of these ideological traditions so long as professional employment continued to expand and redistribution could occur in a harmless manner. These phenomena were both predicated on high levels of economic growth. The product of this growth could be used to absorb talented working class individuals into the middle class without impacting or displacing the latter. This made talk of 'levelling up' both appealing and democratic, a proposition which increasing numbers of the population could experience. As the notion of decline took hold by the mid-1960s, however, future growth appeared less secure. In the frenzy to remedy this, many of the assumptions explored in this chapter were challenged and the concept itself became stretched over an increasingly large ideological canvas.

Chapter (3) 1963: The Triumph of the Meritocracy?

'A highly competitive society with great social mobility and equal opportunity for all is by no means incompatible with considerable inequality in rewards [...] I believe Britain will become a more socially mobile, more genuinely classless society – a society which offers rich prizes but awards them solely on merit, and imposes no restrictions on entry to the race.'

Michael Shanks¹

'The most striking feature about these new arrivals is that they are competitive. They are par excellence the New Competitors [...] They are incalculable value to the nation because success did not come to them, any more than it will to Britain, by birthright, tradition or connections. It came the hard way – by self-help.'

Eldon Griffiths²

(3.1) Introduction: The Suicide of a Nation

In July 1963 the monthly intellectual journal *Encounter* published a special issue on the theme of British decline entitled *Suicide of a Nation?*³ Published a year later as a book, in large part due to the phenomenal debate the issue generated, *Suicide of a Nation?* should be characterised as the apogee of the 'State of the Nation' soul-searching which dominated Britain's intellectual politics in the early 1960s.⁴ It can therefore be placed alongside other widely read declinist texts such as Anthony Sampson's *Anatomy of Britain*, Anthony Hartley's *A State of England* and Rex Malik's *What's Wrong with British Industry?*⁵ In mapping the contours of Britain's supposed economic, political and cultural decline, *Suicide of a Nation?* attracted an impressive array of public intellectuals including the journalists Henry Fairlie, Aidan Crawley and Goronwy Rees, economists Michael Shanks, John Vaizey and Andrew Shonfield, and literary critics Elizabeth Young,

¹ M. Shanks, *The Stagnant Society* (Harmondsworth, [1961] 1972), p. 168, 173.

² E. Griffiths, *The New Competitors* (London, 1965), pp. 4-5.

³ 'Suicide of a Nation?', *Encounter* (July, 1963), pp. 9-122.

⁴ A. Koestler (Ed.), *Suicide of a Nation? An Enquiry into the State of Britain Today* (London, 1964).

⁵ A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1962); A. Hartley, *A State of England* (London, 1963); R. Malik, *What's Wrong With British Industry?* (Harmondsworth, 1964); For more on this literature, see: J. Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline: Understanding Post-War Britain* (New York, [2001] 2014), p. 23; M. Grant, 'Historians, the Penguin Specials and the "State-of-the-Nation" Literature', *Contemporary British History*, 17/3 (2003), pp. 29-54; D. Blackburn, *Penguin Books and Political Change: Britain's Meritocratic Moment, 1937-1988* (Manchester, Forthcoming).

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Cyril Connolly and John Mander. In many ways these contributors brought together the critiques of a class-ridden, amateurish 'Establishment' which we explored in the last chapter. As the Revisionist intellectual and Labour MP Austen Albu argued, in a contribution entitled 'Taboo on Expertise', Britain was being held back by the prevalence of an aristocratic, amateurish elite which had stifled the entrepreneurial potential of those who had led the nation's Industrial Revolution over a century ago.⁶ Similarly, the journalist Goronwy Rees attacked the 'Cult of Incompetence' embodied in Britain's boardrooms and amongst its managerial class. For Rees, one of the most urgent requirements was a national effort to create an elite of 'equal professional competence, technical knowledge, and seriousness of purpose to its counterpart in other advanced industrialist countries, with whom we are after all in competition.'⁷ The psychologist and philosopher Alan McGlashan summed up the position adopted by a majority of the contributors by attacking the conservatism which had infected the nation's social attitudes and political institutions. 'There is in fact nothing the English dislike so much', he claimed, 'as making a clean break.'⁸

This clean break, a majority of contributors agreed, lay in the creation of a meritocracy. As Rees' contribution suggested, to overcome the stagnation which had engulfed 1960s Britain the 'Old Men' would have to be forcefully replaced with the 'New'.⁹ One of the most significant proponents of this efficient, professional and dynamic meritocracy in the early 1960s was the *Financial Times*' industrial editor Michael Shanks. Shanks was sympathetic to the Revisionist project and became a prominent member of the Campaign for Democratic Socialism.¹⁰ He would go on to play an influential role in Harold Wilson's Labour Governments, appointed as an industrial adviser to the newly-created Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) in 1965 and as Co-ordinator of Industrial Policy in 1966. Shanks' contribution to *Suicide of a Nation?*, entitled 'The Comforts of Stagnation', summarised the themes from his 1961 Penguin Special *The Stagnant Society*.¹¹ At the heart of Britain's decline for Shanks was the fact that 'the quality of the people who direct our economy – in industry and Whitehall – is simply not high enough.' At the start of a new decade it was clear that 'the talents, the will, are there – if they can be activated and guided into the proper channels. At present they are not.'¹² In activating talent, and channelling it into positions of authority and responsibility, France formed an

⁶ A. Albu, 'Taboo on Expertise', *Encounter* (July, 1963), pp. 45-50.

⁷ G. Rees, 'Amateurs and Gentlemen or the Cult of Incompetence', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 25.

⁸ A. McGlashan, 'Sex on These Islands', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 100.

⁹ Rees, 'Amateurs', p. 22.

¹⁰ G. Radice, *Friends and Rivals: Crosland, Jenkins and Healey* (London, 2002), p. 116.

¹¹ The first edition of the book carried the subtitle 'A Warning', although this was dropped for the second edition in 1971. Upon initial release it made such an immediate impact that it was turned into a Pelican and altogether sold some 60,000 copies. D. Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: 1957-62*, (London, 2015), p. 489.

¹² M. Shanks, 'The Comforts of Stagnation', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 30, 38.

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important counter-point for many of the contributors. As Shanks argued, 'the *poly-technicien* is the intellectual aristocrat of modern France, the nearest thing to a "meritocrat" in the West to-day.' These men 'move freely between the administration and industry, in a way which is almost impossible in modern Britain.'¹³ Similarly, an anonymous British Executive writing a 'Note from Paris' described the French civil servant as a 'new breed.' They are often 'astonishingly young' and are imbued, not with a class consciousness, but a 'caste consciousness based on their educational success and their privileges of power.' These officials 'dress well but restrainedly, they speak well and with exact emphasis; gesticulations and excitement are gone; they can be maddeningly self-assured about their opinions; above all they play it "cool".' In many ways the ideal they represent 'appears to be something like the aloof imperial tradition of the ICS at the turn of the century, but brought up to date with this scientific age.'¹⁴

In many ways the critiques articulated by the likes of Rees and Albu, and the elevation of the meritocrat which united the majority of the contributors to *Suicide of a Nation?*, reflected the hegemonic position occupied by the concept of meritocracy in the early 1960s. While the contributors agreed that a meritocratic elite was the solution to decline, they disagreed about what this meritocracy would look like, its characteristics and values, as well as what problems it was supposed to solve. As Guy Ortolano has argued, declinism flourished because it offered a malleable set of assumptions and anxieties which could be harnessed to competing and often contradictory ends. Writers like those contributing to *Suicide of a Nation?* all agreed Britain was in a grave crisis but disagreed so widely in their diagnosis and prescriptions that 'they can hardly be said to be discussing the same thing at all.'¹⁵ For the historian Hugh Seton-Watson decline was to be located in the 'painful period of the dissolution of empire' and the failure to enter the European Economic Community.¹⁶ Cyril Connolly identified high taxation, over-legislation and, rather more frivolously, 'the English climate.'¹⁷ Taken as a whole, *Suicide of a Nation?* revealed the tensions and contradictions which characterised declinist literature of the early 1960s. For example, whereas the likes of Seton-Watson, John Mander and Marcus Cunliffe identified decline with relatively recent post-war developments, namely decolonisation, for Albu, Shanks and Rees the problem dated back to the aristocratic

¹³ Shanks, 'Comforts', p. 32.

¹⁴ Anonymous, 'The French Paradox: A Note from Paris from a British Executive of an International Company', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 90.

¹⁵ G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 163.

¹⁶ H. Seton-Watson, 'Commonwealth, Common Market, Common Sense', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 72.

¹⁷ C. Connolly, 'This Gale-Swept Chip', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 94.

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embrace of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur.¹⁸ By diagnosing decline in often contradictory ways, the contributors to the issue placed different aspirations and expectations on the meritocratic solution. While even the most vociferous proponent of the meritocracy may not have expected it to transform the nation's weather, *Suicide of a Nation?* provides a flavour of the substantial burdens placed on the concept during Britain's declinist moment.

This chapter therefore acknowledges the important work of David Edgerton and Jim Tomlinson in exposing the ideological assumptions which lay behind 'declinism'.¹⁹ The reality of post-war decline, however, structured the intellectual politics of the 1960s and provided the framework through which a whole series of political actors approached their past, present and future. Approaching *Suicide of a Nation?* in this spirit illuminates the three central arguments of this chapter. Firstly, and as was discussed above, it reveals the extent to which the concept of meritocracy was stretched in multiple, often contradictory, directions in responding to the politics of decline. For some on the Left the concept served as a mechanism to create a more equal society, for others the means by which Britain could restore a lost sense of dynamism and competitiveness with higher incentives and material inequalities. Secondly, *Suicide of a Nation?* highlights the extent to which decline shattered some of the fundamental assumptions which had encouraged diverse ideological traditions to cohere around meritocracy in the immediate post-war period. Central to this was economic growth. The early 1960s saw the publication and dissemination of reams of comparative economic data which emphasised the relatively slow growth levels of the British economy.²⁰ With growth less secure, meritocracy's promise to blunt the edges of difficult distributive decisions gradually faded. The language of competition, dynamism and entrepreneurship dominated the intellectual politics of the 1960s and in doing so cut across Britain's mainstream ideologies. Despite the emphasis placed on higher incentives and increased competition by the likes of Shanks, the contributors to *Suicide of a Nation?* clearly reached for meritocratic rather than market solutions.²¹ As Guy Ortolano has noted, despite the many differences in the cultural and intellectual politics of decline, arguments about its origins, consequences

¹⁸ Seton-Watson, 'Commonwealth, Common Market', p. 66; J. Mander, 'The Logic of Survival', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 73; M. Cunliffe, 'The Comforts of the Sick-Bay', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 97; Albu, 'Taboo', p. 45; Shanks, 'Comforts', p. 35; Rees, 'Amateurs', p. 22.

¹⁹ For example, see: D. Edgerton, *Science, Technology and the British Industrial "Decline" 1870-1970* (Cambridge, 1996); Tomlinson, *Politics of Decline*; J. Tomlinson, 'Thrice Denied: "Declinism" as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20/2 (2009), pp. 227-51.

²⁰ J. Tomlinson, 'Inventing "Decline": The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years', *The Economic History Review*, 49/4 (1996), p. 735, 752.

²¹ For example see the IEA's response to the *Encounter* issue: A. Seldon (Ed.), *Rebirth of a Nation: A Symposium* (London, 1964). Seldon described the book as a direct challenge to *Suicide of a Nation's* vision of an 'authoritarian society' to 'galvanise human talents and material resources': A. Seldon, 'Letters: "Battle of the Ghosts"', *Encounter* (December, 1964), p. 92.

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and potential solutions 'all unfolded within a shared meritocratic consensus.'²² It was not only that growth appeared less secure however. Even if the nation's poor economic performance was reversed, the likes of John Vaizey began to doubt whether higher levels of growth would automatically lead to a more egalitarian society. His contribution to *Suicide of a Nation?* questioned why the 'flow of educational talent' encouraged by the Butler Act was yet to transform British industry and society. He concluded by questioning whether faster economic growth could 'cure this loss of nerve' or whether post-war Britain's 'total failure of nerve and inventiveness' was 'something like the collapse of Spain, of Austria-Hungary?'²³ In many ways Vaizey's doubts chimed with the work of the influential social researchers Richard Titmuss, Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend and the notion of a 'rediscovery of poverty' in the mid-1960s. Their work severed the link between growth and equality, highlighting how the former simply created new needs without providing the means for their satisfaction on an equitable basis.²⁴ On top of this, universalist welfare services administered by professional elites came under significant attack from both Left and Right. The former for the unfair advantages it offered the middle classes, the latter for its egalitarian consequences in denying choice and individual freedom.²⁵

Finally, *Suicide of a Nation?* reveals how the inherent tensions, the ideological bargains and conceptual trade-offs which support for meritocracy entailed, were being made explicit in the 1960s. Often as a concept reaches its zenith – especially a concept as vaguely defined and conceptually undetermined as meritocracy – its contradictions are unveiled and it begins to fissure.²⁶ As Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy* revealed, these contradictions were inherent to the concept itself and were present at the height of the meritocratic moment. However it was only as the conceptual micro-climate reacted to decline and shifted around meritocracy in the early 1960s that they became exposed. No longer buttressed by secure growth or the guarantees of expanding professional employment, intellectuals were now forced to make difficult choices which the meritocratic moment had allowed them to defer. For Shanks it was clear that while Britain accepted the theory of 'equality of opportunity' and '*la carrière ouverte aux talents*', it had not recognised 'that if there is to be room at the top for the bright young

²² Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 257.

²³ J. Vaizey, 'The Tragedy of Being Clever', *Encounter* (July, 1963), p. 108, 110.

²⁴ See for example: P. Townsend, 'The Truce on Inequality', *New Statesman* (26/09/1959), pp. 381-2; B. Abel-Smith, *Freedom in the Welfare State* (London, 1963); R. Titmuss, *Choice and "The Welfare State"* (London, 1967), p. 3.

²⁵ See for example: R. Titmuss, *The Irresponsible Society* (London, 1960) p. 10; G. Howe, 'Reform of the Social Services: Conservatism in the Post-Welfare State', in D. Howell & T. Raison (Eds.), *Principles in Practice: A Series of Bow Group Essays for the 1960s* (London, 1961), pp. 58-73.

²⁶ A similar point is made by Hobsbawm in his Marx Memorial Lecture of 1978: E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Forward March of Labour Halted?', in M. Jacques & F. Mulhern (Eds.), *The Forward March of Labour Halted?*, (London, 1981) pp. 1-19.

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men (and Britain, thank God, does not lack these), somebody has got to create that room; mobility has to be downwards as well as upwards.²⁷ This fissuring of meritocracy can help to illuminate the trajectory of Harold Wilson's Labour Governments. The 'White Heat' speech delivered to the Labour Party Conference in 1963 and the subsequent General Election victories of 1964 and 1966 are often portrayed as the zenith of meritocracy's influence in post-war Britain.²⁸ Wilson was undoubtedly successful at binding together the critiques of the amateur, class-bound Establishment which permeated the declinist literature of the early 1960s.²⁹ The election of Wilson's Labour Government in 1964, as well as the election of Ted Heath as Conservative Party leader in 1965, represented the triumph of the expansive, classless vision of the meritocratic promise explored in the last chapter.³⁰

Wilson's inspirational rhetoric, however, could not conceal the 'prescriptive fragility' of the basis on which Labour's vision rested.³¹ As this chapter will demonstrate, the concept of meritocracy at the heart of the Labour Governments could not survive contact with political reality. At the point of its realisation the central components of meritocracy were stretched across an increasingly broad ideological canvas, and the often contradictory expectations with which the concept had been loaded were exposed. After the deflationary July Measures of 1966, the subsequent collapse of the National Plan and the debacle over *In Place of Strife* in 1969, the optimism and expectation generated by Wilson in 1964 looked positively utopian. The epistemological consensus relied on carefully managed, gradual change which could be subjected to empirical observation. Decline, however, served to short-circuit the time horizons on which meritocracy rested. The prospect of post-war decline, supported by an increasing body of knowledge which undermined the egalitarian and classless assumptions of a meritocratic social order, encouraged a collective impatience with the promises of the meritocracy. Shanks, in the second edition of *The Stagnant Society* from 1971, lamented that the Wilsonite reforms which he helped to oversee from the DEA did not produce the intended results. In areas such as education and training, central to the Labour Government's meritocratic vision, Shanks argued that 'much of our disappointment and disenchantment with the results of reform in the sixties has come from our inability to appreciate the kind of time-scale

²⁷ Shanks, 'Comforts', p. 32.

²⁸ R. Hewison, *Culture and Consensus: England, Art and Politics since 1940* (New York, [1995] 2015), p. 123; M. Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (New York, [2005] 2013), p. 193; S. Fielding, 'Rethinking Labour's 1964 Campaign', *Contemporary British History*, 21 (2007), pp. 309-24.

²⁹ See for example: H. Wilson, *The New Britain: Labour's Plan Outlined by Harold Wilson* (London, 1964); H. Wilson, *The Relevance of British Socialism* (London, 1964), pp. 22-23.

³⁰ T. Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford, 2012), p. 133.

³¹ N. Thompson, *Political Economy and the Labour Party* (London, 1996), pp. 185-86.

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against which we are operating.³² The optimistic expectations placed on the Wilson Government in 1964 and the severe disillusion which met its demise in 1970 unleashed new ideological constellations which rejected the concept of meritocracy along with the approach to politics embodied in the post-war consensus. In this sense the early 1960s are a crucial point on which the history of meritocracy turns. While it seems highly unlikely that Britain developed a meritocratic social order over the course of the 1960s, the most significant outcome of Wilson's premiership was that intellectuals felt that Britain had successfully created a meritocracy and that this elite had failed to deliver the goods. As this chapter will show, these 'goods' were a diverse array of often contradictory social outcomes. The perceived failure of a meritocracy would ensure that the concept was gradually hollowed out over the course of the 1970s and was unable to respond to the existential ideological challenges posed by a distributive crisis which, in part, it had helped to unleash.

This chapter begins by exploring the challenge an intellectual politics of decline posed to the notion of economic growth and the vision of equality of opportunity at the heart of the meritocracy. It traces how an expansive conception of opportunity, one which posited that each individual have an equal opportunity to acquire intelligence, became overstretched due to a lack of resources by the end of the 1960s. Alongside this, the work of Titmuss, Abel-Smith and Townsend revealed the growth of poverty amidst affluence and highlighted the extent to which the middle classes benefited from the universal provision of the post-war welfare state. In doing so they exposed the limits of the meritocratic 'Opportunity State' and pointed to the return of class politics which would dominate the 1970s. From here, the chapter analyses the rise of competition and the challenges this posed to the professional ethic which underpinned the meritocracy. Wilsonism eulogised the professional, scientific expert and, after the 1964 General Election, it was widely argued that the meritocracy had finally arrived. In response to decline, however, the rise of 'Organisation Man' and the welfare-state bureaucrat was assailed from both Left and Right. Rather than eschewing materialist preoccupations, the likes of the Bow Group increasingly rooted their appeal to the meritocrat in higher incentives and greater consumer choice. The final section explores the impact of the challenge of growth and the rise of the new competitors on how intellectuals judged distributive claims and the mechanisms for delivering rewards. Central to Wilson's meritocracy was a planned pattern of rewards embodied in a national incomes policy. This, however, collapsed after the deflationary July measures of 1966 and the subsequent demise of the much-heralded National Plan. Without growth the distributive

³² M. Shanks, 'The Sins of the Sixties', in his *Stagnant Society*, pp. 238-39.

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logic of the meritocratic moment became stretched as the Left increasingly argued for a limit to the wages of managerial and professional incomes and the Right sought greater rewards to foster risk and encourage entrepreneurship.

(3.2) The Challenge of Growth

1963 was a watershed year for post-war Britain's education system. In August 1963 the Newsom Report was published, concluding that all children should have an equal opportunity to acquire intelligence.³³ A couple of months later the publication of the Robbins Report, recommending that higher education places should be provided for 'all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and who wish to do so', arrived to much fanfare.³⁴ These reports, taken together, represent the height of the expansive vision of equality of opportunity which sat at the heart of the meritocratic moment explored in the last chapter. The Conservative Minister of Education in 1963, the archetypal progressive Popperite Edward Boyle, wrote forewords to both reports and concluded that they had 'cemented the work that the educational sociologists had done in the previous years.'³⁵ For Boyle, Conservatives were forced to acknowledge that, 'if we are a Party that says we believe – as we do – in an Opportunity State, then this must mean that we want every child to have the same opportunities for acquiring intelligence.' This was vital, he argued, for Britain to maintain 'her place in an increasingly competitive world' and as a part of the fundamental Conservative belief in the 'infinite value of each and every human being.'³⁶ Boyle's forewords testified to how the concepts of equality of opportunity, educational expansion and national efficiency, embodied in the Newsom and Robbins Reports, were grafted together in the early 1960s. For Boyle, while 'no Conservative shares the extreme hostility to "meritocracy" which is felt by many Socialists', the expansion of professional employment ensured 'there are going to be more responsible jobs in a modernised Britain than ever before.' This meant that policy-makers could no longer afford to 'disassociate' the 'twin objectives of equality and opportunity.' Conservatives had to recognise that while these 'responsible jobs' still

³³ J. Newsom, *The Newsom Report: Half Our Future* (London, 1963), <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/newsom/newsom1963.html> (Accessed: 09/10/2018).

³⁴ Lord Robbins, *Committee on Higher Education: Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins 1961-63* (London, 1963), <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html> (Accessed: 02/10/2018); R. Anderson, *British Universities Past and Present* (London, 2006), p. 131.

³⁵ M. Kogan & Edward Boyle, 'Interview with E. Boyle on 4th and 5th December 1970', in M. Kogan (Ed.), *The Politics of Education* (Harmondsworth, 1971), p. 91.

³⁶ E. Boyle, *This is Conservative Policy for Education* (London, 1964), pp. 10-11.

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required selection based 'on some objective tests of merit', good schooling could help a child acquire intelligence and 'redress inequalities of home background.'³⁷

A central assumption of reports like Robbins was the belief that change could be managed by the right people to the right ends. In the immediate post-war period, the inherited assumption that there were right people who could identify right ends overlapped with new notions as to who those people were, and what those ends might be. Robbins' central conclusion still sought to identify those individuals 'qualified by ability and attainment.' The assumption governing the university remained hierarchical, but in the interests of national survival this hierarchy was opened to a broader proportion of society.³⁸ In 1963 this position could attract a wide-range of intellectuals and political figures, from those primarily interested in the efficient training and management of Britain's human capital, to those seeking to use education policy to pursue a more equal society. In responding to Robbins, many commentators and intellectuals felt that the Report represented the culmination of the meritocratic promise contained in the 1944 Butler Act. As the sociologist A.H. Halsey argued, the Report's 'analysis of the social determinants of educational opportunity provides the intellectual basis for completing the 1944 revolution.'³⁹ If, as Halsey suggested, the Robbins Report represented the fulfilment of the Butler Act's meritocratic promise or, at the very least, official recognition of the expansive conception of equality of opportunity championed by sociologists in the 1950s, then the future role of education would have to be debated anew. It was here, therefore, that the concept of meritocracy became stretched and the aims of equality and efficiency, moulded together in 1963, began to separate. Michael Young, writing a year after setting up the National Extension College in 1962, called attention to this withering meritocratic consensus. For Young, Robbins represented 'the radical wing' of a distinctly conservative view of education and its purpose: 'The conservative radical asserts that universities are still shamefully inefficient because they do not yet absorb the ablest people in the country.' Robbins was, therefore, a 'conservative document', one which accepted that 'the function of the schools will remain the same as it has been since the war' to select able children and prepare them 'for their higher destiny in the counsels of the nation.' Drawing attention to some of the themes he explored in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Young argued that 'the socialist can go a long way with the radical conservative.' Both can support Robbins, he argued, 'as much as Beveridge; they can unite in demanding measures to stop the wastage of ability.'⁴⁰

³⁷ E. Boyle, 'The Conservative Essence', *New Society*, 4/106 (08/10/1964), p. 10.

³⁸ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 102, 138.

³⁹ A.H. Halsey, 'Robbins Analysed...I', *New Society*, 2/59 (14/11/1963), pp. 14-15.

⁴⁰ M. Young, 'Robbins and Equality', *New Society*, 2/61 (28/11/1963), pp. 14-15.

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In advancing beyond the meritocratic principles of Robbins, and staking out more egalitarian terrain, socialists like Halsey became disoriented. Writing in the pages of *New Society* in 1965 Halsey outlined why education should be seen 'as an instrument in pursuit of an egalitarian society.'⁴¹ Egalitarianism in the late 1950s and early 1960s relied on both educational expansion from 'non-educational' to 'educational uses' and the redistribution of opportunity. For Halsey, the former posed less of a political problem and represented an 'attractive strategy for the egalitarian.' The latter was slightly more problematic as it required an acknowledgement that the determinants of ability may reside in the social realm and entailed further 'incursions into the autonomy of the family.' Halsey also cited *The Rise of the Meritocracy* but largely dismissed Young's concerns because of the book's incorrect assumption that 'intelligence can be measured and translated into social positions.' Ultimately, Halsey sought solace in expansion. It was only 'the wealth which results from a technological society', he argued, which could 'allow a huge allocation of resources to education for cultural as well as economic purposes.' This, in short, was 'the educational path to an egalitarian society.'⁴² In an interesting reply to Halsey's article, Young highlighted how even a sociologist with Halsey's socialist credentials misinterpreted his satire. 'What I was attacking (among other things)', Young argued, 'was the assumption, commonly made, that intelligence can be measured and should be translated into social positions.' For Young, Halsey's claim that educational justice would be achieved by relating the quality and quantity of schooling to ability was the idea 'that was meant to be the butt of my book.'⁴³ This exchange between Young and Halsey demonstrates the extent to which the Left's egalitarian objectives in the 1950s and early 1960s were bound up with the concept of meritocracy. For Young, Halsey had retreated behind the utilitarianism of expansion and had failed to grapple with the fundamental questions posed by his satire. The deferral which expansion facilitated gradually withered away over the course of the mid-to-late 1960s as economic growth stuttered. The Labour Government's decision to postpone the raising of the school leaving age upon re-election in 1966 symbolised that the bountiful future imagined by Halsey was no longer inevitable. As has been explored elsewhere in this thesis the scope of meritocracy extended far beyond the realm of education policy, especially as intellectuals and policy-makers responded to the politics of decline. Nevertheless, the changes in education policy in the 1960s debated by Young and Halsey reflect a broader disillusionment with the expansive vision of equality of opportunity which lay at the heart of the meritocratic moment.

⁴¹ A.H. Halsey, 'Education and Equality', *New Society*, 5/142 (17/06/1965), p. 13.

⁴² Halsey, 'Education', p. 14, 15.

⁴³ M. Young, 'Letters: Education and Equality', *New Society*, 6/144 (01/07/1965), p. 28.

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The nation's education system was increasingly characterised as both the cause of, and solution to, Britain's post-war decline. The contributors to *Suicide of a Nation?* frequently linked the nation's sluggish growth with the failure of Britain's outdated, restrictive and class-bound educational institutions. As we explored in the last chapter, intellectuals from both Revisionist Social Democratic and Middle Way Conservative ideological traditions, had endorsed a meritocratic pattern of opportunities and rewards on the assumption that higher rates of growth were secure. At the beginning of the 1960s as debates about decline reached a critical mass this logic became stretched. Though growth was sustained throughout the early 1960s, Britain's ability to maintain growth was called increasingly into doubt and brought to the fore 'a crisis in Revisionist thought.'⁴⁴ Whereas in the mid-1950s Anthony Crosland could claim that Britain stood 'on the threshold of mass abundance', less than a decade later he was forced to recognise his over-optimism.⁴⁵ Britain's 'exceptionally poor growth rate over the past decade' would require the likes of Crosland to rethink their claims about 'economic planning, the disappearance of poverty, and the shift of power to the trade unions.'⁴⁶ Richard Crossman, a persistently staunch critic of the Revisionist embrace of the affluent society, recognised this shift in 1964 and claimed the Establishment had moved from a position of optimism to one of pessimism, 'like a flight of starlings', in just two years. In the early 1960s, he argued, Britain had witnessed 'an ideological upheaval so violent that the Conservative Party has espoused an incomes policy, planning and controls. Affluence is a dirty word, and *The Times* thunders in terms of Galbraithian economics.'⁴⁷

The intellectual preoccupations of the meritocratic moment, the problems of affluent consumption, unlimited leisure, or limitless spending on education and welfare, began to be disturbed by more pressing issues of production and scarcity. As Baron Bowden, the new Minister for Education and Science in Harold Wilson's Labour Government argued 'well educated, active young men will have an enormous amount to do for the next decade. I don't think that anyone will be worried by the problems of leisure.'⁴⁸ The questions which dominated Britain's intellectual politics in the mid-to-late 1950s, therefore, were significantly different to those being posed less than a decade later. Declinist authors like Shanks argued that Britain's elites, as well as the broader public, possessed an almost pathological resistance to economic growth and its consequences.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ J. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979* (London, 1984), p. 184; G. Foote, *The Labour Party's Political Thought: A History* (London, 3rd Ed., 1997), p. 229.

⁴⁵ C.A.R. Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1956), p. 515.

⁴⁶ C.A.R. Crosland, 'On the Left Again: Some Last Words on the Labour Controversy', *Encounter* (October, 1960), pp. 11-12; C.A.R. Crosland, 'Preface to the New Edition', in his *The Future of Socialism* (London, [1956] 1964), pp. i-ii.

⁴⁷ R.H.S. Crossman, 'Scientists in Whitehall', *Encounter* (July, 1964), p. 4.

⁴⁸ Lord Bowden, 'Labour's Way', *New Society*, 4/105 (01/10/1964), p. 8.

⁴⁹ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 45.

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Breaking this resistance and delivering growth became a 'valence issue' in the 1960s.⁵⁰ As we explored in the last chapter, while both Parties may have embraced growth to serve divergent ends, both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives fought the 1964 General Election on the promise to deliver economic expansion more effectively than their ideological rivals. The 'first priority' of a Labour Government, Wilson argued on the eve of the Election, 'is invariably the restoration of Britain's economic dynamic.' Britain had spent too long 'unnecessarily accepting a rate of economic growth, and a world status, lower than its real abilities and qualities and needs would dictate.'⁵¹ Similarly, Edward Boyle claimed that the 'central aim of Conservative philosophy' was to achieve a 'sustained rate of economic expansion' for the 'sake of the benefits which this will bring to our society.' Drawing on his foreword to the Newsom Report, Boyle argued that the higher public spending enabled by growth was to be used, not simply to provide a more effective 'basic minimum', but as 'an essential means both of compensating for inequalities of home background and of meeting increasing demand for better environmental standards.'⁵²

Higher economic growth remained, therefore, the overriding objective for both Middle Way Conservatives and the Wilsonite Labour Government, uniting all those concerned with reversing Britain's decline. By the middle of the 1960s, however, the interrelationship between growth and egalitarianism was significantly more complicated than intellectuals and politicians had considered at the height of the meritocratic moment less than a decade previously. The notion that a meritocratically selected and rewarded elite would deliver higher levels of growth and that this process would produce inexorably equal and classless results was assailed on a number of fronts. Most significantly, by the mid-1960s Britain's intellectual politics was increasingly dominated by the so-called 'rediscovery of poverty'.⁵³ The work of academics Richard Titmuss, Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend and the foundation of the Child Poverty Action Group in 1965 reflected a significant intellectual shift in understandings of poverty and its relationship to the so-called affluent society.⁵⁴ While the likes of Richard Crossman had

⁵⁰ J. Tomlinson, 'It's the Economy, Stupid! Labour and the Economy, circa 1964', *Contemporary British History*, 21/3 (2007), p. 339.

⁵¹ Wilson, *Relevance of British Socialism*, p. 11, 17; For other examples, see: C.A.R. Crosland, 'On Economic Growth', *Encounter* (April, 1961), pp. 65-68; J.R. Sargent, *Out of Stagnation: A Policy for Growth* (London, 1963).

⁵² Boyle, 'Conservative Essence', p. 8, 9.

⁵³ See: R. Lowe, 'The Rediscovery of Poverty and the Creation of the Child Poverty Action Group, 1962-68', *Contemporary Record*, 9/3 (1995), pp. 602-11; I. Gazeley, *Poverty in Britain, 1900-1965* (Basingstoke, 2003), pp. 178-82; C. Reinecke, 'Localising the Social: The Rediscovery of Urban Poverty in Western European "Affluent Societies"', *Contemporary European History*, 24/4 (2015), pp. 555-76.

⁵⁴ N. Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought and Labour Politics: Retreating Visions* (London, 2nd Ed., 2004), p. 126; Gazeley, *Poverty*, p. 180; S. Middleton, 'Affluence and the Left in Britain, c. 1958-1974', *English Historical Review*, 129/536 (2014), pp. 115-29.

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always been critical of Revisionism's embrace of affluence, analyses which emphasised the growth of private wealth amidst public squalor reached a critical mass in the early 1960s.⁵⁵ For Titmuss, the inequalities of the affluent society were more entrenched and yet discussion of their origins and alleviation increasingly marginalised.⁵⁶ The idea of relative poverty helped to elide the conceptual distinction between poverty and inequality, by defining the former in relation to the wealth and customs of society at large.⁵⁷ While Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives largely adopted this relative definition of poverty in the mid-to-late 1950s, this was buttressed by ever-greater growth.⁵⁸ Townsend and Abel-Smith's influential 1965 study, *The Poor and The Poorest* directly attacked the complacency of these ideological traditions and contradicted the 'commonly held view that a trend towards greater equality has accompanied the trend towards greater affluence.'⁵⁹ For the likes of Townsend, Titmuss and Abel-Smith, the Wilson Governments, with their emphasis on growth, science and meritocracy, were distracting from socialist objectives and may well leave social inequalities wider and poverty more widespread than when they took office.⁶⁰ As Stuart Middleton has argued, by the end of the decade the prioritisation of growth was seen, 'not as an alternative route to socialism, but an alternative to socialism.'⁶¹

The 'rediscovery of poverty' and the notion that affluence had worked to conceal the persistence of widespread inequalities was related to a second complication in the relationship between growth and equality: the idea that the benefits of welfare capitalism had largely accrued to the middle class. While these critiques were visible during the height of the meritocratic moment they took on a new urgency with the onset of decline. By broadening conventional definitions of welfare to include fiscal advantages such as tax concessions and occupational benefits, Titmuss and his disciples demonstrated how the structure of economic power in a post-war capitalist society was inimical to the development of an egalitarian pattern of social relationships.⁶² The sociologist Pete Townsend argued it was clear from research in areas such as higher

⁵⁵ N.W. Thompson, *Social Opulence and Private Restraint: The Consumer in British Socialist Thought since 1800* (Oxford, 2015), p. 136.

⁵⁶ Titmuss, *Irresponsible Society*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ P. Townsend (Ed.), *The Concept of Poverty* (London, 1970); Middleton, 'Affluence', p. 115.

⁵⁸ Crosland, *Future of Socialism* (1964), p. 89; R. Lowe, 'The Replanning of the Welfare State, 1957-1964', in M. Francis & I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska (Eds.), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990* (Cardiff, 1996), p. 259; D. Blackburn, "'For We Shall Prejudice Nothing': Middle Way Conservatism and the Defence of Inequality, 1945-1979', *Political Studies*, 64/Supp. 1 (2016), p. 168.

⁵⁹ B. Abel-Smith & P. Townsend, *The Poor and The Poorest* (London, 1965), p. 66.

⁶⁰ P. Townsend, *Poverty, Socialism and Labour in Power* (London, 1967), p. 1.

⁶¹ Middleton, 'Affluence', p. 127.

⁶² R. Titmuss, *Essays on the Welfare State* (London, 1958); Abel-Smith, *Freedom*, p. 4; R. Titmuss, 'Introduction to the 1964 Edition of *Equality* by R.H. Tawney', in S. Miller (Ed.), *The Philosophy of Welfare: Selected Writings of Richard M. Titmuss* (London, 1987), pp. 18-34; Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought*, pp. 125-34.

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education that the middle classes were gaining advantages at the state's expense.⁶³ In the 1950s the threat these advantages posed to equality of opportunity were obscured by the widely-shared 'embourgeoisement thesis' and the notion that, underpinned by higher living standards, the middle class had infinite room for new recruits. This thesis received increasing scrutiny over the course of the 1960s.⁶⁴ The sociologists John Goldthorpe and David Lockwood, for example, argued in the pages of *New Society* in 1962 that Croslandite interpretations which emphasised that class differences were 'in the process of being obliterated' ignored the 'relational aspect of class.' For Goldthorpe, a more plausible position was one of convergence between the working and middle classes. While the more affluent and less traditional sections of the working class, still committed to collective action to raise their living standards, 'are perhaps moving in a more individualistic direction where expenditure, use of leisure time and social aspiration are concerned', the 'new white collar segment of the middle class is manifestly less attached to the virtues of individualism and more prone to collective trade union action.'⁶⁵ By the start of the 1970s the issue which dominated Britain's intellectual politics was not whether the working class were merging with the middle class, but whether the latter were at risk of descending into the former.

At the heart of the meritocratic compromise was the notion that the proceeds of growth would be redistributed to create an ever more bountiful welfare state. This generous public provision not only served the cause of equality of opportunity, it provided a safety net which cushioned the landing of those who fell off the ladders of the meritocratic state and also supported those who could not climb to begin with. The equality of respect which a universalist welfare state was said to underpin was a powerful dissolvent of meritocratic differences and tensions, serving as a badge of equal citizenship regardless of an individual's status. The revelation that the middle classes were benefitting disproportionately from this arrangement stretched this meritocratic compromise to breaking point.⁶⁶ Universalist assumptions were gradually undermined from both the Left and the Right. Titmuss, writing in 1960, concluded that socialists

must now admit that we placed too much faith in the 1940s in the concept of universality as applied to social security. Mistakenly it was linked with

⁶³ Townsend, *Poverty, Socialism and Labour*, p. 5, 7, 15-16.

⁶⁴ See for example: R. Samuel, 'The Deferential Voter', *New Left Review*, 1/1 (1960), pp. 9-13; D. Marquand, 'Passion and Politics', *Encounter* (December, 1961), p. 7.

⁶⁵ J. Goldthorpe & D. Lockwood, 'Not So Bourgeois After All', *New Society*, 1/3 (18/10/1962), pp. 18-19.

⁶⁶ D. Reisman, *Crosland's Future: Opportunity and Outcome* (London, 1997), pp. 176-77.

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economic egalitarianism. Those who have benefitted most are those who have needed it least.⁶⁷

Similarly, Abel-Smith, writing in 1963, claimed that Britain's public services 'are now a bad advertisement for socialism.' Whereas the previous Labour administration could plausibly argue that 'by placing services in the hands of the people it was thought they would automatically serve each member of the public', it was clear they had simply installed a professional, bureaucratic elite which was unresponsive to demands for consumer sovereignty.⁶⁸

In seeking to represent the interests of the meritocratic middle classes, Bow Group conservatives increasingly came to share Abel-Smith's emphasis on choice and freedom in the welfare state. They challenged the egalitarian consequences which were said to flow from a philosophy of universalism. Writing in 1961, Geoffrey Howe, Bow Group Chairman between 1955 and 1956, *Crossbow* Editor between 1960 and 1962, and future Thatcherite Chancellor, argued that 'equality should never feature as an object of our social policy.' Howe rejected the idea that the social services should act as a 'badge of citizenship' and supported greater choice in areas such as education. For example, Howe lamented the abolition of the parental contribution to university education which he claimed

would set the stage for the socially disruptive triumph of what Michael Young has dubbed the Meritocracy. To centralise the whole business of advancement of talent around the universities and to make a degree the only passport to a position of affluence and importance would make our society the poorer for its lack of diversity [...] The country can ill afford to lose its future Bevins and Bevans.⁶⁹

Howe's intervention demonstrates that attacks on the meritocracy in the name of individual choice could, and often were, more likely to come from the Right than the Left. By the late 1960s, and for wildly divergent reasons, both Left and Right cohered around a positive discrimination agenda which merged together enhanced educational opportunity with targeted welfare provision. These schemes were embodied in the 1967

⁶⁷ Titmuss, *Irresponsible*, p. 10.

⁶⁸ Abel-Smith, *Freedom*, p. 3, 1.

⁶⁹ Howe, 'Reform of the Social Services', p. 71; For Nicholas Timmins, Howe's 1961 essay 'summed up much of what was to become the radical right's agenda during the 1980s.' This is an interesting observation considering Howe's strident opposition to the concept of meritocracy. N. Timmins, *The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State* (London, 1995), p. 254.

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Plowden Report and its recommendation to create Educational Priority Areas (EPAs).⁷⁰ Plowden drew on the two central themes explored above: firstly, the rediscovery of poverty and deprivation; and secondly the growing realisation in professional circles that education and equal opportunity were not having much of an impact on inequality and poverty.⁷¹ Michael Young, a Plowden committee member and architect of the EPAs, saw the latter as mechanisms to transform the nature of teaching and learning, as well as the catalyst for a broader assault on national inequalities.⁷² While EPAs were placed at the heart of the final report, some of Young's more radical proposals were rejected. Despite its association with the Left, the concept of positive discrimination embodied in Plowden was largely shaped by conservative impulses.⁷³ Underlying the rationale of the project was the notion that poverty could be explained culturally, by trouble at home or in the local environment.⁷⁴ Timothy Raison, also serving on the Plowden Committee, expressed the case for positive discrimination in terms which would later be described as Thatcherite.⁷⁵ The first priority, he argued, is 'to concentrate resources where they are most needed.' For Raison, 'positive discrimination entailed additional educational facilities, inducements to doctors, teachers, dentists or special subsidies of one kind or another.' Positive discrimination would encourage 'people to stand on their own feet' and, by coming to provide subsidies in 'cash rather than in kind', could encourage the values of 'thrift, 'self-sufficiency and property in the form of home-ownership'.⁷⁶

EPAs serve as a useful lens through which to view the conceptual stretching of components important to the meritocratic moment: universal welfare provision and equality of opportunity. A significant, if tacit, agreement at the heart of the meritocratic promise was that it would facilitate greater social mobility for the talented individual from the working class but would not threaten the advantages of the middle class in the process. Economic growth would dissolve any difficult distributive dilemmas and prevent both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives from having to redistribute middle-class privileges. Over the course of the 1960s, however, these dilemmas resurfaced. Where Titmuss attacked universalism for perpetuating inequality,

⁷⁰ Lady Plowden, *The Plowden Report: Children and their Primary Schools* (London, 1967), <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/plowden/plowden1967-1.html> (Accessed: 02/03/2019).

⁷¹ K.G. Banting, *Poverty, Politics and Policy: Britain in the 1960s* (London, 1979), p. 111.

⁷² H. Silver & P. Silver, *Educational War on Poverty: American and British Policy-Making, 1960-1980* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 235.

⁷³ G. O'Hara, *Governing Post-War Britain: The Paradoxes of Progress, 1951-1973* (Basingstoke, 2012), p. 191, 180.

⁷⁴ P. Shapely, *Deprivation, State Interventions and Urban Communities in Britain, 1968-79* (New York, 2018).

⁷⁵ T. Raison, 'Strategy of Social Provision', *New Society*, 7/190 (19/05/1966), pp. 6-8; T. Raison, 'The Plowden Report: Equality plus Quality', *New Society*, 9/220 (12/01/1967), pp. 46-48; T. Raison, 'The Social Policy Vacuum', *Crossbow* (April-June, 1967), p. 12.

⁷⁶ Raison, 'Strategy of Social Provision', p. 6, 7.

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concealing both poverty and the preservation of middle-class advantage, the Bow Group targeted it on the basis of its egalitarianism, subsidising those who needed it the least and denying choice. The concept of equality of opportunity at the heart of meritocracy had already been pushed in radical directions; not only would the state be responsible for ensuring the provision of schooling and individual talent were aligned, but for delivering equal opportunity for each child to acquire intelligence. This expansionary agenda would have to face up to the nation's limited economic resources, especially after the deflationary July Measures of 1966. More importantly, it encountered an increasingly fierce epistemological critique. As the variables impacting intelligence expanded from class to include gender and race, the educational consensus witnessed over the Newsom Report began to fragment. For a resurgent cultural Right, the meritocratic sorting process no longer sought to enhance access to a 'liberal tradition', the 'best of what has been thought and said', but to deny that such a tradition existed. For the Left, the school was no longer the most important site for achieving radical change reflecting as it did wider structural inequalities of power and privilege. The notion that the state was responsible for creating an equal playing field, even accounting for the influences of family or culture, made it a target for individuals or groups disgruntled by their social outcomes. A significant component of Thatcherism's appeal was its promise to unburden the state, not just in terms of privatisation, but in its role as a guarantor for society's inequalities. The personalised meritocracy would eventually be replaced by the impersonal market.

(3.3) The New Competitors

At the start of October 1963 Harold Wilson delivered his influential 'White Heat' speech to the Labour Party Conference in Scarborough. For Wilson, Britain had been living in an 'easy-going world' characterised by 'the blind imposition of technological abundance.' In contrast, a Labour Government would ensure the 'conscious, planned, purposive use of scientific progress to provide undreamed of living standards and the possibility of leisure ultimately on an unbelievable scale.' This required an elite, 'ready to think and to speak in the language of our scientific age.'⁷⁷ As Wilson argued, the Party had successfully 'replaced the cloth cap' with the 'white lab-coat as the symbol of British Labour.'⁷⁸ In tune with the scientific, technocratic and non-ideological tenor of the age, the Labour Government of 1964, in the words of Noel Thompson, 'considered that the problems afflicting modern Britain would be solved independently of social conflict, class struggle

⁷⁷ H. Wilson, *Labour's Plan for Science: Reprint of Speech by the Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson MP, Leader of the Labour Party, at the Annual Conference, Scarborough, Tuesday, October 1, 1963* (London, 1963), p. 7, 3.

⁷⁸ Wilson, *Relevance*, p. 54.

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or any fundamental assault on the bastions of capitalist power.' Those who would construct the New Britain were defined not by their class but by their expertise.⁷⁹ The majority of intellectuals, commentators and politicians felt that the meritocracy had finally 'arrived' after Wilson's narrow General Election victory in October 1964. Updating his *Anatomy* series three years after exhorting Britain to cast off the anachronistic values of the aristocracy, Anthony Sampson detected a new 'crackle' in Whitehall. 'Rewriting this book after three years and retracing my steps', Sampson argued, 'the changes seem quite spectacular.' The 'ancient debate between amateurs and professions, or gentlemen and players', which had dominated Sampson's previous book, 'has lost much of its power, for only a few top people, like Sir Alec Douglas Home, would now dare admit to amateur attitudes.' Sampson attributed this transformation to the change of government. The 'wand has been waved over Whitehall', he declared, and 'change, overnight, becomes politically respectable, even essential.' Wilson, 'a man of determined isolation and professionalism', operates a 'kind of government by boredom, in which pretensions and passions dissolve in the dry atmosphere of technical discussion.'⁸⁰ Sampson's account of the change wrought after just one year of Wilson's Government reveals the burden of expectation placed on the meritocracy to fundamentally transform Britain's institutions, the make-up of the nation's elite and its broader social structure. If Britain was finally, or on the verge of being, governed by a meritocratic elite, intellectuals expected the meritocracy to start delivering on its promises and to do so within a shorter span of time. Sampson also draws attention to the fragility on which Wilson's national vision of the meritocracy rested and the extent to which its emphasis on service looked increasingly outdated or misguided. Britain, it was argued, was bypassing the professional 'Organisation Man' and elevating the dynamic, thrusting meritocrat.

In *Anatomy of Britain Today*, Sampson identified a split in Britain's elite: on one side, he argued, 'are the outstanding men in their fifties, who started their careers in the slump years of the thirties' and are now either directors or ambassadors. They joined their government department or corporation 'often with a mixture of a genuine sense of service, and thankfulness for a safe job in hard times.' Importantly, 'they were loyal to their institutions as they were loyal to their colleges.' In the mid-1960s, however, another type of elite was emerging. This generation 'were at school during or after the war' and were 'brought up alongside a crumbling Empire, a dwindling army, and recurring balance of payments crises.' For Sampson, these men did not have the same sense of loyalty. This new generation are 'much more aware of themselves – their value,

⁷⁹ Thompson, *Political Economy*, p. 185; N. Thompson, 'The Fabian Political Economy of Harold Wilson', in P. Dorey (Ed.), *The Labour Governments 1964-1970* (New York, 2006), p. 56.

⁸⁰ A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain Today* (London, 1965), p. 669, 672, 673.

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their reputation and their power.' Sampson associated this elite with a 'new competitiveness in industry' and the return of the word 'entrepreneur' which 'for so long had a stigma.' Accompanying this 'changing, competitive scene, with glitter and fantasies, is the glaring light of publicity' which 'opens up secret places, makes heroes overnight and quickens the pace of envy and self-awareness.'⁸¹ In place of the risk-averse, sensitive professional who shunned conspicuous consumption, found reward in a job well done and subconsciously longed for the approval of the sociologist, stood the thrusting and competitive individualist. Where Wilson's vision of a meritocracy relied on a spirit of service to the nation in order to reverse decline, the likes of the Bow Group sought to recast the meritocrats as economic 'pace-setters' or as the 'New Competitors'.

At the heart of the Middle Way Conservative embrace of the meritocracy in the immediate post-war period was its ability to bind the nation's classes together. For David Clarke, the meritocrats would not forget where they had come from and would help to bridge any divide between the working and middle classes through a shared respect for technical skill, competence and expertise. In contrast, Charles Curran, writing six months after a shock Conservative defeat to the Liberals at the Orpington by-election, diagnosed an 'escalator class' which had shunned the Tories and to which the Party had to adapt if it was to win power again in 1964.⁸² These appeals only intensified after Wilson's victory in 1964.⁸³ Eldon Griffiths, the new Conservative M.P for Bury St. Edmunds, shared much of Curran's analysis. For Griffiths, the new arrivals that had swung the election to Labour 'feel a total lack of kinship with the post-war world of anonymous housing estates, collective holiday camps, fish and chips and Bingo.' Their most striking feature, he argued, was their competitiveness: 'they are, par excellence, the New Competitors.'⁸⁴ Similarly, Howe argued that the prospect of 'enforced equality of consumption' could only go so far in 1960s Britain because 'more and more of the pacemakers of Britain (the New Competitors as Eldon Griffiths has dubbed them – the escalator men in Charles Curran's vivid phrase) will come to vote with their feet.' Tapping into concerns that the 'Brain Drain' was undermining Wilson's national meritocracy, Howe concluded that 'British Governments ignore at their peril the fact that the whole of the English-speaking world is one huge competitive open society.'⁸⁵ In a

⁸¹ Sampson, *Anatomy Today*, p. 670, 671.

⁸² C. Curran, 'The New Model Bourgeoisie', *Crossbow* (October-December, 1962), p. 20, 21.

⁸³ See for example: I. Macleod, 'The Tories Face a New Role', *Crossbow* (January-March, 1965), pp. 32-33; T. Higgins, *Conservative New Tasks No. 9: The Second Managerial Revolution* (London, 1965), p. 3; Conservative Political Centre, *The Great Divide* (London, 1966), p. 8.

⁸⁴ Griffiths, *New Competitors*, p. 6, 5.

⁸⁵ G. Howe, 'The Waiting List Society', in M. Wolff (Ed.), *The Conservative Opportunity: Fifteen Bow Group Essays on Tomorrow's Toryism* (London, 1965), p. 16. For the 'Brain Drain' see: Wilson, *Relevance of British Socialism*, pp. 50-51; Q. Hogg [Viscount Hailsham], *The Brain Drain* (London, 1967); M. Godwin, J. Gregory & B. Balmer, 'The Anatomy of the Brain Drain Debate, 1950s-1970s', *Contemporary British History*, 23/1 (2009), p. 39.

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similar way to Sampson, these accounts portrayed the meritocrats as self-maximising individuals, increasingly characterised as 'self-made' and as owing little to the institutions they work for or the state support which helped to facilitate their rise up the ladder. In contrast to Wilson, by emphasising the role of the individual in thrusting their way forward, the Bow Group argued that the meritocrat was not indebted – in the form of redistributive taxes, for example – to the state for their success. In short, they had ownership of their talents and were under no obligation to utilise their expertise in the public interest for Wilson's national meritocracy.

Importantly these developments should be characterised as stretching the concept of meritocracy, rather than representing a complete break with meritocratic principles. The Bow Group, with its emphasis on competition and incentives, is often characterised as proto-Thatcherite despite the fact it reached the height of its influence during the leadership of Ted Heath.⁸⁶ As we explored above, the likes of Howe and Raison, both former Editors of *Crossbow* and both ministers in Thatcher's Governments, adopted policy positions in the mid-to-late 1960s which would later be at odds with Thatcherism. The Bow Group were distinct in Tory circles because they urged the Party to represent the professional meritocrats, rather than a middle class characterised by the traditional values of thrift or sobriety as discussed by Maude and Lewis. In this sense disputes about who exactly the meritocrats were and what they stood for took place within, rather than in opposition to, a meritocratic framework. This distinction was relatively clear to Josselyn Hennessy, a journalist and Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) economist. In a review of Sampson's book in the short-lived *Statist* magazine, Hennessy doubted whether profits and entrepreneurship had suddenly become respectable. For Hennessy, once the Wilsonite experiment with dirigism failed, Britain would be forced to turn to a government interested in competition, 'leading to madly excessive profits, producing a growth rate that enables wages to be raised without inflation.' This would not produce

an egalitarian society because talented men are ready to shoulder responsibilities and to initiate new ideas, thus opening doors to themselves that lead to pay raises and promotion above the average. But it will be the dynamic Britain that Mr Sampson wants.⁸⁷

While this society might require the entrepreneurial spirit produced by a 'steady upward infusion of outstanding thrusters' it would have nothing to do with the 'pullulation of

⁸⁶ Thirty-nine Bow Group members were elected in 1970 and eight of these were given ministerial office by Heath, J. Barr, *The Bow Group: A History* (London, 2001), pp. 116-17. For the Bow Group as proto-Thatcherite, see: Timmins, *Five Giants*, pp. 254-55.

⁸⁷ J. Hennessy, 'Sampson Agonises', *Statist* (09/04/1965).

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meritocrats from the comprehensive schools, on which Anthony Sampson pins his faith.⁸⁸

The shift from the institutionally loyal meritocrat to the new competitor mirrored the increasing disillusionment, emanating from Left and Right, with the welfare state professional. As we explored above, the likes of Titmuss, Townsend and Abel-Smith on one side, and the Bow Group on the other, cohered around a critique of universalism in welfare provision. For Titmuss, the welfare state had quickly morphed into the 'Pressure Group State'; a shift from 'open social rights to concealed professional syndicalism.' This pointed the way to 'more inequality', the 'restriction of social rights and liberties', and the 'muffling of social protest.'⁸⁹ Similarly, Abel-Smith wanted the Labour Party 'to get rid of the autocratic frame of mind of some civil servants, local government officers and councillors.'⁹⁰ Throughout the economy, he argued, 'manual workers lose pay or even jobs when consumers decide not to buy the goods which the employer, not the worker, has decided to produce.' Nothing, Abel-Smith argued, 'happens to a professional worker in a public service who fails to attract either staff or clients – even when the fault is that of the professional worker.'⁹¹ Raison defended the professions in the pages of *New Society* from Titmuss and Abel-Smith's critiques as well as the increasingly influential 'classical liberal arguments' peddled by the IEA.⁹² Still, Raison was forced to acknowledge that the professions were 'facing mounting criticism for their conservatism and irresponsibility.' While he did not agree with the notion that professionals represented a 'socially divisive, institutionalised elite', he praised the IEA monograph as 'brilliant.' For Raison, D.S. Lees' research highlighted the importance of quality and brought to his attention the fact that 'overt competition is inconsistent with the social status of a professional man.'⁹³ Attacks by the likes of Titmuss and Lees represented a significant repudiation of the interest-group pluralism which had characterised the immediate post-war period. As Ben Jackson has highlighted in relation to the trade union movement, these critiques would only gain ground in the 1970s.⁹⁴ The New Left argued interest group bureaucracies stifled individual freedom just as much as large corporations and, by dismissing corporatist arrangements as a smokescreen for the

⁸⁸ Hennessy, 'Sampson Agonises'.

⁸⁹ Titmuss, *Irresponsible*, p. 12, 20.

⁹⁰ Abel-Smith, *Freedom*, p. 8.

⁹¹ Abel-Smith, *Freedom*, p. 12.

⁹² T. Raison, 'In Defence of the Professions', *New Society*, 7/207 (15/09/1966), pp. 262-63.

⁹³ Raison, 'In Defence', p. 263; D.S. Lees, *Economic Consequences of the Professions* (London, 1966).

⁹⁴ B. Jackson, 'Corporatism and its Discontents: Pluralism, Anti-Pluralism and Anglo-American Industrial Relations, c. 1930-1980', in M. Bevir (Ed.), *Modern Pluralism: Anglo-American Debates since 1880* (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 119-20.

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continuation of rule by elites, paved the way for an eventual reassertion of individual rights over those of the group. Similarly, an increasingly influential neoliberal movement claimed that the corporatist arrangement created and administered by the meritocrats was 'at best pandering to producer interests and at worst incipiently totalitarian.'⁹⁵

In the mid-to-late 1950s British politics was said to be adjusting to the post-ideological age. Political contestation was shifting from 'direct clashes' of productive classes against a background of scarcity to an age of affluence where non-economic discontent, characterised by disagreements about status, predominated. The 'End of Ideology' evoked not only an end to sharp political contestation between rival ideologies, but also a broader diminution of the concept of competition. Competition was wasteful, irrational and dangerous, with decisions about the allocation of resources best left to meritocratically selected experts exercising carefully considered professional judgements. With the onset of decline, however, the professional ethic at the heart of the meritocracy became stretched by a resurgent interest in the language of dynamism, entrepreneurship and competitiveness. As the contributors to *Suicide of a Nation?*, Sampson's updated *Anatomy* and the research output of the Bow Group highlight, this discourse cut across Britain's mainstream ideologies. For Henry Bosch, the Bow Group Chairman between 1964 and 1965, too many managers took 'comfort in established ways and a leisurely set of values that demand a gentlemanly approach and discount aggression even towards competitors.' At 'most levels of society' the 'steady, responsible man is approved while his striving and aggressive counterpart is treated with suspicion.'⁹⁶ Even Crosland had become more receptive to the concept of competition since the publication of *The Future of Socialism* in 1956, arguing in 1962 that 'under conditions of full employment it normally has a salutary effect in stimulating efficiency and discouraging lethargy.'⁹⁷

This was not, therefore, a binary divide between the planning impulses of social democrats and the competitive instincts of conservatives. On the one hand, as Timothy Raison identified, some conservatives disputed the approach of the Bow Group and argued that 'if we are entering an era of greater economic competition, the emphasis in the social services should be on generosity, so as to preserve social harmony within the nation.' It was one of modern politics' 'trickiest theoretical questions' as to whether 'security or insecurity provides the most stimulating basis for achievement.'⁹⁸ Shanks, on the other hand, was a social democrat who placed competition at the heart of his

⁹⁵ Jackson, 'Corporatism', p. 126.

⁹⁶ H. Bosch, 'Profits, Taxes and Incentives', in *Conservative Opportunity*, pp. 108-09, 110.

⁹⁷ C.A.R. Crosland, 'Monopoly, Advertising and the Consumer', in his *Conservative Enemy* (London, 1962), p. 58.

⁹⁸ T. Raison, *Why Conservative?* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 66, 63.

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ideological morphology. 'There is no doubt', he claimed in *The Stagnant Society*, that a large part of British industry is not in fact sufficiently dynamic or enterprising today, and that part of this lack of enterprise springs from a lack of competition.' In his diagnosis of decline Shanks overlapped in significant areas with members of the Bow Group as well as Conservatives emerging from the Middle Way tradition. Here, Britain's poor economic performance was said to be rooted in long-established cultural traditions and an implicit conservative reverence for the methods, traditions and values of the past. Shanks identified Britons 'easy-going tolerance, our allergy to enthusiasms and ulcers, our aversions to change, our pride in our past, our gerontophilia of the machine, our all-pervading social nostalgia.'⁹⁹ Britain was 'buried under the rose-petals of a vast collective nostalgia, lost in a sweet love-affair with our own past.'¹⁰⁰ The declinist moment was defined, therefore, by its hostility to 'tradition' and the past; Britain's apparently unique post-war condition was characterised as deadweight, restricting the room in which the meritocrats could operate and stifling the changes which would allow the nation to embrace the scientific revolution and an abundant future.

While Revisionists like Crosland had long chastised Britain's outdated and outmoded class systems, this disdain for the past was increasingly adopted with equal vigour by conservatives. In a 1959 update to his 1947 book *The Case for Conservatism*, Quintin Hogg had emphasised the importance to the Tory creed of the values of 'patriotism, constitutionalism, continuity and tradition.' Change, he argued, was best managed 'by a group of men known to be devoted to the traditions of their country.'¹⁰¹ By 1963, however, Hogg had been appointed as 'possibly the only Minister for Science in the Universe' and in *Science and Politics* he shared much of Shank's declinist analysis.¹⁰² For Hogg, Britain was in danger of becoming a 'cross between a museum and an old curiosity shop.' If this were to happen, he argued, 'we should scarcely survive as a people.' Survival could only be guaranteed by adherence to one principle: 'a ruthless competitive efficiency.' Britain needed to

stop deluding itself with bromides about the experts being wrong or everything being the fault of the Government, or at least of someone else. I want to see and hear fewer television programmes about the remote past and fewer Westerns about the more recent, and foreign, past.¹⁰³

Interestingly, in response to decline it was social democrats like Shanks, rather than conservatives like Raison, Hogg or Bosch, who were more concerned with preserving

⁹⁹ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 217.

¹⁰⁰ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Viscount Hailsham [Q. Hogg], *The Conservative Case* (Harmondsworth, 1959), p. 39, 31.

¹⁰² Viscount Hailsham [Q. Hogg], *Science and Politics* (London, 1963), p. 9.

¹⁰³ Hailsham, *Science*, p. 54, 55, 59.

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social harmony. For Shanks, the key question was how Britain could 'regain our competitive drive without going back to the heart-breaking conditions of the bad old days.'¹⁰⁴ While he may have become more receptive to competition in response to decline, as the remark above suggests Crosland did not consider it a 'panacea under all circumstances' and was unwilling to countenance greater competitiveness if it resulted in higher levels of unemployment.¹⁰⁵ The 'stagnant society' outlined by Shanks demonstrated how increasingly outdated pressure groups and elite institutions, particularly the trade unions and the public schools, threatened social harmony by perpetuating irrational class-based loyalties and divisions.¹⁰⁶ For Shanks the key to a more dynamic economy was a more egalitarian, classless society. This, however, was defined purely in relation to disparities of status, power and opportunity, rather than representing any broader assault on material inequalities. A society that denied equal opportunity was wasteful:

If we [Britain] are to have an elite – and really it is hard to see how society can operate without one – then let us at least see that we get the best elite that we can, one based on merit and not on wealth or breeding (though these are not of course mutually exclusive categories). All privilege may be unpleasant, but privilege divorced from merit is surely the most obnoxious and least justifiable of all.¹⁰⁷

This 'meritocracy', Shanks argued, 'has one other great advantage from its greater efficiency', namely that its recruits would rotate and refresh 'with each generation.' In a similar vein to the argument proposed by David Glass in the previous chapter, Shanks felt that meritocratic elites would not be able to pass on advantages and that each new wave of meritocracy would be equipped with up-to-date, specialist education. The meritocracy would 'not lose touch with the mass of the population.' Shanks argued that the British public need not worry about the meritocratic bogeyman or the 'austere Wykehamist', because the 'men who reach the top in a genuinely open competitive society would simply be the most able.' While Shanks therefore shared much of the Revisionist thinking about meritocracy in the mid-to-late 1950s, his emphasis on the importance of competition – not only as a product of a meritocratic elite but also a mechanism for deciding which individuals possessed merit – sets him apart from some of the intellectuals explored in the previous chapter. Without access to positions of authority, the frustrated meritocrat poses 'one of the greatest dangers to society, and dangerous in proportion to his ability.' In extreme circumstances 'they become master

¹⁰⁴ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 217.

¹⁰⁵ Crosland, 'Monopoly', p. 58.

¹⁰⁶ Shanks, *Stagnant*, pp. 73-102, 172-74; Shanks, 'Comforts', p. 38.

¹⁰⁷ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 155, 166.

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criminals' while in less extreme cases 'they will become political rebels and extremists' and come to play an active role in unofficial strikes.¹⁰⁸ Importantly for Shanks, the competitive and classless meritocracy, while perhaps 'less comfortable and cosy' than a 'rigid hierarchical society', would produce a social order characterised by 'fewer frictions, less antagonism and hostility between classes and groups, a greater degree of dynamism and common purpose – and ultimately of happiness.' It was only by feeling 'genuinely one nation and one people' that Britain could tap into the wonderful vein of courage, enterprise and initiative which lies hidden in the British personality and which 'can be conjured at rare moments by great men and great events.'¹⁰⁹

In a similar vein to Shanks, Raison challenged the non-competitive, intellectual vision of a meritocracy and argued that an emphasis on competition would produce a more dynamic elite. As we explored in the last chapter, Raison was wary of Young's vision of a meritocracy because of its tendency to generate social tensions. More importantly, he feared that a meritocracy which focused purely on intellectual skills or abilities could degenerate into a form of complacent paternalism. A meritocracy risked creating a society which placed too little importance on non-intellectual virtues such as 'constancy and perhaps decisiveness in action.'¹¹⁰ As the 1960s progressed, Raison became concerned about the suppression of tension, the tendency to conceal differences rather than express them, in a non-competitive meritocracy. In a 1965 pamphlet entitled *Conflict and Conservatism*, Raison urged Conservatives to encourage 'a certain amount of conflict between different groups in society, not for its own sake but for the good that may come of it.'¹¹¹ Where Shanks had laid claim to the 'One Nation' tradition, Raison was 'increasingly convinced that it is not the One-Nation-Spirit-Of-Dunkirk that we need today, but willingness to risk the tension that may arise from a greater readiness to root out our weaknesses.' This emphasis on tension was rooted in Raison's particular reading of psychologists like H.J. Eysenck and the philosopher William James who distinguished between 'tough-minded' and 'tender-minded' character traits.¹¹² For Raison, this 'tough-

¹⁰⁸ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 166, 167.

¹⁰⁹ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 173, 174.

¹¹⁰ Raison, *Why Conservative?*, p. 25.

¹¹¹ T. Raison, *Conflict and Conservatism* (London, 1965), p. 15; Raison reflected in 1990 that the pamphlet caused a 'minor stir by its attack on consensus.' T. Raison, *Tories and the Welfare State: A History of Conservative Social Policy since the Second World War* (London, 1990), pp. 57-58.

¹¹² Raison, *Conflict and Conservatism*, p. 7; Raison, *Why Conservative?*, pp. 22-24; William James argued that the tender-minded individual was 'rationalistic, intellectualistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, free-willist, monistic, dogmatical'; in contrast, the tough-minded person was 'empiricist, sensationalistic, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, fatalistic, pluralistic, sceptical.' W. James, 'The Present Dilemma in Philosophy (1906)', in D. Olin (Ed.), *William James: Pragmatism in Focus* (London, 1992), pp. 24-25; Eysenck built on these principles in his research into the psychology of communism and fascism, see for example: H.J. Eysenck, *The Psychology of Politics* (London, 1954).

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tender' axis mapped onto whether a society could be characterised as masculine or feminine:

Tender-mindedness has generally been predominant in Britain since the hardship of the 1930s and the war led to a revulsion from the harsher features of life. The Welfare State is the most obvious expression of it [...] Against this, tough-mindedness is rooted in the belief that, in the last resort life is still a struggle. There is the will for power and conquest in different spheres, and acceptance of authority.¹¹³

Britain, Raison argued, was 'smothering people' with 'so much care', preoccupied with 'sickness and weakness' and 'forgetful of the importance of achievement.' It was clear to Raison that the Tory Party should first and foremost be a 'masculine party', highlighting to the country the importance of 'vigour, courage, independence, self-reliance and clear sightedness.' If, as Raison argued, 'One Nation ideology' had led Britain into decline it was time for Conservatives to stop seeking 'to hold the ring' among competing interests but to side with the proponents of managerial efficiency.¹¹⁴ In responding to decline Conservatives like Raison were increasingly trying on the clothes of a radical party. In defending the professional meritocracy and seeking to preserve social harmony it was the Wilsonite Labour Party that increasingly looked conservative. This was highlighted by Angus Maude who, after Wilson's election, claimed Britain should prepare for a 'period of extremely conservative, and occasionally reactionary, government.' Maude's critique of the technocratic moment, which for much of the immediate post-war period confined him to the margins of party politics, was received more eagerly by the end of the 1960s. For Maude, the Conservative Party had historically been recognised as 'the party of gradualness, of things more or less as they were, of resistance to radical change.' In the mid-1960s, however, this mode of political action – 'complete with piecemeal social reforms – is precisely the role the Labour Party is in the process of assuming for itself.' There is no room, he claimed, 'for two conservative parties, and the Labour Party has got there first.'¹¹⁵ Whereas in the immediate post-war period meritocracy appeared as a radical concept for delivering progressive change, it increasingly appeared by the end of the 1960s as a mechanism through which such change was stifled or avoided.

¹¹³ Raison, *Why Conservative?*, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ T. Raison, 'Towards a Tory Sociology', *Crossbow* (October-December, 1963), p. 47, 49; Raison, *Conflict*, p. 7, 8.

¹¹⁵ A. Maude, 'Change is Whose Ally?', *The Daily Telegraph* (14/11/1965), p. 14.

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(3.4) Planning and Rewards

In seeking to reverse decline, policy-makers and intellectuals in the early 1960s increasingly turned to the language of planning. This planned economy was to be overseen by meritocratic professionals who, by deploying their expertise in the public interest, would consciously guide economic activity in a rational direction. As Noel Thompson has argued, planning gave scope 'for the *nouvelle couche sociale*' to 'display its professional qualities and exercise its power.'¹¹⁶ The idea of planning, however, has a long history on the British Left.¹¹⁷ It was a prominent concept amongst early-twentieth-century Fabians and came to dominate the intellectual politics of the 1930s following the Great Depression and the perceived failure of classical economics.¹¹⁸ Harold Macmillan's 'Middle Way' was predicated on a similar belief that laissez-faire competition was wasteful and destructive.¹¹⁹ The end of the War brought the triumph of an alternative form of planning in the form of Keynesian demand management.¹²⁰ For Revisionists like Lewis, Crosland and James Meade, planning was associated with Bevanite calls for public ownership, could develop in unpopular, inefficient and illiberal directions, and was not a prerequisite for delivering their cherished aim of social equality.¹²¹ As we explored in the previous two chapters, capitalism was said to have been rendered benign and competitive profit-seeking was not thought to be the primary goal of economic activity, the direction of which, regardless of the pattern of ownership, lay primarily in the hands of the state. The rationale for stronger forms of planning in the 1950s appeared to have withered away.

With the onset of decline and the apparent success of the French *Commissariat au Plan*, economic planning enjoyed a vogue and a cross party support that it had not had since the 1930s.¹²² In 1962 a Conservative creation, the National Economic Development Council, met for the first time. In seeking to steer a course away from the damaging consequences of an irrational 'stop-go' cycle, this economic planning forum, bringing together professional representatives of Labour, Capital and the Government, symbolised the Conservative commitment to corporatist solutions in seeking to reverse

¹¹⁶ Thompson, 'Fabian', p. 57.

¹¹⁷ See for example: D. Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997); R. Toye, *The Labour Party and The Planned Economy, 1931-1951* (Woodbridge, 2003).

¹¹⁸ Toye, *Labour Party*, pp. 16-17.

¹¹⁹ H. Macmillan, *The Middle Way* (London, 1938); A. Budd, *The Politics of Economic Planning* (Manchester, 1978), pp. 51-52.

¹²⁰ J. Tomlinson, 'Planning: Debate and Policy in the 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 3/2 (1992), pp. 173-74.

¹²¹ B. Jackson, *Equality and the British Left* (Manchester, 2007), p. 154.

¹²² Thompson, *Political Economy*, p. 183.

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industrial decline.¹²³ Planning became a central ingredient of Labour's scientific socialism, and Wilson built his electoral appeal on being able to convert Conservative 'paper plans into reality.' For Wilson it was clear that 'a totally unplanned private enterprise system could not provide for full growth and safeguard social justice.'¹²⁴ Despite its cross-party support in the early 1960s, planning remained a theoretically underdefined concept. Even after the publication of the Labour Government's short-lived National Plan in 1965, the exact means, scope and purpose of planning remained the subject of fierce debate. Harold Wilson's economic adviser Thomas Balogh, for example, saw planning as a substitute for the inefficiency and economic waste of competition. While the 'picture of new entrepreneurs forcing their way towards the top, innovating, opening up new ways, is a very attractive one', Balogh felt it had 'become outdated with size' and the concentration of economic power this entailed. As the key figure behind the creation of the DEA, Balogh saw planning as a mechanism through which the government could help address an information shortage, co-ordinating investment decisions and reducing the risk of premature expansion.¹²⁵ By contrast, Michael Shanks, playing a prominent role in the DEA from 1965, sought to disassociate himself from any form of planning 'which sets out to be a substitute for competition.' For Shanks, 'planning should be aimed at promoting expansion and not at avoiding competition.' The latter, he argued, 'is quite literally worse than useless.'¹²⁶ Shanks was to leave the DEA in 1967 after the collapse of the National Plan, becoming increasingly frustrated at the dominance of treasury thinking and the overriding government concern to defend sterling.¹²⁷ While intellectuals and policy-makers could therefore agree on the need to plan, the social and economic ends planning was supposed to serve remained contested. The concept had little to say if Wilson's two objectives of 'full growth' and 'social justice' began to diverge or proved incompatible.

At the centre of the rise and fall of planning was the emphasis policy-makers and intellectuals, from a diverse array of ideological backgrounds, placed on the notion of an incomes policy. These were policies designed to restrain the rate at which money incomes tend to rise by curbing the exploitation of market power by business and labour, professional, or other groups. They had been tested at various points in the post-war period, in Cripps's wage freeze of 1948-1950 or Selwyn Lloyd's 'Pay Pause' of 1961, and

¹²³ S. Wood, 'Why "Indicative Planning" Failed: British Industry and the Formation of the NEDC (1960-1964)', *Twentieth Century British History*, 11/4 (2000), pp. 431-59; As Ben Jackson has noted, the word 'corporatist' could not have been used by the Left in the mid-twentieth century because of its associations with fascism. Still, the word captures an important aspect of the new social order, namely 'the settlement of major social and economic decisions through bargaining between the state and economic interests groups.' Jackson, 'Corporatism', p. 107.

¹²⁴ Wilson, *Relevance*, p. 30,

¹²⁵ T. Balogh, *Planning for Progress: A Strategy for Labour* (London, 1963), p.11, 12.

¹²⁶ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 218.

¹²⁷ M. Shanks, *Planning and Politics: The British Experience, 1960-1976* (London, 1977), p. 35.

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became a central component of the Labour Government's National Plan. As the future Secretary of State for Economic Affairs Michael Stewart argued, an incomes policy would prevent incomes rising faster than production and was hailed across both Parties 'as a way of preventing inflation and indirectly, balance of payment crises and a slow rate of growth.'¹²⁸ In many ways, an incomes policy was the practical manifestation of a meritocratic distributive logic. As we explored in the last chapter, at the heart of the meritocratic moment was the notion that merit and reward should be aligned as a matter of efficiency and social justice. In administering an incomes policy professional meritocrats, the 'wise men' at the centre of government, would evaluate the merits of competing pay claims, resolving disputes in the interests of the nation's economic and social needs. These meritocrats would weigh-up relativities and differentials, relying on objective measurements and job evaluation criteria from the social sciences, as well as responding to the priorities of the National Plan. In a similar way to the expansive definitions embodied in the Newsom Report, intellectual agreement over the benefits of an incomes policy reveals a broader epistemological consensus: the state should and could make relative judgements about the incomes of various groups and underwrite the meritocratic inequalities these judgements generated.

The creation of an incomes policy, however, exposed the divergent expectations and aspirations with which meritocracy had been loaded in the postwar period to political realities. It forced intellectuals and policy-makers to confront the concept's inherent tensions, revealing disagreements, not only about the exact nature of meritorious behaviour, but also the diverging promises a meritocracy was expected to fulfil. Was meritocracy a staging post on the way to greater egalitarianism or an adequate end-state? Did the meritocracy entail the creation of a socially classless society with wide income differentials or a broader assault on material inequalities? These diverging promises were on display in discussions about the ultimate purpose of an incomes policy. For Balogh it was clear that a policy for prices and incomes was required to deliver higher economic growth. While this would be most urgently needed 'immediately after Labour enters office', afterwards, 'when the increase in productivity and production accelerates', much 'greater latitude will be possible.'¹²⁹ Union leaders like Frank Cousins, co-opted into government as the Minister for Technology, agreed to a voluntary pay restraint in 1965 largely because they believed the Labour Government could achieve faster growth, and therefore real increases in wages and salaries, once it had overcome the nation's economic difficulties.¹³⁰ Over the course of the Wilson Governments, the linking of pay increases to productivity imbued the incomes policy with greater flexibility.

¹²⁸ M. Stewart & R. Winsbury, *An Incomes Policy for Labour* (London, 1963), p. 3.

¹²⁹ Balogh, *Planning*, p. 18.

¹³⁰ Ellison, *Egalitarian Thought*, p. 138.

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In the words of Peter Dorey, the language of 'increased productivity' became a 'common trade union means' of securing pay increases in excess of specified norms, irrespective of actual productivity changes.¹³¹

Michael Shanks was a firm supporter of an incomes policy. In *The Stagnant Society* he outlined his support for a planning group which would decide how much wages could be increased each year based on several different indicators.¹³² For Shanks, an incomes policy promised to rationalise the distribution of incomes, to take decisions about differentials out of the irrational horse-trading which characterised free collective bargaining. 'One of the main symptoms of the present sickness of our society', he explained, 'is our obsession with the way in which the national income is divided, our insistence that we should get at least as much out of it as the next man.' In a 'healthy society' the problem 'of the way in which national income was divided would surely be a secondary one.'¹³³ As we explored above, Shanks was in favour of a meritocracy, a society he characterised as open, competitive and socially classless. While in *The Stagnant Society* Shanks claimed he did not want to discuss 'the ethics of income distribution', largely because he did not consider it a 'morally soluble problem', his vision of an incomes policy could see wages 'differ sharply from the national average.' A national wage policy 'should make the movement of wages less and not more monolithic, so that they reflect more closely the actual pattern of demand and supply of labour.' Shank's vision of a meritocracy entailed 'rich prizes.' Ultimately, there was 'nothing objectionable about substantial differences of income', provided they emerged from 'work useful to the community' and 'that there is full equality of opportunity.'¹³⁴ By way of contrast, Michael Stewart, alongside the journalist and unsuccessful Labour candidate at the 1964 General Election Rex Winsbury, argued that the overriding objective of any national wage policy should be to create 'a more fair and equitable structure of incomes.'¹³⁵ The authors agreed with Shanks that an incomes policy offered a tool to rationalise the distribution of rewards. They attacked the inequalities generated by free collective bargaining, arguing that wage increases usually occur 'partly by the accident of who gets his claim in first, goes into bat, argues or fights it out with employers, and then becomes a trend setter for the rest.' This process leads to a 'ratchet effect' and produces a 'pattern of increases' which 'may not meet either economic or social needs.' In highlighting the rise of envy amongst workers over pay differentials, as well as the claim that free collective bargaining undermined those who could not or would not strike,

¹³¹ P. Dorey, 'From a "Policy for Incomes" to Incomes Policy', in his, *The Labour Governments, 1964-1970* (New York, 2006), pp. 78-81.

¹³² Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 125.

¹³³ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 8, 9.

¹³⁴ Shanks, *Stagnant*, p. 53, 125-26, 173, 8-9.

¹³⁵ Stewart & Winsbury, *Incomes*, p. 3.

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Stewart and Winsbury cited the research of industrial relations academic Ben Roberts, published under the auspices of the IEA, who would later argue for legal restrictions on union activity.¹³⁶ While the authors did not seek 'to penalise unduly those with high qualifications and great responsibilities', their vision of an incomes policy, in contrast to Shanks, was about delivering greater material equality:

Equality can only be achieved, in the long run, by making the structure of pre-tax incomes more equal. We recognise that this is not going to happen quickly [...] But we do insist that quite apart from the problems of inflation, the Labour Party must have the avowed intention of reducing the inequality of pre-tax incomes and that this must have implications for the kind of incomes policy it operates during the next five years.¹³⁷

These disagreements about the operation and purpose of an incomes policy was only one part of a broader dispute about the distribution of rewards in the 1960s. The widely shared notion that Britain was entering an increasingly competitive international environment, the challenges posed by sluggish growth, as well as the evidence that the benefits of the welfare state or the 1944 Butler Act had accrued largely to the middle classes, stretched the distributive logic at the heart of the meritocratic moment in two competing directions. As growth became more urgent, intellectuals and policy-makers were willing to condone greater inequalities to achieve it; others lost patience with meritocratic progress and sought a more egalitarian solution. Townsend, for example, challenged the prevailing view with the Labour Government, embodied in the 1964 General Election manifesto and outlined by the likes of Balogh and Wilson, that improvements in social security depended on economic productivity. As we explored above, Townsend felt there was considerable scope for redistribution of both an aggregate and a vertical nature, even at a time of economic crisis. Fundamentally, he argued, this redistribution must also be reinforced by change in political and administrative institutions. Clearly this posed a significant challenge to the concept of meritocracy endorsed by the likes of Vaizey and Crosland, with its emphasis on higher growth and 'New Men'. Townsend's egalitarianism, however, went further. With growth secure, a relative definition of poverty was a concept that could attract broad ideological support; without it, the likes of Townsend sought the relief of poverty in lower managerial and professional incomes. This led Townsend to support maximum wage legislation. For Townsend,

¹³⁶ Stewart & Winsbury, *Incomes*, p. 15, 16-17, 25; B. Roberts, *Trade Unions in a Free Society* (London, [1959] 1962); J. Kelly, 'In From the Cold? Ben Roberts and Conservative Industrial Relations Reform', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 46/2 (2015), p. 103.

¹³⁷ Stewart & Winsbury, *Incomes*, p. 31, 26.

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Every salary increase that is larger than the average wage increase, even when accepted by national sentiment to retain the professional manpower, say of doctors and scientists, widens inequalities and may indirectly increase the extent of poverty. One is linked to the other.¹³⁸

The resources of the rich, therefore, 'provide the starting point from which the rest of the social hierarchy unfolds.'¹³⁹

Pushing in the other direction was the Bow Group. As we explored above, by seeking to appeal to the competitive, materialistic impulses of the middle-class meritocrat, the Group were suspicious of Wilson's 'national' project to reverse decline and were downright hostile to the language of individual restraint or collective sacrifice this was said to entail. For this reason they largely situated themselves in opposition to any national incomes policy. As the former Bow Group Chairman Russell Lewis argued in a 1965 pamphlet, a Conservative economic response to Wilson's General Election victory should be based on two assumptions: 'firstly, that the initiative of individuals is the mainspring of economic advance and, second, that, even if this were not so, voluntary effort is always preferable to compulsion.' For Lewis, the turn towards an incomes policy by Labour and Conservative alike represented a 'blind alley.' It was part of a corporatist solution, a

cosy political view that all problems could be solved by a chummy get-together. This is a view to which very rich or aristocratic politicians, with sensitive social consciences and a slight guilt complex about their advantages in life, are particularly prone [...] Nothing worries them more than angry confrontation, anything that reminds them that there are real and sharp differences of interest between different sections of society.¹⁴⁰

David Howell, the former Bow Group Chairman and future Heath and Thatcher Government Minister, was just as suspicious of attempts to institutionalise an incomes policy and lamented an 'appeal response' to economic management, an approach which provided 'a criterion by which sections of the community can be judged to be helping or hindering and blessed or cursed accordingly.' While Howell was not against public sector planning, he sought a plan which placed the emphasis on maximum cost discipline and the use of commercial criteria in public interests. Except in moments 'of very obvious national peril', he argued, it was clear individuals only responded to 'specific carrot

¹³⁸ Townsend, *Poverty, Socialism and Labour*, p. 26, 30, 31.

¹³⁹ Townsend, *Poverty, Socialism and Labour*, p. 30.

¹⁴⁰ R. Lewis, *Conservative New Techniques No. 2: A Bonfire of Restrictions* (London, 1965), p. 6, 14.

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attractions and stick pressures.' The most significant of these carrots was 'big rewards for top management.'¹⁴¹

In many ways the Bow Groupers were calling time on the distributive deferral which higher growth had facilitated in the immediate post-war period. Socialists, Howe argued, 'recognise the need, at least in the short term, for some kind of financial incentives.' Where Conservatives diverged from this position, however, was over the belief that 'in the long run' incentives 'can be reduced to vanishing point.'¹⁴² Raison found an incomes policy hard to reconcile with a policy of 'incentives' to the 'more dynamic and productive groups in the country, who as it stands are widely underpaid.' Conservatives should not be afraid to 'redistribute some of our wealth upwards if need be if we can restore drive to our economy by doing so.'¹⁴³ While the Bow Group's emphasis on higher rewards stretched the distributive logic at the heart of meritocracy to breaking point, it is important to emphasise that they continued to operate within a meritocratic framework and were nervous about embracing 'Manchesterismus' or the 'stark strictures of Professor Hayek and Friedman.'¹⁴⁴ This explains why the Bow Group's views were often described, by the likes of the conservative journalist T.E. Utley, as indistinguishable from socialism or, in the characterisation of the political scientist Richard Rose, as 'a purplish mix of blue and red with a tincture of Liberal yellow.'¹⁴⁵ Bosch, for example, supported both higher rewards for 'talent' and a wealth tax. The latter, he argued, 'would be bad for the market in grouse moors but very good for the economy and it would be another step on the way from aristocracy to meritocracy.' A reduction in income tax did entail consequences: 'some of the successful businessmen who will be further rewarded will be disagreeable. They will be aggressive and ruthless. Many will not be gentlemen. A few may even eat their peas with a knife.' More significantly 'weak companies will go bust or be taken over', and 'worthy people', some of them 'Old Etonians' with 'the best possible backgrounds', will lose their jobs and have to accept a lower standard of living. There may even be, Bosch argued, 'cases of injustice.' While this was regrettable, Britain 'must be prepared to accept it as the price for growth and prosperity.'¹⁴⁶

As this chapter has demonstrated it was when meritocracy reached its zenith in the middle of the 1960s that, rather paradoxically, the concept's inherent contradictions and

¹⁴¹ D. Howell, 'Managing the British Economy', in *Conservative Opportunity*, p. 97-98, 101.

¹⁴² G. Howe, 'Reform', p. 58.

¹⁴³ Raison, *Conflict*, p. 11, 15.

¹⁴⁴ D. Howell, 'Modern Conservatism in Search of its Principles', *Crossbow* (July-September, 1963), pp. 24-25.

¹⁴⁵ T.E. Utley, 'Toryism at the Crossroads', *The Daily Telegraph* (18/02/1960), p. 12; R. Rose, 'The Bow Group and the Tory Image', *The Guardian* (07/02/1961), p. 10.

¹⁴⁶ Bosch, 'Profits', p. 115, 120, 121.

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fragility were exposed. Whether in disputes over an incomes policy or the future of education policy, the concept could not survive the collision with political reality. Meritocracy became overburdened with often contradictory aspirations over the course of the decade. In responding to the intellectual politics of decline, meritocracy was stretched over an ever-expanding ideological canvas: for some political actors a means to greater equality, for others a more dynamic, competitive economy characterised by larger incentives and material inequalities; for some a mechanism to transcend class, for others a means by which the talented could be absorbed into middle-class existence. By the start of the 1970s this process was to have profound consequences, both for the concept and for the ideologies which had elevated it to such an important place in their respective morphologies. The 1970s would prove hostile, arid terrain for these ideologies and for the concept. The notion of an ever-abundant, classless future underpinned by an economy and society managed by beneficent meritocrats disappeared amidst the return of class conflict, the rise of hostile pressure groups and distributive strife. Whether in terms of creating a more equal, classless society or in reversing decline and restoring dynamism and competitiveness to Britain's economy, meritocracy was perceived by many political actors to have been tried and to have failed. As we will explore in the next two chapters, over the course of the 1970s the concept was gradually hollowed out and eventually superseded by ideological formations relying on different distributive criteria.

(4) 1971: The Collapse of the Meritocratic Moment

'In the second-half of the twentieth century the props that underpinned the meritocracy were shaken [...] people learned to doubt how far scientists, economists and applied sociologists could plan and control the future.'

Noel Annan¹

'The chief enemy of egalitarians today is not the old aristocracy, either the aristocracy of birth or the aristocracy of wealth, it is the aristocracy of intellect.'

John Vaizey²

(4.1) Introduction: The New Anatomy of Britain

In 1971 the journalist Anthony Sampson released the third book in his *Anatomy* series, *The New Anatomy of Britain*, in which he mapped the shifting make-up of Britain's elite, reflected on the faded hopes of Harold Wilson's Labour Governments and evaluated the consequences of the tumultuous student protests of the late 1960s.³ While Sampson's *Anatomies* purported to be an objective guide to the changing nature of the British Establishment, his previous two books – *Anatomy of Britain* and *Anatomy of Britain Today* – wholeheartedly sided with the rising, professional meritocrats who were sweeping away the last bastions of amateur, aristocratic power in the City of London and the civil service.⁴ Despite frequently being cited as a 'declinist' author, Sampson was optimistic about Harold Wilson's attempts to 'introduce new blood from new places into the centre of power.' To allow Britain 'to make proper use of her brains and her energy', he argued, 'the ablest boys must be able to acquire not only a first-class education, but social confidence in themselves.'⁵ As the last chapter explored, in 1965's *Anatomy of Britain Today* Sampson tentatively identified a generational bifurcation in Britain's elite between those who assumed power in the 1950s and those who had started their careers in the mid-1960s. The new elite were characterised as competitive and self-assured, forming a 'new boy network' in place of the 'old'. Sampson's pessimism about the potential of a meritocracy to create a classless, democratic and competent elite only grew in the intervening six years. By 1971 he noted that, 'there is not much sign that,

¹ N. Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics & Geniuses* (London, 1999), pp. 16-17.

² J. Vaizey, 'Why Equality', in his *Whatever Happened to Equality?* (London, 1975), p. 123.

³ A. Sampson, *The New Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1971).

⁴ A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1962); A. Sampson, *Anatomy of Britain Today* (London, 1965).

⁵ Sampson, *Anatomy Today*, p. 680.

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abstracted as they are from their backgrounds by the educational sorting machine, grammar-school men are better able to build bridges between the rulers and the ruled.' The successful climbers of the 1950s, he argued, were 'quick to forget, or romanticise their origins.'⁶

Whereas Sampson's earlier *Anatomies* were characterised by an unrelenting optimism in the professional meritocrats to transcend the perniciousness of class and reverse British decline, by 1971 reviewers noted a significant change in tone. A review in *The New York Times* saw *New Anatomy of Britain* as describing how 'the British zeal for industrial organisation has somehow exhausted itself', how 'class division has been reshaped and reinforced by education', and how 'the middle-class college graduates and the working-class trade unionists are at odds.'⁷ The return of conflict in British society, largely based on class lines, reminded many reviewers of Michael Young's meritocratic dystopia. As we explored in Chapter Two, the former Conservative M.P. Charles Curran had long held that the meritocrats were not 'an unmixed public benefit' and felt this view was confirmed in Sampson's book. *New Anatomy* took him 'back to Michael Young's *The Rise of the Meritocracy*', a fable which 'describes an England where a Mother Christmas Margaret Thatcher supplies educational opportunity without limit. All that is clever comes to the top, all that is stupid goes to the bottom. Then the stupid rise up. They slaughter the swots.'⁸ For Sampson, as well as for a majority of reviewers, it was not that a meritocratic social order had not been realised – very few doubted that Britain was more meritocratic at the start of the 1970s – but that it had failed to live up to the significant aspirations with which it had been invested in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The Labour M.P. Phillip Whitehead, writing in *The Listener*, contrasted Sampson's condemnation of the amateurs in his 1962 book *Anatomy of Britain* with the rise of the meritocrats described in his 1971 account: 'Now, as *New Anatomy of Britain* records, the meritocrats have taken over...To whose gain, Mr Sampson is now less certain.' Sampson, Whitehead argued, must have 'laid down his pen with a heavy heart.'⁹ From a social democratic perspective the meritocracy was to be condemned for failing to deliver:

The Freddie's have been swept away. The meritocrats have triumphed. Yet is Britain now a more equal society than it was ten years ago? Is it even a more efficient one? [...] The fact is that the analysis of the *Anatomies* has always relied on the belief that if you changed the people you would change the system. It is a view which must have influenced the last Labour Government

⁶ Sampson, *New Anatomy*, p. 661.

⁷ B. Weintaub, 'Review of *The New Anatomy of Britain*', *The New York Review of Books* (18/06/1972).

⁸ C. Curran, 'New School Tie: Review of A. Sampson's *The New Anatomy of Britain*', *The Sunday Telegraph* (25/06/1972).

⁹ P. Whitehead, 'Review: *The New Anatomy of Britain*', *The Listener* (23/09/1971).

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whose tinkering could have been directly inspired by the Sampson view. In fact you only change the system by changing the system. Changing the people has led to the triumph of the middle class; it has not conciliated the workers [...] The future historian will find the book fascinating as an account of how power was transferred in the Sixties, but only as far as NW1.¹⁰

Likewise for *The Economist*, the book charted the decline of the professional ideal praised in Sampson's earlier texts as a source of efficiency and classlessness:

When the white heat technological revolution fell flat on its face, Mr Sampson's indictment of an amateur, self-perpetuating ruling class riddled with nepotism and run by indecisive, backward-looking gentlemen went out of a fashion along with the new professionals [...] those of the criticisms that still hold good are now boringly familiar [...] nor can they obscure the need for a new diagnosis.¹¹

Sampson appeared to agree. In his autobiography, written in 2008, he was to lament that the 'social revolution' which many voters had expected, and his work in the early 1960s had optimistically prognosticated, never happened as the 'new rulers fitted comfortably in the gaps left by the old.'¹²

Both Sampson's pessimism in *New Anatomy of Britain* and the reception the book received tell us a lot about the meritocratic moment and its demise. By the late 1960s when Sampson was updating his latest *Anatomy*, the concept of meritocracy was being challenged on three fundamental claims made for it by both social democrats and conservatives in the late 1950s and early 1960s: firstly, the meritocracy had promised to eliminate the arbitrary discriminations perpetuated by Britain's class system. A meritocratic social order was to be fluid, open to all who had 'merit' and would establish a genuinely classless society. The meritocratic ideal committed Revisionist Social Democrats, and a large swathe of Middle Way Conservatives, to an ever-expanding definition, one where increasing resources would go to the underprivileged, equalising the starting line and ensuring a fair discrimination between hereditary privilege and earned ability. As both Charles Curran's and Peter Whitehead's reviews suggest, however, meritocracy had simply reconfigured class on educational lines. Opening opportunities up to merit via the welfare state had simply led to the triumph of the middle class. As *The New York Times* review of *New Anatomy of Britain* noted, there was now a division between the 'middle-class' products of university expansion and the

¹⁰ Whitehead, 'Review'.

¹¹ Anonymous, 'The Part-Worn Scalpel: Review of The New Anatomy of Britain', *The Economist* (25/09/1971)

¹² A. Sampson, *The Anatomist: The Autobiography of Anthony Sampson* (London, 2008), p. 82.

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'working classes' represented by the Trade Unions. Arguably this collapse of a meritocratically legitimatised distribution of the national product also produced rivalry within class groups: between the skilled workers, protecting their differentials with the assistance of the Trade Union movement, and the unskilled, as well as between the 'new middle class' engaged in single issue pressure group politics, and an older middle class determined to protect 'standards' and 'tradition'.

This reimagining of the middle class had profound consequences for meritocracy's second claim, that it would be imbued with a 'professional ethic'. This ethic was characterised by a commitment to public service, the distribution of rewards on the basis of social justice, and a society where those able to acquire, deploy and monopolise the supply of expertise would rise to positions of power and responsibility. Over the course of the twentieth century, but with particular intensity in the decades after the Second World War, the professional ethic came to triumph over its rivals: the aristocratic, the entrepreneurial and the ideal of the worker. Professionalism would ensure the meritocrats would govern in the collective interest and be rewarded for technical expertise and rational, progressive thinking. While this held great power in the supposed age of a gentlemanly, aristocratic 'Establishment', as *The Economist's* review of *New Anatomy of Britain* suggested, condemnation of the amateur and praise for the professional had worn thin by the end of the 1960s. While for the historian Harold Perkin this reflected a bifurcation of the professional ideal – a growing division between public and private professionals – it is more accurate to consider the 1970s as a period in which competing ideological traditions began to articulate a new ideal, one which valued risk, competitiveness and entrepreneurship.¹³ This, of course, would be most clearly articulated by Thatcherism.

This return of class politics and the challenge to professionalism helped to unravel the third, and most important, promise offered by meritocracy: the harmonious, mutually-beneficial distribution of national resources. The meritocratic promise was that the socially mobile would not forget where they had come from and would acquiesce in a socially just, rational distribution of rewards. While both social democrats and conservatives imagined they would require monetary incentives, these would be democratically legitimate and beneficial to the larger national community. If this meritocratic distribution of rewards lay at the core of an epistemological post-war consensus, then the destabilising of the concept in the late 1960s was to have profound consequences for Britain's intellectual politics into the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Meritocracy had also acted as a magnet, attracting a diverse set of concepts, –

¹³ H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880*, (London, 2nd Ed., 2002), p. 472.

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efficiency, democracy, liberty, equality, citizenship, etc. – holding them together, and fusing them to offer a coherent vision of the future. Most importantly in the immediate decades after the Second World War, meritocracy offered a tentative solution to the long-standing tension between liberty and equality by presuming unequal talents but offering equal opportunity.¹⁴ Central to this was a certain meritocratic distributive arrangement which, as Dean Blackburn has highlighted, was formed from a set of 'common epistemological assumptions.'¹⁵ Neither political party believed a fixed distribution of wealth was universally desirable or that distributive reform could be undertaken that would threaten social harmony. Yet this position appeared less appealing in the 1970s, less a permanent distributive settlement and more like an ideological deferral of difficult, inherent conceptual problems. To varying degrees, growth lay at the heart of both conservative and social democratic thinking about meritocracy in the immediate post-war period and Britain's economic performance in the late 1960s, and throughout the 1970s, would expose fatal contradictions in their respective visions of a meritocratic future.

The 1970s was a period of slow economic growth and high inflation, a decade in which narratives of decline took on an apocalyptic tone.¹⁶ A shrinking pie, it was argued, would prove impossible to share without someone getting cut, threatening the social harmony prioritised by both Revisionist Social Democrats like Anthony Crosland and Middle Way Conservatives like Edward Boyle, as well as the political dominance of their respective ideological traditions. Concerns about growth revealed underlying, structural tensions in Britain's distribution of national resources that had been deferred during the meritocratic golden age: debates about the return or persistence of poverty and the class inequalities perpetuated by the welfare state; concerns about the role of unequal pressure groups, using their power to extract unjust and inefficient slices of the national pie; and a fierce debate about the need for democratically legitimate differentials to control inflation and ensure 'fairness' or 'justice'. Meritocracy no longer seemed willing or able to speak to these concerns. While various conservatives and social democrats in the squeezed political centre spoke of the need for a rational incomes policy based on meritocratic evaluations, these voices were to be marginalised by the scramble for rewards and the return of class politics which characterised the 1970s. This fracturing of the distributive

¹⁴ G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Post-War Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 251.

¹⁵ D. Blackburn, 'Reassessing Britain's "Post-War Consensus": The Politics of Reason, 1945-1979', *British Politics*, 13 (2018), p. 196.

¹⁶ R. Bacon & W. Eltis, *Britain's Economic Problem: Too Few Producers* (London, 1976); I. Kramnick (Ed.), *Is Britain Dying? Perspectives on the Current Crisis* (New York, 1979); J. Alt, *The Politics of Economic Decline* (London, 1979). This perspective has also influenced accounts of the period, see: A.W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* (London, 2008); D. Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were, Britain 1970-74* (London, 2010); L. Forster & S. Harper (Eds.), *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade* (Cambridge, 2010).

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logic which had governed the meritocratic moment opened up space for alternatives. Two of the most influential and clearly articulated alternatives came from the constellation of thinkers which made up the Bennite Left and the New Right. The former relished the return of a class-based politics, promising to extend the role of the state in order to enact an irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power to working people. For the latter the key lesson of the post-war period was that the government could not promise too much, and it certainly had neither the right nor the ability to mediate between conflicting distributive claims.

Yet the 1970s should not be seen as a crude transition from one social logic to another, whether that be from Keynesianism to monetarism or from merit to market. Guy Ortolano, for example, has encouraged historians to consider the development of social democracy in relation to a 'horizon' rather than a 'frontier'. Extending 'forever into the distance, there is no moment when the horizon passes by.' From this historicist perspective, emergent priorities, whether they be individualism, consumerism or home ownership, represented further steps in social democratic development rather than part of the ideology's eclipse.¹⁷ Similarly Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson have highlighted in their work on 'popular individualism' how Thatcherism was not an inevitable solution but a contingent outcome. At the beginning of the 1970s people were increasingly insistent about defining and claiming their individual rights, identities and perspectives, expressing a clear desire for greater personal autonomy and self-determination. For Robinson et al this popular individualism was rooted in left-wing policies that seemed to promise equality and, contrary to many conventional historical narratives, did not lead inexorably to Thatcherism but could in many ways point towards an expanded politics of equality.¹⁸ These approaches encourage a history of the 1970s which is alive to ideological possibilities – the possibility of social democrats reformulating meritocracy, or arriving at a new distributive compromise between the principles of equality and liberty; the possibility that the New Left might capitalise on the destabilisation of meritocracy and appeal to a wider audience with a class-based distributive model; or the possibility that the Conservative Party might pursue a different path than the one trod in the 1980s by Thatcherism.

This chapter analyses the consequences of meritocracy's demise by exploring the 1970s as a moment of distributive crisis. While the next chapter focuses on the gradual 'closing

¹⁷ G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English Town* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 33-34.

¹⁸ E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & N. Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the Crisis of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/2 (2017), pp. 268-304.

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off' of alternatives to the market, the focus here will be on the various routes away from the concept of meritocracy pursued by intellectuals and policy-makers over the course of the decade. The first part explores an intellectual shift in thinking about class in the late 1960s and 1970s, away from a theory of 'embourgeoisement' and towards the idea of 'proletarianization'. Whereas at the height of the meritocratic moment the primary concerns of Britain's intellectual politics, particularly for progressive ideologies, were the consequences of social mobility, the growth of white collar work and an expanding middle class, in the 1970s the opposite problem consumed political space. This 'proletarianization' was part of a broader ideological battle to decontest the meaning and function of the middle classes: were they to be cultural exemplars and repositories of tradition, or dynamic risk-takers and competitive entrepreneurs? In articulating middle-class concerns, education policy was an important forum. The school was the central mechanism through which the meritocratic state would achieve a classless society in the immediate post-war period. By the start of the 1970s, however, both Left and Right moved in divergent directions and the fragile vision of equality of opportunity at the heart of the meritocratic promise was shattered.

A significant challenge to the classless meritocracy in the late 1960s and 1970s was the concept's managerial and bureaucratic tendencies. The second part of this chapter analyses how the racial and gender biases of the meritocratic state were exposed and how demands for greater freedom, individual autonomy and cultural equality hollowed out the professional ethic. At the centre of this process were epistemological doubts about the predictive efficacy of the social sciences, the value of expert knowledge and the pursuit of equality. Both the proletarianization of the middle class and the hollowing out of the professional ethic stemmed from meritocracy's failure as a distributive logic. The third section analyses how, by the start of the 1970s, the important assumptions which had underpinned the distributive deferral of the meritocratic moment - secure growth, full employment and painless redistribution - were replaced by a hostile economic environment characterised by 'stagflation', recalcitrant pressure groups and sluggish growth. Intellectuals and policy-makers recognised the need for a new distributive settlement and pinned their hopes on a rational incomes policy. As the previous chapter demonstrated, however, establishing fair principles for the inequalities this produced proved chimerical. The intellectual dynamic of the 1970s was dominated by the Bennite Left and the Thatcherite Right, two loose ideological morphologies which emerged in response to the collapse of the meritocratic moment. Much like meritocracy in the post-war period, the market triumphed, not because it was an ideal concept, but because it responded most effectively to the distributive questions of the 1970s and because its virtues could be interpreted in diverse, and often contradictory, ways.

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(4.2) From 'Embourgeoisement' to 'Proletarianization'

The 1970s are often characterised as a decade where questions of class returned with a vengeance to haunt Britain's intellectual politics.¹⁹ Memories of the decade are dominated by the raw immediacy of Britain's decline and the starkness of the nation's distributive crisis. 'Stagflation', the consequence of a doubling in the rate of unemployment between 1975 and 1977 combined with inflation rates of 26.9% in the middle of the decade, contributed to a sense of national 'ungovernability'.²⁰ The prominence of organised labour, extracting pay claims in contravention of shared notions of 'merit', symbolised the fragility of corporatist solutions and the collapse of a meritocratic distributive logic. When the miners brought down Ted Heath's Conservative Government in 1974 the classless promise of the meritocracy had never appeared further away. For a resurgent political and cultural Left, a product of widespread disillusionment with the outcome of the Wilson Governments, this was to be welcomed. Here, the classlessness of the meritocracy was an obstacle to socialist change rather than a further step in its development. As Wilson's former Minister for Technology Tony Benn argued, writing in 1971, the idea of an 'individual escape from class into prosperity' was a 'cancer eating into the Western European Social Democratic parties'.²¹ The Left's objective, Benn claimed, was 'not to create a standardised, unisex, multi-racial classlessness but actively encourage diversity in the human race so that each feels proud of his or her identity'.²²

A significant part of the decade's history, as well as the gradual hollowing out of the concept of meritocracy at the centre of this chapter, lies, therefore, in a return to national scarcity and a politics dominated by material concerns and productive questions. This picture, however, can be complicated in a number of important ways. The 1970s was also a decade of 'dealignment', a moment where political scientists were suggesting that the role of class in shaping voting decisions was decreasing.²³ Between the years 1959 and 1983 those in working-class jobs stopped voting Labour in large numbers, from 62% to 38%.²⁴ The rising living standards enjoyed by workers coupled with their tendency to pursue larger wage claims was said to represent not the flowering of class

¹⁹ D. Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain 1974-1979* (London, 2013), pp. 26-27; L. Black & H. Pemberton, 'Introduction: The Benighted Decade? Reassessing the 1970s', in L. Black, H. Pemberton & P. Thane (Eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 7.

²⁰ Black & Pemberton, 'Introduction', p. 4.

²¹ T. Benn, 'Diary Entry: 16/07/1971', in his *Tony Benn: Office Without Power, Diaries 1968-1972* (London, 1989), p. 356.

²² T. Benn, *The New Politics: A Socialist Reconnaissance* (London, 1970), p. 13.

²³ See for example: B. Särilvik & I. Crewe, *Decade of Dealignment: The Conservative Victory of 1979 and Electoral Trends in the 1970s* (Cambridge, 1983).

²⁴ Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories', pp. 284-85.

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consciousness, but the firm embrace of a 'culture of consumption'.²⁵ Narratives which emphasise the power of organised labour in the 1970s ignore the trade unions' defensiveness, typified by a vacuum between leaders and members, and a powerlessness of limited policies and visions.²⁶ This can be classified as part of what Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has identified as a 'decline of deference', a tendency to reject the constraints of authority, convention and tradition in a wide array of areas: political, social, cultural and personal. Increasing numbers of people in 1970s Britain, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite argues, were keen to assert their right to choose as individuals but also felt keen to emphasise the values of authenticity and ordinariness as opposed to those of privilege and snobbery.²⁷ While this phenomenon could be mobilised in any number of ways, including to bolster a renewed meritocratic agenda, by the end of the 1980s it was successfully harnessed by Thatcherism against a paternalistic, bureaucratic and 'gentlemanly' meritocracy. In many ways, however, it also grew out of the concept's promises. The aspiration and individualism encouraged by the classless meritocracy, the expectations of higher growth and living standards, had transformed the nature of Britain's class system. As professional public sector employment, white collar work, social mobility and homeownership all grew in the post-war period, the numbers of people with mixed class characteristics also increased. For the Revisionist Labour MP and former Minister of State for Economic Affairs Austen Albu, the distributive strife of the 1970s emerged from 'the new society of general secondary education, full employment and the universal franchise' which had 'not diminished but enhanced the feelings of class division and working-class trade union solidarity and posed difficult problems of economic administration.'²⁸ Rather than mollify the tensions of the affluent society as it had promised in the late 1950s, the meritocracy had exacerbated them by placing goods within the reach of increasing numbers.²⁹ This was all far removed from Crosland's optimistic dictum in 1958 that the 'higher average level of income, regardless of its distribution, the greater the subjective sense of social equality.'³⁰

One of the central intellectual preoccupations of the meritocratic moment, informing Crosland's optimism, was the notion of 'embourgeoisement'. Meritocracy became such a widely-shared concept in the 1950s because it promised to bolster the middle class with increasing numbers of talented working-class meritocrats. Underpinned by economic

²⁵ J.E. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979* (London, 1984), p. 5.

²⁶ L. Black, 'Review Essay: An Enlightening Decade? New Histories of 1970s Britain', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 82 (2012), p. 177.

²⁷ F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford, 2018), p. 7.

²⁸ A. Albu, 'Backbench Technocrat' (Unpublished, 1976), *Papers of Austen Albu*, CCC, Box 15, XIV, p. 14.

²⁹ R. Boudon, *The Unintended Consequences of Social Action* (Basingstoke, 1982), p. 205.

³⁰ See Chapter Two.

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growth and a transformation in the nature of capitalism, the expansion of professional employment would create room amongst the middle class without threatening their privileges. While in the late 1950s the classless society appeared within reach, as the last chapter explored, a central component of decline was the persistence of class barriers. Scepticism towards the notion of embourgeoisement only grew in the 1970s. The most significant contribution to this debate came from the sociologists John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt. The 'Affluent Worker Study' had started in 1962 and the team's co-authored 1969 monograph *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* marked the project's effective conclusion.³¹ For Goldthorpe and his team, adherents of 'embourgeoisement' in the 1950s and early 1960s, particularly Labour Party Revisionists like Crosland, had failed to distinguish between the economic, normative and relational aspects of class. While manual workers undoubtedly benefited from higher living standards, the empirical evidence for a corresponding adoption of new 'middle-class' outlooks or norms was lacking. In place of the embourgeoisement thesis, the Affluent Worker team posited the idea of a convergence amongst manual and non-manual strata around the issues of 'family centeredness' and 'instrumental collectivism'.³² In many ways this pointed to some of the trends identified above: a decline of deference, the spread of aspiration, educational opportunity and social mobility, and a hegemonic association between social status and consumption, income and standard of living. As the sociologist Peter Willmott argued in the pages of *New Society*, while Goldthorpe and his team may have successfully demolished the idea of embourgeoisement their analysis did not suggest a return to the issues of 'traditional' class politics.³³

In many ways much of the intellectual energy of the Affluent Worker Study was spent debunking a thesis which, as the last chapter explored, had long been open to challenge. Instead it was Goldthorpe's second point of convergence, the rise of 'instrumental collectivism', which spoke to one of the dominant intellectual paradigms of the 1970s: the 'proletarianization' of the middle class.³⁴ As the sociologist Roger King argued in 1979, it 'has become fashionable to suggest that the 1970s have witnessed a middle-class revolt in Britain.' All are agreed, King argued, 'that the middle classes are no longer prepared to accept with their traditional forbearance the alleged erosion of hard-won living standards, the declining influence of traditional morality and the depredations of

³¹ J.H. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhofer & J. Platt, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (London, 1969), p. vii.

³² Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer & Platt, *Affluent Worker*, p. 24, 27.

³³ P. Willmott, 'Well-Off Workers', *New Society*, 373 (25/12/1969), p. 1027.

³⁴ Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Decline*, pp. 37-38.

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socialist governments.³⁵ Theorising about a middle class under threat or in decline dominated much of the cultural and intellectual output of the decade. Whereas in 1949 Angus Maude and Roy Lewis's analysis of a middle class under threat from the rise of a technocratic elite in *The English Middle Classes* could be classified as a piece of pessimistic sociology, the republication of the book in 1973 symbolised a significant intellectual shift. Maude and Lewis's narrative was reconsidered a prescient warning, sitting comfortably on the nation's bookshelves alongside other alarmist texts such as Patrick Hutber's *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Class* and Paul Johnson's *Enemies of Society*.³⁶ The notion of 'proletarianization' bound these analyses together and spoke to a series of political, cultural and intellectual concerns in the 1970s. The republication of Maude and Lewis symbolised the vacuum that was created by the collapse of the meritocratic moment and the vision of Britain's middling orders as a repository for the most highly valued technical skill or specialist expertise which had been so dominant in the immediate post-war period.

All of these alarmist texts agreed that a distinct set of middle-class values were under threat in the 1970s, with grave consequences for Britain's national survival. At its most basic level the idea of proletarianization spoke to concerns that the middle class were dropping into the working class thanks in large part to a decline in living standards, the growth of inflation, the rise of organised labour and the triumph of the 'permissive society'. For the journalist Paul Johnson, a former Labour Party Bevanite who moved increasingly rightwards over the course of the 1970s and who eventually became one of Margaret Thatcher's speechwriters, 'the health of the middle class is probably the best index of the health of society as a whole.' Any political system, he argued, 'which persecutes its middle class systematically is unlikely to remain free or prosperous for long.' Whereas in the recent past 'the embourgeoisement of the great mass of working people was regarded as a desirable and attainable objective', by the end of the 1970s 'the climate of opinion has greatly changed.'³⁷ The *Daily Telegraph* columnist Patrick Hutber shared much of this analysis, identifying middle-class values as 'self-help, self-reliance and the virtues of individual effort.' For Hutber it was 'hard to think of circumstances in which the pursuit of these goals can be held to be contrary to the interests of society as a whole.' It should be recognised, he argued, that the middle-class individual striving for 'independence and belief in the possibility of self-help and self-improvement' possesses a 'set of attitudes in many ways more adult than the greater

³⁵ R. King, 'The Middle Class in Revolt?', in R. King & N. Nugent (Eds.), *Respectable Rebels: Middle Class Campaigns in Britain in the 1970s* (London, 1979), p. 1.

³⁶ A. Maude & R. Lewis, *The English Middle Classes* (Bath, [1949] 1973); P. Hutber, *The Decline and Fall of The Middle Class and How It Can Fight Back* (Harmondsworth, 1977); P. Johnson, *Enemies of Society* (London, 1977).

³⁷ Johnson, *Enemies*, p. 258, 188.

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dependence, whether on trade union or the State, regarded as the working-class norm.³⁸ While the values of self-improvement, effort and upward mobility had played a prominent role in the discourse of the meritocratic moment they were frequently connected to collective needs. Where Hutber and Johnson emphasised self-interest, the meritocracy had valued contributions to a broader national interest or a distinctly 'public' good.

Proletarianization could also be used to highlight concern with middle-class behaviour. In meeting the distributive power of the trade union movement, the middle class was frequently accused of mimicking working-class behaviour, forming their own corporate interest groups and engaging in what Goldthorpe identified as 'instrumental collectivism'. For King the phrase 'middle-class revolt' was useful because it described the 'increased willingness of certain sections of an undeniably fragmented class to organise in the 1970s so as to protect their interests.' This greater activism, it was argued, was matched by an increased propensity to engage in demonstrative, combative and direct forms of political action characteristic of other orthodox pressure groups, whether in the guise of 'white collar' trade unionism or the creation of new organisations such as John Gorst's Middle Class Association.³⁹ To some on the Left this trend led in potentially radical directions. The sociologist Richard Edwards for example argued that the 'deprofessionalisation' of the middle-class workforce in the 1970s had created a non-manual labour force which was increasingly sympathetic to the political aspirations of the working class, sharing its hostility to bureaucratic overreach and managerial control.⁴⁰ Conservatives like Johnson, Hutber and Maude were divided about this phenomenon. Maude and Lewis had long argued that the middle classes should act as a 'cultural exemplar' or a source of emulation for the working class rather than seeking to climb into the ring with it to publicly compete for goods and rewards.⁴¹ For Johnson while the middle class were not to blame for seeking refuge in associations and unions, this trend was evidence of national decay. A result of this 'wave of syndicalist panic among the bourgeoisie' was that

professional workers of all kinds with exceptionally high codes of conduct,
who had hitherto placed their obligations to society above financial rewards,

³⁸ Hutber, *Decline*, p. 104, 25.

³⁹ King, 'Middle Class in Revolt?', p. 3; Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories', p. 281.

⁴⁰ R.C. Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1979).

⁴¹ Maude & Lewis, *Middle Classes*; R. King & J.M. Raynor, *The Middle Class* (London, 1981), p. 32.

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were now driven by rapid impoverishment to abandon their traditional ethics.⁴²

The 'educated and cultural elite', Johnson claimed, 'was positively stamped by government policy into embracing the social morality of the industrial ghetto.'⁴³ Hutber in contrast saw inflation as an acute issue for the middle class because 'it lacks the bargaining power of those groups that can, to some extent, protect themselves at the expense of the rest of the community.' Where Maude and Lewis could write a detached sociological study, Hutber published *Decline and Fall* as a guidebook, a text 'not so much about as for the middle classes.' His book sought to encourage the middle classes to think and act as a 'pressure group like any other.'⁴⁴

This divergence was part of a broader process of decontestation to define the function of the middle class in the 1970s. The likes of Maude and Lewis saw themselves as defenders of a traditional middle class, 'the poor relations of the affluent society', in contrast to the 'up-and-coming middle-class well-to-do' with whom the former share 'no clear identity of economic interest.'⁴⁵ As they argued in a series of articles in *The Times* in 1969, 'the heart and soul of the middle classes are divided.' Their defence of the middle class was largely a cultural project, a reaction to the rise of a permissive society and the authority of the progressive, middle-class meritocrats who had loosened the fabric of the 'traditional middle-class moral code almost to the point of dissolution.'⁴⁶ By way of contrast, Johnson argued that 'men, unlike animals, are immensely competitive, ambitious and aggressive creatures.'⁴⁷ Whereas Maude and Lewis saw the middle class as a repository of tradition, Johnson embraced a much more entrepreneurial vision which placed an emphasis on the values of competition and risk. These interpretations, however, shared one common thread: hostility to the classless meritocracy. As Maude and Lewis explained,

the middle classes have never wholly accepted the idea of a meritocracy based on universal comprehensive education and official selection. They still, basically, believe in an elite class permeable by merit from below.⁴⁸

By the end of the 1960s and the start of the 1970s the socially-mobile, post-war meritocrats, expected not to forget where they had come from and to lead the way to

⁴² Johnson, *Enemies*, p. 190, 191.

⁴³ Johnson, *Enemies*, p.191.

⁴⁴ Hutber, *Decline*, p. 48, 9, 119.

⁴⁵ R. Lewis & A. Maude, 'The Modern Middle Class: Barricades That Have Not Come Down', *The Times* (29/09/1969), p. 10.

⁴⁶ R. Lewis & A. Maude, 'The Modern Middle Class: Values That Are Worth Preserving', *The Times* (02/10/1969), p. 10.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *Enemies*, pp. 186-87.

⁴⁸ Lewis & Maude, 'Barricades', p. 10.

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the classless society, began to be evaluated as a distinct generation which, as the reception to Sampson's 1971 *Anatomy* made clear, had failed to deliver on its significant promises. For the author Jeremy Seabrook, the archetypal grammar school meritocrat, the products of Butler's 1944 Education Act had failed to bridge Britain's class system:

None of us returned to the town of our birth. We tended to weaken, or even sever actual links with our families [...] We have all retained at least a nominal sympathy with our class of origin, but we were in reality only too anxious to escape from the cloying and inhibiting demands of kinship [...] We are progressive and unproductive; are sympathetic to radical causes.⁴⁹

For Seabrook, meritocrats like himself had justified their inertia by a 'prudent belief in the impossibility of changing the economic system, the futility of individual action, the irrelevancy of party politics.' In a decade where the dividing line between the forces of capital and labour would be sharper than at any period since the 1930s, the meritocrats promise to, as Seabrook reflected, 'place ourselves outside of the conflict', looked increasingly irrelevant.⁵⁰

Debates about the form and purpose of education in the late 1960s and early 1970s provide an ideal lens through which to explore these issues of class in greater depth. As we explored in the first half of this thesis, education was the central mechanism through which the meritocratic state sought to deliver a classless society. At the heart of this process was an expansive concept of equality of opportunity, one which provided equal opportunities for each child to acquire intelligence and which committed state professionals to distinguish objective talent from the constraints or privileges afforded by an individual's class background. By the end of the 1960s, with growth less secure and the function of education being debated anew, the concept was stretched in divergent directions. On the one hand, the disappointing egalitarian results of the meritocratic moment necessitated a shift in priorities towards greater equality of outcome; on the other, economic constraints and demands for greater freedom called for more selective targeting and wider choice. By the start of the 1970s any sense of a shared meritocratic vision of equality of opportunity had therefore fragmented. In an *Encounter* article of 1972 the sociologist A.H. Halsey outlined the various phases of education policy in post-war Britain and the failure of policy-makers to use such policies 'as a means towards the political and social end of Equality.'⁵¹ Until the end of the 1950s, Halsey argued, 'the key

⁴⁹ J. Seabrook, 'Stand: We're Really Quite Neutral', *New Society*, 325 (23/01/1969), p. 14.

⁵⁰ Seabrook, 'Quite Neutral', p. 14.

⁵¹ A.H. Halsey, 'When They Are Very Young', *Encounter* (October, 1972), p. 72.

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concept was opportunity' in the sense of 'access to the more advanced stages of education for all children irrespective of their social origin.' The practical expression of this position was 'the scholarship ladder', and the logical end 'when equality of opportunity is combined with national efficiency – is Meritocracy.' By the start of the 1970s, however, the position adopted by the likes of Halsey was more complicated. The failure of a meritocratic approach demonstrated that

Too much has been claimed for the power of educational systems as instruments for the wholesale reform of societies which are characteristically hierarchical. The traditional social pattern of selection has remained remarkably stable; and the retrospective disillusion which runs through this year's books is in part a recognition that the school is only one influence among others and probably a fairly minor one.⁵²

An individual's motivations and performance in school, Halsey argued, 'reflect children's general social milieu and family background as well as the expectations built in by the constraining custom of his teachers.'⁵³ This idea played a central role in the influential theories of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu's 1971 book *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron, was translated into English in 1977 and demonstrated how teaching was a form of 'symbolic violence', imposing cultural values on an unwitting child. For Bourdieu, those intellectuals who had persistently fought for fair competition had failed to see how their stress on 'rewards based on merit' had helped to reproduce class inequalities.⁵⁴ Alongside evidence of the meritocracy's failure to remedy class barriers, the disproportionately unjust outcomes associated with the categories of race and gender worked to expose the concept's implicit biases.⁵⁵ The cultural turn of the late 1960s and 1970s created a clear link between the work of the school and the challenges to established forms of identity, knowledge and power that were developing outside it. For Halsey it was time to shift the meaning of education opportunity from 'equality of access to equality of achievement.'⁵⁶ As Lindsay Paterson has argued, these critiques posed a fundamental challenge to the notion of a liberal education. Far from liberating the working class through knowledge,

⁵² Halsey, 'Very Young', p. 72, 73.

⁵³ Halsey, 'Very Young', p. 73.

⁵⁴ P. Bourdieu & J. Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (New York, [1970] 1977), p. 8, 12, 84.

⁵⁵ See for example: A. Wolpe, 'Education and the Sexual Division of Labour', in A. Kuhn & A. Wolpe (Eds.), *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London, 1978), pp. 290-328; S. Tomlinson, *Race and Education: Policy and Politics in Britain* (Maidenhead, 2008), pp. 42-70.

⁵⁶ A.H. Halsey, 'Inputs and Outputs', *New Society*, 363 (16/10/1969), p. 604.

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the concept of 'the best that has been thought and said' was merely an ideological illusion, concealing the intrinsically middle-class nature of such values.⁵⁷

The reasoning behind the shift from an equality of access to one of achievement, deployed by the likes of Halsey, broke the fragile balancing act at the heart of the meritocratic promise, and conjured in response a cultural Right which sought to defend the autonomy of the family from progressive professional authority, the capacity of the middle classes to transmit privilege, and the 'standards' or 'judgements' embodied in Paterson's notion of a liberal heritage. Hutber's *Decline and Fall* testified to this sense of a broken promise. For Hutber, whereas 'early socialists' seemed 'in their hopes of equality' to mean 'a society in which everyone was middle class in their standards, their ideals and their way of life', now 'even equality of opportunity' is often 'pursued in a way which suggests that the doing down of the middle class is a stronger motive than the elevation of anyone else.' This phenomenon, he claimed, was 'particularly true in the field of educational controversy.'⁵⁸ For former Labour intellectuals and academics like Rhodes Boyson, Brian Cox or A.E. Dyson, education policy was a gateway which gradually led towards Thatcherism. Cox and Dyson edited the influential *Black Papers*, a series of articles published in the journal *Critical Quarterly* between 1969 and 1977, the first issue of which would go on to sell over 80,000 copies.⁵⁹ *The Black Papers* melded together a diverse array of public intellectuals – from conservative moralists like Boyson to neo-liberal economists like Ralph Harris as well as discredited geneticists like Cyril Burt – and provided a network through which central tenets of the meritocratic moment, from its classless promise to the professional ethic, could be debated and critiqued. While the *Papers* are often interpreted as a reaction against the progressive egalitarianism of the comprehensive school and therefore characterised as seeking a return to the principles of meritocracy, they should instead be read as profoundly hostile to the meritocratic moment and the radical concept of equality of opportunity at its centre.⁶⁰

The Black Papers represented an explicit defence of middle-class values and privileges in the face of proletarianization. As the editors Cox and Dyson argued in a 'Letter to Members of Parliament' in 1969, 'increases in taxation make it difficult for middle-class people to send their children to private schools, so the very rich become more

⁵⁷ L. Paterson, *Social Radicalism and Liberal Education* (St. Andrews, 2015), pp. 214-15.

⁵⁸ Hutber, *Decline*, p. 93.

⁵⁹ K. Jones, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2003) p. 103. See for example: C.B. Cox & A.E. Dyson (Eds.), 'Fight for Education: A Black Paper', *Critical Survey*, 4/1 (1969).

⁶⁰ See for example: D. Lawton, *Education and Labour Party Ideologies, 1900-2001 and Beyond* (London, 2005), p. 85.

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privileged.⁶¹ The majority of the contributors shared Halsey's conclusions that education policy had failed to deliver equality. For the historian Tibor Szamuely 'schools neither create nor preserve social and economic inequality' because these 'social divisions are a product of human society and schools, as creations of the same society, merely reflect these divisions.'⁶² Whereas the likes of Halsey saw this as a reason for a more wide-ranging assault on the mechanisms of inequality which existed outside the school, the *Black Paper* authors took the opposite view. There was a concerted attempt, as Szamuely's contribution outlined, to portray inequalities as unnatural and ineradicable. Progressives had demonstrated how little they understood about equality and, therefore, further experimentation should be limited. This entailed a radical revaluation of equality of opportunity. A year prior to contributing to *The Black Papers*, Maude urged conservatives to rethink their post-war endorsement of the concept. For Maude

whereas Conservatives have invariably set themselves against flat egalitarianism, they have for many years been making soothing noises in the direction of equality of opportunity [...] but I am inclined to think that we have not always worked out very carefully what we mean by equality of opportunity, and how far it is possible or even desirable.⁶³

Unequal opportunity, Maude argued, often arises as a 'result of a whole lot of accidents.' The 'classic heresy of the Left is the belief that you can produce a perfect solution to a complex social problem.'⁶⁴ By the late 1960s the feasibility of the radical vision of equal opportunities at the heart of the meritocracy, one which posited that each individual should have an equal chance to acquire intelligence, was thrown into doubt. Where equality of opportunity in the immediate post-war period was understood as a vehicle for greater freedom, by the late 1960s it was characterised as a mechanism through which freedom was restricted.

While those who supported Thatcherism in the hope that it would reverse the tendency towards instrumentalism in education in favour of a liberal heritage were to be disappointed, Thatcher's rhetoric of freedom, her emphasis on the family and individual responsibility, reached out to the various traditions uncomfortably melded together in *The Black Papers*. In many ways Thatcherism was a direct response to the proletarianization of the middle class explored in this chapter. It tapped into the aspirations fostered by the meritocratic moment – the desire for higher living standards and greater educational opportunities – and spoke the language of classlessness,

⁶¹ C.B. Cox & A.E. Dyson, 'Letter to Members of Parliament', *Critical Survey*, 4/3 (1969), pp. 13-14.

⁶² T. Szamuely, 'Comprehensive Inequality', *Critical Survey*, 4/3 (1969), p. 49.

⁶³ A. Maude, *Education: Quality and Equality* (London, 1968), p. 4.

⁶⁴ Maude, *Education*, p. 4.

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aspiration and ordinariness. Thatcher herself tapped into the decline of deference, appearing classless and anti-Establishment, as well as deploying an anti-political 'common sense' which appealed to the increasing numbers of individuals resistant to be identified by their class background.⁶⁵ At the same time this language concealed Thatcher's faith in the universality of middle-class virtues and Thatcherism's desire to restore and protect middle-class privilege and advantage. This marked a visible departure from the concept of equality of opportunity at the heart of the meritocratic moment. While the language of opportunity remained prominent throughout the 1980s, it was shorn of its radical potential and had little to say about the pre-existing familial advantages of individuals and their effects on social outcomes.

(4.3) The End of the Professional Ethic

A significant component in the unravelling of meritocracy's classless promise in the late 1960s and 1970s stemmed from a reaction against its managerial and bureaucratic tendencies. As Maude made clear, the increasing power assumed by progressive, state-led professionals in areas like education served to undermine individual responsibility as well as the authority of the state and the inequalities it underpinned. For the likes of Maude a state which attempted less, and offered individuals greater choice, freedom and responsibility, could generate greater consent for its actions. By the start of the 1970s increasingly influential strains on the Left deployed a similar language of freedom and choice for different reasons. After the disillusionment of the Wilson years the likes of Tony Benn posed a significant challenge to corporatist 'top-down' arrangements, abandoning faith in the radical potential of the meritocratic 'New Men' and seeking a more far-reaching overhaul of the British state. This increasingly influential strand within the Labour Party deployed a language of accountability and participation, seeking to expose professional power to greater scrutiny and democratic pressure. The late 1960s also saw a blossoming of a nascent 'identity politics' which challenged the implicit and often explicit biases of the meritocratic state in relation to questions like race and gender. As Guy Ortolano has argued, by the start of the 1970s 'egalitarian demands challenged the meritocracy to deliver on its promises.' A true meritocracy needed to constantly address structural inequalities, an imperative that, if taken seriously, threatened to emphasise the pursuit of equality of opportunity, even at the expense of the cultivation of unequal talents. Campaigns for gender and racial equality, for example, applied pressure upon the meritocratic promise at precisely this point.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories', p. 289.

⁶⁶ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 251, 252.

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This pressure increased exponentially in the late 1960s. Despite being portrayed as largely an American or European phenomenon, the student unrest of 1968 had a significant impact on the authority of the meritocratic state in Britain.⁶⁷ As the conservative journalist and future MP Robert Jackson argued in the pages of *Crossbow* at the start of 1970, student activism had 'brought home the extent to which the new machine societies lack human values and subordinate human ends to streamlined institutions.' Whereas 'affluence and the rise of the managerial meritocrat' appealed to Britain in the early 1960s as 'pass keys to a rational future' the 'sterility of the philosophy of efficiency has become increasingly apparent.'⁶⁸ In many ways these students were meritocrats in revolt, unwilling to or uninterested in assuming their privileged role in the state apparatus.⁶⁹ The most significant legacy of 1968 was in the kind of thinking and tactics it inspired. Later social movements or pressure groups, whether those related to peace, women's rights or the environment, all emphasised their distaste for formal organisation and hierarchy. On the whole they all drew their support from the same sector in society and, in different ways, questioned the prevailing paradigms of economic growth and modernisation.⁷⁰ They also challenged the alleged objectivity of the meritocracy's judgements about opportunity, skill and reward. The sewing machinist strike at Ford's Dagenham plant in the summer of 1968, for example, demonstrated the extent to which women performing the same work as men could be labelled unskilled and paid significantly less.⁷¹ Similarly, in responding to a resurgence of racism and the mobilisation of race by mainstream politicians like Enoch Powell, black activists sought to expose the entrenched inequalities of the social democratic settlement, eschewing the paternalism of the meritocratic state and embracing a global vision of Black Liberation.⁷² As Hilary Wainwright has argued, linking these movements together was a desire to overcome the 'cultural subordination' of the post-war decades.⁷³

Whether it was the subordination implied by 'the paternalism of professional social reformers, who presume a cultural superiority to those on whose behalf they are devising reforms', or the 'benign employer who presumes to know what is in the best

⁶⁷ J. Eisen & David Steinberg, 'The Student Revolt Against Liberalism', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 382 (1969), pp. 83-94; P. Byrne, *Social Movements in Britain* (London, 1977), p. 32.

⁶⁸ R. Jackson, 'Toryism and the Cult of Efficiency', *Crossbow* (January-March, 1970), p. 12, 14.

⁶⁹ J. Rex, 'Students and Revolt', *New Society*, 291 (30/05/1968), pp. 791-93; Byrne, *Social Movements*, p. 40, 48.

⁷⁰ Byrne, *Social Movements*, p. 32, 33.

⁷¹ S. Rowbotham, *The Past is Before Us: Feminism in Action since the 1960s* (London, 1989).

⁷² J. Solomos, 'Equal Opportunities Policies and Racial Inequality: The Role of Public Policy', *Public Administration*, 67/1 (1989), pp. 79-93; Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories', pp. 297-302.

⁷³ H. Wainwright, '1968's Unfinished Business – Cultural Equality and the Renewal of the Left', in G. Andrews, R. Cockett, A. Hooper & M. Williams (Eds.), *New Left, New Right and Beyond: Taking the Sixties Seriously* (London, 1999), p. 135, 136.

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interest of their employees', these movements rejected the authority of the 'all-knowing expert', whether that be 'the professional politician, civil servant, army general, corporate manager or party general secretary.' This assertion of 'cultural equality' could not easily be rebottled. 1968 represented a transient window of possibility, a moment 'when a repressive culture, already hollowed out, visibly collapsed.' Before a new cultural order could establish itself, Wainwright reflects, 'unthinkable alternatives suddenly became feasible.'⁷⁴ In this sense if 1968 represented 'neither an end nor a beginning', it posed an existential challenge to a generation of intellectuals and policy-makers 'that half believed it had solved the problems of Western society for good.'⁷⁵ The New Left's radical anti-statism chimed with the themes deployed by a resurgent political Right led by figures like Diana Spearman and Enoch Powell, and by the start of the 1980s it was Thatcherism which capitalised on these trends most dominantly.⁷⁶ The language and politics of social and cultural equality described by Wainwright challenged the delicate meritocratic balancing act between equal opportunity and unequal capacity. While in the end the social movements and pressure groups of the 1960s and 1970s did not eradicate inequality, they did force the revision of the meritocratic rationale that had sustained it.⁷⁷

They were particularly hostile to the professional ethic that had often propped up meritocratic ideas. For Lynne Segal, along with Wainwright one of the co-authors of the influential socialist feminist text *Beyond the Fragments*, the feminism of the 1960s 'had begun to shift epistemological outlooks across the social sciences and humanities, affecting state policies, union practices and transforming cultural spaces generally.'⁷⁸ In their opposition to a paternalist and masculine professional ethic, these writers and activists were, to some degree, pushing at an open door. As the last chapter explored, this ethic was straining under the weight of a significant bundle of aspirations and expectations. In responding to decline, other cultural forms, chief among them the ideal of the entrepreneur, began to intrude on Britain's intellectual politics. This intrusion only intensified over the course of the 1970s. By the start of the decade there was already a widespread sense of nostalgia for a bygone age amongst those who had been most wedded to the panacea of professionalism. In 1971, John Vaizey published general histories of both social democracy and capitalism. In the development of the former he

⁷⁴ Wainwright, 'Unfinished Business', p. 136, 125.

⁷⁵ E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London, 1995), pp. 286-87.

⁷⁶ R. Cockett, 'The New Right and the 1960s: The Dialectics of Liberations', in Andrews, Cockett, Hooper and Williams, *New Left, New Right*, p. 92.

⁷⁷ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 254.

⁷⁸ S. Rowbotham, L. Segal & H. Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (London, 1979); L. Segal, 'Jam Today: Feminist Impacts and Transformations in the 1970s', in Black, Pemberton & Thane, *Reassessing*, p. 150.

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highlighted the importance of 'a growing body of professional opinion that wished to exercise its skills free from the pressures of the market place' and 'whose professional judgements involved radical reallocations of resources.'⁷⁹ In the latter he identified the post-war period as one characterised by 'a philosophy of responsible management.' Here, 'management became a profession with its own codes of behaviour, its own education and training process.' The similarities to traditional professions such as medicine, law and the church were obvious

and so, too, were the similarities to the civil service and the army, with their selfless anonymity, their concept of service to the community rather than self-aggrandisement, and of a balanced and objective approach to all questions [...] It was this type of man, in this spirit, who dealt with the post-war problems. Their astonishing success in raising productivity, in solving social problems and in beginning to tackle international political questions, was the dominant feature of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁸⁰

While Vaizey acknowledged that this form of 'managerial capitalism' had its flaws, he lamented its passing. By the late 1960s, he claimed, 'the corporate ethic and its liberal political counterpart seemed to be worthy but irrelevant.' As the 'managers comforted themselves with an ideology of benevolence', a series of groups, including 'students and the disenchanted', denounced it as 'paternalistic and as a manifestation of the rationalist, technological outlook which had come to dominate the world and which, in their view, was destroying it.'⁸¹ Growing hostility to the professional ethic posed existential questions for Revisionists like Vaizey, Shanks and Crosland. Reflecting on the 1960s while updating his *Stagnant Society* in 1971, Michael Shanks argued that while 'many brave and honest men have laboured to resolve the problems of our society' so far 'they have not succeeded.' A central lesson from the 1960s for Shanks was the 'limitations of government as an agent of change' and it was time, he argued, for social democrats to review the activities of the public sector and to decide 'which if any could be more effectively handled in other ways than at present, including the possible hiving off of some to the private sector.'⁸² Others like Anthony Crosland were more reluctant to conduct an intellectual overhaul. 'The objectives', he argued in 1971, 'seem to me basically those which most Fabians have believed in for the past ten years or more.'⁸³ Upon his premature death in 1977, even Crosland's closest friends had to admit that his brand of social democracy 'had little to say about ways of "redistributing" or "equalising"

⁷⁹ J. Vaizey, *Revolutions of Our Time: Social Democracy* (London, 1971), p. 189.

⁸⁰ J. Vaizey, *Revolutions of Our Time: Capitalism* (London, 1971), p. 208, 212.

⁸¹ Vaizey, *Capitalism*, p. 216, 212.

⁸² M. Shanks, 'The Sins of the Sixties', in his *The Stagnant Society* (Harmondsworth, [1961] 1972), p. 237, 241, 242, 247.

⁸³ C.A.R. Crosland, *A Social Democratic Britain* (London, 1971), p. 1.

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the power of the State and other bureaucracies like the trade unions.’ For Michael Young this was ‘far more obviously now the central dilemma of Egalitarian Socialism than it was in the mid-1950s.’⁸⁴

Over the course of the 1970s the intellectual running on the Left lay with a broad extra-parliamentary ‘New Left’, loosely grouped around the journals the *New Left Review* or *Marxism Today* as well as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and, more significantly for this study, a cluster of academics, intellectuals and MPs ranged behind the former Labour Minister of Technology Tony Benn. Benn had invested heavily in Wilson’s scientific socialism, believing that a technocratic state could radically transform Britain into a more efficient, classless and equal society. In this sense it was precisely because the modernising, meritocratic ‘New Men’ were invested with such hope that Benn’s disillusionment at the end of the 1960s was so profound. The Bennite Left posed a significant challenge to the corporatist solutions of the early 1960s and the notion that the state could mediate between competing pressure groups or the professional representatives of Labour and Capital. In *Arguments for Socialism* and *Arguments for Democracy*, published in 1979 and 1981 respectively and based on Benn’s experiences over the course of the 1970s, the main focus of his hostility was social democratic corporatism.⁸⁵ ‘We have to agree’, Benn claimed in 1981, ‘with Mrs Thatcher in saying there is a log jam. Even if we do not agree with her solution, she has at least turned her mind to the problem.’⁸⁶ For Benn it was clear at the start of the 1970s that the Left needed to develop a strategy of ‘confrontation with bureaucracy.’ Without such a strategy, Benn claimed, ‘it is hard to see how we can ever liberate ourselves.’⁸⁷ The 1960s had revealed the central problem with a society which leaned too heavily on science and technical expertise at the expense of democracy. Once a central mechanism to realise Benn’s vision of a classless and efficient ‘New Britain’, by the start of the 1970s they stood condemned as a ‘new religion, replacing to some extent profit and loss.’ The Left had to acknowledge the conflict between ‘the technocracy that comes from science and engineering and democracy that stems from the ballot box.’⁸⁸

The Bennite Left intended to control this technocracy, as well as the multinational, ‘mesoeconomic’ concentrations of economic power identified by Stuart Holland, through enhanced democratic mechanisms.⁸⁹ While ‘liberation’ would not be achieved by ‘freeing

⁸⁴ M. Young, D. Bell & J. Vaizey, ‘Memoir: Anthony Crosland & Socialism’, *Encounter* (August, 1977), p. 85.

⁸⁵ T. Benn, *Arguments for Socialism* (Harmondsworth, [1979] 1980), pp. 19-20; T. Benn, *Arguments for Democracy* (Harmondsworth, [1981] 1982), p. 108.

⁸⁶ Benn, *Democracy*, pp. 136-37.

⁸⁷ Benn, *New Politics*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ Benn, *Democracy*, p. 93.

⁸⁹ S. Holland, *The Socialist Challenge* (London, 1975).

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a few thousand entrepreneurs from government interference', nor 'can public ownership, economic planning and improved and more egalitarian social services, essential as they are in providing the basis for further advance, alone provide the answer.' The Labour Party, Benn argued, should not 'accept existing patterns of nationalisation as a form for the future' and should instead be talking about a fundamental transfer of power within industry to the worker.⁹⁰ Benn's experience in government during the 1960s had shown that 'nationalisation plus Lord Robens does not add up to socialism' and over the course of the 1970s he built up strong links with the Institute for Worker's Control.⁹¹ Where the Wilson Governments had placed their faith in professional, socially mobile and meritocratic 'New Men' the resurgent Left of the Labour Party posited the idea of a 'New Citizen'. While Crosland maintained that only a small minority of the population wished to 'participate', preferring instead to 'lead a full family life and cultivate their gardens', the radicalism of the late 1960s had convinced Benn that the 'New Citizen' was eager to assume a new democratic responsibility in the workplace, the community and in national political life.⁹² In doing so, the Bennite brand of 'democratic socialism' sought to make the powers exercised by professional meritocrats staffing the corporate state, particularly those in the civil service wedded to what Benn described as a top level structure of 'committees and quangos', accountable to a broader constituency made up of those residing outside of the meritocracy. 'We must never accept', he argued, 'that democracy can be limited by the educational qualifications of the rank and file.'⁹³

An increasingly influential anti-statist strain on the Right intersected with elements of Benn's analysis. While applying divergent means and pursuing often hostile ends, the likes of Maude and the conservative journalist Peregrine Worsthorne shared Benn's antipathy to the meritocratic elite. Worsthorne reflected on the 1950s as a decade where 'the End of Ideology had been proclaimed' and 'the class war was thought to be over.' At the start of the 1970s, however, 'industrial strife is taking new forms', a 'new kind of radicalism in the shape of student power has risen' and 'whole fresh areas of potential disaffection have begun to unfold.' These disaffections had started, Worsthorne claimed, 'just at the very moment when the Party which historically existed to embrace and articulate such pressures decided to change its role, wrongly believing that a party of protest was no longer needed.' In responding to this crisis 'the meritocracy based on brain-power', which was 'fashioned in the mould of an ideology deeply unsympathetic to the problems of democratic government', merely served to 'compound the malaise

⁹⁰ Benn, *Socialism*, p. 109, 110, 60.

⁹¹ Benn, *Socialism*, p. 60. For Benn and worker's control see for example: T. Benn & W. Greendale, *Workers' Control: How Far Can the Structure Meet Our Demands?* (Nottingham, 1973); T. Benn, *A New Course for Labour* (Nottingham, 1976).

⁹² Crosland, *Social Democratic*, p. 13; Benn, *New Politics*, p. 10.

⁹³ Benn, *Socialism*, p. 51, 178.

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rather than cure it.⁹⁴ As we explored in relation to education policy, the collapse of the meritocratic moment witnessed the migration of a host of diverse figures, including conservatives like Maude and Worsthorne, and extending to neo-liberals such as Hayek, away from the peripheries of mainstream politics where they had resided in the immediate post-war decades and towards the centre. At the heart of this migration, and the hollowing out of the professional ethic, was a 'crisis in the practice of social engineering and scientific management' in the late 1960s and 1970s at the same time as 'the philosophy of science and the social sciences were in a state of momentous flux.'⁹⁵ The likes of Maude had always been sceptical of the claims made for the social sciences and the expertise-oriented professional. In 1967's *The Consuming Society* Maude attacked the notion that a 'human community' could be reduced 'to a system of statistics' or trends of inevitability. For Maude, the concept of 'society' in the late 1960s was nothing more than an 'illusion' created by social scientists which was 'destroying personal and local responsibility, swamping the family and the genuine community.'⁹⁶ Maude distinguished between the 'rationalism' of social scientific theory and a 'rational' conception of the individual. The latter was not simply 'conditioned automata' wholly determined by 'their heredity, environment and upbringing.' To the 'large-scale administrator' or 'technologist', Maude argued, the human individual was simply a 'source of error', a 'creation with a dangerous predilection for making unpredictable choices.' For Maude 'there was a time when this was considered rather a good thing than a menace, since it was believed that out of the diversity of human endeavour almost everything that was worthwhile was created or evolved.'⁹⁷

While Maude's analysis of the post-war meritocratic moment contained plenty of caricature, it serves to capture a widespread disillusionment with the idea that expert knowledge could successfully inform political action and predict its consequences with accuracy. By the mid-1970s this extended to Revisionists like Albu and Vaizey. In his history of social democracy the latter placed a faith in 'rationality' at the heart of the ideology's success in the middle of the twentieth century:

Rationality – and this is a huge claim – would, it was held, lead to a more desirable, a softer, more prosperous, more equal and more just society. Rationality involved the understanding of society. Social democracy,

⁹⁴ P. Worsthorne, 'Going Nowhere: A Reply to Raymond Fletcher', *Encounter* (March, 1971), p. 82, 83.

⁹⁵ Wainwright, 'Unfinished Business', p. 138.

⁹⁶ A. Maude, *The Consuming Society* (London, 1967), p. 12. Also see: A. Maude, *The Common Problem: A Policy for the Future* (London, 1969), p. 40

⁹⁷ Maude, *Consuming*, p. 9; Maude, *Common*, p. x.

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therefore, is the application through social engineering of the findings of the social sciences.⁹⁸

Similarly at the end of his unpublished 1976 memoir, Albu looked back to 1945 and cited the American economist R.L. Heilbroner to describe the immediate post-war decade as a time

when one spoke of social problems as so many exercises in applied rationality: when economists seriously discussed the fine tuning of the economy [...] where growth seemed to offer a setting in which formerly recalcitrant problems were expected to lose their capacity for social mischief.⁹⁹

'Those of us who held those views', Albu claimed from the vantage point of the mid-1970s, 'stand unhappy and uncertain in the face not only of social and economic problems with which we do not know how to deal, but of destructive forces in society which although organised in minorities, can inflict severe damage on the social fabric.'¹⁰⁰ A significant part of the problem for social democrats was uncovering the precise mechanisms by which inequality was 'manifested, promoted or controlled.' At the beginning of 1974 Vaizey set out to explore these questions with a range of public intellectuals, from the monetarist economist Milton Friedman to the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, in a series of broadcasts for BBC Radio Three which were later published as *Whatever Happened to Equality?*. For Vaizey it was clear that the last couple of decades had shown that 'egalitarian ideals are difficult to frame in practical terms; that even when so framed they do not seem to lead to the results that were intended or feared.' This was especially true, Vaizey claimed, when egalitarians confronted their 'chief enemy today': not 'the old aristocracy, either the aristocracy of birth or the aristocracy of wealth' but the 'aristocracy of intellect.'¹⁰¹ In reflecting on how the issue of equality was approached in the immediate post-war decades, the philosopher Richard Wollheim informed Vaizey that social democrats like himself 'were looking for the smallest possible modification which could produce the largest possible effect.' This led to the prioritisation of equality of opportunity:

We thought that, if everyone in society had equal access to different ways of life, if there was equality of opportunity, then what would follow from this would be something like equality of reward. We thought that this would

⁹⁸ Vaizey, *Social Democracy*, p. 213.

⁹⁹ Albu, *Backbench Technocrat*, I, p. 2; R.L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (New York, 1974), p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Albu, *Backbench Technocrat*, XV, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Vaizey, 'Why Equality?', p. 123.

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happen, because once you had a fluid society, people – simply because they cared about their children – wouldn't want to have gross inequalities of reward [...] There, perhaps, was the most significant error in our political thinking.¹⁰²

The institutions which egalitarians in the post-war world had relied on 'very heavily' to achieve equality were 'successfully manipulated only by a comparatively favoured group.' As this group got bigger and became an 'ascendant majority' it 'effectively blocked the efforts of the minority.'¹⁰³ As Vaizey and Wollheim suggested, the concept of meritocracy, once the central stepping stone on the path to an egalitarian future, had simply recast inequalities in a new mould which proved just as, if not more, difficult to alleviate or transcend as others. Like many social democrats in the 1970s and 1980s, Vaizey concluded his book by expressing his confusion about equality: 'If I were put up against a wall and told I was to be shot...I think I would ultimately say I was an egalitarian.' But on the other hand, he argued, 'the arguments for equality do seem to me to be extremely weak.'¹⁰⁴

The hollowing out of the professional ethic at the heart of the concept of meritocracy did not, however, lead inevitably towards a market-oriented logic. While Maude's attack on 'society' directly influenced Thatcher's infamously similar reasoning two decades later, in the late 1960s Maude was condemning the 'affluent society', the ad-men and 'manufacturers of mass-produced consumption goods' as much as the technologist, administrator and sociologist. 'A situation in which men and women have no part in the economic process except to consume its products', Maude argued, 'would be not only the end of civilisation but the end of humanity.'¹⁰⁵ His support for Thatcher in the late 1970s stemmed from Thatcherism's claims to be a moral project as much as an economic one. As will be explored in further detail in the next section, much like meritocracy in the immediate post-war period the market triumphed in the 1980s, not because it was an ideal concept, but because it spoke most effectively to the epistemological conditions of the 1970s. The market was well placed to capture intellectual space. It was hostile to an increasingly undermined professional ethic. In the words of David Marquand, for the 'marketizers' the professions, professionals and professionalism were classified, like the trade unions, as 'market-distorting cartels.' If the 'professional ethic was premised on the assumption that professional goods could not be allocated on market principles',

¹⁰² J. Vaizey, T.E. Utley & R. Wollheim, 'Concepts of Equality', in Vaizey, *Whatever Happened*, p. 29.

¹⁰³ Vaizey, Utley & Wollheim, 'Concepts', p. 29.

¹⁰⁴ Vaizey, 'Why Equality?', p. 115.

¹⁰⁵ Maude, *Consuming*, p. 12, 19, 21; M. Grimley, 'Thatcherism, Morality and Religion', in B. Jackson & R. Saunders (Eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 84.

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professionals had to be systematically forced into 'a market mould'.¹⁰⁶ The market also worked 'with the grain of the 1960s Cultural Revolution' and was capable of delivering an, albeit limited, egalitarian response to the issues of gender bias or racism exposed by social movements in the 1970s.¹⁰⁷ As the future Chancellor Geoffrey Howe argued, 'the merits of a liberal economic depend upon the extent to which the market is (or should be) colour-blind'.¹⁰⁸ Finally, and most importantly, the concept of the market spoke to the 'knowledge problem' at the heart of the meritocratic state's demise. Here, the likes of Hayek argued that rational economic calculation was only possible on the basis of the price mechanism and its ability to disseminate widely diffused knowledge about consumer demand and the scarcity of economic resources not available to a central planning authority.¹⁰⁹ This insight also applied to meritocracy. Whereas Hayek's contention that 'no man or group of men possesses the capacity to determine conclusively the potentialities of other human beings' placed him at odds with the post-war technocratic moment, the intellectual politics of the 1970s would prove fertile ground for his anti-meritocratic logic.¹¹⁰

(4.4) The Distributive Crisis

Both the proletarianization of the middle class and the hollowing out of the professional ethic stemmed from the failure of meritocracy's central promise in the immediate post-war decades: to align reward with merit to produce a democratically legitimate form of inequality. This logic appealed to both Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives for different reasons and was buttressed by supposedly benign developments in post-war capitalism which would deliver higher growth and guarantee a painless distribution of economic resources. The impact of decline challenged this formation. As we saw in the last chapter, the implicit contradictions of a meritocratic distribution of rewards were stretched to breaking point: between those who saw a meritocracy as a mechanism to deliver greater competitiveness to Britain's economy, with higher incentives and material inequalities, and those seeking more egalitarian social outcomes. With soaring inflation, low growth and rising unemployment it is easy to see why intellectuals and policy-makers in the 1970s felt Britain had become engulfed in an irrational distributive free-for-all. For the Labour MP David Marquand this was connected to the decline of deference and the growing hostility to the professional meritocrat discussed elsewhere in this chapter. The New Left perspective, condemning

¹⁰⁶ D. Marquand, *Mammon's Kingdom: An Essay on Britain Now* (London, 2014), p. 115.

¹⁰⁷ Cockett, 'The New Right', p. 92.

¹⁰⁸ G. Howe, *Too Much Law? The Effects of Legislation on Economic Growth* (London, 1977), p. 10.

¹⁰⁹ See for example: F.A. Hayek, 'The Use of Knowledge in Society', *The American Economic Review*, 35/4 (1945), pp. 519-30.

¹¹⁰ F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London, 1960), p.88.

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bureaucracy and emphasising direct participation, ignored the fact that society was made up of

different groups, whose interests conflict [...] they can't all be right at once; and someone has to adjudicate between them. The gut issue of politics is how the cake should be divided up; and if people who cut the cake are regarded as faceless monsters whom every interest group in society has the right to beat over the head, the end result will be, not more social justice but less [...] If we decide that pressure groups offer a better way of changing societies than political parties do, the cake will be cut according to who can shout the loudest. And the people who shout the loudest are not often the nicest.¹¹¹

Distributive questions were therefore central to the widespread perception of national crisis in the 1970s. Britain's intellectual politics in the 1970s was dominated by the search for a new distributive settlement in the wake of the vacuum created by the collapse of the meritocratic moment.¹¹² For Albu this would have to provide foundations upon which 'new political and economic institutions can be built for settling in a just and civilised manner the distribution of the national product.'¹¹³ Reading the 1970s as a decade of distributive crisis would condition Britain's intellectual politics for the rest of the century and beyond. While the market would eventually triumph, in attempting to fill the distributive vacuum intellectuals and policy-makers engaged in a diverse 'marketplace of ideas'.¹¹⁴

At the heart of the distributive deferral of the immediate post-war period was the idea of economic growth. As we explored in the last chapter, the concern over the security of this growth, triggered by the politics of national decline, profoundly destabilised the concept of meritocracy in the 1960s. A decade later and the likes of Vaizey were, in a similar way to his reflections on the professional ethic, profoundly nostalgic for the economic certainties of the immediate post-war world:

Supposing that you were a supporter of greater equality in British, or American, or European society, in the late 1950s. The economic miracle was happening [...] It seemed not unreasonable to suppose that by some relatively painless process, the greater affluence of the different societies

¹¹¹ D. Marquand, 'Stand: In Defence of Politics', *New Society*, 366 (06/11/1969), p. 736.

¹¹² For example see: M. Shanks, 'Can Capitalism Survive?', *Encounter* (August, 1973), p. 20; Editorial, 'The Crisis', *Crossbow* (January, 1974), p. 4.

¹¹³ Albu, 'Backbench Technocrat', XV, p. 17.

¹¹⁴ P. Hall, 'Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain', *Comparative Politics*, 5/3 (1993), pp. 275-96.

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might be used to reduce, once and for all, the greater inequalities in incomes, in education, and in housing, for example.¹¹⁵

Delivering higher levels of growth had become an almost intractable problem by the middle of the 1970s. Environmental concerns began to impress themselves on policy-makers, and a coherent anti-growth lobby began to emerge in the wake of both the Club of Rome's *The Limits of Growth* report of 1970 as well as the 1973 oil crisis caused in part by the Yom Kippur War.¹¹⁶ As Benn argued in his diary

The traditional social democratic view that if we are going to get socialism now, we must have growth and distribute it fairly has got to be re-examined in the light of a possible ban on growth. This will drive us towards redistribution without being able to give us the excess that would make that redistribution painless. This certainly is a great challenge to our thinking.¹¹⁷

Of more significance for Revisionists like Crosland, however, was a failure of government will-power and a history of poor political choices.¹¹⁸ With the publication of *Socialism Now* in 1974, Crosland did acknowledge that British society, 'slow-moving, rigid, class-ridden', had proven 'much harder to change than was supposed.' The early Revisionist writers, he argued, 'were too complacent in tone; they proposed the right reforms, but under-rated the difficulty of achieving them in Britain.' This entailed the need for a rather vaguely defined 'move to the Left', not in the 'traditional sense of a move towards old-fashioned Clause 4 Marxism, but in the sense of a sharper delineation of fundamental objectives' and a 'greater clarity about egalitarian priorities.'¹¹⁹ Growth remained central to the delivery of these priorities. Without growth, 'any substantial transfer then involves not merely a relative but an absolute decline in the real incomes of the better half of the population (which incidentally includes large numbers of working-class voters); and this they will frustrate.' While redistribution in a zero-growth environment might be possible in 'utopia', it was impossible in the 'rough democratic world in which we live.' The environmental lobby was dismissed by Crosland as 'hostile to growth in principle and indifferent to the needs of ordinary people', reflecting 'a set of middle- and upper-class value judgements.'¹²⁰ Despite his confidence that there was 'no need for Revisionists to revise our definitions of Socialism', the contours of Crosland's egalitarianism remained difficult to pin down. Drawing on the American philosopher John Rawls in the opening essay of *Socialism Now*, Crosland claimed

¹¹⁵ Vaizey, Utley & Wollheim, 'Concepts', p. 20.

¹¹⁶ See for example: The Club of Rome, *The Limits of Growth* (New York, 1972); E.J. Mishan, 'Economic Priority: Growth or Welfare?', *Political Quarterly*, 40/1 (1969), pp. 79-89.

¹¹⁷ T. Benn, 'Diary Entry: 22/01/1972', in his *Office Without Power*, pp. 398-99.

¹¹⁸ Crosland, *Social Democratic*, pp. 2-3.

¹¹⁹ C.A.R. *Socialism Now and Other Essays* (London, 1974), p. 44, 45.

¹²⁰ Crosland, *Social Democratic*, p. 2, 3, 4, 5.

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By equality, we meant more than a meritocratic society of equal opportunities in which the greater rewards would go to those with the most fortunate genetic endowment and family background; we adopted the strong definition of equality – what Rawls has subsequently called the democratic as opposed to the liberal conception.¹²¹

It is no surprise that Crosland's most explicit condemnation of meritocracy should come in 1974 (as opposed to 1964), a time when the concept was being hollowed out and discredited. As Chapter Two explored, Crosland certainly sought to move beyond meritocratic inequalities. Underpinned by secure growth and a benign capitalism, however, the dangers of a meritocratic society appeared to reside in a distant future. In *Socialism Now* his vision of a more egalitarian society remained relativistic:

What is the trade-off between more equality and faster economic growth?
What functional inequalities are necessary in an open industrial society? [...] A practising politician in the Britain of the 1970s, not cerebrating in a monastery cell but living day by day in the thick of things, is not required to answer the stern examiner's question: how much equality ultimately?¹²²

While this was an attractive intellectual position in the late 1950s, when visions of a progressive and abundant future appeared secure, it became difficult to maintain amidst the distributive strife of the 1970s. With the social democratic approach to egalitarianism being scrutinised on the Left, and the concept itself being challenged on the Right, a new wave of Revisionists sought from Crosland a sense of why equality was still a viable and worthy end.¹²³ As his friend the American sociologist Daniel Bell argued upon Crosland's death in 1977, social democrats of the post-war vintage had 'eschewed difficult questions of distributive justice.' The idea of equality 'was no longer the dream of careers open to talent or the widening of the areas of society.' Scarcity, 'not just of goods, but of information, time and limited social positions - will always exist, and it is that very fact which makes socialism problematical.' Despite Crosland's claim to Rawls, the latter, by recognising the 'permanent character of scarcity' and the need for a 'distributive principle that could be defended as just and fair to all' was, Bell argued, more attuned to the intellectual conditions of the 1970s.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Crosland, *Socialism Now*, p. 16; J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge MA., [1971] 2009), pp. 75-83.

¹²² Crosland, *Socialism Now*, p. 17.

¹²³ See for example: D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair* (London, 2nd Ed., 1999), p. 175; K. Jeffreys, *Anthony Crosland: A New Biography* (London, 1999), pp. 175-76.

¹²⁴ Young, Bell & Vaizey, 'Memoir', p. 92, 93.

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Revisionist Social Democracy was also ill-equipped to tackle new distributive issues which urgently pressed themselves onto the intellectual agenda in the 1970s. Inflation was a particular concern. While the precise causes of the inflationary pressure of the 1970s was widely debated, including in particular the role of the trade union wage claims in this process, at a cultural level it was broadly felt to symbolise Britain's slide into distributive irrationalism. For Patrick Hutber inflation 'caused an arbitrary and unplanned redistribution of wealth', and privileged groups with bargaining power. It shifted economic rewards 'towards the strong' and 'away from the weak.'¹²⁵ Similarly the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf in his 1974 Reith Lecture *The New Liberty* characterised inflation as a 'more or less hidden redistribution struggle between those who are able to keep pace, because of their market capacity, and those who are not.' The potential of this conflict, 'like all concealed struggles, is nasty.'¹²⁶ Pressure groups, and in particular the trade unions, played an important role here. Regardless of whether policy-makers and intellectuals considered the unions directly responsible for inflation, ever increasing wage claims combined with greater militancy appeared to demonstrate how far questions of distribution had shifted away from the principles of meritocracy. As Marquand noted, higher living standards ensured 'meaningful redistribution' could no longer be carried out 'solely at the expense of people who do not belong to trade unions and do not vote Labour.' In a 'very real sense', he argued, the old world of 'us-against-them has been replaced by a much chillier world of us-against-us.'¹²⁷

Britain's intellectual politics was dominated by competing visions aimed at restoring order to the nation's distributive flux. Most social democrats and conservatives reached for a familiar tool in the form of an incomes policy. Such a policy was necessary, the Revisionist Labour MP John Mackintosh argued in 1972, because without one the unions would continue to trigger inflation and exacerbate inequality. If one of the fundamental purposes of the Labour Party is to reduce this inequality, then to permit 'free collective bargaining and to encourage wage inflationary wage demands runs directly counter to this basic objective.' A socialist party 'without an incomes policy', Mackintosh argued, 'is a contradiction in terms.'¹²⁸ Similarly, Albu, writing in the same year as Mackintosh, felt a society without an incomes policy was a 'Utopian dream'.¹²⁹ Such a policy was at the heart of Labour's narrow return to power in 1974 and the development of the 'Social Contract'. While in the short term the Contract's constraints were relatively successful at reducing industrial stoppage and the rate of inflation, it dissolved in the Winter of

¹²⁵ Hutber, *Decline*, p. 48.

¹²⁶ R. Dahrendorf, *The Reith Lectures: The New Liberty – Survival and Justice in a Changing World* (London, 1975), p. 11.

¹²⁷ D. Marquand, 'The Challenge to the Labour Party', *Political Quarterly*, 46/1 (1975), p. 402.

¹²⁸ J. Mackintosh, 'Socialism or Social Democracy? The Choice for the Labour Party', *Political Quarterly*, 43/1 (1972), pp. 476-77.

¹²⁹ Albu, 'Backbench Technocrat', XIV, p. 21.

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Discontent: a symbolic collapse of the attempts to 'manage the contradictions, tensions and failure of a post-war settlement that had been visibly disintegrating throughout the 1970s.'¹³⁰ The competing visions of what an incomes policy was supposed to achieve and the divergent distributive principles which underpinned it had never been further apart. As Marquand argued at the start of the decade, the central aim of an incomes policy was to 'narrow the gap between low-paid and higher-paid workers.' It is 'self-evident that this can only be done if the policy discriminates against the higher paid workers and in favour of the low paid.' In practice this had proved impossible, he argued, 'not because the government has abandoned its belief in equality, but because the higher-paid workers do not share it.'¹³¹

For an increasingly influential Bennite Left an incomes policy needed to be treated with 'deep scepticism':

We never hear the increases awarded to judges, field marshals or senior civil servants being described as confetti money. There seem to be two currencies in this country, the currency in which better-paid people are paid where the gain is held to be real and currency given to the working class which, they are told, is actually worthless.¹³²

While people were willing to see an 'element of wage planning as part of a planned economy', they were breaking wage limits dictated by an incomes policy because the 'salaries of professional people, people who live on dividends and those who are living on incomes which cannot be easily measured' appeared to be exempt from any restrictions.¹³³ In place of an incomes policy Benn articulated a radically anti-meritocratic, class-based distributive logic, eventually bundled together in the 'Alternative Economic Strategy', which sought a 'fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families.'¹³⁴ This was connected to the broader themes of industrial democracy, participation and accountability discussed above. For the Bennite Left any incomes policy administered by the corporate state would only deepen inequality. The intellectual force behind much of Benn's analysis was the economist Stuart Holland and his 1975 book *The Socialist Challenge*.¹³⁵ Like Benn Holland had played a prominent role in the Labour Governments

¹³⁰ C. Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the Winter of Discontent', *Sociology*, 30/2 (1996), pp. 260-61.

¹³¹ D. Marquand, 'Stand: The Gulf in British Politics', *New Society*, 324 (16/01/1969), p. 95.

¹³² Benn, *Socialism*, p. 154, 155.

¹³³ Benn, *Socialism*, p. 155.

¹³⁴ The Labour Party, *Labour's Programme: Campaign Document 1974* (London, 1974), p. 15; Benn, *Socialism*, p. 49.

¹³⁵ Holland disagreed with Benn over Europe as well as the latter's desire to impose planning agreements on the top 100 companies, see: S. Holland, 'Alternative European and Economic

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of the 1960s, resigning from the leader's Political Office in 1968 due to Wilson's failure to adopt planning-by-agreement with leading firms.¹³⁶ *The Socialist Challenge* and its influence signalled a significant intellectual shift in the Labour Party away from the relatively benign view of capitalism articulated nearly two decades previously in Crosland's *The Future of Socialism*. Such a shift is also detectable amongst some Revisionists. Initial support for state holding companies in the Party came from the centre right through the likes of Bill Rodgers, and Holland himself drafted a lead chapter for Jenkins' 1972 book *What Matters Now*.¹³⁷ For Holland, Crosland's 'confusion' on the fact that state capitalism was still capitalism in the late 1950s 'was not merely semantic.' The 'severe empiricism' and the 'over-reaction against Marxist theory' which characterised *The Future of Socialism* prevented Crosland from 'adapting Marx's insights on the nature of class and state power to mid-twentieth-century realities.'¹³⁸ The Revisionist confidence that public-oriented authorities could control the allocation of economic resources had been left behind by events largely because of the trend towards monopoly power and economic concentrations in an increasingly transnational private sector:

The critical power over the allocation of resources either in Britain or abroad, lies with a miniscule class of enormously powerful top managers. The trend to shared monopoly in the upper half of industry has made the managerial class incomparably more powerful than when Crosland wrote *The Future of Socialism*.¹³⁹

Those interpretations emphasising the meritocratic implications of the Managerial Revolution had significantly overestimated the benign nature of post-war capitalism. The rise of powerful new firms at the meso, rather than the micro or macro, level required fresh theoretical analyses and economic solutions. For Holland this entailed not only a major extension of new public enterprise through the mesoeconomic sector, but also socialist planning in which new patterns of ownership and control are made possible. This planning entailed transformations in 'capitalist criteria and incentives' and a shift away from the compromised gradualism of Keynesian economic management.¹⁴⁰ The Bennite approach entailed a fundamental challenge to the assumptions which had underpinned the meritocratic moment. Rather than seeking to overthrow the aristocratic

Strategies', in Black, Pemberton & Thane, *Reassessing*, p. 110. These disagreements should not obscure the broad similarities in their approach to 'state capitalism'.

¹³⁶ S. Holland, 'The Industrial Strategy', in A. Seldon & K. Hickson (Eds.), *New Labour, Old Labour: The Wilson and Callaghan Governments, 1974-1979* (London, 2004), p. 297.

¹³⁷ R. Jenkins, *What Matters Now* (London, 1972); Holland, 'Alternative', p. 108, 109.

¹³⁸ Holland, *Socialist Challenge*, p. 26, 27.

¹³⁹ Holland, *Socialist Challenge*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁰ Holland, *Socialist Challenge*, p. 38, 34.

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leadership of the post-war Establishment, in order to deliver socialism in the 1970s, it was argued, socialists now had to critique and replace a meritocratic elite. More fundamentally, the Bennites reflected a deep frustration with the time horizons of a meritocracy. 'To some people', the Minister of State for Industry Eric Heffer argued in 1975, 'socialism is always for the future.' It is 'the far off millennium on the horizon which gets further away the more we supposedly advance towards it.'¹⁴¹

While the Bennite Left positioned itself against corporatism and a meritocratic distributive logic, its programme still relied heavily on state mechanisms to control the mesoeconomic sector, to administer socialist planning and to enact the irreversible 'shift in power and wealth to working people.' If the Bennite answer to the perennial distributive dilemma of 'who gets what?' was relatively straightforward, i.e. 'working people', as David Marquand's notion of 'us-against-us' adequately captures, operationalising this distribution logic amongst a backdrop of entrenched differentials and the expectations of higher living standards was fraught with difficulty. By the start of the 1980s it was clear that the market possessed the most effective response to this question. It is important to emphasise, however, just how wary intellectuals were of fully embracing market mechanisms in the 1970s. For example, by the end of the decade, as we will explore in the next chapter, John Vaizey had joined Thatcher's Conservative Party and become a prominent public defender of monetarism. Midway through the decade, however, in a discussion with the neo-liberal economist Milton Friedman, he argued that

To assume that the distribution of incomes before tax is a natural distribution of income which is then altered by some kind of state intervention is to take the point of view that the society which is as it were established by the market is right and actual [...] This is, I think, a false view of the way that modern society actually functions.¹⁴²

For Vaizey, 'a great many of us get most of our income from publicly provided activities', activities which are 'mediated, not through the market, but through our rights as citizens.'¹⁴³ Similarly that great defender of middle-class values Patrick Hutber felt an incomes policy was essential because 'left to themselves the forces of the market will never succeed in procuring an adequate wage for some of the most vital members of the community.'¹⁴⁴ As late as 1977 Thatcher's Conservative Party endorsed a similar position and only moved beyond an incomes policy and significantly towards the free market

¹⁴¹ E. Heffer, 'Two Labour Parties or One?', *Political Quarterly*, 46/4 (1975), pp. 392-93.

¹⁴² J. Vaizey & M. Friedman, 'Rich and Poor', in Vaizey, *Whatever Happened*, p. 66.

¹⁴³ Vaizey & Friedman, 'Rich and Poor', p. 66.

¹⁴⁴ P. Hutber, 'Anderson's Unemployment', *Encounter* (January, 1973), p. 86.

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after 1979.¹⁴⁵ The economic trajectory of the 1970s, however, delegitimised existing policy norms and opened a profitable market for fresh ideas. Neo-liberal ideas legitimised a counter-inflationary strategy that did not require the painful machinations of an incomes policy, provided warrant for public expenditure cuts and established that the state should not be held responsible for unemployment.¹⁴⁶ As the economist Samuel Brittan argued in 1973, and the next chapter will explore in greater detail, while it was fashionable to believe that greater individual autonomy could be achieved by 'participation or by workers control or by bodies of professional consumers or a widespread extension of government controls', after the threadbare nature of these devices has been revealed by experience, 'the case for the market as an instrument of individual choice will again receive a hearing.'¹⁴⁷

By the end of the 1970s it was difficult for Britain's intellectuals and policy-makers to remember why or how meritocracy had become such an appealing post-war concept. What exactly a meritocracy was supposed to achieve, whether that was greater social harmony, classlessness or material equality, was thrown into doubt. As Marquand argued, with groups ranged against one another in a competitive scramble for rewards, and defending their interests not through rational appeals to merit but through the brute force of organised power, meaningful redistribution was impossible. If the concept of meritocracy survived the 1970s it was certainly not the same concept which dominated the intellectual politics of the immediate post-war period. It no longer held out a classless promise or embodied a radical vision of equality of opportunity; the professional ethic and the rational evidence for political action was hollowed out and shattered; and the distributive crisis of the decade symbolised how far 1970s Britain had shifted away from the alignment of reward and merit. The concept was unable to respond to a set of profoundly different conceptual questions, whether related to the rise of inflation, questions of identity, or the desire for greater autonomy and individual freedom. A new rationale was required to justify inequality and this was to emerge as the market displaced merit in the 1980s. This distinction between a meritocracy and the market, and its consequences for Britain's post-war intellectual politics, has been under-emphasised in the historiography. If the meritocracy's problem was that it could never be certain whether inequality stemmed from internal qualities or external conditions,

¹⁴⁵ T. Bale, *The Conservatives since 1945: The Drivers of Party Change* (Oxford, 2012), p. 232.

¹⁴⁶ B. Jackson, 'The Think-Tank Archipelago: Thatcherism and Neo-Liberalism', in Jackson & Saunders, *Making Thatcher's Britain*, pp. 52-53.

¹⁴⁷ S. Brittan, 'A Rebirth of Political Economy? The End of Some Fashionable Myths', *Encounter* (May, 1973), p. 65.

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shifting the cause of this inequality from the capacities of the individual to the dictates of the market rendered its origins diffuse.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Ortolano, *Two Cultures*, p. 252.

(5) 1983: From Merit to Market

'The most radical of Hayek's contributions is the denial that it is possible to assess a just reward for people's services and pay them accordingly. This strikes at the most cherished illusion on the Right as well as on the Left. Not merely does Hayek deny that there are ethical or scientific principles for determining, say, a socially just incomes policy. He also denies that there is any moral merit attaching to the rewards people can obtain in the market-place.'

Samuel Brittan¹

'Rewarding individuals according to merit is therefore simply a grandiloquent euphemism for rewarding some people according to what other people think of them.'

Keith Joseph & Jonathan Sumption²

(5.1) Introduction: In Breach of Promise

In 1983 the educational economist and former Labour Party peer John Vaizey published *In Breach of Promise*, the penultimate book before his premature death aged just 54 a year later.³ Vaizey had spent much of the late 1950s and early 1960s carving out a space as one of the world's foremost experts in the economics of education. As we saw in Chapters Two and Three, he wanted to transform Britain's education system and use it to create a more meritocratic social order. His closeness, both personally and politically, to the Revisionist project of Anthony Crosland made Vaizey emblematic of post-war social democracy and its commitment to meritocracy. While his faith wavered in the late 1960s, as late as 1971 he was full of praise for those professionals who wished to exercise their skills 'free from the pressures of the market place' and the rationalist social science which underpinned their work.⁴ By 1983, however, Vaizey's commitment to a meritocratic social order and a professional ethic had been significantly eroded. *In Breach of Promise*, subtitled 'five men who shaped a generation', critiqued the 'ideas and ideals' of Hugh Gaitskell, Iain Macleod, Richard Titmuss, Anthony Crosland and Edward Boyle. At one level this was a specific critique of these individuals. While they possessed a 'radical style', they lacked 'the power to rethink fundamentally.' To do the latter, Vaizey claimed, might have needed them to 'approach questions from the right and not

¹ S. Brittan, 'Hayek, the New Right, and the Crisis of Social Democracy', *Encounter* (January, 1980), p. 40.

² K. Joseph & J. Sumption, *Equality* (London, 1979), p. 74.

³ J. Vaizey, *In Breach of Promise: Gaitskell, Macleod, Titmuss, Crosland, Boyle – Five Men Who Shaped a Generation* (London, 1983).

⁴ J. Vaizey, *Revolutions of Our Time: Social Democracy* (London, 1971), p. 189.

from the left.' At another level, however, this was a critique of an entire creed. Despite Boyle and Macleod being members of the Conservative Party, for Vaizey they all represented the intrinsic failures of post-war British social democracy. This creed 'made our world'; their 'own careers were the post-war.'⁵ A review in *New Society* accurately captured Vaizey's intentions when it claimed that the book represented an 'indictment of a whole epoch of British politics.'⁶

In Breach of Promise was the culmination of a party political break formalised in May 1979, when Vaizey resigned the Labour Party whip in the House of Lords and joined the Conservative benches. Vaizey outlined the reasons for defecting to Thatcher's Conservative Party in a series of letters to *The Times* between 1980 and 1982. In his first public statement since taking the decision he lambasted the Labour Party membership as 'swamped by bombastic polytechnic lecturers regurgitating inaccurately the half-baked ideas of sentimental Marxists that Tawney would not have let in to his lecture room.'⁷ These members saw the world through the lens of class while Vaizey doubted the existence of social classes altogether: 'There is no longer one working class way of life, but several ways of life, divided ethnically, regionally and occupationally.' Political divisions were now, and perhaps had always been, about 'attitude and temperament' and not class.⁸ Yet while Vaizey was unlikely to ever support a Marxist-inspired analysis of British society, the main focus of his ire was on social democracy as it was constituted at the end of the 1970s. He argued that there was simply

[...] no longer a set of social democrat ideas that will work. Keynesianism is intellectually dead. With our trade unions no incomes policy can ever work. With our state industries productivity will always be abysmal [...] Nobody, not even Shirley Williams, has the faintest idea how to redistribute income [...] Social democratic theory is just plain wrong.⁹

The distributive crisis of the 1970s, therefore, had shattered some of Vaizey's most cherished assumptions and policy platforms, forcing him to actively seek out new solutions. He defended monetarism, for example, in the wake of a letter signed by 364 economists sharply criticising Thatcher's approach. Vaizey claimed that if the government's economic policy means 'that printing money does not create jobs,

⁵ Vaizey, *Breach*, p. 2, 142, 4.

⁶ D. Johnson, 'Brightest and Best – Review of *In Breach of Promise* by John Vaizey', *New Society*, 66/1101 (22/12/1983), p. 496.

⁷ J. Vaizey, 'Lord Vaizey's Change of Party', *The Times* (03/12/1980), p. 17.

⁸ J. Vaizey, 'Why Labour? John Vaizey on the Basis of the Party's Support' *The Times* (28/09/1982), p. 10.

⁹ Vaizey, 'Change', p. 17.

monetarism is probably as correct as any policy in this imperfect world.¹⁰ Vaizey liked Thatcher, claiming she was 'honest, a patriot, and ready to listen.' While the Council for Social Democracy was not launched until the 25th January 1981, and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) until the 26th March of that year, it is unlikely that Vaizey would have joined Shirley Williams, Roy Jenkins, David Owen and Bill Rodgers. Yet while he never supported the SDP, he felt it imperative to try and find consensus. This, he claimed, required an opposition capable of 'constructive dialogue' and possessed of 'fundamentally shared assumptions.' Labour rejected the values he thought he had found in Thatcher's Conservative Party: support for a pluralistic society, a mixed economy, controlling inflation and an emphasis on entrepreneurship as an engine of economic growth. The SDP shared some of these assumptions and could therefore provide the 'powerful and effective Opposition' Vaizey felt was needed to restore democracy. 'Thank goodness,' he concluded, 'that we already have a strong and effective government.'¹¹

The distributive crisis of the 1970s fragmented social democracy, and when the ideology broke its pieces were scattered across the party political spectrum. While many remained in the Labour Party and others joined the SDP, Vaizey's shift was not unique. Over the course of the 1970s and early 1980s former social democrats Brian Walden, Reg Prentice, Woodrow Wyatt, Hugh Thomas and Paul Johnson all joined Thatcher's Conservative Party.¹² In many ways this reflected part of an explicit charm offensive, led by Alfred Sherman and the Centre for Policy Studies, to portray Thatcherites as the 'heirs to the social-democratic heritage.' Sherman, a convert from Communism himself, wrote to Thatcher to encourage her to consider differentiating sharply between socialism and social democracy, with the latter characterised as a 'legitimate element in the British political heritage.' The likes of 'Kier [sic] Hardie, George Lansbury, Ernest Bevin are part of British political history' that Sherman claimed would 'find much more in common with us than with Benn, Mikardo and the Tribunites.' This position would find much support amongst 'academics and writers' for whom 'it is not so much a matter of their leaving the Labour Party as it's leaving them.' For Sherman the likes of Crosland 'reneged on social democratic principles and curried favour with [sic] Marxist left out of personal ambition.' Therefore Thatcher should have 'no difficulty in restoring social democratic

¹⁰ F.H. Hahn & R.R. Neild, 'Statement on Economic Policy' (13/03/1981), *Thatcher Foundation Archive* [TCHR 1/5/7]; J. Vaizey, 'Monetarism's Share of the Blame for Unemployment', *The Times* (20/07/1981), p. 11.

¹¹ J. Vaizey, 'Dividing Line between Left and Right', *The Times* (29/10/1981), p. 15.

¹² For example, contrast the views in P. Johnson, *Enemies of Society* (London, 1977) with the views expressed three years later in P. Johnson, *The Recovery of Freedom* (London, 1980). For a general overview of those former social democratic 'intellectuals' who joined Thatcher's Conservative Party, see: C. Moore, *Margaret Thatcher, The Authorised Biography – Volume One: Not for Turning* (London, 2013), pp. 345-50.

principles from the incidental and the dross, and making them our own.¹³ In a reply from her private office, Thatcher was 'very impressed' with Sherman's case and authorised him to proceed with the theme.¹⁴

The movement of these social democratic politicians and intellectuals, however, was about more than a simple charm offensive by Sherman, the CPS and Thatcher. As *In Breach of Promise* demonstrated, while Vaizey found certain elements of the Thatcherite policy programme attractive (certainly when compared to the Labour Party) he was more interested in its potential epistemological solutions. Gaitskell, Crosland, Boyle, Titmuss and Macleod were to be condemned because they belonged to the 'first generation of Englishmen to believe that the solution to social and even political dilemmas lay in political action.'¹⁵ Vaizey had once belonged to this generation. Since the mid-to-late 1970s, however, he broke with the rationalist epistemology which underpinned his faith in expertise, social engineering and, most importantly for this study, meritocracy, and embraced what he described as 'Tory Pragmatism.'¹⁶ This entailed viewing society as

a dark and turbulent river which flows through time, very little understood [...] the task of politicians, and indeed of anybody holding a position of responsibility, is merely to try to keep the raft of civilisation afloat – a view which is most eloquently expressed by Michael Oakeshott [...] It is this view which has increasingly seemed to me to be realistic, and one which is more worthy of intellectual sympathy and support than the naive and optimistic views which have dominated public policy since the Munich crisis in 1938.¹⁷

For Vaizey, it was this Oakeshottian view of society which offered potential solutions to the distributive crisis of the 1970s. In many ways this chimed with Angus Maude's argument, later infamously deployed by Thatcher, that society 'does not exist.' For Maude, the 'idea of "society" as a sociological concept purporting to represent common behaviour patterns and to be capable of automatus [sic] action' was misguided and dangerous in that it served to subsume or replace the traditional conservative emphasis on individual responsibility.¹⁸

As 'a Socialist', Vaizey had argued that there were 'certain principles in society which were better than others' such as 'equality' or 'justice'. Once these were established and

¹³ A. Sherman, 'Letter to Margaret Thatcher (Initiatives)' (25/10/1977), *Thatcher Foundation Archive*, p. 1, 2, 3.

¹⁴ R. Ryder, 'Letter to Sherman' (28/10/1977), *Thatcher Foundation Archive*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Vaizey, *Breach*, p. 5.

¹⁶ J. Vaizey, *Scenes from Institutional Life and Other Writings* (London, 2nd Ed., 1986).

¹⁷ J. Vaizey, 'Inquest on a Movement', *Encounter* (January, 1980), p. 84.

¹⁸ A. Maude, *The Common Problem: A Policy for the Future* (London, 1969), p. 41, 104-05; M. Thatcher, 'Interview for Woman's Own' (23/09/1987), *Thatcher Foundation Archive* [THCR 5/2/262].

'accepted throughout society, the techniques by which they might be put into practice could be discovered through the operation of the social sciences.' From the vantage point of the 1980s, however, this seemed 'fundamentally misconceived.' No political or social objectives could command 'widespread let alone universal consent' and social scientists have provided no evidence that they have made 'any discoveries of any significance which can be translated into social engineering.'¹⁹ Vaizey's intellectual output in the years before his death in 1984 sought to critique the concept of social engineering as well as the social engineers themselves, once so central to his social democratic politics. In the process his commitment to meritocracy was assailed on all sides.²⁰ Where Vaizey had once thought experts like himself, or 'social engineers', could 'know' or 'understand' society and social change, he now felt that despite the work of

generations of criminologists, little more is known about Crime than that it is largely committed by adolescent males, a fact which was first discovered over a century ago. There is no commonly accepted technique for dealing with widespread Unemployment or Inflation which are the current economic problems which face Western societies. There is no acceptable definition of social class, let alone any understanding of the processes by which the social structure of society is changed or, even if there were such understanding, how the change might be altered by a process of legislative enactments and executive enforcement of the legislation.²¹

The idea that political agents could transform Britain's social order into a meritocracy, and that this would become more meritocratic or egalitarian over time – a view at the heart of the meritocratic moment and Vaizey's ideological morphology in the early 1960s – had evaporated amongst the competing distributional claims of the 1970s. In Vaizey's Oakeshottian worldview, even agreeing on an objective or widely-accepted definition of 'merit' would prove impossible. The party-political movement of Vaizey, and the epistemological shift it resulted from, highlights how the concept of meritocracy had become eclipsed by the end of the 1970s. Vaizey's personal trajectory, as well as those of other prominent social democrats, demonstrates the contingent nature of their commitment to meritocracy in the post-war period, a commitment slowly eroded by their interpretation of social change in the late 1960s and 1970s. While the concept was useful for reconciling the fundamental tension between liberty and equality within social democratic thought, by 1979 other concepts proved more capable. Performance in the market as a determinant of an individual's rewards spoke to Vaizey's concerns. If Vaizey

¹⁹ Vaizey, 'Inquest', p. 84.

²⁰ J. Vaizey, *Capitalism and Socialism: A History of Industrial Growth* (London, 1981).

²¹ Vaizey, 'Inquest', p. 84.

read the 1970s as a moment when the sectional claims of producer groups – chief among them the trade unions – sought inflated rewards in contravention of meritocratic principles, then the market appeared to offer a non-political, impersonal mechanism of distribution. Vaizey's endorsement may appear as a minor footnote in Thatcherism's political triumph, yet his decision to join Thatcher's Conservatives can be considered a microcosm of the eclipse of meritocracy and the rise of the market.

As discussed in the previous chapter, several distributive logics competed for primacy throughout the 1970s. The rise of Thatcherism should not be read, therefore, as an inevitable development. The rise of a popular, aspirational form of individualism should be seen as growing out of post-war social democracy rather than rising in opposition to it. For the likes of Robinson, Braithwaite, Thomlinson and Schofield this could have led to the ascendancy of a form of left-wing politics which promised greater equality.²² On this reading, social trends associated with the 1980s become exploited or managed rather than created by Thatcher. While being alive to historical contingencies can help us disentangle some of the bolder claims, largely perpetuated by Thatcherites, that the 1980s witnessed a 'revolution' based on popular demands for greater choice and freedom, historians must also grapple with *why* Thatcherism triumphed over its ideological competitors. Historians have highlighted the rise of new ideological constellations on the Left and the survival of social democracy into the 1990s, but it was with the ascendancy of Thatcherism that market logic became ensconced as the primary mechanism through which political agents and intellectuals thought about the distribution of rewards. By the end of the decade something significant about British society had changed, and while others tried, it was Thatcher herself who proved best placed to articulate and manage developing social trends – whether growing demands for individual self-determination, anger at 'the Establishment' or disillusionment with meritocracy – and provide a new framework or paradigm for understanding and interpreting British society in the 1980s and beyond.²³ This is not to argue, however, that competing logics disappeared or were subsumed under the rubric of Thatcherism. Just as the meritocratic settlement of the post-war period can be characterised as a moment of deferral, so can the rise of the market. As will be explored below, while market logic appeared to offer the best mechanism through which to distribute rewards, reconcile equality and liberty, and legitimise inequalities in the 1980s, it failed to

²² E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & N. Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the Crisis of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History* 28, (2017), pp. 302-03; G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019).

²³ J. Lawrence, 'Paternalism, Class and the British Path to Modernity', in S. Gunn & J. Vernon (Eds.), *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (Berkeley, CA., 2011), p. 164.

fundamentally 'solve' these perennial questions.²⁴ The concept of 'the market' had to be decontested and filtered through a diverse range of ideological morphologies. The market, therefore, meant different things to different political agents: for some a mechanism to restore responsibility and morality, for others a vehicle for realising greater freedom and liberty.

Thatcherism has been analysed with a wide range of methodological tools and through a variety of lenses. It has been studied, for example, through the utterances of Margaret Thatcher, her personal biography or political thought; by considering the ideological output of the Conservative Party or Conservative ministers thought to have influenced Thatcher or been sympathetic to her worldview; and by eliding neoliberals and conservatives into one large grouping committed to identical ideological ends.²⁵ Until recently much of the historiography took Thatcherism's language of revolution at face value.²⁶ Thatcherites were said to have, in the words of Ian Gilmour, 'inserted into Conservative policy an ideological, if not religious, fervour and a dogmatic tone that had previously been lacking.'²⁷ This approach often involves defining an 'eternal' conservative doctrine with which to compare and contrast Thatcherism. For Gilmour, Thatcher's creed was an aberration, yet for others like Norman Barry, Thatcher has a 'greater claim to be part of the pantheon of conservative traditionalists' than those 'tame adherents' of the post-war consensus.²⁸ As was noted above, however, historians are now more sceptical of these claims, and are interested in tracing exact areas of continuity or discontinuity between Thatcherism and previous varieties of conservatism.²⁹ In some approaches this involves identifying a 'largely submerged' laissez-faire or neoliberal strand of conservatism associated with figures such as Enoch Powell, Peter Thorneycroft and Richard Law.³⁰ Despite these interpretations, however, there remains a tendency to elide the terms 'new right', 'neoliberalism' and Thatcherism when analysing the ideology of

²⁴ D. Blackburn, 'Penguin Books and the Marketplace for Ideas', in L. Black, H. Pemberton & P. Thane (Eds.), *Reassessing 1970s Britain* (Manchester, 2013), p. 242

²⁵ P. Riddell, *The Thatcher Government* (Oxford, 1985); S.R. Letwin, *The Anatomy of Thatcherism* (London, 1992).

²⁶ E.A. Reitan, *The Thatcher Revolution: Margaret Thatcher, John Major, Tony Blair and the Transformation of Modern Britain, 1979-2001* (Oxford, 2003); G. Fry, *The Politics of the Thatcher Revolution: An Interpretation of British Politics, 1979-1990* (Basingstoke, 2008). For challenges to this, see: Robinson, Schofield, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite & Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories'; S. Brooke, 'Living in New Times: Historicising 1980s Britain', *History Compass*, 12/1 (2014), pp. 20-32.

²⁷ I. Gilmour, *Dancing with Dogma: Britain under Thatcherism* (London, 1992), p. 6.

²⁸ N. Barry, *The New Right* (London, 1987), p. 28.

²⁹ S. Evans, 'The Not So Odd Couple: Margaret Thatcher and One Nation Conservatism', *Contemporary British History*, 23/1 (2009), pp. 103-04.

³⁰ C. Cooper, 'Little Local Difficulties: Peter Thorneycroft, the 1958 Treasury Resignations and the Origins of Thatcherism', *Contemporary British History*, 25/2 (2011), p. 228; E.H.H. Green, 'Thatcher: An Historical Perspective', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 9 (1999), p. 41; K. Hickson, 'Lord Coleraine: The Neglected Prophet of the New Right', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 14/2 (2009), pp. 173-87; C. Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 332.

Thatcherites.³¹ In reality these group formations are best characterised as a complicated mix of at times overlapping, at other times contradictory, ideological positions. The distinctions both between and within them remain under-theorised. Conceptual history can help us out of this methodological bind. By exploring Thatcherism with the tools of conceptual history we can begin to trace its ideological contours and evaluate its reach and limits with more accuracy. If we imagine Thatcherism as an ideological map made up of various concepts, we can begin to analyse how different ideologies – from Hayekian neoliberals, to anti-permissive conservatives, and even extending to disillusioned social democrats like Vaizey – all overlapped at certain junctures with the Thatcherite project and could find reasons for endorsing elements of its programme. We should see Thatcherism, therefore, as a 'pathway through a diverse array of neoliberal ideas' and recognise that it reflected particular strains of neoliberalism which were compatible with the Thatcherite's specific reading of their conservative inheritance.³²

Conceptual approaches help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of neoliberalism and the areas of its interaction with, and departure from, Thatcherism. If the last chapter analysed the 1970s as a marketplace of ideas characterised by competing distributive logics, this chapter explores how these different pathways were gradually closed off as the market became the hegemonic concept for approaching the distribution of rewards. It begins by exploring Thatcherism's relationship with social class. Whereas in the immediate post-war decades meritocracy was seen as a mechanism to contain class conflict, by the start of the 1980s it was blamed for unleashing it. The meritocracy, it was argued, had unleashed unrealistic material expectations and triggered the distributive grab of the 1970s. In seeking to restore authority and legitimacy to Britain's social order, Thatcherites looked to the family unit and sought to insulate its autonomy to transmit privilege from the radical conception of equality of opportunity at the heart of meritocracy. The second section evaluates Thatcherism's attack on the professional ethic which lay at the heart of the meritocratic moment. For Thatcher, professionalism was associated with the triumph of 'producer interests' over those of the consumer, bureaucratic over-reach and the inefficiency of a technocratic, corporate state. In its place the likes of Keith Joseph constructed the ideal of the entrepreneur. Where the professional engaged in cautious, rational and empirical judgements, the entrepreneur acted on instinct, taking risks to exploit market opportunities and generating economic growth in the process. Finally, the chapter traces the consequences of Thatcherism's embrace of the market for thinking about the

³¹ As Robert Ledger argues, 'the reality is far more complex', see: R. Ledger, *Neoliberal Thought and Thatcherism: A Transition from Here to There?* (New York, 2018).

³² A. Davies, J. Freeman, & H. Pemberton, 'Everyman a Capitalist or Free to Choose? Exploring the Tension within Thatcherite Individualism', *The Historical Journal*, 61/2 (2017), pp. 24-25.

distribution of rewards. In seeking to restore authority and legitimacy to state action by reducing its responsibilities, Thatcherism sought to curtail the intrusive power of equality of opportunity. The state would no longer be responsible for underpinning meritocratic outcomes or for discriminating between claims of talent and those afforded by hereditary advantages. Thatcherites did, therefore, take onboard much of Hayek's critique of the notion of a 'just reward' or a meritocratic distribution of incomes. They did not absorb these claims completely, however. While Hayek warned against connecting market-generated rewards with claims to 'merit', Thatcherism had its own priorities. For Thatcher it was crucial to restore a link between reward and effort, especially after the crisis of the 1970s and the irrational distributive effects of inflation. At the start of the 1980s the market appeared as the best mechanism to achieve this. The coating of outcomes generated by the market with the residual language of meritocracy, however, was to have a profound effect on the nature of inequality well into the twenty-first century.

(5.2) The Death of Class and the Triumph of Meritocracy?

In June 1979, just over a month after the Conservative Party achieved a modest 43 seat majority in the General Election, *The New York Review of Books* published a series of articles from the likes of Noel Annan, Hugh Trevor-Roper and Kingsley Amis interpreting 'Thatcher's Victory'.³³ Many of the contributors highlighted as central to this victory the shifting and antagonistic nature of Britain's class system in the 1970s. 'People now', Annan claimed, 'no longer are so keen to see that the lowest paid are paid better.' For at least a decade 'they have seen differentials for the skilled eroded, foremen paid less than the men they supervise, management become an occupation to avoid, an ill-rewarded life of endless quarrelling with shop stewards.' Whereas Heath and Thatcher emerged from the same lower-middle-class origin, the latter 'does not believe as Heath did that Tories should heal the rift between the classes.' For Annan, Thatcher 'shows no concern for the unemployed, she wants the successful to be rewarded for success.' Her victory was about trying to 'return to a past when hard work, self-reliance and respect for contracts were honoured', a past characterised by an absence of 'do-gooding and feather-bedding'.³⁴ Kingsley Amis preferred to focus on Thatcher's personal style and background. While 'British middle-class intellectuals' thought her 'middle-class ways' would 'put the working-class off her', it was the latter that had swung the election in the Tories' favour. Amis lambasted the *New Statesman* for claiming, even after the election,

³³ K. Amis, N. Annan, R. Dworkin, K. Miller, H. Trevor-Roper, E. Rothschild & A.J.P. Taylor, 'Some Views of Mrs Thatcher's Victory', *The New York Review of Books*, 26/11 (28/06/1979).

³⁴ Annan, 'Thatcher's Victory'.

that 'Mrs Thatcher was born to the purple.' Her father, Amis argued, 'was a small shopkeeper but he left not less than \$15,000, the bloody plutocrat.'³⁵ Amis's contribution provoked a sharp exchange in the letters section with the *New Statesman's* editor Bruce Page. Page claimed that while his magazine had not suggested she was 'born to the purple' they had sought to provide a corrective to

the usual rubbish in which Mrs Thatcher is presented as a glittering meritocrat who fought her own way up to the wealth from poverty, we showed that (a) she was, like Mr Amis himself, born into a relatively well-off section of society, and (b) that she displayed little professional merit either as a scientist or a lawyer, and (c) that she acquired her wealth by the fine old means of marrying it.³⁶

Page's response reveals some of meritocracy's associations acquired during the meritocratic moment: the linear movement from one class position to another; the desire to separate class advantage from objective 'merit'; and most importantly, the connection with the professional ethic and careers such as science or law. Amis fired back that while 'only an idiot' would present Thatcher as a 'glittering meritocrat', she did 'rise to the highest office by her own efforts, not through her family's wealth or position.'³⁷ These exchanges highlight how central Thatcher's personal status as a meritocrat was when intellectuals and commentators were explaining the Conservative victory and its apparent capture of working-class voters from the Labour Party. Page's scepticism of the new Prime Minister's meritocratic credentials has largely been subsumed in the historiography below interpretations which laud Thatcher's rise from provincial grocer's daughter to the top of the political tree as an explicit triumph of meritocracy. She represented something, we are told, the Tories had not seen before: 'a persuasive meritocrat.'³⁸ In many ways these interpretations are accurate. Thatcher followed the archetypal path of the aspiring meritocrat, rising from the grammar school ladder to the University of Oxford before embarking on a career as a chemist. Here, however, conceptual confusion creeps in. While Thatcher could be characterised as a meritocrat – i.e. she may have benefited from meritocratic policies – this does not mean that she herself or the ideology she propagated embraced the principles of meritocracy. Central to this distinction is Thatcherism's conception of class politics and its reading of the distributive crisis of the 1970s.

³⁵ Amis, 'Thatcher's Victory'.

³⁶ B. Page, 'Letters: The Rise of Mrs Thatcher', *The New York Review of Books*, 26/13 (16/08/1979).

³⁷ K. Amis, 'Reply to B. Page', *The New York Review of Books*, 26/13 (16/08/1979).

³⁸ Moore, *Thatcher*, p. 140.

While the notion of an affluent society, holding out the promise of greater economic growth and increasing professional employment, helped to contain significant class-based, distributive challenges in the immediate post-war decades, the 1970s were characterised by the rising salience of class. The classless promise of the meritocracy collapsed amongst competing pressure groups, organised, it seemed, to extract distributive claims above and beyond shared notions of objective merit. This explosion of pressure groups extracting 'unfair' rewards from the corporate state – most prominently analysed in this period through the lens of the trade union movement – is often characterised as being contained or defeated by a combination of Thatcherism, a failure of the political Left and structural changes in the global economy during the 1980s.³⁹ Thatcher herself certainly appeared to offer an explicit anti-class message in the run up to the 1979 General Election

I hate these labels, I really hate them. I simply don't understand why you can't look at a person quite apart from their social background for what they are, for what they can do, for what contributions they can make.⁴⁰

The Labour Party was left having to explain why this messaging appeared to resonate with a large chunk of their potential voters, and why by the 1983 General Election more trade unionists than non-trade unionists voted Conservative.⁴¹ Over the course of the 1980s it was politicians such as Neil Kinnock, Bryan Gould and Roy Hattersley who would grapple with this question most persuasively as the Bennite Left became increasingly marginalised.⁴² While not always agreeing with Kinnock's prescriptions, 'New Times' theorists such as Martin Jacques and John Urry, loosely grouped around the journal *Marxism Today*, shared much of his analysis of the post-Fordist economy and the decline of collectivism.⁴³ These interpretations received further intellectual support from a diverse range of academic disciplines including economics, sociology and history. Here, inequalities of race and gender appeared more salient and to point to a collapse in the connection between class structure and class consciousness.⁴⁴ This dealignment was said to stem from the emerging priorities of a post-industrial society. While this was most

³⁹ E.J. Evans, *Thatcher and Thatcherism* (London, 4th Ed., 2019), p. 41; A. Hindmoor, *What's Left Now? The History and Future of Social Democracy* (Oxford, 2018); A. Gamble, *The Free Economy and the Strong State: The Politics of Thatcherism* (Basingstoke, 2nd Ed., [1988] 1994).

⁴⁰ J. Lawrence & F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher and the Decline of Class Politics', in *Making Thatcher's Britain*, p. 141.

⁴¹ H.T. Himmelweit, P. Humphreys & M. Jaeger, *How Voters Decide* (London, [1981] 1985), p. 208.

⁴² N. Kinnock, *The Future of Socialism* (London, 1986), p. 2; B. Gould, *Socialism and Freedom* (London, 1986); R. Hattersley, *Choose Freedom: The Future for Democratic Socialism* (London, 1987)

⁴³ F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 'Discourses of Class in Britain in New Times', *Contemporary British History*, 31/2 (2017), pp. 294-95.

⁴⁴ See for example: T.N. Clark, S.M. Lipset & M. Rempel, 'The Declining Political Significance of Social Class', *International Sociology*, 8/3 (1993), p. 293, 313.

prominently theorised by Daniel Bell in 1973, in the increasingly globalised world of the 1980s and 1990s it became a truism at the heart of a range of important sociological texts. Whereas Bell had argued that the post-industrial society was 'in its logic a meritocracy', later discussions placed the global market at its centre.⁴⁵ For these theorists, society should be characterised less as a community of producers and more as a marketplace of consumers.⁴⁶ While the likes of Bourdieu claimed this shift required a reformulated class analysis, one which focused on the role of cultural knowledge in social hierarchies, others argued that the consumerism of the post-industrial society made class redundant.⁴⁷ The latter, most prominently expressed by Stephen Crook, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, preferred to talk in terms of status and a society characterised less by an individual's location in 'systems of production and reproduction' but on their 'access to codes' in the sphere of consumption.⁴⁸ Unlike the apparent class biases of the meritocracy, the consumer-oriented post-industrial society would encourage those attributes which 'cannot be accumulated, reproduced or inherited' and, while it may give rise to 'well recognised and sometimes oppressive inequalities', these will not be 'divisive or enduring'.⁴⁹

Yet this narrative was as much ideological construction as it was a fixed reality.⁵⁰ While structural social change may well have resulted in a decline of class, this was also the product of politicians, academics and intellectuals failing to successfully mobilise such identities.⁵¹ More importantly, it was a consequence of significant reordering amongst Britain's mainstream ideological traditions. While Thatcherism clearly shared much of the analysis deployed by Pakulski and Waters, as Florence-Sutcliffe Braithwaite and Jon Lawrence have shown Thatcherites sought to replace class with a 'new popular constituency' and in doing so mobilised a 'mutable language of "ordinariness", hard-working respectability and family-centred individualism'.⁵² In this sense Thatcher created, defined and mobilised a particular type of voter as much as she tapped into pre-existing sentiments. The Thatcherite view of class, therefore, was often messy and

⁴⁵ D. Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York, 1973), p. 409; D. Cohen, 'The Era of Ruptures', in his *Three Lectures on Post-Industrial Society* [Trans. W. McCuaig] (London, 2009), p. 12.

⁴⁶ A. Offer, 'British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950-2000', *Contemporary British History*, 22/4 (2008), pp. 537-71.

⁴⁷ P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA., [1979] 1984), pp. 358-60; H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London, 1978), pp. 15-19; J. Pakulski & M. Waters, *The Death of Class* (London, 1996).

⁴⁸ S. Crook, J. Pakulski & M. Waters, *Postmodernization: Change in Advanced Society* (London, 1992), pp. 133-35.

⁴⁹ Crook, Pakulski & Waters, *Postmodernization*, p. 135.

⁵⁰ K.C. Vogt, 'The Post-Industrial Society: From Utopia to Ideology', *Work, Employment and Society*, 30/2 (2016), pp. 366-76.

⁵¹ G. Stedman-Jones, 'Why is the Labour Party in a Mess?', in his *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 239-56.

⁵² Lawrence & Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher', p. 142.

contradictory. It sought, on the one hand, to eschew class categories completely by tapping into a decline of deference as well as popular notions of classlessness and 'ordinariness'. The 'vernacular emphasis on ordinariness' was increasingly opposed to 'politics' and could be mobilised in both 'an egalitarian, anti-privilege direction' or in a 'populist, anti-establishment one'.⁵³ On the other hand, Thatcherism leaned heavily on traditional notions of a middle class and a corresponding set of values which were perceived to be submerged or under threat. These values were also open to interpretation, but the need for their reassertion stemmed from a common reading of the 1970s as a decade where Britain's middle class, was at risk of 'proletarianization'.⁵⁴ A potent symbol of this threat was the proliferation of middle-class pressure groups, many of which were mobilised in response to the perceived rise in organised working-class power. Thatcherites offered strong support to these campaigns, including the National Association for Freedom, the Middle Class Association or the National Viewers and Listeners Association, and sought to remould the Conservative Party to make it more reflective of the values these groups were said to represent.⁵⁵

Meritocracy can help historians to define Thatcher's relationship with class politics in greater detail and with more precision. Thatcherism's particular reading of the distributive crisis of the 1970s, emphasising the failure or impossibility of state authorities to manage or judge the individual merit of competing claims on the corporate state, had a profound effect on meritocracy's promise to nullify class conflict. For a diverse range of Thatcherites, a significant part of enhancing state authority lay in restoring the 'social utility of classes'.⁵⁶ Whereas Thatcher sought to do away with class labels, stemming from her faith in the universality of middle-class values, Lord Hailsham sought to distinguish between 'class antagonism' and the 'social utility' of classes 'left out in the cold':

A class structure is not incompatible with nationhood. Nor are great differences in wealth. In 1914 British society was markedly divided into social classes, far more so than we are now. At the same time we were a nation and

⁵³ In many ways the increasing salience of 'authenticity, individuality and ordinariness' was the result of 'the major tranche of upward social mobility' which accompanied the expansion of white collar work for men and women in the years between 1945 and 1970. F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics, and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 6-7.

⁵⁴ For a good overview of this debate, see: G. Marshall & D. Rose, 'Proletarianization in the British Class Structure?', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 39/4 (1988), pp. 498-518. As the authors note, 'just as the embourgeoisement formed the lynchpin for debates in class analysis during the affluent years of the early 1960s so has the argument about proletarianization of the class structure come to hold centre-stage during the recessionary 1980s.'

⁵⁵ See for example, N. Nugent, 'The National Association for Freedom', in R. King & N. Nugent (Eds.), *Respectable Rebels: Middle Class Campaigns in Britain in the 1970s* (London, 1979), pp. 76-100.

⁵⁶ Lord Hailsham [Q. Hogg], *The Dilemma of Democracy: Diagnosis and Prescription* (London, 1978), p. 31.

far more united than today [...] In every real sense class distinctions as we knew them have almost gone [...] Yet it is precisely in the face of this dramatic shift towards classlessness that the class warriors are more vocal than ever before.⁵⁷

For Hailsham, the meritocratic promise of a classless society which he had supported in the immediate post-war period had failed. As it took root it served to undermine the deferential authority of Britain's traditional hierarchy and to magnify any injustices propagated on the basis of class, resulting in the uncontrolled distributive grab of the 1970s. In short, meritocracy had produced a legitimisation crisis for class-based inequality. A similar view was expressed more explicitly by the Thatcherite 'guru' Sir Keith Joseph. His 1979 book *Equality*, co-authored with the historian Jonathan Sumption, was a polemical, Hayekian-informed critique of the state-led social mobility of the post-war decades. This mobility was 'no palliative to inequality' because 'people do not like deferring to those who are much the same as themselves.' It is a lot more comforting, the authors argued,

to think that one is poor because one belongs to the class whose lot is poor. This is partly because people do not value each other by their skill at work or by the strength of the market in demand for their services [...] in a prosperous meritocratic society there is hardly anything which is not potentially attainable, and almost everything is therefore in principle of being envied. To that extent, class barriers palliate the effect of inequality [...] As society moves slowly towards classlessness and cultural homogeneity one would, therefore, expect to find a growing resentment of income differences. The history of Britain since the war bears this out in the most striking fashion.⁵⁸

Here, the meritocracy fostered an unrealistic acquisitiveness and encouraged envy. For Joseph, a state constantly responsible for sieving and sorting its population encouraged social conflict. By connecting the classless promise of the meritocracy and its demise with the rise of class conflict in the 1970s, Thatcherite indictments overlapped with socialist and New Left critiques of the meritocrats in the late 1960s. As we explored in Chapter Four, these critics attacked the meritocracy for perpetuating the rule of bureaucratic elites and for fostering inequalities connected to class, race and gender.⁵⁹ While Thatcher certainly did not share this nascent identity politics, at times her populist

⁵⁷ Hailsham, *Dilemma*, p. 29, 30.

⁵⁸ Joseph & Sumption, *Equality*, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁹ L. Williams, 'Ideological Parallels between the New Left and the New Right', *The Social Science Journal*, 24/3 (1987), pp. 317-18.

railings against the 'Establishment' condemned the oligopolistic tendencies of the meritocracy in a similar vein to radical figures on the Left. Any overlap, however, ended here. Whereas the socialist Left's indictment of meritocracy pointed towards a more egalitarian, democratic politics, Thatcherism offered a substantially limited form of equality of opportunity which would restore authority or legitimacy to social outcomes. Two components were central to this reconceptualisation of equality of opportunity: firstly, that it would be best delivered through the market; and secondly, that pre-existing advantages, privileges or capital brought to this market should not impact on the social outcomes it delivers.

The Thatcherite interpretation of equality of opportunity is best viewed through the renewed focus on the 'family unit' in 1980s Britain.⁶⁰ In the immediate post-war decades the inequalities generated by hereditary advantage were characterised as undemocratic, unjust and inefficient, and both conservatives and social democrats supported limiting the scope of the family in order to create a meritocracy. This was enshrined in an expansive definition of equality of opportunity, one aiming to ensure that each child had the right to acquire intelligence. Despite his ideological differences with Thatcherism, a significant part of Michael Young's rationale for writing *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958 was as a response to an intellectual politics which considered the family 'as being passé, finished.'⁶¹ The notion that the state could or should be able to arrive at a judgement of objective merit, one free from the influences of class background or hereditary privilege, was central to the meritocratic moment. By the start of the 1980s, however, this position appeared profoundly utopian. For Thatcher, it was the family which should be considered 'the basic unit of society' and strengthening it central to the broader project of protecting the middle class, restoring responsibility and building a property owning democracy.⁶² Family stood in opposition to state bureaucracy and the 'needs' of an ideologically constructed notion of 'society'. Whereas 'ordinary human beings', Thatcher argued prior to the 1979 General Election, will make vast sacrifices for the well-being 'of those near and dear to them', state support for 'what it calls the "socially disadvantaged" is limited by what politicians regard at any moment as "the taxable capacity of the community."' For Thatcher the state had 'stripped the family' of 'so many of its rights and duties', and this explained the 'deplorably inadequate condition' of health and education provision despite record spending levels.⁶³

⁶⁰ J. Pilcher & S. Wagg, 'Introduction: Thatcher's Children?', in their *Thatcher's Children?: Politics, Childhood and Society in the 1980s and 1990s* (London, 1996), pp. 1-7; M. Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York, 2017), p. 139.

⁶¹ M. Young, 'Looking Back on Meritocracy: Interview with G. Dench (22/03/1994)', *The Political Quarterly*, 77/1 (2006), p. 76.

⁶² M. Thatcher, 'Speech at Conservative Party Conference (17/10/1981)', *Thatcher Foundation Archive* [CCOPR 786/81]

⁶³ M. Thatcher, 'The Moral Basis of a Free Society', *The Daily Telegraph* (16/05/1978), p. 16.

Disillusioned social democrats like Vaizey and Michael Shanks shared much of this analysis. In 1978 Shanks reflected that in the immediate post-war decades Britain's intellectual politics was dominated by those who felt that social problems could be solved 'by techniques of social engineering and the application of ever greater doses of social support.' In many cases governments thought

they were applying once-and-for-all aid to solve a specific problem, only to discover that this solution produced a new set of problems, so that the commitment became an unending one [...] The State, in other words, does not cut a very convincing figure as Santa Claus. Plainly much of the tasks performed, at great cost, by well-meaning officials could be much better done by self-reliant local communities and by extended families.⁶⁴

The narrower vision of equality of opportunity this position entailed had major consequences for the concept of meritocracy. As will be explored in greater depth below, while Thatcherites and social democrats occasionally utilised the language of meritocracy to bolster social outcomes, on the whole they found themselves culturally and logically restricted from restoring the concept as an adjacent principle in their respective morphologies. In the immediate post-war decades the state saw its role as marginalising the drivers of hereditary privilege in order to accurately determine the extent to which a social outcome was due to objective talent, function or hard work. In short, conservatives and social democrats alike thought it not only desirable, but possible, to align reward with merit. As their views on the family make clear, Thatcherites thought it impossible and undesirable to separate out the advantages of hereditary inheritance or class advantage from social outcomes.⁶⁵ In limiting the ability of the family to transmit advantage to their children, the state had undermined the prized value of individual responsibility, overburdening the state and threatening social harmony in the process. Thatcherism built on critiques of the meritocracy which emerged from both the Right and Left in the late 1960s. Although Thatcherism claimed the market would be blind to distinctions of race, gender or class, it had little to say about the pre-existing advantages individuals or collectivities brought to the market-place. In this formulation Thatcherites still wanted the state to support the talented but it would no longer be responsible for seeking them out, sieving them, and delivering meritocratically 'just' outcomes. Social mobility gradually shifted from a collective or, more appropriately, a state-led and administered national project, to an individual one. This of course primarily benefited those already possessed of privilege or capital, namely the middle classes. In order to

⁶⁴ M. Shanks, *What's Wrong with the Modern World? Agenda for a New Society* (London, 1978), p. 92, 93-94.

⁶⁵ See for example: A. Maude, 'The Winning Classes – Review of *The English Middle Classes are Alive and Kicking* by Ian Bradley', *The Daily Telegraph* (11/02/1982), p. 12.

rescue this group from the 'proletarianization' they were said to have faced in the 1970s, Thatcherites were culturally restricted from returning to meritocratic themes. The distributive crisis of the 1970s was felt by the likes of Hailsham and Joseph, as well as social democrats like Vaizey, to stem directly from the collapse of the meritocracy. In relation to class, the failure of meritocracy to honour its ambitious promise to contain conflict served to hollow out the concept. The residual rhetoric of merit utilised by Thatcherites served as a gloss which obscured the precise nature of market-generated social outcomes.

(5.3) From Professional to Entrepreneur

If Thatcherism's conception of class politics, the role of the family and equality of opportunity stemmed from a desire to restore authority by limiting the activities of the state, this process had consequences for other important components central to the concept of meritocracy. As we discussed in Chapter Two, meritocracy was propelled by the notion of a professional ethic. In the immediate post-war decades this ethic was said to characterise those who worked in a whole host of public bodies, from welfare state professionals to academics, scientists and civil servants, and even encompassing businessmen and corporate employees. These professionals, it was widely argued, would use their expertise in the interests of the collective, to grow the economy and manage social change. By the end of the 1960s, however, professional bodies were under attack from both the Left and the Right. The former highlighted their implicit biases in relation to gender, race and class, as well as their bureaucratic centralisation which stifled democracy and led to calls for greater devolution and accountability, whether through enhanced democratic mechanisms at a local government level or in the workplace. The latter increasingly turned their ire on the corporate state and its ability to negotiate and contain competing claims from 'pressure groups' or 'producer interests'. The notion that professionals would grow the economy, distribute the national product justly and not seek a disproportionate share of rewards themselves, once so central to the epistemological consensus between Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democrats, was rebuked for not accurately capturing human nature. Thatcherism built on these critiques and, through the market, attempted to impart its own ethic in the form of entrepreneurship. The competitive entrepreneur was characterised as the key agent of economic growth. Where the professionals collectively utilised expertise, underpinned by academic or technical credentials, the individual entrepreneur was characterised as possessing an innate capacity for risk-taking. The decline of the professional ideal was to have a profound impact on understandings of meritocracy. If the meritocracy was characterised as 'personal' – i.e. it involved professionals using their

expertise to make judgements about the 'merit' of individuals or collectivities – the market was impersonal, its decisions were said to be anonymous and 'natural'. In this sense no one individual or agency, let alone the state, could take responsibility for social outcomes on the basis of justice or fairness and, in a similar process to that which characterised its classless promise, the decline of the professional ideal contributed to meritocracy's hollowing out over the course of the 1970s and 1980s.

In the immediate post-war decades the notion of an amateurish 'Establishment', stifling progressive change and contributing to national decline, dominated Britain's intellectual politics. Diagnoses of the structural weaknesses of Britain's economy, politics and culture accelerated in the 1970s and contributed to Thatcher's electoral victory in 1979.⁶⁶ As part of a reaction against this decline, Thatcherism was often portrayed as posing a distinct threat to the idea of a 'traditional', 'gentlemanly' ruling class.⁶⁷ For example, David Marquand claimed the Thatcher Governments, in the name of economic liberalism

made war on traditional institutions and traditional elites. The victims of the Thatcher Blitzkrieg included not only the trade unions and local authorities, but the elite universities, the BBC, the old Tory grandees, the bench of bishops, the higher ranks of the Civil Service – all the interlocking networks that made up the old establishment.⁶⁸

Whereas attacks on the 'amateurish Establishment' in the late 1950s and early 1960s often came from professionals seeking to open these institutions up to expertise, the Thatcherite challenge sought to fundamentally transform their role in society by exposing them to the market and commercial considerations. In higher education, for example, Thatcher was seen by the likes of Noel Annan to challenge the very culture of the universities. The dons, who saw themselves as 'successors to the boffins and code-breakers in the war' and as a fundamental part of a 'civilised welfare state', were 'being told that commercial considerations came first.'⁶⁹ We should be wary, however, of taking Thatcherite accounts of a revolutionary attack on the bastions of traditional, gentlemanly

⁶⁶ B. Jackson & R. Saunders, 'Introduction: Varieties of Thatcherism', in their *Making Thatcher's Britain*, p. 18; M. Grimley, 'Thatcherism, Morality and Religion', in *Making Thatcher's Britain*, pp. 79-80.

⁶⁷ P. Dorey, *British Conservatism: The Politics and Philosophy of Inequality* (London, 2011), pp. 129-30; Letwin, *Anatomy*, p. 42; A. Gamble, 'The Entrails of Thatcherism', *New Left Review*, 1/198 (1992), pp. 117-28; Thatcherite attacks on the civil service play a particularly important role in this narrative, see for example: L. Chapman, *Your Disobedient Servant* (London, 1978); L. Castellani, *The Rise of Managerial Bureaucracy: Reforming the British Civil Service* (London, 2018), p. 31.

⁶⁸ D. Marquand, *The Progressive Dilemma: From Lloyd George to Blair* (London, 2nd Ed., 1999), p. 242.

⁶⁹ N. Annan, *The Dons: Mentors, Eccentrics and Geniuses* (London, 1999), p. 291.

power at face value.⁷⁰ A more accurate characterisation would be to consider this as part of a process of 'deprofessionalisation'.⁷¹ This process brought to an end the relatively high levels of social mobility, the product of ever-expanding professional, white-collar employment, which distinguished the immediate post-war decades. The loss of these opportunities, combined with a crumbling promotional ladder, deteriorating working conditions and a broader loss of status, resulted in significant downward occupational mobility even for those already employed in professional jobs.⁷²

Contemporary observers certainly considered the professions to be in significant decline by the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s.⁷³ As was highlighted in the previous chapter, scholars contrasted the high prestige and public trust engendered by professions in the immediate post-war period with the suspicion they encountered in the 1980s.⁷⁴ A host of reasons were cited for this, most commonly the idea of a more consumer-oriented public unwilling to defer wholeheartedly to experts or expertise.⁷⁵ Another Marxist-informed school considered deprofessionalisation a significant component of a process of 'proletarianization' which also threatened the middle classes.⁷⁶ These interpretations portrayed professional agents as enmeshed in bureaucratic procedures, subject to strict controls that routinised and deskilled their work.⁷⁷ While here 'proletarianization' focused on the notion of bureaucratisation, over the course of the 1980s the threat to the professions was gradually replaced in these critiques by the increasing commercialisation of much professional employment.⁷⁸ In the immediate post-war decades the professions were often theorised as a distinct social layer between capital and labour, largely thought of, however, as a progressive force committed to improving the lot of the latter. Yet by the end of the 1960s they were increasingly pulled in both directions. Alive to critiques from the Left in the 1970s, radical professionals sought to demystify their expertise in areas as diverse as medicine,

⁷⁰ E. Barrett, 'King Caz: Cazenove, Thatcherism, and the 1980s Financial Revolution', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30/1 (2019), p. 116.

⁷¹ For a good overview, see: E. Freidson, *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalisation of Formal Knowledge* (London, 1986), pp. 110-24.

⁷² C. de Bellaigue, H. Mills & E. Worth, 'Introduction: "Rags to Riches?" New Histories of Social Mobility in Modern Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 16/1 (2019), pp. 1-11.

⁷³ N. Toren, 'Deprofessionalisation and Its Sources', *Sociology of Work and Occupations*, 2 (1975), pp. 323-37.

⁷⁴ B. Barber, *The Logic and Limits of Trust* (New Brunswick, NJ., 1983).

⁷⁵ Freidson, *Professional Powers*, p. 110; On the decline of deference see: Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Decline*.

⁷⁶ M. Oppenheimer, 'The Proletarianization of the Professional', *Sociological Review Monograph*, 20 (1973), pp. 213-27; M.S. Larson, 'Proletarianization and Educated Labour', *Theory and Society*, 9 (January, 1980), pp. 131-75.

⁷⁷ C. Derber, 'The Proletarianization of the Professional: A Review Essay', in his *Professionals as Workers: Mental Labour in Advanced Capitalism* (Boston, MA, 1982), pp. 13-33.

⁷⁸ K. Russell & N. Abercrombie (Eds.), *Enterprise Culture* (London, 1991); H. Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society* (London, [1989] 2002), pp. 436-72.

welfare and education. In doing so they attempted to throw their lot in with the workers. As one recent account has argued, however, as the gap between the 'radical professionals' and the 'demobilised working class' failed to close by the end of the 1970s, 'the New Right stepped into the breach.' Defeated in this struggle, many of these young professionals retreated into consumerism and personal advancement, a transformation highlighted by the rise of the 'yuppie'.⁷⁹ As part of this 'retreat into consumerism' meritocratic professionals were portrayed as mirroring the oligopolistic, avaricious behaviour outlined by Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* two decades previously.⁸⁰

Thatcherism certainly sought to capitalise on those critiques which characterised politics as a 'gentlemanly pursuit', as well as the paternalism which often underpinned the professional ideal. In doing so it sought to demystify the power exercised by professionals and challenged the notion that they served a unified public good. For Thatcherites the notion that professional agents – whether operating in the welfare state, in planning departments or operating the machinery of the corporate state – would not seek to exponentially expand their bureaucratic remits as wide as possible, and in doing so hoard greater status, rewards and power, was to contradict generations of evidence about human nature. These attacks should be read as part of a neoliberal preference for the consumer over the producer as well as the growing salience of 'interest group' analysis. As Ben Jackson has argued, the public interest was construed by neoliberal theorists as being synonymous with the aggregated interests of consumers, whereas producer groups were regarded as seeking to advantage themselves at the consumers' expense.⁸¹ The main target of Thatcherism's ire was the trade union movement. The unions, it was argued, posed an existential challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the state. They increased unemployment and inequality, serving primarily as a mechanism whereby privileged groups of workers advantaged themselves relative to other groups of workers.⁸² In this sense, it was clear to influential neoliberal theorists like W.H. Hutt and Gary Becker that free-market policies which challenged the oligopolistic power of the unions was the best way to tackle discrimination and realise a

⁷⁹ G. Winant, 'Professional-Managerial Chasm: A Sociological Designation Turned into an Epithet and Hurlled like a Missile', *N+1* (10/10/2019), <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/professional-managerial-chasm/>, (Accessed: 02/11/2019); Lawrence, 'Paternalism', p. 164.

⁸⁰ See for example: P. Toynbee, 'Self-Made Class Wars', *The Guardian* (22/10/1987); J. Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility* (London, 2018), p. 151.

⁸¹ B. Jackson, 'Neoliberalism, Labour and Trade Unionism', in S. Springer, K. Birch & J. MacLeavy (Eds.), *Handbook of Neoliberalism* (New York, 2016), p. 267.

⁸² As Jackson notes, the empirical evidence to support this claim was less well explored by the likes of Hayek compared to its grounding in economic theory. Jackson, 'Labour and Trade Unionism', p. 264.

narrow conception of the classless society.⁸³ A further strand of neoliberal thought argued for the abolishment of the distinction between labour and capital. The likes of Theodore Schultz claimed that knowledge acquired by workers should be considered as a form of capital investment, similar to spending on machinery or equipment.⁸⁴ As Daniel Ussishkin has argued in his recent study of morale, work 'ceased to be considered an arena for the manufacture of collective life or proper forms of democratic citizenship.' Thatcherites sought to remodel the workplace as a space for 'personal growth and development along a consumerist model, rather than an arena of collective production.'⁸⁵

Thatcherism's attack on 'producer interests' challenged the notion that politics was a 'benign activity' and that social stability was secured by permitting a plurality of groups to operate in an almost unconstrained manner in the political system, a fundamental assumption at the heart of the corporate state.⁸⁶ As Vaizey's critique highlighted, this posed a broader epistemological challenge to the notion of social engineering. Vaizey's concerns about the nature of 'bureaucratic power' as 'uncontrollable and inherently working primarily for its own interests' overlapped with Thatcherite attempts to restore authority, individual choice and responsibility by limiting the nature and scope of state activity.⁸⁷ Speaking to the Zurich Economic Society in 1977 Thatcher attacked 'collectivists' who

may flatter themselves that wise men at the centre – with whom they identify – can make better decisions, and waste fewer resources than a myriad of individual decision-makers and independent organisations all over the country. Events in Britain have shown that, wise or not, those at the centre lack the knowledge, foresight and imagination required. They are overworked and overwhelmed. They are certainly surprised by events.⁸⁸

For Thatcher, there were no professionals, experts or meritocrats capable enough to administer the meritocracy. In a similar vein David Howell, Secretary of State for the Environment in Thatcher's first cabinet, posed a series of questions for democratic socialists

Who is to rule? Who is to judge whom, who is to decide the socialist priorities? [...] Which wise folk equipped to assess the value of other people's

⁸³ B. Jackson, 'Hayek, Hutt and the Trade Unions', in R. Leeson (Ed.), *Hayek: A Collaborative Biography, Part V: Hayek's Great Society of Free Men* (Basingstoke, 2015), pp. 167-68.

⁸⁴ Jackson, 'Labour and Trade Unionism', p. 267.

⁸⁵ D. Ussishkin, *Morale: A Modern British History* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 137-39.

⁸⁶ Barry, *New Right*, p. 74.

⁸⁷ Vaizey, 'Inquest', pp. 84-85.

⁸⁸ M. Thatcher, *In Defence of Freedom* (London, 1986), p. 25.

work? [...] Where are the lucky socialist supermen who will stand above it all, diverting and channelling these resources?⁸⁹

To expect 'wise men', propelled by a professional ideal, to distribute rewards according to merit was to significantly overestimate the motivations and capacities of human nature. Thatcherism wanted the state to sit above the fray of competing interests or pressure groups, to encourage families and individuals to be independent and responsible, and to rely on the market, rather than state-led authorities, to satisfy public needs.⁹⁰ Yet as Thatcher's official biographer notes, in the immediate post-war years she 'had a fairly strong belief in the capacity of Whitehall men and ideas to run the country in a humane and orderly way.'⁹¹ In a similar intellectual transmutation to Vaizey, for Thatcher, Thatcherism was a response to the 1970s. The professional approach, developed, administered and delivered by the meritocrats staffing the nation's universities, its schools, hospitals and government, amongst other sites of professional expertise, had failed. If critics targeted the lack of accountability over the power it wielded, Thatcherism's market had an answer: decisions about the distribution of rewards would be democratically decided according to the laws of supply and demand and the individual choices of millions of consumers. Similarly, if critics targeted its implicit biases in relation to gender, race or class, Thatcherism's market could also meet this challenge with an egalitarian response: the decisions of the market were said to be impersonal, anonymous and open to all regardless of background. In short, no group of 'wise men' or professional meritocrats would be administering the market: instead its judgements would be the product of every individual consumer. While there was always someone else accountable for the personal judgements of the meritocracy, in the impersonal market you only had yourself to blame.

In imagining who would thrive in this impersonal market Thatcherites constructed the ideal of the entrepreneur. As the work of Pemberton, Davies and Freeman on pension reform has shown, the value and economic utility of the entrepreneur was a central motif of Thatcherism's political and economic narratives.⁹² Thatcher herself, like many of her ministers, was personally attracted to the work of Corelli Barnett.⁹³ Barnett's *Audit of War*, published in 1986 as a sequel to 1972's *The Collapse of British Power*, condemned

⁸⁹ D. Howell, *Time to Move On: An Opening to the Future for British Politics* (London, 1976), p. 13.

⁹⁰ Gamble, *Free Economy*, p. 6.

⁹¹ Moore, *Thatcher*, p. 51.

⁹² Pemberton, Davies & Freeman, 'Everyman', pp. 477-501.

⁹³ D. Cannadine, 'Apocalypse When? British Politicians and British "Decline" in the Twentieth Century', in P. Clarke & C. Trebilcock (Eds.), *Understanding Decline: Perceptions and Realities of British Economic Performance* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 277; A. Denham & M. Garnett, *Keith Joseph* (London, 2001), p. 300.

Britain's irresponsible cultural elite for its anti-industrial values.⁹⁴ The likes of Keith Joseph certainly built on Barnett's critique:

The recent obsession with formal qualifications has obscured the fact, which the lives of these self-made millionaires bring out very clearly, that the enrichment of individuals has very much more to do with luck and with the strength of their motivation than the quality of their upbringing. There is no reason to suppose that intensity of motivation goes naturally with the material advance of a prosperous background.⁹⁵

Whereas in the early 1960s decline underpinned the conceptual rise and eventual fragmentation of meritocracy, in the late 1970s and early 1980s it was used as a rationale to promote the market. Joseph's sentiments suggested that if the state could not know what produced talent, the best it could do was to provide a loose framework, namely the market, through which talented individuals could 'emerge'.⁹⁶ Yet this formulation, through its disdain for the credentialism which underpinned much of Britain's professions, highlights the extent to which Thatcherites juxtaposed the qualities of the entrepreneur with those of the professional. The professional required the 'objective' judgements of institutional gatekeepers, usually in the form of credentials, whereas the entrepreneur was said to rely on intuitive knowledge. Where the professional was characterised by carefully considered, rational and empirical judgements, promoting stability and gradualism, the entrepreneur possessed unique capabilities to spot opportunities, taking decisions with significant risk which encouraged competition and fluidity. In contrast to the entrepreneur individually assuming responsibility for risk, the professionals were characterised as unaccountable, falling back on their, usually publically-funded, institutions to justify their mistakes.

The appeal of the entrepreneur also extended to social democrats. Michael Shanks, for example, had long championed the dynamic, competitive individual. Now he noted that 'entrepreneurship is indeed coming back into fashion. It accords with the spirit of the times, the prevailing distrust of large scale.'⁹⁷ As we explored in Chapter Three, for those who had made a career out of attacking Britain's aristocratic elite for its amateurism and complicity in national decline, elements of the entrepreneurial ideal were bound to appeal. In the first two books in his *Anatomy* series, the journalist Anthony Sampson

⁹⁴ As Paul Addison noted at the time of publication, Barnett held contradictory messages for Thatcherism in the way it pinned decline on the perpetuation of the Victorian values Thatcher held dear. P. Addison, 'Warfare and Welfare', *London Review of Books*, 8/13 (24/07/1986); C. Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972); C. Barnett, *The Audit of War: The Illusion and Reality of Britain as a Great Nation* (London, 1986).

⁹⁵ Joseph & Sumption, *Equality*, p. 34.

⁹⁶ Denham & Garnett, *Keith Joseph*, p. 9.

⁹⁷ M. Shanks, *Work and Employment in Post-Manufacturing Society* (Maastricht, 1981), pp. 24-26.

had contrasted the hereditary elite, and Britain's outdated institutions, with the promises of a meritocratic social order staffed by professional experts. His third book in the series, *New Anatomy of Britain*, was published in 1971 and castigated the meritocracy for failing to deliver on these promises. Over a decade later, in 1982, Sampson returned to anatomise Britain's elite in *The Changing Anatomy of Britain*.⁹⁸ In the intervening years he had become increasingly disillusioned with the Labour Party and its management of the corporate state, and became a founding member of the SDP in 1981.⁹⁹ *The Changing Anatomy of Britain* was dismissed by many reviewers as a tract for Sampson's new party, yet the text and its reception provide a useful lens through which to explore the rise of the entrepreneur as a cultural presence in Britain's intellectual politics.¹⁰⁰

In a stereotypically acerbic review, the conservative journalist Peregrine Worsthorne claimed that Sampson dare not reach the conclusion that Britain's traditional institutions have been more in touch with British life than those concocted during the 'egalitarian zeitgeist' of the early 1960s. This conclusion would 'make a nonsense of his whole approach.' No 'anatomist' can be expected to admit that 'what he took to be a corpse under dissection is in fact very much alive, particularly when the anatomist in question has made such a successful career out of pronouncing it dead, not once but four times.' The failure of meritocracy, long predicted by Worsthorne, was evident from Sampson's adverse comparisons between Thatcher, 'a modern meritocrat if ever there was one', and Lord Carrington or Sir Ian Gilmour, 'products of the very *ancien regime* which in 1982 he was so anxious to get rid of.'¹⁰¹ Alan Watkins in *The Listener* picked up on a similar shift in Sampson's cultural saviours. The book, Watkins claimed, highlighted how 'over the last twenty years' the 'demon squash players with diamond hard-brains have let Mr Sampson down.' Yet, in spite of this disappointment, Sampson 'must have his heroes.' *Changing Anatomy of Britain* showed how 'he has shifted his affections and loyalties from bureaucrats and organisers to what he variously calls entrepreneurs and tycoons.'¹⁰² In a similar vein *The Economist* noted that while this *Anatomy* still called for 'new kinds of people outside the old classes' they were characterised as those individuals who were able to capitalise on 'new opportunities, innovation and new markets abroad.' While the reviewer noted Sampson's SDP connections, they concluded by claiming, 'dare I say it? – he often sounds a lot like Mrs Thatcher!'¹⁰³

⁹⁸ A. Sampson, *The Changing Anatomy of Britain* (London, 1982).

⁹⁹ A. Sampson, *The Anatomist: The Autobiography of Anthony Sampson* (London, 2008), pp. 193-206.

¹⁰⁰ M. Rutherford, 'Sampson's Little England', *The Financial Times* (18/09/1982).

¹⁰¹ P. Worsthorne, 'Review of *Changing Anatomy of Britain* by Anthony Sampson', *The Spectator* (02/10/1982).

¹⁰² A. Watkins, 'Review of *Changing Anatomy of Britain*', *The Listener* (23/09/1982), pp. 22-23.

¹⁰³ Anonymous, 'Changing Anatomy of Britain', *The Economist* (02/10/1982), pp. 107-08.

Yet Sampson clearly felt conflicted about the rise of Thatcherism. Reflecting in his autobiography, he noted feeling

Disoriented and displaced in Thatcher's Britain: sitting on the middle ground I felt as if an earth tremor had opened up a wide crack beneath me. I was split between the two sides of the crack with an inevitable ambivalence. I welcomed the reinvigoration of business, the release of young energies and the assault on class barriers; but I was deeply disturbed by their replacement with the cruder divisions based on money and gross inequalities. Was this the only choice, between harsh money values on the right and defensive state socialism on the left?¹⁰⁴

Sampson clearly felt capable, however, of endorsing the entrepreneurial elements of Thatcherism. Like many Thatcherites, he connected the rise of the entrepreneur with a particular class background. The model entrepreneur for someone like Joseph was someone who begins with nothing, mortgaging his house, for example, to raise startup capital.¹⁰⁵ This vision of entrepreneurialism has been characterised as a 'volatile blend of thrift and risk', a tension at the heart of the Thatcherite project.¹⁰⁶ In a similar process to the previous discussion on class, Thatcherism sought to obscure or play down the origins of market-generated inequalities and the role played by luck or pre-existing capital. When articulating the rise of the entrepreneur, Thatcherites were keen to emphasise narratives of individual upward mobility, skill and the rhetoric of merit. The likes of Sampson sought to cling to the exceedingly limited meritocratic promise offered by the entrepreneurial ideal. Yet by the end of the 1980s it was clear that, just as the professionals had let Sampson down, so too had the entrepreneurs. In *The Midas Touch*, published in 1989, he critiqued the rise of 'prosperous communities' which have 'no direct economic interest in improving the condition of the underclass.' The 1980s witnessed the collapse of 'old assumptions about the permanence of corporations' as 'Conservative politicians and intellectuals' began 'reinstating the entrepreneur as a romantic hero, as a heroic loner battling amongst the complacent battalions, the reincarnation of the earlier tycoon.' In reality, however, this simply encouraged a 'small group of raiders' who 'personified a renewed and aggressive capitalism.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Sampson, *The Anatomist*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁵ Denham Garnett, *Keith Joseph*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁶ Pemberton, Davies & Freeman, 'Everyman', pp. 18-19.

¹⁰⁷ A. Sampson, *The Midas Touch: Money, People and Power from West to East* (London, 1989), pp. 30-32, 43.

(5.4) The Triumph of the Market

A central component of the post-war meritocratic moment was a distributive logic which sought to align rewards and merit. As we explored in the first half of this thesis, the free market, underpinned by the enlightened self-interest of consumers, remained a marginalised concept in Britain's intellectual politics in the immediate post-war decades. Market mechanisms could not ensure a correlation between an individual's reward and their contribution to the social good, and therefore, in the context of the 1950s and 1960s, would fail to produce democratically legitimate inequalities in the eyes of both social democrats and conservatives. A significant part of the market's appeal, its capacity to transmit information about the preferences and needs of consumers, sat ill at ease with a technocratic moment where these could be uncovered through empirical investigation and delivered by political action. At the heart of the idea that the state could and should control and determine rewards was an incomes policy. In responding to the irrational distributive effects of inflation, an incomes policy underpinned Heath's pay controls between 1972 and 1973 as well as the subsequent Labour Governments' 'Social Contract'. It remained an appealing and widely shared solution at the time of the 1979 General Election. For Michael Shanks the distributive politics of the 1970s represented a return to the laws of the jungle. The 'first social priority', Shanks argued a year before Thatcher's election victory, must be 'the restoration of economic order, based on a generally acceptable structure of disciplines.' This structure has to be created by 'agreement between the various groups which make up society', namely 'the major producer interests.' Shanks was determined that Britain could not leave decisions about how resources were allocated or which priorities it was going to follow to the 'impersonal forces of the market' or the 'conflicting self-interests of sectional pressure groups.' It required the creation of a 'Rational Society', one where 'the conflict of competing groups' was replaced by a 'consensus based on rational discussion and debate.'¹⁰⁸

The desire to establish a rational, consensual and socially just pattern to the distribution of rewards sounded remarkably similar to the arguments Shanks had put forth in *The Stagnant Society* nearly two decades earlier. By the end of the 1970s he remained, like many social democrats, unwilling to countenance the consequences for unemployment which the free reign of market mechanisms was felt to entail. As the Thatcher Government's early 'experiment' with monetarism plunged Britain into recession, with GDP shrinking by 2% in 1980 and unemployment reaching over three million by 1983, pleas for a change of course only grew louder.¹⁰⁹ The Labour M.P. Giles Radice, for example, argued that the 'Thatcher gamble' could not work without crippling 'social

¹⁰⁸ Shanks. *What's Wrong*, pp. 157-58.

¹⁰⁹ Jackson & Saunders, 'Varieties', pp. 5-6.

dislocation.' The solution lay not in abandoning tripartism in favour of a return to a 'non-existent free market' or of a 'massive extension of old-style public ownership', but in strengthening the capacity of the corporate state.¹¹⁰ Even those social democrats critical of the trade unions considered the range of economic options open to British Governments of any ideological persuasion as 'in fact very narrow.' For David Marquand it was clear that 'all recent Governments, irrespective of party, have sooner or later been obliged to operate an incomes policy of some kind.'¹¹¹ This pessimism was shared within Thatcher's Cabinet with the 'wets' shocked by their new government's attitude to incomes.¹¹² Jim Prior, Secretary of State for Employment between 1979 and 1981, believed

that we had to have a policy to encourage voluntary restraint, and that we would need a pay policy for people who served Government, both in the public sector generally and in the civil service [...] I used to sit in amazement as increases were sanctioned, not because they were acceptable, but because the new theory stated there would be no pay policy, since control of the money supply would force down the level of settlements.¹¹³

The lady, however, was not for turning. Growing doubts about the feasibility of state-led efforts to rationally determine or control incomes were increasingly shared across the spectrum as market logic came to dominate the distribution of rewards. Eventually all of the figures mentioned above, Marquand, Prior and even Radice joined the likes of Joseph, Vaizey and Thatcher in endorsing the laws of supply and demand at the heart of market logic. As Prior reflected in his memoirs in 1986, Thatcher often claimed that her great achievement 'was that no one talked any more about incomes policy.' The Thatcherites had, she claimed, 'finally killed off the myth that wages could be controlled by anything other than the market.' Prior's conclusion that 'as things have turned out, she was right and I was wrong' was widely shared by the end of the 1980s.¹¹⁴

The idea that the state should and could regulate incomes, maintain a set of employment differentials based on competing notions of 'skill', 'function' or 'effort', and contain wage claims within a set of rationally defined criteria gradually ebbed away as a solution to Britain's economic problems over the course of the 1980s. Its demise served to sever the connection between merit and reward which lay at the heart of the meritocratic moment. The implications of this severance were clear to some

¹¹⁰ G. Radice, *Community Socialism* (London, 1979), pp. 11-12.

¹¹¹ D. Marquand, 'Trying to Diagnose the British Disease: Pessimist and Utopians', *Encounter* (December, 1980), p. 78, 77.

¹¹² See for example: F. Pym, *The Politics of Consent* (London, 1984), p. 134.

¹¹³ J. Prior, *A Balance of Power* (London, 1986), p. 109, 121.

¹¹⁴ Prior, *Balance*, p. 121.

contemporaries such as the Chicago School monetarist Milton Friedman. In 1980's *Free to Choose*, co-written with his wife and economist Rose, the Friedmans argued that the Western post-war experience had demonstrated the impossibility of defining 'fair shares' in a way that is 'generally acceptable' or to 'satisfy the members of the community that they are being treated fairly.' Much of the 'moral fervour' which had motivated post-war distributive politics, they argued, stemmed from the widespread belief in the unfairness of children gaining advantage over others because 'they happen to have wealthy parents.'¹¹⁵ While the Friedmans acknowledged that this was unfair, other injustices were just as, if not more, significant. Unfairness, they argued, can take the form

of the inheritance of property – bonds and stocks, houses, factories; it can also take the form of the inheritance of talent – musical ability, strength, mathematical genius. The inheritance of property can be interfered with more readily than the inheritance of talent. But from an ethical point of view, is there any difference between the two? Yet many people resent the inheritance of property but not the inheritance of talent.¹¹⁶

When Friedman reflected on meeting Margaret Thatcher for the first time, he noted she was not 'a typical classical Tory.' For Friedman, she was 'the closest thing there is equivalent to a nineteenth-century liberal.' Fundamentally this was because Britain's recent history was characterised by an 'alternation between groups that wanted to construct different aristocracies', in the one case an 'aristocracy of labour' and in the other case an 'aristocracy of the wise, the well born, the meritocratic.' Thatcher's opposition to these aristocracies, Friedman argued, 'represents a sharp break.'¹¹⁷

This break was embodied in the rise of the market. The concept of the market operated as a landing ground for a diverse array of ideological positions – from 'conservative moralists' like Rhodes Boyson to 'permissive liberals' like former Liberal Party leader Jo Grimond – partly because, much like meritocracy in the immediate post-war years, it could glue together a series of concepts which usually sat in tension.¹¹⁸ For Thatcherites, the market spoke to concerns about authority and freedom. By removing the state's responsibility for justifying inequality, Thatcherism sought to restore legitimacy to the distribution of rewards, a legitimacy which was said to have collapsed in the symbolic Winter of Discontent. In part this was about managing the rampant expectations unleashed by the meritocracy. Whereas in the immediate post-war decades the panacea

¹¹⁵ M. Friedman & R. Friedman, *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement* (London, 1979), pp. 135-36.

¹¹⁶ Friedman & Friedman, *Free*, p. 136.

¹¹⁷ P. Whitehead, *The Writing on the Wall: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 1985), p. 333.

¹¹⁸ J. Grimond, *The Common Welfare* (London, 1978), p. 61; R. Boyson, *Speaking My Mind: The Autobiography of Rhodes Boyson* (London, 1995), p. 66.

of growth would serve to dissolve difficult distributive questions about 'who gets what', for the Financial Secretary to the Treasury and future Chancellor Nigel Lawson 'the hallmark of the new Conservatism is a new and healthy humility about the scope for Government action to improve the economy.' Governments, he argued in a lecture to the Bow Group in 1980, 'cannot create economic growth.'¹¹⁹ This can be seen as a direct response to the conceptual weaknesses meritocracy had acquired over the course of the 1970s. As Guy Ortolano has argued, if the problem with meritocracy was that it could never be certain whether inequality stemmed from 'internal qualities or external conditions', the market 'rendered its origins diffuse.'¹²⁰ In the process it transferred the responsibility for social outcomes from an institution to an abstraction. In part, as discussions of class and the professional ideal have highlighted above, this also provided a response to critiques of the meritocracy that centred on questions of democratic accountability or unequal power. This response could be, and often was, couched in egalitarian terms. Equality of opportunity, therefore, remained a treasured concept for the British state throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Yet as discussions of class, family and the professional ideal have highlighted, the concept's horizons were severely limited. If the state could not and should not be active in trying to reduce inequality, then the pre-existing advantages individuals brought to the market-place were irrelevant to the social outcomes it produced.

As has been noted elsewhere in this study, arguing that merit and market are distinct distributional mechanisms is not to claim that a pervasive meritocracy was replaced by a hegemonic market. In all probability Britain never had a meritocracy: even in the immediate post-war period the market remained the dominant form of distribution and exchange. Yet in the immediate post-war decades the nation's policymakers and intellectuals operated under the assumption that Britain was a meritocracy, that it should be, or that it would be one in the near future. Through the 1970s they agreed that Britain's meritocratic social order had been constructed, that it had failed to deliver on its vast promises, and that it needed to be replaced. While it is easy to highlight prominent intellectuals who had endorsed the market even in the midst of the meritocratic moment, as the previous chapter discussed this placed the likes of Hayek on the intellectual peripheries during the 1950s and 1960s. While their Prime Minister was frequently categorised as a meritocrat, Thatcherites rarely deployed the language of

¹¹⁹ N. Lawson, 'The New Conservatism (1980)', in his *The View from No. 11: Memoirs of a Tory Radical* (London, 1992), p. 1052.

¹²⁰ G. Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 251, 254.

meritocracy directly.¹²¹ Here the likes of Keith Joseph owed a direct debt to the theorising of Hayek:

Rich men do not, on the whole, deserve their rewards [...] the fact remains that they have been rewarded not for the effort itself but for the value which the consumer placed upon its results [...] There is no such thing as assessable merit [...] To assess merit, one must consider not only the nature of a particular job, but the qualities of every individual who performs it. One must discover not only how great was his effort and sacrifice but how far his success was due to them and how far to inborn abilities for which he cannot claim praise, whether he has made the best use of his opportunities and what alternatives would have been open to him.¹²²

Joseph concluded that 'rewarding individuals according to merit is therefore simply a grandiloquent euphemism for rewarding some people according to what others think of them.'¹²³ Here, a society in which rewards were determined by ascertainable merit would be one in which individuals were constantly measured by their success in complying with existing values. As we explored above, the importance Joseph placed on the entrepreneur stemmed from the fact that he believed economic progress 'arises out of confusion, not out of homogeneity and social discipline.' This Hayekian critique focuses on the 'knowledge question', rejecting the notion that any authority or individual could arrive at an objective assessment of merit. Meritocracy's claims to a rational reward structure masked the personal nature of its judgements. These personal decisions ultimately decided which particular talents get rewarded. When 'we say that a nurse is more useful than an inventor of electric ice-crushers', Joseph argued, 'what we really mean is that their life is more morally admirable.' While this might be true 'it is irrelevant' as the fact that the latter 'are always better paid than the former reflects the truth that others are prepared to pay them more.' While not every talent was worthy of reward, Joseph, like Hayek, wanted the market to decide. 'The truth is', Joseph claimed, 'we do and must reward people according to how useful they are' or, in other words, 'according to the value which we put upon the services which they perform for us.'¹²⁴ The market operates according to the laws of supply and demand and, while it may end up rewarding those with larger IQs, more credentials, or those that work hardest, this is always a secondary consideration. Thatcherites hailed the virtues of self-interest, arguing it would lead not to selfishness, but to responsibility and community-

¹²¹ A search for the term 'meritocracy' on the Thatcher Foundation Archive yields only three examples of Thatcher using the term directly.

¹²² Joseph & Sumption, *Equality*, p. 70, 71, 72, 73.

¹²³ Joseph & Sumption, *Equality*, p. 74.

¹²⁴ Joseph & Sumption, *Equality*, p. 124, 78, 76, 74.

mindfulness.¹²⁵ As Daniel Brudney has argued however, under free market exchange motivated by self-interest it is a trivial, rather than a vital, fact that one individual produces for another's use. Individuals do not set out to satisfy the needs of others for their own sake but rather use them in a purely instrumental fashion.¹²⁶ In this sense Joseph's distributive logic was situated in opposition to the meritocracy, and his interpretation of the meritorious individual a hollow one. There could be no external criteria with which to judge them, apart from their capacity to satisfy a potentially limitless and ever-changing set of consumer needs.

It would be a mistake to equate Thatcherism's conception of the market with that of Hayek or Friedman: Thatcherism had its own priorities. As Ben Jackson has argued, neoliberal thinkers placed a much greater emphasis on welfare state restructuring and on the need for constitutional limits to the reach of democratic government than conservative Thatcherites.¹²⁷ Thatcherites 'absorbed the analysis of some neo-liberal thinkers', while paying 'less attention to others whose work did not fit their vision of social policy.' In this sense, the Thatcherite conception of individualism differed 'subtly but importantly' from the economic individualism propagated by the likes of Friedman.¹²⁸ While the success of neoliberal activists in projecting their ideas as dynamic and innovative ensured even a Prime Minister felt she could bolster her authority by associating herself with them, this did not entail their wholesale adoption.¹²⁹ The virtues of a 'free market' did not spring forth fully formed at the start of the 1980s, but had to be decontested. This process of decontestation provides an ideal lens to explore the intermingling of conservatism and neoliberalism, to carve out the conceptual boundaries between these two distinct ideological traditions. In the same way that meritocracy underpinned a moment of deferral in the immediate post-war period, the market attracted support for different reasons and for often divergent or contradictory ideological ends. Whereas in *Equality* Joseph had clearly absorbed the Hayekian critique of a meritocratic distributive logic, associating it with the technocratic corporate state, Thatcher herself was much more ambiguous. For Thatcher the market was to be embraced precisely because it promised to restore a connection between effort and reward.¹³⁰ As she explained in the first Airey Neave memorial lecture of 1980, 'the

¹²⁵ For example see: M. Thatcher, 'TV Interview for ITN (10/10/1978)', *Thatcher Foundation Archive*; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Decline*, p. 156.

¹²⁶ D. Brudney, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA., 1998), p. 185.

¹²⁷ B. Jackson, 'The Think-Tank Archipelago: Thatcherism and Neo-Liberalism', in B. Jackson & R. Saunders (Eds.), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 60.

¹²⁸ F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Neo-Liberalism and Morality in the Making of Thatcherite Social Policy', *The Historical Journal*, 55/2 (2012), p. 499.

¹²⁹ Jackson, 'Think-Tank', pp. 59-60.

¹³⁰ See for example: M. Thatcher, 'Speech to Conservative Rally in Cardiff (16/04/1979)', *Thatcher Foundation Archive* [GE 542/79]; M. Thatcher, 'Speech to Conservative Rally in Birmingham (19/04/1979)', *Thatcher Foundation Archive* [GE 601/79]; Thatcher, *In Defence*, p. 130.

British economy is the British people at work – their efforts and their attitudes.’ Economic success, she argued, would only be achieved in so far as ‘people relate the rewards they receive to the efforts they make.’¹³¹

Less than a year after Thatcher’s first General Election victory, the influential *Financial Times* journalist Samuel Brittan probed these questions in the pages of *Encounter*. Brittan is often mischaracterised as a dyed-in-the-wool Thatcherite, yet as late as 1980 he described himself as a ‘social democrat of the oddball variety.’¹³² As Rodger Middleton has argued, Brittan would fail many of the tests of true Thatcherism and was critical of the 1981 budget.¹³³ For Brittan, the primary benefit of a ‘reasonably free Market Economy’ is that a person’s livelihood does not depend on ‘persuading a public official, or a Trade Union, or a workers’ cooperative of his merit.’ While this served as a neat summary of Hayek’s arguments in *The Constitution of Liberty*, where Brittan’s analysis becomes interesting is in how he applies these principles to the 1980s. Hayek appealed because his denial of a ‘just reward’ undermined so much ‘conventional wisdom’ and struck at the most ‘cherished illusions’ on both the Left and the Right. Not only did this denial mean there are no ‘ethical or scientific principles’ for determining a socially just incomes policy but there is also, Brittan argued, ‘no moral merit attaching to the rewards people can obtain in the market-place.’ For Brittan, Hayek’s rejection of a meritocracy of rewards had clear egalitarian consequences. A ‘true Hayekian’, he claimed, has ‘no more sympathy than any member of the left-wing *Tribune* Group with the white-collar worker who dislikes being overtaken by blue-collar workers’, or ‘with professional men who complain that truck-drivers are now earning more than they are.’ Conservatives, on the other hand, required a moral or theological justification of differences in well-being or position. While Thatcherite conservatives ‘may pay lip-service to some of these ideas’ and ‘even follow a few of them partially and erratically’, the rational arguments for accepting a system which does not even claim to bring a just distribution of rewards are too abstract to accept.¹³⁴ As Brittan argued five years later, Thatcher believed that ‘the most moral course is for people to take responsibility for themselves and their families (the latter a concept only integrated with great difficulty into mainstream market

Thatcher’s attack on inflation as an irrational distributive mechanism attracted widespread support, see for example: Pym, *Consent*, pp. 131-32.

¹³¹ M. Thatcher, ‘Airey Neave Memorial Lecture (03/03/1980)’, *Thatcher Foundation Archive* [CCOPR 174/80].

¹³² Brittan, ‘Hayek’, p. 37.

¹³³ R. Middleton, ‘Brittan on Britain: Decline, Declinism and the Traumas of the 1970s’, in Black, Pemberton & Thane, *Reassessing*, p. 75.

¹³⁴ Brittan, ‘Hayek’, p. 41, 33.

economics).’ For all of the Prime Minister’s ‘citations of Hayek’, Brittan claimed, ‘there has not been yet a real “Thatcherite” economic philosopher.’¹³⁵

In seeking to restore authority, legitimacy and consent to social inequalities, Thatcherites sought to unburden the state from the expansive role it had acquired at the height of the meritocratic moment. It would no longer be responsible for underpinning meritocratic outcomes, or for discriminating between claims of talent and those afforded by hereditary advantages or transmitted via familial privileges. In restoring the family unit, eulogizing individual responsibility and radically curtailing the intrusive power of equality of opportunity, Thatcherism sought to restore the social stability offered by a secure middle class. At the start of the 1980s the market appeared to be the best mechanism to achieve this, the concept of meritocracy associated too closely with a failed technocratic moment, the distributive crisis of the 1970s and the proletarianization of the middle classes this engendered. As Brittan argued, Hayek’s case against a meritocracy of rewards was the ‘complete opposite of what most Conservative and Republican politicians and most middle-class voters wish to believe.’ These groups all ‘feel much better if they can suppose that their relative affluence of former years and any advantages they still retain have been and are rewards for conspicuous merit.’¹³⁶ As this chapter has demonstrated, it is by exploring the relationship between the market and merit that we can begin to separate out strands of neoliberalism from Thatcherism. While the language of merit and meritocracy survived the hollowing out of the 1970s and 1980s, the concept that emerged was a significantly different one to that which dominated the intellectual politics of the immediate post-war decades. Whereas Hayek argued that it would contribute more to human happiness if instead of adopting a meritocracy of rewards ‘we made clearer how uncertain is the connection between value and merit’, Thatcherism’s priorities led in a different direction.¹³⁷ As Brittan’s analysis suggests, Thatcherites ignored Hayek’s abstract strictures and coated market-generated rewards with the gloss of meritocratic discourse. Even as the language of meritocracy returned with a vengeance under Tony Blair and New Labour’s ‘Third Way’, social outcomes would remain determined by the dictates of the market. The hollowing out of meritocracy and its connection to the outcomes of the market was to have profound consequences for the nature of inequalities and Britain’s broader intellectual politics well into the twenty-first century.

¹³⁵ S. Brittan, ‘...and the Same Old Problems: Thatcherism and Beyond’, *Encounter* (April, 1985), p. 53.

¹³⁶ Brittan, ‘Hayek’, p. 41.

¹³⁷ F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (London, 1960), pp. 98-99.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that meritocracy is a remarkably slippery concept. Difficult to pin down with precision, it simultaneously has a long conceptual history and a short etymological one; it has been deployed in the post-war world to instigate radical change and to restrict it; and it has found ideological favour as both a means to greater equality and classlessness but also to bolster or legitimise social inequalities. Meritocracy's meaning, like that of any political concept, is shaped by the political, cultural and intellectual context in which it is being explored. The rise of the concept gained enormous ground in the aftermath of the Second World War. While there is clearly a longer conceptual history of meritocracy to trace dating back to the eighteenth century, 1944 is a useful starting point because it highlights a period where both conservatives and socialists began to arrive at meritocratic conclusions about the status of post-war Britain and its future direction. The Butler Act, and the ecumenical agreement it generated between the likes of R.H. Tawney and R.A. Butler, provides a useful window into this moment and exemplifies how divergent ideological traditions could overlap at the point of meritocracy. In order to fully understand this overlap Chapter One argued that we have to look outside the changes in education policy, meritocracy's conventional historiographical habitat, to fully realise the extent of the concept's contours. In doing so this chapter introduced the themes at the heart of this thesis as well as the ideological tensions and conceptual questions meritocracy spoke to most successfully in the immediate post-war period. It is no surprise that meritocracy emerged as a privileged concept in the post-war morphology of both conservatives and socialists when Britain's class system was widely felt to be in a state of flux. Meritocracy appeared to describe the rise of a 'Third England', the emergence of an indeterminate stratum which pointed the way to a classless national future. The concept offered a means to escape the narrow confines of class politics by the creation of a genuinely classless and more egalitarian society which preserved social harmony. If an older historiographical tradition has painted the broad transition in post-war British history as a shift from a politics of collectivism and equality to one of individualism and inequality, this conceptual history of meritocracy helps us complicate the picture in important ways. By presuming unequal talents but promising equal opportunity, meritocracy navigated a long-standing tension between liberty and equality. It offered to open up positions of power on the basis of equality of opportunity or proved competence and, in the process, to restore authority and democratic legitimacy to Britain's elite.

These positions, it was increasingly argued in the post-war period, would be occupied by classless professionals, 'humane technocrats' dedicated to using their expertise for the

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public good. These professionals would staff a burgeoning welfare state, alleviating material poverty and ensuring a fair and just distribution of resources to those in need. While the expansion of white collar public sector employment played a significant role in this formulation, meritocracy also explained the apparent benign transformation of post-war capitalism. At the heart of this phenomenon was the so-called 'managerial revolution'. The separation of ownership from control, it was argued by both conservatives and socialists, had produced a new breed of professional managers who were meritocratically selected and rewarded, with a responsibility to the wider community. At the centre of this shift, and the broader intellectual politics of post-war Britain, was the fundamental question: 'who gets what?' Meritocracy possessed an appealing answer to this question which spoke to the social, political and economic environment of post-war Britain. By aligning reward with merit, the distributive logic of meritocracy fulfilled socialist objectives to eradicate functionless wealth as well as the conservative desire to distance themselves from the perceived failure of market mechanisms in the interwar years. It was not only epistemologically possible but politically imperative that the distribution of rewards be taken out of the hands of a class-biased or erratic market and replaced by the conscious, democratic control of public authorities. Both conservatives and socialists therefore overlapped in the immediate post-war period over the desirability of a meritocratic pattern of rewards. Importantly, however, this overlap occurred on the basis of divergent political aims and expectations of what a meritocracy was supposed to achieve. While for conservatives it was a defensive measure, one required to meet the democratic challenges of the post-war world and to fend off claims to greater equality of outcome, for socialists it was an important step on the road to a more egalitarian society. Both ideologies therefore evaluated a meritocracy against different criteria. While these tensions and contradictions were obscured, or successfully contained, in the immediate post-war decades their gradual unravelling was to have profound consequences for Britain's intellectual politics.

If 1944 represented the moment meritocracy assumed an important position in the ideological architecture of both socialists and conservatives, it was in the 1950s that it reached its conceptual zenith. Chapter Two, therefore, took 1958 as the height of the meritocratic moment. While on the surface this may appear paradoxical considering this was also the year in which the word meritocracy was catapulted into the social, political and cultural lexicon with the publication of Michael Young's dystopian satire, the tools of conceptual history allow us to evaluate *The Rise of the Meritocracy* as one vision of the concept amongst many. The reception of the text demonstrates how even those intellectuals we might expect to be most receptive to Young's warnings, Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, for example, felt more able to dismiss them as concerns for a

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distant future. If Young's text highlighted the inherent contradictions of meritocracy, these were contradictions that many were not yet willing or able to embrace. The creation of the word therefore attests to the concept's pre-existing dominance. It does, however, serve as an important benchmark in this study, providing shared conceptual currency which encouraged intellectuals and policy-makers to discuss the trends of classlessness, social mobility, expertise and the affluent society. This conversation was increasingly dominated by two ideological formations, Middle Way Conservatives and Revisionist Social Democracy, which placed meritocracy in a privileged conceptual position in their respective morphologies. Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives oversaw an 'epistemological consensus' which valued empiricist reasoning. If their ideological impulses encouraged them to seek partial rather than ultimate ends, then meritocracy was the ideal distributive concept because it was flexible enough to allow tweaks or modifications when and if the empirical evidence changed.

In fleshing out the concept at the heart of this epistemological consensus, Chapter Two explored the notion of an 'Opportunity State'. This bound together the themes of social mobility, classlessness and affluence at the heart of meritocracy. At the same time a burgeoning sociological literature demonstrated the persistent impact of class, whether in relation to education or individual mobility, on social outcomes. In interpreting this literature, Revisionist Social Democrats argued that post-war Britain was so far away from an equal opportunity society that Young's warnings could be safely dismissed. The triumph of a meritocracy over an aristocracy, while not the limit of the Revisionist's ambitions, would represent a significant victory for egalitarianism. Middle Way Conservatives evaluated Britain's meritocratic credentials differently. Their defensive adoption of meritocracy made them more wary of Young's warnings and the threat a meritocratic elite could pose to social harmony. If contemporary accounts of the concept often interpret it as a conservative phenomenon, a conceptual approach to the post-war world has the power to radically alter our understandings of ideologies and their history. It was in the 1950s that meritocracy acquired a non-ideological character, emerging as an important concept to explain the shift from class to status which, it was argued, characterised the post-war age. In order to make successfully objective judgements of relative status, Britain was said to require a new type of elite. Attacks on the irrational, class-bound Establishment provided an important target for those seeking to modernise Britain by replacing aristocratic leadership with a meritocracy. The most important challenge for these meritocrats was to deliver growth. If merit appeared in the post-war period as a distinct distributive logic, it was underpinned by the assumption that higher growth and higher living standards were inevitable. This was a narrow window before the onset of decline, difficult to pin down but integral for the concept of meritocracy's future trajectory. Growth facilitated meritocracy's distributive deferral by helping to lift all boats

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and ensuring that distinctions made on the basis of merit would not be too sharp or unequal. Speaking to an impressive range of conceptual problems and ideological tensions, it was in the late 1950s, however, that the concept became overburdened with often contradictory aspirations and expectations.

The politics of decline provided the backdrop to Chapter Three and served to stretch the concept of meritocracy to breaking point, revealing its inherent tensions and contradictions and challenging some of the fundamental assumptions at the heart of Britain's intellectual politics. These assumptions, particularly the relationship between growth and equality, forced intellectuals and policy-makers in divergent directions.

For some meritocracy was a mechanism to transcend class, for others a means by which the talented could be absorbed into middle-class existence. With higher growth less secure, meritocracy's distributive deferral became harder to maintain, and debates about which behaviour or values were meritorious dominated the decade's intellectual politics: who exactly was the meritocrat - the professional, scientific technocrat or the competitive, risk-taking entrepreneur? Paradoxically the 1960s was also a period in which the meritocracy was felt to have arrived in power, particularly after the election of Harold Wilson's Labour Government in 1964. This served to short-circuit the gradualist time horizons around which Revisionist Social Democrats and Middle Way Conservatives cohered in the late 1950s: if the meritocrats had arrived then it was time for them to deliver on the concept's substantial and often contradictory expectations. In this sense the meritocracy could not survive contact with political reality and began to fragment. The early 1960s are therefore a crucial period in both the concept's history and the broader trajectory of post-war Britain's intellectual politics. This becomes the period in which significant elements of the epistemological consensus, and the concept at the heart of it, began to appear deeply problematic and started to lose ideological coherence. In this sense the thesis has demonstrated the capacity of conceptual history to complicate our conventional chronological understandings of post-war political, social and cultural change. Rather than the 1970s broadly, or 1979 specifically, serving as a crucial gateway between one type of post-war existence and another, the early 1960s and the intellectual politics of decline become central to understanding the unravelling of the assumptions which underpinned notions of a 'post-war consensus'.

Clearly post-war Britain never became a true meritocracy of talent. While social mobility increased and professional employment expanded, an individual's class origin continued to play a disproportionate role in their social outcomes, whether that be related to accessing education or positions of power. The tools of conceptual history deployed in this thesis, however, encourage historians to be alive to the assumptions and myths of

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intellectual politics. While Britain may never have been a meritocracy, policy-makers and intellectuals assumed that it had. This important assumption governed how they responded to the intellectual politics of the 1970s. If the early 1960s was a period in which meritocracy was stretched over an expanding ideological canvas, the later years of the decade is when the concept snapped. As the 1970s progressed, meritocracy's central post-war promises were disintegrating. The classless future was replaced by class conflict as pressure groups fought for higher living standards and sought to preserve long-standing differentials. If a central post-war problem was the idea of 'embourgeoisement' and a working class increasingly adopting middle class values, the 1970s was said to witness a reverse process of 'proletarianization'. The function and values of the middle class, the repository of skill and expertise at the height of the meritocratic moment, was once again open to interpretation. The professional ethic was hollowed out as new social movements called on the meritocracy to deliver on its promises and challenged its racial and gender biases, as well as its poor record in overcoming the barriers of class. A longer study could trace how racial and gender stereotypes were embodied in the concept in the immediate post-war period and analyse how these movements challenged meritocracy's claim to equality of opportunity. Increasingly the professional meritocrats were targeted as a distinct generation of paternalist bureaucrats and their expertise gradually demystified and challenged.

By the start of the 1970s, the important assumptions which had underpinned the distributive deferral of the meritocratic moment - secure growth, full employment and painless redistribution - were replaced by a hostile economic environment characterised by 'stagflation', recalcitrant pressure groups and sluggish growth. If meritocracy is an ideal lens through which to explore the 1940s and 1950s because it was a concept which traversed the ideological spectrum, when applied to the 1970s it becomes useful for the opposite reason: it highlights how divergent ideological traditions were united over their hostility to a meritocratic social order. The demise of meritocracy, accompanied by the fragmentation of both Middle Way Conservatism and Revisionist Social Democracy, created space for new ideological constellations on both the Left and Right in the form of the Bennite Left and the New Right. While the Bennite critique led towards a distributive model which privileged class identity, the New Right claimed that the failures of meritocracy proved that the state could not promise too much and certainly did not have the right, or the ability, to mediate between conflicting distributive claims. They were united, however, by their opposition to the technocratic, meritocratic state of the 1960s. In this sense a conceptual history of meritocracy complicates our understanding of political contestation, drawing lines and connections between seemingly intractable ideological opponents.

Conclusion

If recent historiographical trends have reminded historians of the importance of contingency, the need to remain alive to alternative futures and lost possibilities, then successful explanations of Britain in the 1970s and 1980s must also evaluate why Thatcherism triumphed. The concept of the market was at the centre of this process. The market proposed solutions to the central tensions and conceptual problems which emerged out of meritocracy's demise in the late 1960s. If the meritocracy could never be certain whether inequality stemmed from internal qualities or external conditions, shifting the cause of inequality from the capacities of an individual to the dictates of a market rendered its origins diffuse. The responsibility for inequality, once the preserve of the meritocratic state, was gradually transferred over the course of the 1970s and 1980s from an institution of an abstraction. The cultural archetype of the professional meritocrat utilising their expertise in the public interest was replaced by the self-interested entrepreneur. Where the professional engaged in cautious, rational and empirical judgements, the entrepreneur acted on instinct, taking risks to exploit market opportunities and generating economic growth in the process. In seeking to restore authority and legitimacy to Britain's social order, Thatcherites looked to the family unit and sought to insulate its autonomy to transmit privilege from the radical conception of equality of opportunity at the heart of meritocracy. The state would no longer be responsible for underpinning meritocratic outcomes or for discriminating between claims of talent and those afforded by hereditary advantages.

For Thatcher it was crucial to restore a link between reward and effort, especially after the crisis of the 1970s and the irrational distributive effects of inflation. At the start of the 1980s the market appeared as the best mechanism to achieve this. The coating of outcomes generated by the market with the residual language of meritocracy, however, was to have a profound effect on the nature of inequality well into the twenty-first century. There remains work to be done, however, in exploring exactly how the concept of the market was decontested in the 1980s and beyond. This study could approach the market in post-war Britain through a similar, if somewhat reversed, lens to the one used in this thesis. In a similar way to meritocracy in the post-war period, the market triumphed in the 1980s not because it was an ideal concept but because it spoke most effectively to the epistemological problems of the 1970s. Ultimately, however, just as the meritocratic settlement of the post-war period can be characterised as a moment of deferral, so can the rise of the market. While it served as the most appealing mechanism through which to distribute rewards, reconcile equality and liberty, and legitimise inequalities in the 1980s and beyond, it failed to fundamentally 'solve' these perennial questions.

Conclusion

The 1980s may seem a strange place to end this study considering New Labour's firm embrace of meritocracy and the concept's survival well into the twenty-first century. In seeking to distance themselves from the social divisiveness of Thatcherism and reading back into Labour's Revisionist past, the concept of meritocracy appeared ready-made for Blair's 'Third Way' social democracy. Blair was not alone in considering meritocracy a neutral and popular concept with widespread appeal. Meritocracy consistently reappears in moments of national crisis or distributive strife. As this thesis has shown, however, the contemporary incarnation of the concept is nothing but a spectre which remains subservient to its market master. The 1980s, therefore, represent a distinct break in the concept's history, after which it emerges shorn of its conceptual potential. Many of the contemporary references to the principles of meritocracy reflect this hollowing out, deploying the concept as a simple byword for equality of opportunity. Meritocracy's distributive implications have been largely ignored and remain subsumed under the rubric of the market. While the neo-liberal interpretation of the market undoubtedly remains the hegemonic distributive concept of the twenty-first century, it has come under considerable strain since the 2008 Financial Crisis. In the age of austerity, and now Covid-19, questions of 'who gets what?' are more important than ever. To many, the inequalities generated by the free market no longer appear socially useful or democratically legitimate.¹ In a similar way to meritocracy in the late 1960s, the concept's proponents are gradually peeling away and new ideological constellations are emerging to challenge its dominance. In order to successfully challenge the market these constellations will be required to articulate new distributive principles. As Ben Jackson has argued, the distributive achievements of social democracy were not simply the fruit of social pressures or the expertise of sympathetic intellectuals but required a carefully formatted 'rhetoric of redistribution'.² In articulating new and potentially more egalitarian distributive principles it is always tempting to look back to the immediate post-war period as a golden age of equality. While it undoubtedly holds vital historical lessons, as this thesis has demonstrated it may not provide ready-made solutions. Rather than considering the post-war as a time when the concept of equality was fully fleshed out and implemented, we should instead approach it as a period of ideological tension, conceptual confusion and deferral. Meritocracy was a product of these tensions, confusions and deferrals, and while the distributive elements could be rehabilitated for post-Covid Britain, this thesis has highlighted some of the concept's profound blindspots and conceptual weaknesses.

¹ See for example: G. Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London, 2016).

² B. Jackson, 'The Rhetoric of Redistribution', in J. Callaghan, N. Fishman, B. Jackson & M. McIvor (Eds.), *In Search of Social Democracy: Responses to Crisis and Modernisation* (Manchester, 2010), p. 233.

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