

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Menace of Meritocracy: Unmasking Inequality in the Creative and Cultural Industries

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Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility, by Jo Littler, Abingdon, Routledge, 2018, xiv + 236 pp.

Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries, by Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor, London, Arts Emergency, 2018, [ii] + 41 pp.

Shaping the Next Ten Years: Developing a New Strategy for Arts Council England, Manchester, Arts Council England, 2018, [i] + 17 pp.

Modern cultural policymakers struggle with the inequality problem. Are subsidy arrangements favouring opera over, say, hip-hop “unfair”, or just a reflection of opera’s greater financial need and superior aesthetic merit? Do geographical imbalances matter? Are centres of excellence hogging resources or putting them to exemplary use? When comparatively few seem to be enjoying great art and culture sponsored by government on behalf of everyone, should we worry or instead celebrate freedom of consumer choice in a mixed arts-and-cultural economy? These are important questions, hard to debate in an honest and rigorous way while facts about inequality remain hidden and while words used in debate can have multiple, conflicting meanings. “Meritocracy” is a case in point: a social selection principle said by some to reduce inequality and by others to entrench it. Here I try to decide which position is more nearly correct. Two of the three publications under review confront meritocracy’s ambiguities head on while the third skirts round them. Since the third is an Arts Council England strategy document its authors speak revealingly even when they stay silent.

Meritocracy sounds like a good idea – a system designed to ensure that people who get on or right to the top in politics, at school and university and in organizations of every other sort are those who really deserve to. Just by existing (apparently it didn’t, before the 1950s) the word meritocracy brings other systems into disrepute. Shamed by their names, other systems are clearly designed to hand out life’s rewards on some basis other than merit, and no-one now considers that fair.

Most people use the word informally I suspect, to signal (truthfully or not) their belief in social justice, social mobility and social efficiency in some combination. Beliefs to which people lay claim spread along a spectrum rather like this: sincere but impracticably idealistic; sincere and practically grounded (beliefs in this category could lead to action); shallow – informed by very little thought, making sincerity hard to judge; politely feigned to avoid conflict in social-conversational situations or at work; cynically counterfeited, for instance by politicians who see advantage in pretending to be meritocrats.

If only a minority of meritocracy's advocates fully appreciate the consequences of testing and selection/deselection at every life stage, and really are prepared to visit those consequences on themselves and on friends, family members and more distant descendants, then public debate on the subject will achieve very little. Participants will be swapping platitudes, flattering or humouring or lying to each other. This I think is the basic message of Jo Littler's *Against Meritocracy*: the book has been written to expose lies told in the name of meritocracy and to reveal the harm that normalized lying can do, both to individuals and to whole societies thus misled.

"[O]ver the past few decades", as Littler argues, "the language of meritocracy has become an alibi for plutocracy and the key ideological term of the reproduction of neoliberal culture" (Littler, p.2). Her attack on meritocracy is a means to an end: with the myths exploded, people fooled by them at the moment will be able to see neoliberal culture for what it is, and may be more inclined to challenge its life-sapping hegemony.

Against Meritocracy is in two equally weighted parts (plus Introduction, plus Conclusion): I. Genealogies, and II. Popular Parables. I. covers academic debate about meritocracy from the 1950s to date, as pursued mainly in English-speaking parts of the "Global North": Littler's frame of reference is Anglo-American. In countries not so thoroughly in thrall to neoliberal ideology softer lines on meritocracy are no doubt spun: Littler's vehemence may puzzle readers lucky enough to live in them. But for Brits like me, of a certain age and left-ish political conviction, her book will serve to revive a string of deeply unpleasant memories. "There is no such thing as society" said Britain's first woman prime minister Margaret Thatcher, interviewed in *Women's Own* magazine (Littler, p.82) – while advocating and implementing policies designed to smash it up. Littler's analyses are subtle, and the research informing them is impressively wide-ranging. Perhaps the clearest summary of her theoretical argument is this, provided by Littler herself (p.43):

'Meritocracy' ... is a word with a short etymological history – under 60 years – but during this time it has gradually and dramatically shifted in its meaning and value. It has moved from a negative, disparaging criticism of an embryonic system of state organisation which was creating problematic new hierarchies ... to a positive, celebratory term, one connecting competitive individualism and 'talent' with a belief in the desirability and possibility of social mobility in an increasingly unequal society.

So the current British prime minister Theresa May "want[s] Britain to be the world's great meritocracy – a country where everyone has a fair chance to go as far as their talents and their hard work will take them" (cited in Littler, p.1). What's not to like about that?

Littler's Popular Parables probe the downsides. Her "normcore plutocrats" (Ch.4) gain power "to an extensive degree through wealth" but dress and act like ordinary people much of the time. Moral: if they can make it so can we. ("Normcore" is or was a designer-label fashion style selling ordinary looks at fancy prices.) "Luxury flaunters" appearing on TV programmes such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* and in *Hello!* magazine (Littler, p.133) are simultaneously busy reminding us why we might want to make it. Even the purist altruists have a motive for making it: then they could give their money away like Littler's "philanthrocapitalists" (pp.132-3).

Chapter 5, another parable, uses a 2015 US reality TV incident starring Matt Damon to explore "the unbearable whiteness of merit". Damon, one of the judges paid to decide which contestant(s) on the show *Project Greenlight* would get to direct a ready-scripted feature film, took high-handed exception to a fellow (black and female) judge's suggestion that diversity issues should be taken into account – not to meet any particular quota but to ensure that the "racialized dynamics of the script" were noticed and handled sensitively. "Do you *want* the best director?", said Damon in reply, along

with other provocative things (Littler, p.148), unleashing a storm of social media protest. Later he issued an apology. Littler tells this story at length, drawing from it the moral that “merit” has racialized and gendered dimensions. White men in positions of power see merit chiefly in the mirror.

“Desperate success: managing the mumpreneur” is Littler’s final parable (Ch.6), about high-profile stay-at-home mothers who somehow combine childcare duty with successful entrepreneurial careers. Their websites and self-help books say disingenuously little about the “sizeable amounts of private capital” with which they started out, or about their “very privileged backgrounds” (Littler, p.189). Though “frequently packaged as an enticing meritocratic solution ... [to] problems of restrictive work and expensive childcare ... also providing glamour and personal fulfilment” (Littler, p.187), it is one realistically available only to mumpreneurs with money behind them. Mumpreneurial mythmongering hides this uncomfortable truth. Mumpreneurialism is a special, heavily gendered case of general meritocratic mythmongering, and Littler presents it as such. Constant alertness to gender complications apt to be overlooked by people writing about meritocracy in a broad-brush way is one of her book’s great strengths.

Against Meritocracy is a cultural theory or cultural studies text, not a work of empirical sociology. It is strong on argument and illustration, light on data. Littler leaves readers indignant. She leaves neoliberal targets weakened, morally concussed, but with one trump card still in hand – that of plausible deniability. Calm down dear: where’s the evidence that people in general think and feel like Littler’s parable exemplars? Where’s the evidence that people theorized into positions of disadvantage are themselves aware of being in positions of disadvantage? *Panic! 2018* supplies that evidence for Britain’s (mainly England’s) arts and cultural sector, and I turn to that shortly.

In her Conclusion, Littler advocates “a more plural understanding of merit – which considers merit on a collective and not a purely individual basis – alongside mutual and co-operative forms of social reproduction which create greater parity in wealth, opportunity, care and provision” (p.224). This to me sounds rather like socialism. Had her Conclusion been just a few lines longer it might have landed there.

Tensions between socialism and meritocracy are among the most interesting explored in Geoff Dench’s 2006 edited collection *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy*, by a roster of contributors drawn from the left, right and centre of British politics. Littler refers to the Dench volume in passing. In the interests of balance she could, I think, have given it a bit more space. *The Rise and Rise* looks for operational good in the meritocracy concept – for beneficial outcomes that wisely designed, well intentioned meritocratic policies could conceivably deliver – and it does succeed in finding some.

Littler worked on *Against Meritocracy* for over a decade on and off, as explained in her Introduction. For much of that time Michael Young’s satirical novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (serious sociology in the form of a novel, really) was out of fashion. A number of journalists revisited it 2018, the sixtieth anniversary of *The Rise of the Meritocracy*’s original publication. Suitably inspired I read it for the first time then, and like several contributors to the Dench symposium just mentioned was struck not by the accuracy of Young’s predictions (their accuracy was never the point) but by the pertinence of his warnings. Far too many of the bad things that Young feared might happen have been allowed to happen, up to and including Brexit: “The last century has witnessed a far-reaching re-distribution of ability [wealth? opportunity?] between the classes in society, and the consequence is that the lower classes no longer have the power to make revolt effective. For a short moment they may prosper through an alliance with the odd and passing disillusion of a section of the upper classes ...” (Young 1958/r1961, p.189).

Littler covers Young in five pages, as the author responsible for popularizing meritocracy as a term but possibly not its inventor. She notes that Alan Fox beat him into print with it. Among British left-wing thinkers in the 1950s concerns about the socially corrosive effects of selective education were fairly widespread. The 1944 Education Act had reorganized the state school sector: children who passed a competitive exam taken at age 10 (called the 11+ because it settled their educational destiny from then on) went to high-status grammar schools; children who failed – the great majority – went to lower-status, comparatively poorly resourced “secondary moderns”, where teachers prepared them for jobs rather than entry to university and a subsequent professional career.

The 11+ opened a door to upward social mobility through which some bright working-class children were able to pass: this looked like progress. But upward social mobility for just a few strained family relationships – the traumatic experience of Richard Hoggart’s “Scholarship Boy” (in Hoggart, 1957). What would happen to society as a whole if all its younger members were screened for “talent” by standardized competitive tests, looking obviously for particular types of talent (test-passing aptitude) not talent any more broadly or imaginatively conceived? Talented test-passers schooled together, graduating and entering professional employment together, would be likely to socialize together – making friends among themselves; likely also to intermarry and interbreed. A caste structure would emerge and over time solidify; or a new sort of caste system, slowly supplanting the ancient one present in Britain already. Were socialists in business just to replace one caste system with another?

Michael Young headed the British Labour Party’s research department from 1945 to 1951, and in that capacity drafted the party’s 1945 election manifesto. Eleven publishers had rejected *The Rise of the Meritocracy* before Thames and Hudson finally brought it out. I think it likely that Young discussed the challenge of meritocracy with his intellectual fellow-travellers and that together they tried out various names for this outwardly red yet prickly rose. Alan Fox himself reviewed the first edition of *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958: not all that appreciatively, but without dropping a hint that naming credit belonged to him rather than Young. Perhaps it doesn’t matter very much – for, as Littler reminds us, “The meanings of ‘meritocracy’ were ... not just born with the invention of the word in English in the 1950s. As a complex concept it can be connected to much longer historical and geographical genealogies” (Littler, p.25).

Among those genealogies, one of particular interest to the cultural policy community concerns the identification – starting in the mid nineteenth century if not before – of certain types of cultural organization thought to benefit the public at large just by existing. These deserved or merited taxpayer and/or philanthropic support. In Britain their charitable status made that merit explicit. Assumptions that “great art” made more widely available would have a civilizing effect on ordinary people exposed to it, and that ordinary people would be willing to take cultural direction from their social superiors fuelled the “Arts Council Movement” about which Anna Upchurch published an important book shortly before her death (Upchurch 2016).

Merit concepts came to condition thinking in the subsidized art world on three levels therefore: meritorious art qua art (“great”, “excellent”, etc.); meritorious art consumption – as more and more people learn to appreciate great art, so the world becomes a better place; meritorious art production – the “community service ideals” which subsidized arts organizations and officials making subsidy available to them were supposed to share (see the Arts Council of Great Britain’s first annual report, 1946, “Conditions of Association”, pp.32 and 36).

All three of these merit premisses appeal intuitively. I doubt I am the only reader of *Cultural Trends* sure in my heart that great art exists, whose life has been enhanced if not transformed by it, and who feels grateful every day to the people who make great art happen.

The Arts Council Movement built on merit premisses, understandably – helped from the 1950s on by new developments in welfare economics. Economist Richard Musgrave introduced the “Merit Good” concept in 1957, to denote goods or services valuable in themselves, likely to be produced or provided in socially sub-optimal quantity if production or provision were left entirely to market forces. It is no great surprise that the terms meritocracy and merit good gained currency at the same time, for they are two sides of the same coin: justifying or rationalizing (respectively) selective investment in people, and selective investment in production systems for whose output not enough people at the moment seem willing or able to pay.

Since the merit badge unlocks funding, and those with power to determine merit get to spend public money on projects they approve of, checks to ensure that merit goods are produced in sensible not wildly excessive quantity are worth putting in place. So are rules requiring merit-assessors to do an honest and fully-informed job.

Panic! 2018 (full title *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries*) brings a lot of rather shocking information out into the open. It is the latest and so far the most influential public intervention by Arts Emergency and Create London working collaboratively. Arts Emergency is a campaigning charity that commissions research designed both to fact-find and to provoke debate about the facts as they emerge; Create London commissions and delivers arts projects. Funding for the research in this instance came from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council: they were brave to take it on.

Lead authors Orian Brook, Dave O’Brien and Mark Taylor draw on a range of research – mostly but not all their own, all of it published in one form or another, or forthcoming – looking for inequalities along two of the three merit dimensions I identified above: consumption and production. They do not investigate the meritoriousness of art qua art, steering mercifully clear of the “intrinsic value” trap. They define “key terms” very carefully (*Panic! 2018*, pp.38-40), all except meritocracy, which they and their survey respondents and interviewees were undoubtedly using informally to mean a ladder-of-opportunity system getting talented people on and up. This is confirmed on p.4, where meritocracy is glossed as follows: survey respondents favouring a meritocratic explanation for career success in the creative and cultural industries over other explanations that they could have chosen instead believed “that individuals get rewarded for what they put in, or receive what they deserve from the sector, irrespective of background or privileges”. As emerges elsewhere in *Panic! 2018*, evidence gathered by other means shows that background and privileges matter profoundly. Survey respondents claiming to be unaware of this were for some reason denying truths entirely obvious to the researchers – to defend the honour of the sector perhaps, to defend funding privileges that some organisations within the sector currently enjoy; to make their own career achievements seem more impressive, or to bury feelings of guilt. *Panic! 2018* and *Against Meritocracy* agree that meritocracy’s biggest problem is the web of deceit surrounding it. Both are arguing against public discourse and public policy rooted in deceit. This is why I thought it would be useful to look at the two together.

Brook, O’Brien and Taylor are experienced policy advisers as well as academics. Often, policy academics and policymakers talk past each other: challenges put by academics to policymakers are not ones that the latter are disposed or required to take up. *Panic! 2018* addresses policymakers in an unusually direct way, adopting the form and layout of recent Arts Council policy documents, presenting data in easy-to-grasp graphical form and inserting human-interest case study evidence here and there. This mimicry of host structures was a clever move (though not without precedent: GPS Culture’s 2013 report *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* did something similar). Locking on to policy debate much as viral DNA locks on to me when I get a cold, Brook, O’Brien and Taylor compelled Arts Council England to respond. (I come to the nature of that response later.) *Against Meritocracy* has implications similar to *Panic! 2018*’s, but Littler’s book is not the sort that actual

policymakers read. Taking host mimicry to a daring extreme, Arts Emergency and Create London launched *Panic! 2018* with a conference held at London's Barbican Centre in June 2018, and commissioned new artwork to mark the event – creating a buzz that undoubtedly helped to get the report noticed.

Panic! 2018 has four main sections, matter-of-factly titled:

1. Getting in and getting on: Beliefs in meritocracy
2. Culture's unequal workforce: How people of Working Class origin have been and continue to be excluded
3. Who gets paid to work in the arts? The problem of unpaid labour in the cultural industries
4. Attitudes, values and tastes: An unrepresentative 'creative class'?

Intersectional analysis is the aim throughout, looking not for single causes of inequality and exclusion but for sets. If some would-be cultural workers are disadvantaged for more than one reason, policymakers wanting to help them along would have to take that into account. There would be little point tackling minor causes of inequality and exclusion while doing nothing about decisive ones (though there could be a public relations rationale: good to be seen doing something). Brook, O'Brien and Taylor gathered facts about inequality and exclusion through forensic analysis of published data sets, tested opinions about inequality and exclusion using a questionnaire, and conducted interviews allowing people to talk about inequality and exclusion from a range of perspectives – witness to, victim of; often both.

2014 British Labour Force Survey data shows, on analysis, that "the arts are not diverse in terms of ethnicity". Sectors with "particularly low numbers of Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) workers" are these, apparently: Museums, Galleries and Libraries; Film/TV/Video/Radio/Photography; Music, Performing and Visual Arts (p.13). "Almost every [arts-and-culture] occupational sector has an underrepresentation of women in its workforce", Publishing and Museums, Galleries and Libraries being the only exceptions noted.

Class similarly: all arts-and-culture sectors except Crafts "have an over-representation [of workers] from upper middle class social origins ... [with] the situation in Publishing ... especially grave" (p.13). (Crafts includes smiths, glassworkers and ceramicists, who have to be skilled in the use of traditional working-class technologies.)

Women where employed at all are underpaid compared to men, earning "an estimated £5,800 less per year ... [a]cross all creative industries" (p.15). The gender pay gap widens to £15,000 per year in Film/TV/Video/Radio/Photography.

In London, BAME creatives make up a higher proportion of their respective sector totals than seems to be the case elsewhere – but are still significantly underrepresented when the size of London's whole BAME workforce is taken into account. (Percentages reported are these: London's creative workforce 17% BAME, London's total working-age population 39% BAME.) "34.8% of the creative workforce in London are from upper-middle class origins", as against 23% outside London (p.14). Disproportionately white therefore, and disproportionately posh.

Inequalities on the production side are mirrored, perhaps exaggerated on the consumption side. Using provisional results from the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport's 2017 *Taking Part* survey, *Panic! 2018* shows with the aid of pie charts that the population percentages attending different artform events at least once a year vary greatly from artform to artform: 3% contemporary dance, 4% opera, 8% classical music; rising through 23% play/drama to 57% film.

Taking Part does not expect survey respondents to know or care whether the events they attended were or were not funded by Arts Council England, or any other subsidy distributor. If, as *Panic! 2018*'s authors say, "[a]ttending the arts very regularly is only the norm for a minority of English society" (p.28), then regular attendance at events supported by Arts Council England is the norm for an even smaller minority.

Panic! 2018 refers, without specific citation, to "[e]xisting academic research ... demonstrat[ing] that cultural consumption is closely related to particular forms of inequality, such as education, social status and social class" (p.31). The authors are not in a position to demonstrate that cultural labour force inequalities correlate closely with "similar types of social inequalities" on the consumption side, though they take this to be the case. So do I. They were able to establish, via the *Panic!* Survey, that creative workers are much more likely to know fellow creatives and people in other traditionally middle class occupations "as friends, family members and colleagues", than they are to know people doing traditional working class jobs. If the social and professional networks to which cultural and creative workers belong are disproportionately white and disproportionately middle class – "relatively homogeneous and coherent" – then this isolation from "the rest of the population" (p.33) perhaps explains the difficulty they have reaching out to the rest of the population.

Middle class creatives talk mainly to people they know; people they understand; people like them. Their social attitudes are extremely liberal and they incline very definitely to the left in politics. (Careful analysis of 2010-2015 British Social Attitudes Survey findings enabled Brook, O'Brien and Taylor to establish this.) But these right-on attitudes – values or beliefs to which middle class creatives lay claim when surveyed – have not led to meaningful action in over 40 years. The inequalities and exclusions exposed in *Panic! 2018* are precisely those to which Augustin Girard drew attention in his 1972 (!) report for UNESCO – international arts funding system representatives conferring in the 1970s and 80s discussed this situation candidly. We were still discussing it when I worked for Arts Council England and (briefly) for London Arts, from 1992 to 2004. Brook, O'Brien and Taylor are to be admired for keeping their tempers and for devoting so much care and energy to battle re-enactment – telling same old ugly truths to same old cynically complacent power.

Brook, O'Brien and Taylor end their report very professionally with four "important questions" (p.34). In turning their questions into accusations I may have gone too far. But I found some of their interview evidence genuinely troubling.

I think there is a bit of luck to it, but I think at the end of the day the people who succeed are really the people who are willing to sacrifice the most for it ... I think it is the people who are willing to give up the other bits of their life who are most likely to succeed. (Zoe, quoted on p.7)

"Other bits of life" likely to have to go include, as explained by Kate (also on p.7), the chance to buy a house and have children.

Cat, "a white, female artist whose parents were senior managers" – one of *Panic! 2018*'s younger interviewees – is making good career headway but has "never been paid to make or do anything" (p.22). Sarah, "from a working class background [but] with parents in London", heard from job agencies "that there was no way in hell that I was getting a job in publishing without an unpaid internship" (p.22). She did a succession of internships, all but one of them unpaid, while living with her parents perhaps. (The report doesn't say, but cheap London accommodation might have made all the difference.)

When older artist-interviewees talked about un- or underpaid work they claimed to do it by choice (Des and Sandra, p.23). Beginners recognized it as a rite of passage, a test both of determination and of family financial muscle. “It’s stating the obvious to point out that those with more financial resources to fund living costs are more able to afford unpaid work” (p.22). Agreed. Cat’s senior manager parents (I assume) kept her afloat while she worked for nothing to build her artistic CV. Now that CV exists it is bankable: she has a confidence-inspiring track record and can compete for paid commissions. Arts Council England and other grant-giving bodies may well be funding these commissions. Cat buys her way into publicly-subsidised professional employment essentially, overtaking equally talented competitors who lack her family’s means and cannot afford the entrance fee. I don’t for a moment blame Cat or her parents, or deny her ability. She deserves to succeed. But so do others, barred from entry to art-worlds for which they too have trained and to which they have (in theory) just as much to contribute.

Panic! 2018 does not look at artists’ earnings spectra, at longitudinal cost-of-living data (housing costs especially), or at disposable income differentials making it more or less easy for arts attenders in different age brackets to pay for tickets. Though the picture of inequality painted in the report is bleak enough, scope for further intersectional research making it bleaker still undoubtedly exists.

If house price and rent inflation far outpaces general inflation and artists’ sector-average pay keeps up only with the latter then artists trying to live on sector-average pay will find that more and more of a struggle. Artists with private means enabling them to supplement sector average pay while remaining prominently active in the sector will have it increasingly to themselves. (The more non-arts work artists have to take on to make ends meet the thinner their arts CVs are prone to look, and this damages future arts employment prospects.)

According to the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS), between 2008 and 2018 “the median disposable income of retired and non-retired households increased by £3,200 (16.0%) and £900 (2.9%) respectively” (ONS, 2018). An equity problem surely arises when working-age taxpayers are expected to subsidize the production of art disproportionately consumed by their comfortably retired elders.

50-somethings like me are underrepresented in city centre nightclub crowds. 20-somethings are underrepresented on hospital geriatric wards. This is as it should be. Underrepresentation becomes a problem only when types of people that we wish, or hope, or think we ought to encounter in particular situations are not actually encountered in those situations often enough.

Groups of people with interests or attributes in common often do get together voluntarily: the Women’s Institute for instance; the Lute Society; the London Gay Men’s Chorus. No-one on the outside minds, and no social harm results, provided group members and non-members are treated similarly when they find themselves competing for rewards equally attractive to both. Since *Panic! 2018* does not spell out the social harm caused by inequalities in the creative and cultural industries perhaps I should do that here:

- Arts and cultural employers in the UK recruit talent mainly from a white, middle-and-upper-class pool. Other pools are not trawled for talent as conscientiously as they could be. So talent goes to waste.
- At entry level and at most others almost to the (superstar) top of the career ladder, wealth tests filter out artists who are not in a position to supplement their arts earnings using money available to them from other sources.

- Arts funding systems supporting the production of opera, ballet, live orchestral music, “serious” drama, etc., provide subsidized leisure opportunities mainly taken up by people who are, on the whole, better educated and better off than most of their fellow citizens.
- The same arts funding systems provide subsidized employment opportunities disproportionately benefiting artists from wealthier-than-average family backgrounds. Since even with the subsidies in place sector-average arts earnings are not enough to live on, artists with no other means of support will sooner or later have to abandon their arts careers.
- Funding systems of the Arts Council type redistribute wealth from poor to comparatively rich. The whole Arts Council Movement was, and remains, in that respect socially regressive. Girard made this eloquently clear in 1972. Nothing much has changed.
- Occasional exceptions to these generalizing rules do not invalidate them.

While the Arts Council of Great Britain was young – for its first few decades of apparently successful operation – general taxation arrangements funding the provision of a wide range of social services tended to redistribute wealth in the other direction. Arts subsidies could be seen as partial compensation for socialist or social-democratic reforms otherwise “disadvantaging” traditional elites. Here are B. Ifor Evans and Mary Glasgow, writing in 1947: “Once the loss of the patron had been felt, the State which had destroyed the patron by heavy taxation had itself to step in, by some means or another, if the functions of patronage were to continue” (Evans and Glasgow, 1949 [preface dated August 1947], p.16). Mary Glasgow was the the Arts Council of Great Britain’s first Secretary General. Or as John Maynard Keynes, the Council’s first chairman, explained in a June 1945 BBC radio broadcast, the script for which was printed in the Arts Council’s first ever annual report: “we do not intend to socialise this side of social endeavour”. Keynes delivered his anti-socialist address while parties were campaigning in the 1945 General Election, weeks before the announcement of Labour’s landslide victory. By then he must have seen it coming.

Residual arts inequalities in a world from which grosser sorts of inequality were being eliminated looked harmless enough. The political tide turned in the 1980s: inequality started widening again thanks to neoliberal reverse-reforms “shrinking the state”, cutting taxes and deregulating financial traffic. But by then the Arts Council Movement was set in its ways – valorizing inequality using the code word “excellence”. Neoliberals question its economic efficiency but not its poor-to-rich redistributive tendency. From a neoliberal “meritocratic” perspective winners deserve to win, and deserve all the prizes coming their way.

Today’s Arts Council England (ACE) is in a difficult position. Shaped by 70+ years of elitist history – no-one running or working for the Arts Council now is to blame for that. Perhaps embarrassed by *Panic! 2018*’s findings (surprised – I hope not): forced to act embarrassed whether or not it really is, so that left-and-liberal-leaning appearances can be maintained across the subsidized arts sector. That too must act embarrassed whether or not it really is. Hence *Shaping the Next Ten Years: Developing a New Strategy for Arts Council England 2020-2030* – a consultation document responding to *Panic! 2018* without once mentioning it.

Shaping the Next Ten Years appeared in Autumn 2018. People attending consultation meetings were asked to read it in advance and come along ready to discuss its content. Online comments were invited too. Arts Council England will publish a draft version of its 2020-30 strategy in Spring 2019.

ACE outlines its “case for change” on p.2. The case rests on a “review of evidence”. No further details are given, but three of the six planks comprising ACE’s case seem to me to have been lifted from *Panic! 2018* (or at least influenced by *Panic! 2018*):

Across the population there are significant differences in how ‘arts and culture’ are defined, understood and valued.

There are still widespread socio-economic and geographic variances in levels of engagement with publicly funded culture.

Although awareness of the issue is greater than it used to be, there remains a persistent and widespread lack of diversity across the creative industries and in publicly funded cultural organisations.

A strategy with seven “proposed outcomes for 2030” is envisaged. These follow from the case for change. The case identifies problems; solutions to those problems count as outcomes (fair enough).

Outcome 1. “A nation that supports and celebrates culture of every kind.” This will require “greater public support ... and investment” and a much wider Arts Council remit, allowing it to “recognise, value and invest in” practically anything that might be considered creative, up to and including computer coding (p.6).

Outcome 2. “People from every background [will by 2030] benefit from public investment in culture.” At present “[p]ublicly funded culture generally serves only a very small percentage of the population – those that tend to be better off and more likely to have a degree. The Arts Council believes that this situation must change” (p.7).

Outcome 4. “England’s diversity is fully reflected in the organisations we support, and in the culture they produce.” Another *mea culpa*, quite likely *Panic!*-induced: “Over the course of the last ten years, despite a series of investment programmes and policy initiatives targeted at this issue, we have not succeeded in delivering systemic change” (p.9).

Shaping the Next Ten Years does acknowledge the existence of systemic inequalities. Arts Council England has “started to think about the sorts of action [it] might need to take” to deal with them, and this is good as far as it goes.

Missing from *Shaping the Next Ten Years*, unfortunately, is any real engagement with the issue of social class. It lists symptoms of inequality without properly considering their causes. It ignores *Panic! 2018*’s crucial intersectional lesson, and in so doing dramatically reduces the likelihood that change advocated will actually occur.

After decades of practice, sector insiders are good at talking change without walking any further or faster than necessary in its direction. New members of funded arts organisations’ boards – many of them Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic, recruited because Arts Council England says they must be – will quickly learn that knife-edge financial fragility rules out any behavioural change with potential to alienate existing patrons, sponsors ... or elderly supporters writing their wills. More projects can and no doubt will be devised to tick diversity boxes. Some new organisations of diverse character are certain to enter the Arts Council’s national portfolio.

Artists from working class family backgrounds will continue to struggle financially. Over the Next Ten Years a higher proportion of those struggling will be Black, Asian and other Minority Ethnic – a victory for equality and diversity, yes, but not one I would rush to celebrate.

Much of the future belongs to BAME artists from middle- and upper-class family backgrounds. This is progress, but again of a limited sort: co-opting BAME artistic talent into a power structure designed to pass wealth upwards not push it down and out.

Michael Young's fictitious meritocracy collapsed in 2033 – into civil war. The rebels were no longer prepared to live in a state where clever planners made all the rules and deprived everyone else of decision-making autonomy. Though pay had been equalized in 2005 (everyone, clever or not, drew the same centrally-determined wage from then on), to maintain incentives "[p]ublic-spirited employers increasingly adopted [a] new conception of the duty they owed their staff ... to provide the best possible conditions for mental activity, during the whole of every twenty-four hours, on and off the job" (Young, 1958/r1961, p.158). Free and very comfortable housing for top employees therefore; company cars and planes; servants on call both at work and at home; family holidays charged to the firm. Had Young anticipated the rise of corporate arts sponsorship in the 1960s and 70s he might well have added company boxes at the opera to his list of "supplementary payments in kind". As we learn from *Panic! 2018* and from *Shaping the Next Ten Years*, today's Arts Council has a strong conception of duty to the nation's better off and better educated.

Young's fictitious rebels drew inspiration from the equally fictitious "Chelsea Manifesto" issued in 2009 by a group of oddly articulate socialist workers whom Young imagined meeting there. (Few articulate workers remained by 2009. The Labour movement had, as Young put it brutally, "lost [its] clever children to the enemy" (Young, p.162). Their manifesto "opposed inequality because it reflect[ed] a narrowness of values ... *The classless society would be one which both possessed and acted upon plural values ... [and] would also be the tolerant society, in which individual differences were actively encouraged as well as passively tolerated*" (pp.168-9: Young's italics). Young in his assumed pro-meritocracy narrator persona mocked all this as quaintly archaic, harking back pointlessly to Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light". The real Young thought otherwise. Here he is, despite surface appearances (this is satire after all), godfathering parts of the *Panic! 2018* report sixty years before it appeared.

Arts Council England's Next Ten Years take it close to 2033; and close to the social brink imagined by Young. ACE has time to start getting diversity right, but not as far I can tell from this latest consultation document the sociological insight needed to put effective diversity-promoting policy measures in place. "[T]he first rule in any cultural policy," wrote Augustin Girard in 1972 (meaning any healthy and effective cultural policy) "must be decentralization ... [To] ensure that cultural programmes keep pace with changing modes of life, it is essential that the ultimate purposes, objectives and means be discussed and brought to light at the local level" (Girard, 1972, p.131). Girard was of course a sociologist. Breaking this first rule, Arts Council England wants over the Next Ten Years greatly to extend its centralizing policy influence, "looking to develop, advocate for and invest in a far wider range of culture and creativity" (*Shaping the Next Ten Years*, p.6). Along with development and investment go mapping, monitoring and control. ACE will "partner with world class research organisations to develop metrics and methods that clearly and effectively show how culture and creativity improve people's lives" (p.13). Metrics and methods by which culture and creativity of every sort can then be judged.

Metrics and methods scream meritocracy to me. I expect Littler, Brook, O'Brien and Taylor are screaming too. Young will be spinning in his grave.

Afterword

Three anonymous reviewers read this article as first submitted to *Cultural Trends*, and made helpful suggestions for improving it. I am grateful to them.

I realized when reading their comments that meritocracy poses different types and degrees of menace in different countries. From a communitarian perspective (British socialist-nostalgic maybe? modern Scandinavian?) meritocracy is a sifting and organising principle with insidious destructive power. Fair-and-progressive surface appearances make it all the more dangerous: good people can be suckered in. From other perspectives, social selection systems normalizing vigorous interpersonal competition for educational and later career reward might not look so problematic – and a “good” or benign understanding of meritocracy might still appeal. A US-based referee wanted me to distinguish clearly “between the cynical or hypocritical use of the notion of ‘merit’, genuine attempts to measure promise or value, and the misguided or unintended consequences of using the concept of ‘merit’”. These are valid distinctions, but unenforceable outside academia. Once a term like meritocracy has been thoroughly corrupted through frequent cynical or hypocritical (mis-) use then I fear that people who would like to use it genuinely will have trouble getting their meaning across. Alternatives might serve them better.

The same reviewer queried my interpretation of arts subsidies as proxy purchases made by funders in lieu of consumers who, for the moment, are not consuming in sufficient quantity or at high enough prices. Here I want to stand my ground. In Britain, at any rate, the “market failure” case for Arts Council intervention was time limited. Audiences would grow in confidence and in willingness-to-pay as initial, positive experience of subsidized art encouraged repeat attendance. Sooner or later the subsidies could be phased out. Keynes made that clear in his 1945 BBC broadcast: “do not think of the Arts Council as a schoolmaster. Your enjoyment will be our first aim. We have but little money to spill, and it will be you yourselves who will by your patronage decide in the long run what you get”. Arts market failure was a failure of information in other words – a plausible argument when Keynes first mooted it, but no longer tenable.

Current arts funding arrangements in England and in the US redistribute relatively little money away from poor people toward richer ones, perhaps not enough to worry about. Funded arts organisations do have a public education function, and can perform it in socially progressive ways if required and resourced to do so. These are important caveats. In England, perhaps also in the US, we are nearing the end of an era in which people with university degrees moved smoothly on to well paid jobs, and smoothly into the frequent arts attender category. We may be heading for a future in which educated people increasingly struggle to afford the cultural stimulants to which education left them rationally, life-enhancingly addicted. In that scenario, everything we thought we knew about cultural policy would need re-thinking from scratch.

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