

Meritocracy

Meritocracy is a system of government or other organization based on demonstrated ability (merit) and talent rather than by wealth, family connections, class privilege, race, gender, sexual orientation, cronyism, popularity or other historical determinants of social position and political power.

The word “meritocracy” is now also often used to describe a type of society where wealth, position, and social status are in part assigned through competition or demonstrated talent and competence, on the premise that positions of trust, responsibility, and social prestige should be earned, not inherited or assigned on arbitrary quotas.

Meritocracy is used both to describe or even criticize competitive societies, that could accept large inequalities of income, wealth, and status amongst the population as a function of perceived talent, merit, competence motivation and effort.

“The pressure to avoid it (white privilege) is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; ones’ life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtue of their own.”

(Unpacking the White Knapsack - Peggy McIntosh)

Origin of Term

The term “meritocracy” was first used in a pejorative sense, in Michael Young’s 1958 book *Rise of the Meritocracy*, which is set in a dystopian future in which one’s place is determined by IQ plus effort. In the book, this social system ultimately leads to a social revolution in which the masses overthrow the elite, who have become arrogant and disconnected from feelings of the public.

Despite the negative origin of the word, there are many who believe that a meritocratic system is a good thing for society. Proponents of meritocracy argue that a meritocratic system is more just and more productive than other systems, and that it allows for an end to distinctions based on such arbitrary things as sex, race or social connections. Detractors of meritocracy, on the other hand, argue that the central dystopian aspect of Young’s conception -- the existence of a meritocratic class that monopolises access to merit and the symbols and markers of merit, and thereby perpetuates its own power, social status, and privilege -- has rapidly appeared in many if

not all societies that have embraced meritocracy.(Much of this text stolen from wikipedia)