

4-30-83

planned

See also Schacht
in England

Michael Young, Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-1923. (1958)

The feigned year of composition is 2034 (N.B.--1984 plus 50), when a crisis in the state is developing; the book is written to explain the prelude to the crisis, and it shows how Britain achieved a meritocracy by eliminating hereditary privilege and substituting position by talent and achievement. In the main, the author is given a chance to air all his personal feelings about English politics, economics and education, and one assumes that when he describes some fantasy of the later 20th century the good guys represent his beliefs, the defeated ones his opponents. Since the whole thing is written as past history, it is not utopian as much as science fiction.

The book is very quoteworthy, for the author is evidently a very witty person. While the general theme of the triumph of merit is meritorious, the way in which Young institutionalizes it--by precise I.Q. tests in conjunction with achievement--locks him into a bureaucratic and finally state-controlled system which is much creepier than he ever allows. The great horror of it appears at the end, in a humorous sequence which stems from the crisis which he says inspired the book: the high I.Q.'s have begun to intermarry in order to set up an hereditary meritocracy. When their progeny turn out to be ordinary I.Q.'s, they swap babies with the lower classes, which do produce high I.Q. children occasionally. Mothers have banded together to resist this enforced baby-swapping, and so the crisis has come. It is hardly a woman's lib attitude--it's motherhood saving humankind from its excesses.

One cannot always be sure that 2034 is basically good--it might well be meant by the author to be twice as bad as 1984. But there seems little doubt that the things he speaks about of the 1950's represent his own attitudes clearly: eliminating the comprehensive school (i.e., the egalitarian one); destruction of "public" schools by taxing capital so heavily that no one can afford them; high pay for teachers so that they are an elite. Also, his system of downgrading the older citizens as their regular I.Q. eye tests show them slipping, but allowing vigorous senior citizens to go well beyond any mandatory retirement age, seems to represent his cherished thoughts on the social order.

Part Two of the book, describing the lower classes in the ~~merit~~ meritocracy, may represent a shift from beneficent to malignant effects of the system. The differences between classes becomes greater in the new system, since the gulf represents not an artificial, inherited difference but a genuine I.Q. difference. The governed also rather genuinely despise the governed as true inferiors--whereas in earlier times the nobility knew that persons brighter than themselves were their social inferiors. The lower classes are kept happy by the myth of muscularity, hope of children's rising, refining the pecking order on the lower level to simulate achievement in the lower echelons. The very bottom become domestic servants--again, as in days of inherited wealth. The sections on decline of the movement, the leveling of income (with meritorious getting expenses on a variety of bases which make them in fact better off), seem to have strong Anglican in-jokes.

Lesson learned: futuristic scenes are very risky; they easily lead to authoritarian positions.