

Peter Mandler

The Crisis of the Meritocracy

Britain's Transition to Mass Education Since the Second World War

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Meritocracy - the idea that there are equal opportunities for all provided that one has the ability and will to climb the "ladder of opportunity" – seems to be a dirty word in British education these days. For decades, there has been a growing consciousness of just how unequal access to this ladder happens to be, and so equitable access and provision for all in education is repeatedly called for. Strangely, though, the meritocratic ideal remains rooted in British education in the way that student progression, development, and attainment are assessed. Thus, it is unsurprising that Peter Mandler titles his book "The Crisis of the Meritocracy". Given the extent to which meritocracy has become a pejorative idea, yet it still permeates the education system in the methods we choose to measure how "good" a student is, we might suggest that the idea of meritocracy is, at least, suffering from a crisis of identity as it becomes both something unwanted, but apparently valuable enough to retain.

Nevertheless, Mandler's argument here does not explicitly concern such an identity crisis (although he alludes to it implicitly throughout the book). His argument is that the post-war, meritocratic, system of selecting suitable routes of education based on ability was, and is, increasingly challenged by the thirst for more education beginning in the 1950s. He weaves together a range of sources in order to make his case from the worlds of economics, history, politics, and sociology. Alongside the ubiquitous longitudinal studies of the academic disciplines of history and sociology, he also looks at birth cohort data, political communications, legislative frameworks, and public opinion surveys from academic, governmental, and private sources. At one point, he also references the influence of political dystopian fiction (Michael Young's 1958 work, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*) to explain how the question of meritocracy entered public and political consciousness. His comfort in the use of less obvious sources is compounded by his use of [auto]biographical anecdotes and quotes from those at the vanguard of the mass education movement. As one might expect, these sources often present a contradictory narrative as to the growth of mass education and so are presented more as an illustrative backdrop for Mandler's real emphasis: the demand for more education came primarily from parents and students whose voices are not quite so prevalent in the more official discourses.

We are taken on a journey which really begins with the establishment of the Butler Act (1944). This legislated for all 11 year olds to be tested and streamed into the appropriate setting: grammar schools for the most intellectually capable; technical schools for the vocationally minded; and secondary moderns for everyone else. It was parental rejection of the "11 plus" examination and a demand for schools offering opportunities for all that saw a marked shift, but not a complete shift, to comprehensive schooling. This more closely resembles the system in place today. Still, it cannot be described as a perfectly democratic system given that streaming still exists in the form of ability set classes and the requirement to meet prerequisite criteria (based on previous ability) before being allowed to present for particular qualifications.

The quasi-democratic success of the movement to comprehensive schooling followed through to further and higher education institutions. The attraction of higher wages for graduates (the graduate premium), and the opening up of routes into higher education beyond the traditional entry straight from school, can be considered contributing factors to the widening participation of students from all social classes in further and higher education. An interesting point is made by Mandler when he details how the introduction of the student loan system was not necessarily a deterrent for students wishing to go to university. This emphasises the idea that education is seen by students across social

classes as both a “consumption” and an “investment” good and offers an explanation as to why so many are willing to get into considerable debt to ensure that they can access it.

In fact, Mandler’s book is full of curiosities like this. It was interesting to read that middle class parents were as likely, if not more so, to push for comprehensive schooling than working class parents. It was surprising to learn that it was Conservative-led local authorities at the vanguard of the comprehensive secondary school system given how often Tories are associated, in popular discourse, with a somewhat elitist ideology. The assertion that higher education expanded more under Thatcher’s government than any other was yet another statement that challenged my personal preconceptions about established party political attitudes towards education. Of course, it makes sense that a Conservative government would push for the marketisation of state held institutions, including universities, which would open them up for a wider group of consumers. Still, it is perhaps thanks to former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair’s 1997 election manifesto promise of “Education, education, education” that people of my generation see widening participation in education as more of a centrist (or even left wing) concern. It is an enjoyable characteristic of this book that it dispels widely accepted myths about Britain’s changing education system in the 20th century, and does so using robust, previously overlooked, sometimes deliberately misinterpreted, evidence.

From the outset, Mandler reminds us that this is not intended to be a history of British education. Indeed, I agree that such a feat would be impossible without equal consideration given to Scotland and Northern Ireland. This would be justifiably difficult to achieve en route to Mandler’s thesis given the breadth of diversity to be found among the four nations of Britain. If I have one concern, as a Scottish reader, it is that Scotland’s case is treated more as an outlier “for comparative purposes” (16) while Northern Ireland is bypassed entirely due to a lack of data. It is a valiant effort on Mandler’s part that he attempts to pin together the similarities and differences between the Scottish context and England/Wales to support his argument. Sadly, it cannot avoid the cultural trope which plagues the people of Scotland that we are often only considered part of Britain on a contingent basis – in this case to provide useful comparisons which support the author’s thesis. As a general rule, it is wise to be wary of anything that describes itself as British but pertains largely to England and Wales. This may not be something which greatly concerns an international readership; however, it may be worth suggesting that this book be read in tandem with other publications that do investigate the Scottish and Northern Irish cases more thoroughly.

In spite of this limitation, this bottom-up, people first (as opposed to top-down, politicians first) interrogation into the transition to mass education was an enlightening read. Perhaps this was due to my own limited knowledge of the English/Welsh system which certainly does not predate the 1990s. However, it seems more likely that it was enlightening precisely because of the bottom-up approach that was taken. As he describes: “the fixation on the political narrative has caused us to overlook some of the most powerful forces shaping society” (10) and this is a continuing theme in this work. He is unable, though, to remove himself from this entirely as he uses the political landscape of changing times towards his argument, as well as offering alternative interpretations of sociological and economic studies. Of course, we could level a sceptical accusation that such alternative interpretations could have been hammered to fit his purpose, thereby rendering them unrecognisable from the datasets used in the original investigations. However, the comprehensive inclusion of the original findings happily allows for a stringent analysis of Mandler’s interpretations on the part of the reader.

Whether or not it can be agreed, after reading this book, that meritocracy is, or has been, in crisis (personally, I view it as loitering behind a thin veil of democracy), there is merit in the way that Mandler presents his argument. In short, we are offered a refreshing perspective on half a century of

change in our education system, one which amplifies the forgotten influence of parents and students in the transformation. It would seem, then, that Mandler has not only produced an engaging and interesting volume but also something that might be considered a democratic enterprise in its own right.

Nicola Robertson (University of Strathclyde)