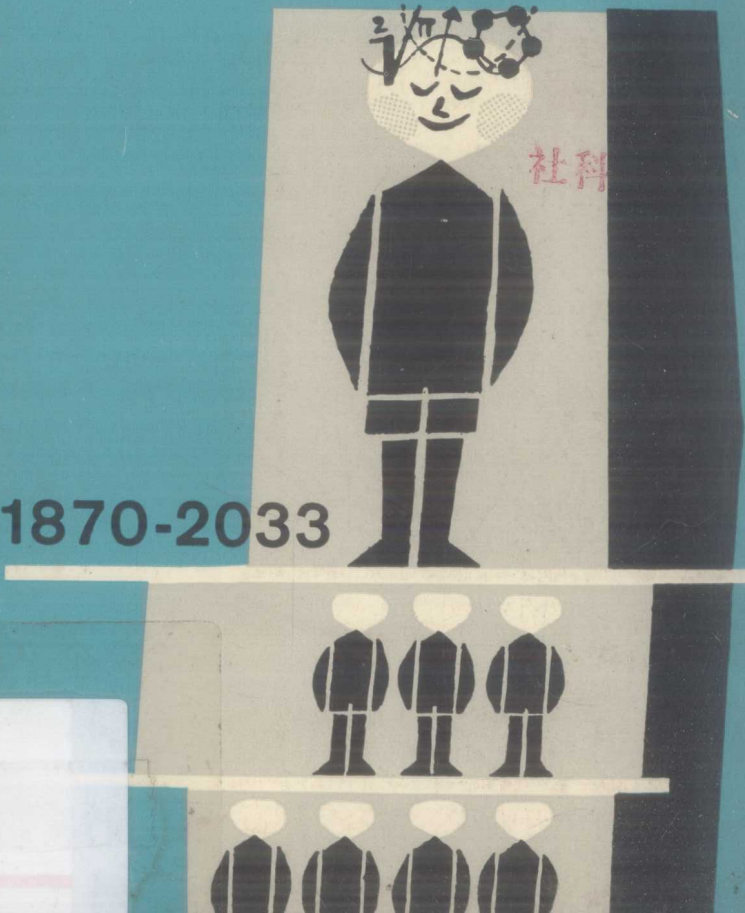
a Pelican Book

The Rise of the Meritocracy

Michael Young



PELICAN BOOKS

THE RISE OF THE MERITOCRACY

1870–2033

Born in 1915 of an Irish mother and an Australian father, Michael Young states that he succeeded in learning very little at a number of schools in Australia and England before he was fourteen. His education began when he arrived at Dartington Hall, the experimental school in Devon started by Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst. He has been connected with Dartington for thirty years, first as a boy and later as a Trustee.

Michael Young began to study sociology in 1954. He more or less simultaneously took a very late Ph.D. at the London School of Economics and started his own research unit in Bethnal Green, called the Institute of Community Studies. The Institute's first report was *Family and Kinship in East London*, which he wrote jointly with Peter Willmott. Subsequently he founded the Consumers' Association (publishers of *Which?*) in 1957, the Advisory Centre for Education (publishers of *Where?*) in 1960, the National Extension College in 1962 and the International Extension College in 1971. He was the first Director of the Mauritius College of the Air and the first Chairman of the Social Science Research Council. He is the author of *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (with Peter Willmott, 1960), *Innovation and Research in Education* (1965), and *Learning Begins at Home* (with Patrick McGeeney, 1968).

MICHAEL YOUNG

THE RISE OF THE MERITOCRACY 1870–2033

An Essay on Education and Equality

PENGUIN BOOKS

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PART TWO: DECLINE OF THE LOWER CLASSES

'The courage and imagination with which the development plan is drawn, the energy and judgement with which it is carried into effect, will not only determine the future of our educational system, but may largely shape the future course of the nation's forward march.'

The Nation's Schools
Ministry of Education, 1945

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT was the connexion between the gutting of the Ministry of Education and the attempt on the life of the Chairman of the T.U.C.? Between the unofficial transport strike and the equally unofficial walk-out of domestic servants? All these questions are rendered doubly topical by the general strike which the Populists have called for the coming May, on the first anniversary of the troubles. Will there be a response? Will 2034 repeat 1789 or merely 1848? I would submit that more topical, and more important, a subject could hardly be discussed. It touches on a clear and present danger to the state.

The Prime Minister, in his frank report to the House of Lords, put part of the responsibility for the May Affair upon administrative failings. The wrecking of Wren's store at Stevenage the Prime Minister regards as a local disturbance; its 2,000 shop assistants were undoubtedly incensed by the management's unexpected rejection of the four-day week. Destruction of the atomic station at South Shields might never have happened with a less provocative director. The walk-out of domestic servants was precipitated by the slowness of the Price Review, similar trouble in the other Provinces of Europe being evidence enough for that. Feeling against the Education Ministry was stimulated by the publication in April of the last report of the Standing Commission on the National Intelligence, and so on. All this I readily accept, yet it is not the whole story. We also have to explain why administrative miscalculations, that in an ordinary year would have passed almost unnoticed, should on this occasion have provoked such fierce and

concerted protest. To understand what happened, and so be prepared for what is going to happen, we have to take the measure of the Populist movement, with its strange blend of women in the lead and men in the rank and file.

The women's circles have produced evangelists before; their eclipse has usually been as sudden as their rising. Not so the leaders by whom we are now plagued. They have consolidated their strength. The Convention they organized at Leicester shortly before Christmas 2032 was their decisive moment. The women's circles would be mustered – that was well known; the women's sections of the Technicians' Party would be there – that was half allowed for. What was not expected was the attendance of so many representatives, men as well as women, from local branches of the Party and the Unions. In defiance of their leaders, they came from all over the country, and particularly from the North of England and Scotland – this hostility to London and the South is a sinister aspect of the agitation too much played down by government sociologists. Even the Association of Scientific Benefactors was represented. From Leicester sprang the ill-assorted conglomeration which has come to be known as the Populist Movement, with its strange charter. For the only time within living memory a dissident minority from the élite has struck up an alliance with the lower orders, hitherto so isolated and so docile. Their union fomented the local incidents in Kirkcaldy and Stevenage, South Shields and Whitehall, into the national crisis of last May.

What does it all mean? Only the historians of the future will know, perhaps even they will not agree. Close as we are to the crisis, with every day bringing fresh news, it is impossible for anyone to be more than

tentative in his opinions. No consensus has yet formed. The official view is that such an alliance across class-lines is a misalliance, the background of leaders and led so different, and the common interest between them so slight, that the movement cannot last. The *Sunday Scientist* has in a much-quoted, if scurrilous, phrase likened some of the leaders to 'Rimsky-Korsakov in a Lyons Corner House'. Has Somerville vulgarized itself without finding any deep response? I think not, at least I do not agree about the response. The Populists could not have gathered such momentum, the May Affair reached such dimensions, unless there were more than passing resentments to feed on. My reading is that these resentments have their roots deep in history.

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The purpose of this essay is to discuss some of the historical causes of the grievances that erupted in the May risings. My theme is that, whether or not these were explicitly organized by the Populists, they were certainly organized by history. One belief is implicit throughout: there are no revolutions, only the slow accretions of a ceaseless change that reproduces the past while transforming it. I am not thinking of the thousand and one technical innovations which have, from one point of view, made of the last century an aeon. These commonplaces I will not deal with but rather try to show that, however odd our great-grandfathers may now seem, the twenty-first century is woven on the same loom as neo-Elizabethan times. I shall illustrate my essay with references to the period, between 1914 and 1963, on which I specialized at the Manchester Grammar School. I would like to acknowledge my debt to my

sixth-form master, Mr Woodcock, for first pointing out to me how revealing a study of that time could be for an understanding of the progress man has made in the last century. He first introduced me to historical sociology as it has been developed in the ancient universities.

At the beginning of my special period, 1914, the upper classes had their fair share of geniuses and morons, so did the workers; or, I should say, since a few brilliant and fortunate working men always climbed up to the top despite having been subordinate in society, the inferior classes contained *almost* as high a proportion of superior people as the upper classes themselves. Intelligence was distributed more or less at random. Each social class was, in ability, the miniature of society itself; the part the same as the whole. The fundamental change of the last century, which was fairly begun before 1963, is that intelligence has been redistributed between the classes, and the nature of the classes changed. The talented have been given the opportunity to rise to the level which accords with their capacities, and the lower classes consequently reserved for those who are also lower in ability. The part is no longer the same as the whole.

The rate of social progress depends upon the degree to which power is matched with intelligence. The Britain of a century ago squandered its resources by condemning even talented people to manual work; and blocked the efforts of members of the lower classes to obtain just recognition for their abilities. But Britain could not be a caste society if it was to survive as a great nation, great, that is, in comparison with others. To withstand international competition the country had to make better use of its human material, above all, of the talent which was even in England, one might say always

and everywhere, too scarce. Schools and industries were progressively thrown open to merit, so that the clever children of each generation had opportunity for ascent. The proportion of people with I.Q.s over 130 could not be raised – the task was rather to prevent a fall – but the proportion of such people in work which called upon their full capacities was steadily raised. For every Rutherford there have in modern times been ten such magnates, for every Keynes two, and even Elgar has had a successor. Civilization does not depend upon the stolid mass, the *homme moyen sensuel*, but upon the creative minority, the innovator who with one stroke can save the labour of 10,000, the brilliant few who cannot look without wonder, the restless élite who have made mutation a social, as well as a biological, fact. The ranks of the scientists and technologists, the artists and the teachers, have been swelled, their education shaped to their high genetic destiny, their power for good increased. Progress is their triumph; the modern world their monument.

And yet, if we ignore the casualties of progress, we fall victim, in the sphere of human relations, to the insidious complacency which in natural science we so much deplore. In the balanced view of sociology we have to consider the failures as well as the successes. Every selection of one is a rejection of many. Let us be frank and admit that we have failed to assess the mental state of the rejected, and so secure their necessary adjustment. The danger that has settled in upon us since the shock administered by the events of the last year is that the clamouring throng who find the gates of higher education barred against them may turn against the social order by which they feel themselves condemned. Do not the masses, for all their lack of capacity, sometimes

behave as though they suffered from a sense of indignity? Do they necessarily see themselves as we see them? We know it is only by giving free rein to well-trained imagination and organized intelligence that humanity can hope to reach, in centuries to come, the fulfilment it deserves. Let us still recognize that those who complain of present injustice *think* they are talking about something real, and try to understand how it is that nonsense to us makes sense to them.