In the era of the earmark

The postmodern pejoration of meritocracy— and of peer review

Paul Forman

In June of 1999, Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure of the American Association of University Professors approved for publication and comment a statement opposing the increasing tendency, as it observed, to add the separate category of “collegiality” to the three traditional areas of faculty performance, namely, teaching, scholarship, and service.1 Historians know that term as referring to a pre-modern, pre-meritocratic academic regime in which the personal interests of the members of such collegial institutions of higher learning have tended to be placed above the interests of learning, and eventually research.2 That is, for most of its centuries-long history, the collegiality criterion has been understood as antithetic to the enlightenment concept of “the career open to talent,” i.e., to meritocratic criteria of advancement.

Meritocratic criteria for admission to, and advancement in, institutions of higher learning are now being disparaged and discarded after slow ascent toward primacy, culminating in the increasing tendency, as it observed, to add the separate category of “collegiality” to the three traditional areas of faculty performance, namely, teaching, scholarship, and service.1 Historians know that term as referring to a pre-modern, pre-meritocratic academic regime in which the personal interests of the members of such collegial institutions of higher learning have tended to be placed above the interests of learning, and eventually research.2 That is, for most of its centuries-long history, the collegiality criterion has been understood as antithetic to the enlightenment concept of “the career open to talent,” i.e., to meritocratic criteria of advancement.

The pressures for this retreat from modernism arise on both sides. From the traditional faculty side it reflects resistance to the ever more hegemonic business-managerial style of administration of these institutions and the imposition of management-administered reviews and evaluations with their “costs in emotions and collegiality,” as one resistant mathematician put it.3 But for the most part, says Greg McColm, of the University of South Florida, “The Administration has brought ‘collegiality’ to the table,”4 more concerned, as administrations increasingly are, with avoiding unpleasantness—and especially unpleasant criticism or dissent—than with the nominal purposes of their institutions.

If collegiality is on the rise, merit must be worth less. And this accords with the anti-meritocratic parole that is widespread in our culture. The bad odor of meritocratic elites is reflected not only in the rhetoric of our conservative politicians pandering to the populus, but also in rhetoric and subtext that appeal today to the highly educated—as, for example, the title of Nicholas Lemann’s widely noticed The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy (1999), the reading of which, said the president of Mount Holyoke College, convinced her that SAT results should not be required in an application for admission.5 It is not my contention that the SAT, about which in truth I know very little, is the ideal meritocratic instrument, nor is it even my contention that the concept of merit which the SAT aims to make operational is the only possible or the best possible. My contention is that in the rhetorical handling of the SAT today, and in the considerations that are brought—and not brought—to bear upon the issue of its merit, we recognize that the matter of merit itself is now viewed from a perspective alien to modernity. continued on page 10

Promotion of the comfortable over the capable is once again taking place in our universities and other research institutions, in our society generally.

openly argue that such a Youngian dystopia, however inevitable, is entirely desirable. On the other side, scarcely anyone will argue that merit is a meaningless concept, or that it is to be shunned on moral grounds—however meaningless it is rendered in fact by indulgence in our postmodern freedom to redefine merit ad libitum.

Indeed, the typical tactic today on the liberal left for pejorating meritocracy is the converse of Mark Antony’s with Caesar, namely, to come forward as a supporter of the ideal, but to give an account of actual social practice that so emphasizes departures from that ideal as to undermine the belief that meritocratic criteria have enough legitimacy to be defensible.

Rather, the consensus to which our now thoroughly “individualized society,” in Zygmunt Bauman’s term, has come is revealed in the rationale offered by University of California President Richard Atkinson for his recent proposal to eliminate all “objective” tests in selecting applicants for admission to undergraduate study at the many campuses of that distinguished university. President Atkinson founds his proposal to abandon the SAT, and eventually all national standardized tests, on the proposition that the use of any “notions of ‘aptitude’ or ‘intelligence’” in deciding college admissions is not compatible with the American view on how merit should be defined and opportunities distributed. The strength of American society has been its belief that actual achievement should

---

11. As Harvard’s former president Derek Bok said recently, “all admitted students are academically qualified and ‘meritorious,’ having all been judged especially likely to further the legitimate purposes of the institution.” New York Times, 23 October 1999, “Arts and Ideas”.
12. S.M. Miller, “My meritocratic rise,” Tikkan 16, no. 2 (March/April 2001), pp. 63-64; Deborah L. Rhode, “Myths of meritocracy,” Fordham Law Review 65: 585-594 (1996). Lemann, The American Meritocracy (1999), 347, for all the anti-meritocratic message of his book, professed in his “Afterword” a commitment to a simplistically meritocratic conception of an ideal society: “What would a United States that was a true meritocracy look like? It would be a society that gave everyone equal opportunity and gave jobs to those best able to perform them.” This contradiction could not survive the wide attention that this high-level journalist’s work received from more disciplined thinkers, and in rewriting that “Afterword” for the paperback edition (2000) Lemann took a less modernist line.
be what matters most. Students should be judged on the basis of what they have made of the opportunities available to them. In other words, in America, students should be judged on what they have accomplished during four years of high school, taking into account their opportunities.

Thus the President of the country's largest and best public university system treats any social interest in educating the ablest as entirely negligible, and rests the question of undergraduate admissions wholly upon our newly sovereign concept of moral virtue as individual responsibility ("judged on the basis of what they have made of the opportunities available to them")—and that applied to juveniles! Indeed, our most up-to-the-minute liberal theorist of social justice would "make as much turn on such responsibility as possible," thus trailing only a few years behind public opinion and social-welfare legislation.

The affinity between this postmodern reconceptualization of selective admissions and the return of collegiality in faculty evaluation lies both in the disregard of any obligation that the institution of higher education may be presumed to have to a 'realm of knowledge' or society's interest in those who possess it best, and in the downgrading of anything like objective measures of individual merit in favor of moral criteria freely invented and subjectively applied. ("Holistic" is President Atkinson's oft-repeated characterization of his proposed new way of looking at applicants.) And even as President Atkinson urges that California turn its back on the SAT, he provides a sketch of its history emphasizing that the College Board was founded in 1900 to remedy the situation—unsatisfactory from the modernist, meritocratic perspective—"in which each university has its own examination (of unknown validity)"—just the situation that his plan would recreate.

If, then, with these postmodern principles of distribution of opportunity and reward in mind we turn our attention to academic science, what would we expect to find? Obviously, a disregard, even disdain, of the long-standing, modernist, meritocratic principles governing awarding of funds, and that from top to bottom: among the representatives of the public providing those funds, among university presidents, deans, etc., and even among the researchers at the benches. The two main manifestations of this typically postmodern elevation of ends over means—i.e., legitimation of any means serving any legitimate end (and who's to say my ends are not legitimate?)—are the ascendency of the academic earmark and the disparagement of peer review. These two manifestations are interrelated, indeed interdependent, the earmark being, by definition, an evasion of peer review, while the disparagement of peer review legitimates more muscular mechanisms.

The indications of the ascension of the Congressional earmark as a funding mechanism of academic science are clear enough. For a decade after its first appearance in the early 1980s the growth of earmarking was quasi-exponential, reaching about 500 earmarks and $500 million dollars a year by the early 1990s. In the mid-nineties earmarking stabilized at about that rate, but in the past three years has taken off again, and now stands above the billion-dollar mark. Agency budgets that previously were innocent of earmarks are now being tagged all over with them. It is an indication of the impact that this mechanism for apportioning Federal research funds is having, and, more important, is expected to have in coming years, that this spring the annual AAAS Colloquium on Science and Technology Policy held a plenary session on "Funding Academic Science in an Age of Earmarks."

The ascension of the earmark is a good index of the failing cultural credit of the concept of objective merit precisely because the earmark was resisted so vehemently by those most strongly invested in modernist, meritocratic criteria for distribution of research support. Resisted—initially—by men like, yes, Richard Atkinson, who arrived where he stands today on admissions criteria via a change of heart on the issue of seeking earmarks for the University of California. (I say "change of heart," not "mind," because what is going on here is so far from rational, albeit highly consistent.)

Turning then, finally, to the pejoration of peer review, this too is consistent with all the phenomena previously pointed to—the continued on page 12


return of collegiality, the disparagement of meritocratic criteria, and the ascent of earmarks as a funding mechanism. Indeed, the pejoration of peer review is logically required by them and would be an inevitable by-product of them, even if the cunning of history had not provided for its appearance from within the bosom of the scientific community.

Space does not permit presentation of the different directions and different grounds of this self-disparagement of science—most of which, to be sure, claim to be meritocratic in intent, however dismissive of all those modernist “due process” mechanisms intended to ensure merit in fact. Unmistakable is the rise in volume, and in the highest notes, of that discordant chorus over the ten years since Chubin and Hackett referred discreetly to “murmurings from many quarters.” And when scientists deeply immersed in, and dependent upon, the peer review mechanism write letters to Science opining that, absent the protective wing of insightful funding-agency officials, “most innovative research proposals would never survive the peer review gauntlet,” and “that this model of research support has survived so long is indeed dismaying,” then it is not surprising to find others in higher positions, whose primary purpose is not the advancement of science, repeating those opinions through the megaphones available to them. But, to repeat, my principal point is that today, in ends-justify-the-means postmodernity, the lab researcher at the bottom of the hierarchy, the politician at the top, and the university president mediating between them are all in agreement that regular, formal due-process procedures to ensure merit above all else are not in their own interest, or that of their institutions, or that of their constituents. Indeed, they are agreed that such modernist hang-ups make no sense.
