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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 nearly unchallenged ideological predominance during the quarter century after the second world war. Appearing first in the form of qualified and circumscribed exceptions for purposes of remediation, the departure from meritocratic criteria has become a general and principled repudiation in the past few years as we have moved so much more fully into postmodernity. Thus the historian can hardly be surprised that collegiality is on the rise: promotion of the comfortable over the capable is once again taking place in our universities and other research institutions, in our society generally.

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.

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1. "On collegiality as a criterion for faculty valuation," *Academe,* September-October 1999, pp. 69-70.
2. William Clark, "From the medieval 'Universitas Scholarium' to the German research university: A sociogenesis of the German academic," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987, revised and augmented for publication by University of Chicago Press, 2001.
3. Bryan Cain, "What is the cost of post-tenure reviews?" AAUP Iowa State University Chapter Newsletter, January 1998, available at *www.public.iastate.edu/~aaup/newslisu/jan98.htm.*
4. Greg McColm, "Collegiality," *Newsletter of the United Faculty of Florida, University of South Florida Chapter*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Winter 2000), available at *w3.usf.edu/~uff/NSp00a.html.*
5. Thomas Frank, *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy* (Simon and Schuster, 2000); Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999); Brent Staples, "The Coming Backlash Against the Big Test, Why Mount Holyoke Dropped Out of the SAT Race," *New York Times,* 10 July 2000, op-ed pages. Likewise the cover story of *Time,* 9 March 2001, prompted by the Atkinson lecture referred to below.

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Just how great a turn-around this pejoration of meritocracy is may best be seen from the history of the word. Freely though we apply it and its adjectival form to centuries past, the word itself is of recent origin. It was coined by the British sociologist Michael D. Young in the mid-fifties to characterize a dystopia toward which he saw his society tending, and which he sought to satirize in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958). Young pictured Britain 75 years in the future as a starkly stratified society in which "intelligence has been redistributed between the classes" as a result of giving "the talented ... the opportunity to rise to the level which accords with their capacities." He went on, "The ranks of the scientist and technologists, the artists and 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."[6]

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

Yet that vision which Young sought to satirize was so widely and strongly held just then, at the height of modernity, that most of Young's readers (and all of his non-readers) failed to notice, or chose to ignore, the fact that the book was satirical.[7] In that high-modern era the word was immediately stripped of any pejorative connotation—on this side of the pond—and adopted to express the reigning social ideal. As David Riesman wrote in 1968 in *The Academic Revolution,* "The universities...have become pacesetters in the promotion of meritocratic values. In Talcot Parsons' terms, they are 'universalistic'."[8]

Yet even as Riesman was writing the pejoration was beginning. By the early 1990s, meritocracy had taken on such unfavorable connotations that Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, in *The Bell Curve* (1994), use the word meritocracy only twice, in a short section headed "Giving Meritocracy Its Due"—and that in a work of over 800 pages claiming to offer overwhelming empirical proof of Young's (only half-serious) thesis. And, oh, did I forget to say that they never mention Young, nor do they cite his book in their bibliography of more than a thousand titles?[9]

How then does it stand with meritocracy today? On the one side, nobody, not even those propagandists in the American Enterprise Institutes and the Heritage Foundations, can openly argue that such a Youngian dystopia, however inevitable, is entirely desirable.[10] 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.*[11] 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.[12]

Rather, the consensus to which our now thoroughly "individualized society," in Zygmunt Bauman's term,[13] 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.[14] 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

6. Michael Dunlop Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958; reissued, with a new introduction by the author, by Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, NJ, 1994), 4-5.
7. Young, ibid., new introduction (1994), xv.
8. Quoted by Lionel S. Lewis, *Scaling the Ivory Tower: Merit and its Limits in Academic Careers* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 12-13.
9. Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (The Free Press, 1994), 511-12.
10. Dinesh D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity: Finding Values in an Age of Techno-affluence* (The Free Press, 2000), manifests the requisite ambivalence. And note "virtue," the contemporary keyword that crosses all ideological lines.
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," *Tikkun* 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.
13. Zygmunt Bauman, *The Individualized Society* (Polity Press, 2001).
14. Richard C. Atkinson, "Standardized tests and access to American universities," being the 2001 Robert H. Atwell Distinguished Lecture, delivered at the 83rd Annual Meeting of the American Council on

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,"[15] 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 situtation 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.[16] 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."[17]

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.[18] (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

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Education, Washington, D.C., February 18, 2001. Available at *www.ucop.edu/ucophome/pres/comments/satspch.html*. In this widely noticed lecture, President Atkinson viewed with alarm that SAT preparation courses are "now a $100 million per year industry"—which should be compared, but is not, with the hundred billion that is paid in undergraduate tuition each year—and twice declared this comparatively trivial social expenditure to be "the educational equivalent of a nuclear arms race."

15. Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 5.

16. James D. Savage, *Funding Science in America: Congress, Universities, and the Politics of the Academic Pork Barrel* (Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jeffrey Brainard and Ron Southwick, "Congress gives colleges a billion-dollar bonanza," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 28 July 2000, p. A29; Brainard, "FIPSE budget loads up on pork," ibid., 26 January 2001, p. A27; Tim Weiner, "Lobbying for research money, colleges bypass review process," *New York Times*, 24 August 1999; Andrew Lawler, "Academic earmarks: pork takes a bite out of NASA's science budget," *Science* 286: 1837-39 (3 December 1999); David Malakoff, "Legislators get creative with new crop of earmarks," *Science* 281: 1436-38 (4 September 1998).

17. *www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/rd/clqpub01.htm.*

18. Savage, *Funding Science* (1999), 188-89.

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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."[19] 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.[20] 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 constitutents. Indeed, they are agreed that such modernist hang-ups make no sense.

Paul Forman, a curator at the National Museum of American History, Washington, DC, is author of, among much else, "Recent Science: Late-Modern and Post-Modern," In The Historiography of Contemporary Science and Technology, *edited by Thomas Söderqvist (Harwood Academic, 1996), soon to reappear in* Science Bought and Sold: Rethinking the Econmics of Science, edited by *Philip Mirowski and E.-M. Sent (University of Chicago Press, 2001).*

19. Daryl E. Chubin and Edward J. Hackett, *Peerless Science: Peer Review and U.S. Science Policy* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1990), 2; Michele S. Garfinkel, "Biomedical gerrymandering," *Recent Science Newsletter,* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 4-6; Bruce Agnew, "NIH eyes sweeping reform of peer review," *Science* **286**: 1074-76 (5 November 1999); David L. Goodstein, "Conduct and misconduct in science," in Paul R. Gross et al., eds., *The Flight from Science and Reason* (New York Academy of Sciences: NY, 1996), pp. 31-38.
20. Sheldon Penman, letter to *Science* **286** (1999): 239; Newt Gingrich, "An opportunities-based science budget," *Science* **290** (2000): 1303.

Rockefeller

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The Rockefeller University, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other philanthropies and associated individuals.

Grants will be made on a competitive basis to applicants from any discipline, usually graduate students or postdoctoral scholars, who are engaged in research that requires use of the collections at the Center. The amount of the grant is based upon the successful applicant's budget for round-trip travel to the Archive Center, temporary lodging while studying at the Center, and related research expenses. Applicants from the United States and Canada may request up to $2,500; scholars from other countries may apply for up to $3,000.

Applications for the program must be postmarked by 30 November of each year for awards that will be announced the following March. The funds awarded may be used any time during the next twelve months.

Residencies in the History of Basic Medical Research

The RAC will continue a five-year program of residencies for research at the Center on topics related to the history of basic medical research, a subject richly represented in the archival collections at the Center.

The history of basic medical research will be broadly defined to include most aspects of the history of the Rockefeller University (founded in 1901 as the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research), much of the history of the international medical, public health, and scientific research programs of the Rockefeller Foundation, and major elements of the histories of the Commonwealth Fund, Culpeper Foundation, Lucille P. Markey Trust, and Markle Foundation.

Scholars conducting substantial research in any aspect of the history of basic medical research are urged to apply. Prospective researchers may apply for residencies of one month, one semester (4.5 months), or an academic year (9 months). Stipends at the rate of $5000 per month will be awarded to cover all travel, food and lodging, and research expenses.

Applications will be reviewed in a competitive process, and it is expected that a total of two to six awards will be made in each year during the five-year program. Prospective applicants are urged to contact the Center prior to applying to determine the type and extent of records that will be useful for their research.

Deadline:	30 November 2001
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