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Doris Witt

University of Iowa

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A MEDIOCRE MERITOCRACY

DORIS WITT

*We rarely throw ourselves beyond the limits of what exists
and ask questions (now labeled 'Utopian') about what
could exist.*

— Stuart Hall (“The Supply of Demand”, 1960)

I joined this collective of academics working on Stuart Hall thinking that I would write about Hall’s abiding influence on my research in the area of literature, food, and culture. But in reading, or at times rereading, the essays that have been collected recently in Hall’s *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays*, I have found myself responding less as an academic than a parent, one whose older child has recently surpassed a major life milestone. Here follows, then, a meditation derived from one of Hall’s early essays and dedicated to my daughter and her classmates on the occasion of their graduation from our local public high school. Writing in 1960, at the relatively young age of 28, Hall not only demonstrated remarkable abilities of prognostication in predicting the emergence of meritocracy as a new model of socio-economic domination, but he also held out hope that we would not abandon the utopian goal of creating a society in which wealth, resources, and opportunities are distributed equitably rather than hoarded by a small elite.

In this essay, “The Supply of Demand,” Hall focused on the increasing hegemony in mid-century Britain of a consumer driven society, one legitimated, he argued, by misleading claims about how we define prosperity. Why, Hall asked, should one accept at face value talk about rising affluence when profits were being disproportionately captured by private industry, and the public sector was, as a direct result, being eroded? Hall looked out and saw, for example, that the Tory government of the era was systematically subsidizing the owners of the automobile industry but then extending indefinitely the time frame for making needed improvements to public transportation. “How can we say . . . that there are so many things ‘which we cannot afford,’” he wanted to know, “and yet assert that ‘we have never had it so good’? It does not make sense” (51). No, it did not make sense in the Britain of 1960, nor do similar claims made today in the U.S., where the stock market booms but wages for workers stagnate, where massive tax cuts for the rich are followed by calls for reductions

in social spending, where gated communities flourish while promised—and sorely needed—investment in public infrastructure is continually deferred.

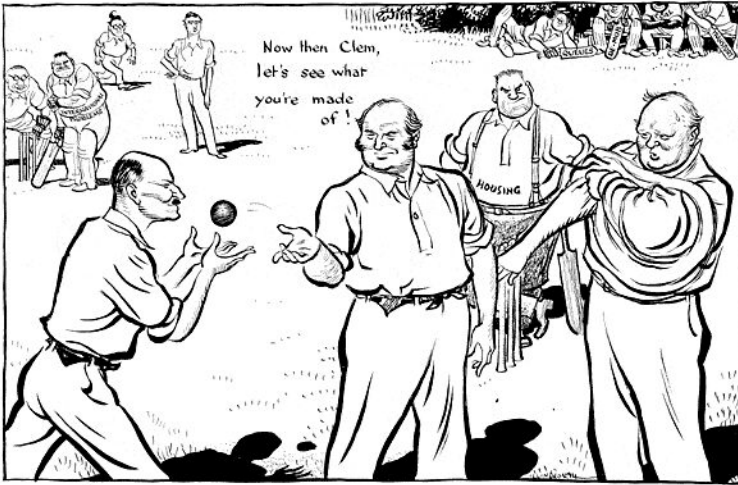


Figure 1: British Editorial Cartoon depicting Labour Party Politics, June 1945.

“The Supply of Demand” was originally published in a collection edited by the revered historian E.P. Thompson called *Out of Apathy*, and indeed Hall repeatedly returns to the question of whether the laboring classes will be satisfied with the promise of a TV set in every living room when the need for more hospitals is going unmet. Greater access to consumer goods, he argues, is hardly just compensation for capitalism’s innate inability to ensure the welfare of society as a collective. But at best, Hall continued, the labor movement in its then-current form had become little more than one among many competing interest groups. It lacked a vision for how to create a “genuine, balanced and lasting prosperity for all” rather than a gated-in bastion of privilege for the few (54). Meanwhile, those proliferating TV sets were serving primarily as a distraction. Even when “the gap between fantasy and life is too sharp” for viewers to be able to project themselves wholly into the “dream-life” of televised glamour, “‘living near the picture’ becomes a habit which makes constant calls on the attention and emotions” (63). The upshot? Hall’s contemporaries were faced with a constant swirl of mostly out-of-reach possibilities and the loss of any cohesive understanding of who should be held accountable when the streets are not swept and there are no affordable flats available to lease.

Granted, Hall’s opinions about the mass media evolved over the course of his subsequent career, and, in any case, the Tory-run Britain of 1960 is not the Trump-torn America of today. And so, one might reasonably ask what Hall’s

effort to inspire a moribund labor movement in mid-twentieth-century England has to do with Iowa City's most recent crop of high school graduates. One important answer can be found in those moments when Hall turns his attention to the fate of education in a society whose resources are concentrated in the private sector. Not surprisingly, this sector accepts responsibility for "giving managerial children an elite education" because such an investment "is something from which, in the short term, the corporation can expect to benefit directly" (60). Among the many things the private sector will emphatically not do, by contrast, is "reduce the average size of classes from forty to thirty for *all* children" (60). Using this example of education, Hall tries to help his readers understand that the Labour Party of mid-century Britain had surrendered to the capitalist class the right to determine social priorities and, in the process, failed to confront effectively the reality that the "responsibility of the firm—no matter how well discharged—ends at the frontier of the firm" (60).

Having thus characterized the ground that the Labour Party had already ceded, Hall turned his attention in the final segments of his essay to the future, including the question of how a corporate-controlled educational system will eventually fare when a "*home-centred*" (65) and status-conscious individualism has fully replaced what might formerly have been described as a community-centered and class-based web of human connections. What will life be like when the traditional working-class value of cooperation, to cite the most obvious way of framing the binary, has fully given way to the neoliberal valorization of competition? Or, put another way, if we allow education to be conceptualized only as "a series of 'Ladders of Opportunity,'" then will we not "have yielded up one of our central values—the concept that education is to enlarge our capacities as *people*"—and replaced it with "a more meretricious attitude towards education, as a process for personal advancement, another form of status-striving" (66)? Although Hall concedes that the idealized, working class neighborhood he had in mind was often also "a cluttered, cramped, inconvenient slum" (65), his utopian imagining of what education should ideally accomplish is surely worth taking seriously.

After all, Hall was right to fear that, in the absence of a cohesive political movement capable of giving "the new aspirations of the new groups in society direction and clarity," Britain would run the risk of transforming into what he labeled "a mediocre meritocracy" (67). In using this provocative phrase Hall had in mind a very specific development: "Gradually, the elites will draw more and more from within their own ranks: the ways to the top will sift and separate us according to our talents, helping to develop the acquisitive, self-aggrandising instincts, shutting off the generousities of our culture, our social responses to life" (67-68). In other words, if we teach children to approach their educations as a winner-take-all race to the top, we should not be surprised if they quickly learn

to equate success with individual accomplishment. Hall believed that the British educational system of 1960 had not yet succumbed to this still unrealized neoliberal celebration of competition *über alles*. "That is not where we are but certainly where we are going," he wrote (67-68). Almost sixty years later, and an ocean away, that is very certainly where we are. Or, if journalist Matthew Stewart is correct, perhaps mediocre meritocracy is where we have been, and at stake is where we are going next.

In "The Birth of the New American Aristocracy" (published in *The Atlantic* magazine in June 2018), Stewart notes that, "According to a 2017 study, 38 elite colleges—among them five of the Ivies—had more students from the top 1 percent than from the bottom 60 percent." Yet the problem, according to Stewart, is not just the top 1 percent—the elite of the elite. Of no less concern is the much larger but still exclusive top 10 percent, many if not most of whom conceptualize themselves as middle class but are actually very busy creating a new hereditary elite: "In America today, the single best predictor of whether an individual will get married, stay married, pursue advanced education, live in a good neighborhood, have an extensive social network, and experience good health is the performance of his or her parents on those same metrics." The upshot is that it is easy to vilify the top 1%, or better yet the top .1%, but we need to bear in mind the fact that the remaining 9.9 % of the most privileged in society have been faring very, very well, and feeling not the slightest pangs of guilt. "It's one of the delusions of our meritocratic class," Stewart aptly notes, "to assume that if our actions are individually blameless, then the sum of our actions will be good for society."

Nowhere in "The Birth of the New American Aristocracy" does Matthew Stewart cite Stuart Hall, but the latter's continuing relevance is abundantly evident in Stewart's diagnosis of what has gone wrong. "The source of the trouble, considered more deeply," Stewart explains, "is that we have traded rights for privileges. We're willing to strip everyone, including ourselves, of the universal right to a good education, adequate health care, adequate representation in the workplace, genuinely equal opportunities, because we think we can win the game." Stewart's analysis seems persuasive, as far as it goes: competition offers many enticements for those who feel they are well positioned to succeed. Yet in making his address to those who identify with this meritocratic class, Stewart has missed an opportunity to imagine the remaining 90% of the population as the mostly likely agents of meaningful, positive change. Stuart Hall did not make this mistake, not at all, and it is for this reason that his ideas seem so well suited to the occasion of celebrating a public high school graduation.

It is common, on such an occasion, to see students wearing various insignia of “distinction”—tassels and medals and the like. And, to be sure, Hall, himself the recipient of a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford in 1951, would have offered nothing but the sincerest congratulations to these hard-working young women and men who graduate with honors. Although he abandoned work on a Ph.D. in order to focus on political activism, ultimately Hall found his calling in academia. Never, though, did he cease believing that the role of education is not to sort students into the categories of winner and loser, gifted and dull, but instead “to enlarge our capacities as *people*.” And never did he lose faith in the potential of *people*, working together, to develop a “vision of how the society as a whole could be better and what we would have to do to make it so” (66-67). We do not need mediocre meritocracy. We certainly do not need hereditary aristocracy. What we do need is utopian thinking. We need to “throw ourselves beyond the limits of what exists” and regain faith in our ability to transform our dreams of what “could exist” into reality. Most of all, we need everyone, including every member of my daughter’s graduating class, to help us get there.



Figure 2: “Graduates.” Royalty free image from Pixabay.com.

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