

Aporias of Merit

ANDREA CEGOLON

Ricercatore di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale
Università di Macerata

Abstract:

Merit is universally welcomed and promoted as a contrast to the privileges of belonging that the school is called to correct in order to prepare for a better world. Advanced societies, now largely dominated by technology that closely interacts with the economy, do not give due recognition to merit. Meritocracy, which would be responsible for enhancing skills by promoting equal opportunities, often ends up by reaffirming privileges, in a kind of heterogenesis of ends. An answer to these criticisms can only come from an ethics based on the value of the person that is combined with an idea of merit also comprehensive of moral values.

Riassunto:

Il merito è universalmente salutato e promosso come contrasto ai privilegi delle appartenenze che la scuola è chiamata a correggere per preparare ad un mondo migliore. Le società avanzate, oggi dominate in gran parte dalla tecnica che dialoga strettamente con l'economia, non danno il giusto riconoscimento al merito. La meritocrazia, cui spetterebbe di valorizzare le competenze promuovendo uguali opportunità, finisce non di rado per riaffermare i privilegi, in una specie di eterogenesi dei fini. Una risposta a queste critiche può venire solo da un'etica basata sul valore della persona che si coniughi con un'idea di merito comprensiva anche di valori morali.

Keywords: merit, work, education

Parole chiave: merito, lavoro, educazione

1. Introduction

Merit is generally hailed as a source of recognition, an instrument of justice, and one of the best strategies for improvement, growth, and greater well-being (Floris, 2007). On the economic level, it helps companies make quality advancements (Da Empoli, 2000). Widespread and acceptable is the idea that Italy can restart only if more space is given to merit. This idea is looked at with greater interest, even by political decision-makers. In this regard, what

appears to be a decisive political turn favouring the space to be reserved for merit, coupled with professionalism, must be welcomed; even though, once, it was treated almost with disdain, with poorly concealed annoyance, almost like an aberration of democracy (Bobbio, 1984a; Bobbio, 1984b).

This cultural change is not unrelated to more reliance on the role of the school. Expectations towards the educational training system are growing as a source of skills (Cegolon, 2008) centred on enhancing differences, developing talents, and training of excellence (Abravanel, 2008, p. 231 and following). It is not difficult to see how we come across the merit. The gap between young people and educational institutions in our country is worrying and spreading more and more. How can we explain it? The reasons are obviously many. Like wildfire, the responsibilities are extensive, few being the «actors» spared. Indeed, in the dock, we find the scholastic world in relation to education in a broad sense; responsibility weighs heavily on the social and economic world with the low sensitivity to follow its vocation, i.e. to train and mobilize resources. Is it an unavoidable consequence of the so-called «end of work» (Rifkin, 1995)? Or is there more?

Certainly, the job offer has shrunk. The most obvious consequence is, on the one hand, the increase in poverty (Bauman, 1998; Brandolini, Saraceno & Schizzerotto, 2009); on the other hand, there is a growing perception of a substantial impregnability of the world of privileges, while the battle for the rebalancing of the power relations between the classes could play an essential role in favouring social mobility, progress and democratic coexistence.

Exactly in this cultural and political context fits the theme of merit. Potentially, it stands as the only defence against privilege, a functional weapon to counter the obstacles in the way of the gradual and painless exchange or transition between generations.

Merit, as known, is a source of recognition, an instrument of justice, and one of the best strategies for improvement, growth, and greater well-being (Floris, 2007). It helps companies make quality progress on the economic level (Da

Empoli, 2000). Widespread is the idea that Italy can restart only if more space is given to merit, which is looked at with greater interest, even by political decision-makers. In this regard, what appears to be a decisive political turn favouring the space to be reserved for merit, coupled with professionalism, must be welcomed. Luckily greater is today the reliance on the role of the school as a place dedicated to the formation of personal talents in view of more social equalization. But let us investigate the nature of the merit.

2. Merit

Etymologically, «merit» come from the Latin «merere», to «deserve». The semantic range is broad. It includes a material aspect as well as its opposite and indicates both «to deserving a reward» (a material reward) and the condition of one who is worthy of praise, object of esteem, spiritually elevated. In ancient Greece «merit» – *Kleos* (Tognon, 2016) – was chiefly referred to fame, glory, honor.

Beyond this semantic swing, the merit is appreciated, at first glance, as the maximum of transparency. But the closer the glance, the more shadowy areas are highlighted so that we find it difficult to notice limits and aporias. More or less these are the perplexities raised by the famous economist Sen: «The idea of merit can have many virtues, but among these there is no clarity» (Sen, 1999, pp. 5-16). Otherwise said, when moving into pages dealing with merit, we should have clear both the premises on which are based the arguments and the extent of the consequences drawn by the author. In this sense a welcomed invitation to prudence comes from an essay which should be taken into high consideration, *The Rise of Meritocracy* of Michael Young. Written in 1958, published for the first time in Italy in 1961, it is frequently cited in debates (Young, 2014).

The study is inscribed in the sociological tradition opened in the modern era by De Mandeville, whose famous work, *The fable of bees* (De Mandeville, 1957), has become a classic even because the author dared to challenge the

academy by taking a philosophically incorrect or nonconformist position. Mandeville, indeed, violates a die-hard taboo, i.e. the tendency to stay barred in the fort, thus avoiding confrontation with factual reality. The interest in Mandeville is precisely on the methodological side: asking the facts to confirm a specific hypothesis; this is Mandeville's approach, also known as hypothetical deductive reasoning. In this way, we are allowed to verify the stability of a hypothesis from the resulting consequences. In such a way, Mandeville carries out an operation bordering on recklessness, overturning an almost stainless cliché. He manages to prove the birth of social virtues at the hands, paradoxically, of private vices: the evil changed into a virtue! This is also what the Young does, who succeeds in demonstrating how the meritocratic system, created to eliminate privileges, inequalities, position rents, etc., comes to its opposite. In the end, privileges and inequalities, which should have been removed, stay untouched, and continue keeping their position. Nevertheless, let's proceed step by step. Moving from a scientific instance to arrive at incontrovertible results, Young identifies the mathematical formula containing the secret of merit:

$$M = E \times IQ$$

[M = merit; E = effort; IQ = intelligence]

Developed in the post-industrial era, the formula highlights a social, dramatic phenomenon, the gradual loss of centrality of work. This downsizing is coupled with the growing dominance of technology and the consequent imposition of the principle of an ever-tighter selection, regulated by the criterion of the skills endowment. In the context so outlined, two reversed factors come into play in the analysis of merit: the failure of the ethical

component; the primacy of intelligence in measuring effectiveness in performance. In the post-Taylorist and post-Fordist historical phase (Boyer, 2004; Magatti, 2012), the driving force for improvement is no longer identified in goodwill but in human «intelligence», which in learning societies stands for critical ability, disposition to innovation, creativity, entrepreneurship, design competence etc. (Rullani, 2004a; Rullani, 2004b; Foray, 2006).

Therefore, let's suppose how to regulate socio-political-economic relations based on the formula described. Young confronts us with the consequences of a vertically meritocratic organization and highlights its limits. The assumption is this: the merit is guaranteed by its absolute transparency. More simply said, it can be quantified, measured, and then predicted. In such a way, merit becomes a little less merit; let me pass the pun. Intelligence can be measured (applying the well-known QI formula); the same can be said about the effort made to achieve some goal, at least according to accredited assumptions (Taylor, 1911; Young, 2014, p. 108 et seq.).

If the picture thus outlined has its logic, the irrefutable verification can come precisely from the school, which is the field of interest here. The principle – according to which the less good, objectively and scientifically measured as such, are discriminated against by those who excel – is right logically founded. This operation should be accepted as a matter of fact by the interested parties, without that rancorous trail of hatred or perhaps of indignation with which one rebels against injustice. Far from complaining about being relegated to the role of supporting actors, destined for more tiring and less profitable works, they could accept a less benign fate quietly because they do not feel victims of injustice perpetrated against them.

However, on this basis, a far-reaching consequence follows that undermines the very foundation of the merit-based perspective. The egalitarian objective, supporting the meritocratic framework, translates into its opposite, ending up, without immediate awareness, in its opposite, a society of discrimination. Sic!

Gradually and smoothly, the further step is a form of hyper-selectivity, which is the exact opposite of the axiomatic belief in the «educability of the majority»; the final step is the acquiescence of humanistic knowledge to the dictates of science and technology. The follow-up is a ruthless turnover to the detriment of the elderly, who, being less gifted in learning, are less important for all companies which can egoistically do without them. This sacrifice of the elderly acts as a counterbalance for the benefit of the youngest, who profit by being more reactive and ready in learning, therefore more profitable from an economic point of view.

In such a case, who is more worthy? Where is the merit? In a meritocratic society, justice generally comes after merit, which is immolated on the altar of efficiency. However, in the long run, to pay, we will be almost all because the path leading to happiness is destined to narrow within reach of a small group of technocratic oligarchs. How not to seriously imagine a bleak scenario? History documents that social inequalities beyond a certain threshold generally prepare the way for social revolt. Adrift, as described, could act as a detonator to ignite social rebellion?

Is there any chance to counter this dystopia? How to do it?

We could start from this question: can we measure complex psycho-mental faculties and behavioural attitudes thanks to which we think, explain what happens, understand and make ourselves understood, judge, know how to adapt to the environment and modify it if necessary? If so, how? Precisely by virtue of their complexity these components. The basis of intelligence is irreducible to an algorithm; this is the adage today. But above all, the variety of personal endowments, rather than requiring a mathematical classification and social graduation, deserve to be valued as a repository of resources (Jarvela, 2008; Miliband, 2008) on which education must leverage to preserve in all subjects the potential of human realization as well as the value of dignity (Khan, 2021; Ruano-Borbalan, 2008).

We are used to dealing with the distinction in classes, but the real goal to pursue, starting from school, would be a world without classes. At least we would be pleased to imagine a world with fewer barriers and more bridges, where the aspiration towards good co-existence is the drive to permeate the walls of social indifference. Geniuses exist, of course (those with high IQ), but they are few. Nevertheless, it also happens to discover talented people among a lot of people we usually deal with insufficient recognition: self-respecting artisans, the skilled musician in a band, creative cabinetmakers, IT nerds, generous volunteers, selfless people taking care of the poor, the disabled or the elderly. To sacrifice one's free time to help other people qualifies those who rise from mediocrity.

The moral of the story is like this: the contributions making a virtuously meritocratic society are infinite, all worthy of a proper appreciation. A new product, revolutionary as it can be today, for example, the electric car, is inevitably the result of the complexity of actors who are involved: from those who have the intuition and develop the project; from the engineer to the draftsman to the communicator to the humble but no less important worker assigned to assembly the components, where good practice manages to solve problems not foreseen in the design phase. Alternatively, let's take what happens in a hospital world. What a competent doctor does (i.e. transplants of a human organ) cannot be done without. However, what about the loving presence, human warmth, and sensitivity of the personnel involved in various job steps? In a democratic and cooperative organization, all team members have the right to be recognized for their merit. The distribution of merit should be regulated by fair criteria, which unfortunately are often disregarded. For instance, in big companies, top managers are rewarded with stratospheric remuneration – leaving out additional benefits – maybe 100 times that of the worker, who has to deal with the job precariousness and the safety risks, such as daily accidents in the workplace document. As envisaged by Young, a classless society is a utopia (Young, 2014). Nevertheless, a drastic reduction

of social stratifications would thoughtfully contribute the improving the working condition and the recognition of merit, thus promoting the value of the dignity of people.

3. Pedagogy and merit

Let's roughly translate the afore-said socio-political considerations into a pedagogic framework. First of all, the starting and decisive point is the pupil. Each student is a priceless value in himself, not only for the family, not only for the role he will play in life, not even for his prospective position in his working career. In this sense, we have a concrete measure of the importance of school. Elevated are, indeed, the social expectations from the school, an irreplaceable training ground for future generations. The top objective should be to favour the full and integral development of the person, coupled with training focused on the work activity as an adult, according to the line of a fruitful thought connected to personalistic pedagogies (Mounier, 1947; D'Arcais, 1987; Peretti, 1978). From this point of view, this vision is neatly antithetical to the utilitarian thinking, which incubates meritocracy and its claim to conceiving life as a race only governed by uniform criteria (Barrotta, 1999, p. 59 et seq.).

A distinction concerning this vaguely Darwinian approach comes surprisingly from the same market, whose logic rejects external conditioning and rules, only aiming at being consistent with the principle of guaranteeing people's freedom of choice, as von Hayek eloquently reminds us: «The market order does not it has the purpose of selecting the merit of individuals, but that of coordinating their actions, which are governed by intrinsically subjective aspirations, tastes, preferences and values» (von Hayek, 1960, p. 60). Basically, even from another side – not only from that of democracy that coherently fights the idea of privilege generating privilege – but just in the same laws of the market, the meritocratic ideology leads to uniformity and conformity and should be disavowed.

However, it will be objected: merit – the value of the subject – not only contrasts privilege but is also coupled with cardinal principles of mature democracies, such as innovation, improvement, and competitiveness (Dewey, 1916; Tognon, 2016). Precisely this is the space where not only the company, as one might think, but a democratic society finds its *raison d'être*. This is the point where to link separate worlds. The economic world cannot but find its ally in the pedagogical world, and, consequently, the school must answer the needs coming from the socio-working world. But the common striving for improvement, that should synergistically squeeze society in the various spheres of which it is composed, should be motivated by material values no less than by immaterial ones, ethically connotated. To develop and promote this perspective, a pre-requisite should be a society governed by a competent political class, devoted to the common good. Once, political professionalism sounded like blasphemy, as said before; today, it is being re-evaluated as a factor of stability and progress. However, to guarantee merit, it should be based on solid ethical ground and support an education system from which we expect an action centred on skills aimed at enhancing differences and promoting the talents of everyone (Bertagna, 2004; 2018; Damiano, 2007). Merit will be the ingredient of a harmoniously organized society, projected on a future where the permeability between the social classes will favour justice and social peace.

4. Conclusion

In the collective imagination, merit is placed in the hyperuranium of perfection, among the indisputable ideas. All people are inclined to boast of having progressed in their career, in studies, in life thanks to their merits, to what they have been able to do, to their commitment and ability. Exactly on these premises, the reflection of these pages took off. However, as research and insights progressed, our ideas went into crisis. Indeed, contradictions,

uncertainties, doubts have emerged, which we have called aporias. The search for merit has led us to a heterogenesis of ends. The keystone of this reversal of values were the Mandeville analyzes linked to those of Young. On these two authors in particular, we questioned ourselves for a long time and in the end we had to agree that, however extreme at times, those hypotheses had the merit, let me pass the pun, of highlighting the opaque sides of the idea of merit. Limited to some human characteristics, merit can easily end up sacrificing the variety of elements composing it and the diversity and the way it is expressed with which it is expressed. For this reason it can just lead to its opposite. In short, in the name of the merit there is the risk of endorsing the reasons for the demerit.

The final question remains. On the assumption that merit is going through a difficult time in our culture where derivative merits prevail – that is, position rents, inheritances, affiliations, etc. – is there a way to restore to it luster and value, considering the high rank of the idea of merit? We have tried to demonstrate that, in a world characterized by an unbearable materialistic drift, one of the few lifelines still capable of reversing the course can come from education in the broad sense. Any educational context, but in particular the school as the first place for socialization, will be able to give credibility to merit. The school as a training ground for a competition of a moral nature.

References

Abravanel, R. (2008). *Meritocrazia. Quattro proposte concrete per valorizzare il talento e rendere il nostro paese più ricco e più giusto*. Milano: Garzanti.

Barrotta, P. (1999). *I demeriti del merito. Una critica liberale alla meritocrazia*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino.

Bauman, Z. (1998). *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Bertagna, G. (ed) (2018). *Educazione e Formazione. Sinonimie, analogie e differenze*. Roma: Studium.

Bertagna, G. (2004). *Valutare tutti valutare ciascuno. Una prospettiva pedagogica*. Brescia: La Scuola.

Bobbio, N. (1984a). *Il futuro della democrazia. Una difesa delle regole del gioco*. Torino: Einaudi.

Bobbio, N. (1984b). *Crisi della democrazia e neocontrattualismo*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

Boyer, R. (2004). *Theorie de la régulation*. Paris, FR: Editions La Découverte.

Brandolini, A., Saraceno, C. & Schizzerotto, A. (eds.) (2009). *Dimensioni della disuguaglianza in Italia: povertà, salute, abitazione*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Cegolon, A. (2020). *Lavoro e pedagogia del lavoro. Origine, sviluppo, prospettive*. Roma: Studium.

Cegolon, A. (2008). *Competenza. Dalla performance alla persona competente*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino.

D'Arcais, G. (1987). *Le ragioni di una teoria personalistica della educazione*. La Scuola: Brescia.

- Da Empoli G. (2000). *Meritocrazia e mobilità nella nuova economia*. Venezia: Marsilio.
- Damiano, E. (2007). *L'insegnante etico. Saggio sull'insegnamento come professione morale*. Assisi: Cittadella editrice.
- De Mandeville, B. (1957). *The fable of the bees: Or, Private vices, publick benefits. With a commentary, critical, historical, and explanatory by F.B. Kaye*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916), *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Floris, G. (2007). *Mal di merito. L'epidemia di raccomandazioni che paralizza l'Italia*. Milano: Rizzoli.
- Foray, D. (2006). *The Economics of Knowledge*. Boston, MA: MIT Press Books.
- Jarvela, S. (2008). L'apprendimento personalizzato. Come stimolare le capacità di apprendimento, in CERI-OCSE (2008) *Personalizzare l'insegnamento*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Kahn, S. (2021). *Pedagogia differenziata*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Magatti, M. (2012). *La grande contrazione. I fallimenti della libertà e le vie del suo riscatto*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Miliband, D. (2008). L'apprendimento personalizzato: scegliere e avere voce in capitolo, in CERI-OCSE (2008) *Personalizzare l'insegnamento*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Mounier, E. (1947). *Qu'est-ce que le personnalisme?*. Paris, FR: Éditions du Seuil: Paris.
- Peretti, M. (1978). *Breve saggio di una pedagogia personalistica*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Rifkin, J. (1995). *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. New York, US: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Ruano-Borbalan, J. C. (2008). Politiche per la promozione di un apprendimento personalizzato, in CERI-OCSE (2008) *Personalizzare l'insegnamento*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Rullani, E. (2004b). *La fabbrica dell'immateriale. Produrre valori con la conoscenza*. Roma: Carocci.

Rullani, E. (2004a). *Economia della conoscenza. Creatività e valore nel capitalismo delle reti*. Roma: Carocci.

Sen, A (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Mill, J. S. (1961). *Considerazioni sul governo rappresentativo*, trad. it.. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2019.

Taylor, F. W. (1911). *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York, NY: Harper & Brothers.

Tognon, G. (2016). *La democrazia del merito*. Roma: Salerno Editrice.

Von Hayek, F. (1960), *The Constitution of Liberty*. Chicago, MI: University of Chicago Press.

Young, M. (1958). *L'avvento della meritocrazia*, trad. it.. Roma: Edizioni di Comunità, 2014.