Meritocracy, inheritocracy and wealtherty

"…**meritocracy**, political, social, or economic system in which individuals are assigned to positions of power, influence, or reward solely on the basis of their abilities and achievements and not on the basis of their social, cultural, or economic background or irrelevant personal characteristics."

"Meritocracy is argued to be a myth because, despite being promoted as an open and accessible method of achieving upward class mobility under neoliberal or free market capitalism, wealth disparity and limited class mobility remain widespread, regardless of individual work ethic."

The four pitfalls of meritocracy *Chan Chun Sing, Minister of Education of Singapore*, 12 June 2023:

"I) Meritocracies may measure success with narrow, static, and outdated yardsticks. Those who have succeeded in the past will want to perpetuate the same definitions of success. However, this will cause us to stagnate and become irrelevant.
II) Meritocracies run the risk of rewarding success only at pre-determined fixed points, where a single test at one point in time determines the trajectory of one's life.
III) Meritocracies tend to stratify over time. Successful people will pass on their wealth and privileges to their children and can perpetuate a widening inequality of opportunities.
IV) Meritocracies can lead to the misplaced belief that only their talents and hard work account for their success, neglecting the support they have received."

The Diploma Divide:

https://jacobin.com/2024/11/liberals-democrats-college-education-dealignment

https://www.pbs.org/video/how-ivy-league-admissions-broke-america-david-brooks-explains-xv2mem/

Inheritocracy

Is inheritance becoming a surer route to wealth than work? Data show that the importance of inherited wealth, a given up to a couple of centuries ago, has made a comeback. The share of inherited wealth in a country's GDP relative to income from work is rising, particularly in rich countries. In the UK, for instance, inherited wealth is now twice as important relative to income from work for those born in the 1980's compared to those born in the 1960's.

https://www.economist.com/leaders/2025/02/27/inheriting-is-becoming-nearly-as-important-as-working?utm_content=ed-picks-image-link-2&etear=nl_weekly_2&utm_campaign=r.the-economist-this-week&utm_medium=email.internal-newsletter.np&utm_source=salesforce-marketing-cloud&utm_term=2/27/2025&utm_id=2065252

Economist, April 10th - Horrible for Henrys
Bagehot's column on the plight of those who are High Earners, Not Rich Yet, or Henrys, focused on incomes and taxes (March 29th).
But income is not wealth. Plenty of people on high incomes are not rich and the cost-of-living crisis makes it harder for everyone to get rich. Conversely, there are plenty of extremely rich people with low incomes. These folk are asset-rich and have become a lot more prosperous since the financial crisis of 2008, yet the tax system has not caught up. We still tax earned income far more than wealth or income derived from capital. This is a disincentive to work and exacerbates the unfairness of things like inheritances. So the rich get richer and those who have to work to become rich never do. Poor Henry.

Richard Baum
Burnham-on-Sea, Somerset

From: It's not a rich list – it's gone far beyond that. We need to talk about 'extreme wealth'
Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/17/sunday-times-rich-list-extreme-wealth-damage

"The problem is that wealth begets wealth. Those who own land, property and shares have seen huge returns on these investments and been able to accumulate more assets over time, generating even more returns. To make things worse, while income inequality can be tempered by measures like a minimum wage or progressive taxes, policymakers seem unable or unwilling to do anything about wealth accumulation.

Successive governments have claimed to be for "working people" but have turned a blind eye to the fact that most wealth accumulation in recent decades has been through the passive collection of returns on existing wealth, rather than earned through hard work or entrepreneurial brilliance. Worst of all, there is no upper limit on how much an individual or family can acquire."

Wealtherty

https://thesociologicalreview.org/magazine/december-2021/postgraduate-research/lets-talk-about-wealtherty/

Wealth, Poverty and Enduring Inequality (Wealtherty, for short) - Dr Sarah Kerr, LSE Inequalities Institute

"What if talking about poverty increasingly mitigates against us doing anything useful about it? What if producing new and increasingly granular knowledge about it (its causes, its effects, its genesis) causes more harm than good?"

"…..We spend millions on understanding and trying to solve poverty....We research it. We debate it. We care about it. We volunteer to try and help mitigate its effects. We legislate against it. We monitor it. And yet we don't eradicate it or solve it."

"……Critical policy sociology asks how the problems we are addressing have been socially constructed. What is being represented as the problem? What is being left unproblematised? "

Instead of concentrating on poverty and looking down, Kerr encourages researchers and policymakers to look up.
"Putting wealth at the heart of a social critique and redescribing the relations we see around us - and the history of those relations - from this perspective, the book recasts the history between the state and richer and poorer people through the idea of wealtherty: the enablement of wealth hyper-concentration; the perpetuation of social and policy divisions; the marketisation of influence; the gatekeeping of knowledge-making and knowledge resources.

John Wile's description of Kerr's book
The rich and the poor in the UK are subject to radically different legislative approaches. While the behaviours of the poor are relentlessly scrutinised, those of the rich are ignored or enabled…..

In pursuit of social and economic justice, Kerr…."contests contemporary policy and practice which disregards the enduring role of the rich in the production of poverty and poverty in the production of the rich."

Richard H. Tawney (economic historian and social critic) said in 1931, on the problem of riches, "what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice the problem of riches."