UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

MERITOCRACY AND POPULISM
IS THERE A CONNECTION?

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UKICE working paper 01/2021

ABSTRACT

In three recent critiques of meritocracy – Markovits (2019), Sandel (2020) and Goodhart (2020) – the argument is advanced that the failing pursuit of an education based meritocracy by mainstream political parties, together with the persistence of meritocratic discourse, have generated status discontents that readily translate into support for populist movements and parties. We consider how far recent research can provide empirical grounding for this argument. We find that there is a growing body of evidence that populist support is associated with low social status – is an expression of status rather than of class politics. The evidence that status discontents arise from the discordance between meritocratic discourse and the failure to realise a meritocracy is less strong but, such as it is, appears consistent with the claims that the authors in question make. We suggest that further research in this latter regard would be of more than academic importance, given the policy and political implications that would follow if a meritocracy-populism connection were to be more decisively confirmed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade or so, critiques of the idea and the practice of 'meritocracy' in the western world have regularly appeared (e.g. Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2008; MacNamee and Miller, 2009; Bloodworth, 2016; Littler, 2018). Although these critiques are written from differing disciplinary standpoints, two points recur. First, very limited progress has in fact been made towards the creation of a meritocratic social order, despite this being a widely accepted political objective. The 'myth of meritocracy' is a common phrase. Second, the meritocratic discourse that nonetheless prevails carries damaging implications for those who have not achieved 'success'. Three very recent contributions in this same vein do, however, include a further contention that is of potentially large importance. The books of Markovits, a lawyer and economist (2019), of Sandel, a political and social philosopher (2020), and of Goodhart, a senior think-tank figure (2020) share in the view that *a connection exists between the pursuit of meritocracy and the rise of populism*. The line of argument that these authors follow, with reference chiefly to the US and the UK,[1] has plausibility but is not provided with any very systematic grounding in empirical social research, despite their citing social science literature quite extensively in other respects. In this paper, we do not present original research of relevance to the bold claim that Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart advance. Rather, we seek to draw attention to the fact that there is *existing* research, though much of it very new, that can, at least to a degree, give support to their claim – and that at the same time serves to bridge hitherto largely separate fields of enquiry.

We first outline the case that the three authors in question make out for a meritocracy-populism connection. We then go on to show what can be added to

[1] Markovits and Sandel focus on the US but make frequent reference to the UK, and the UK edition of Markovits' book has an Appendix devoted to the UK. These two authors are, as the titles of their books indicate, concerned quite specifically with meritocracy and its problems. In some contrast, Goodhart focuses on the UK, though with frequent reference to the US, and his most immediate concern is with the changing importance and evaluation of different kinds of work – 'head, hands and heart'. But the implications in this regard of the pursuit of meritocracy is a constant underlying theme. There are, not surprisingly, a number of respects in which the authors' interests, and sometimes also their views, diverge but we here concentrate on what they have in commons.

their arguments by way of empirical evidence, while also indicating where gaps in this regard still remain and further research could be rewarding. In conclusion, we note some of the wider issues that their work raises.

THE CASE FOR A MERITOCRACY-POPULISM CONNECTION

Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart are in general agreement with each other and with earlier authors that, in the US and the UK at least, little movement is apparent towards a meritocracy, in the sense of a distinctively open form of society in which access to leading, better-rewarded positions results from individuals' demonstrated capacity, and is independent of the accidents of their birth. And this is so despite the creation of such a meritocracy being – as they amply document – a goal that mainstream political parties of the left and right alike have for some time explicitly adopted. Their explanation for this failure is on the following lines.

Merit is not 'a natural or universal virtue' (Markovits, 2019: 73). Rather, what counts as, and is valued as, merit in a society is highly context-dependent. In a hunter-gatherer society, merit and its rewards would derive from prowess in the chase and field craft. In modern, technologically advanced societies, with economies and organisational procedures that are increasingly 'knowledge-based', merit becomes equated with *cognitive ability*, as this is developed and certified within the educational system, and especially at its higher academic rather than vocational levels. It is then this system that serves as the key sorting mechanism through which individuals are allocated to social positions with differing levels of reward, material and symbolic.

However, the problem arises that cognitive ability is developed not only within the educational system but also – and, on all the evidence, more importantly – *within the family*. Thus, as Sandel observes (2020: 121), it is 'the institution of the family' that crucially compromises the meritocratic project 'of giving everyone an equal chance'. Those who in one generation have gained advantaged positions through merit, as achieved via education, will seek to deploy their superior resources so as to enable their offspring to follow a similar route, and as inequalities determined by what is taken to be merit increase, the fear of

educational failure and consequent downward social mobility intensifies (cf. Ehrenreich, 1989). The 'concerted cultivation' of children (cf. Lareau, 2003) thus becomes an overriding concern. More advantaged parents exploit their own educational experience and the cultural resources deriving from it in order to ensure that their children's natural endowments find their fullest expression, and in regard not only to cognitive ability but also to other attributes relevant to the application of this ability, such as industriousness and perseverance (Markovits, 2019: 147-56; Sandel, 2020: 12-13, 177-9). Moreover, as well as in this way furthering their children's educational careers, and in turn their labour market prospects, more advantaged parents are ready enough also to apply their economic and social resources to these same ends. For example, in gaining their children access to elite schools and universities, and to social circles and networks through which favourable employment opportunities are likely to arise.

Thus, although the application of meritocratic principles may have helped to increase equality of opportunity in class-bound societies of the past, 'the meritocratic inheritance now drives a wedge between meritocracy and opportunity' (Markovits, 2019: 147). In turn, any increase in social mobility that may have been previously achieved is lost because of the growing tendency for what counts as merit to be regularly transmitted across generations, resulting in the creation of a virtual cognitive caste (Markovits, 2019: 260-1; cf. Sandel, 2020: 168-9). Or, in Goodhart's words (2020: 8), 'mobility inevitably slows when "smart produces smart"'.[2]

Up to this point, nothing much is in fact added to what is already well established. The failure of an education-based meritocracy to emerge and the reasons for this failure have for long been the subject of sociological research and analysis. Halsey

[2] The question of the size and composition of the meritocratic or cognitive elite leads to some difficulties, especially with Markovits. To begin with, he appears to equate this elite with the top 1% of households in terms of disposable income, though with a 'penumbra' of the next highest 5-10%. Elsewhere, however, in seeking to further characterise his elite, he refers (e.g. 2019: 47-8, 86, 117-8, 182-3) to the much larger groupings of the top quintile or quartile of earners or simply to graduates. Sandel and Goodhart appear more consistent in equating the meritocratic elite with higher-level managers and professionals with graduate qualifications.

(1977: 184) was already observing that, through the influence of the family, 'ascriptive forces find ways of expressing themselves as achievement', and research pursuing and developing this insight has continued to the present (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2019). Nor is the next step in the three authors' case – entailing a normative turn – all that new either: that is, the claim that the discourse of meritocracy and 'the rhetoric of rising' necessarily carry damaging psychological consequences for those who do not get ahead, and thus provides grounds for moral objections to the very idea of meritocracy. Here, the main recourse is to Michael Young, and in particular (Markovits, 2019: 258-9; Sandel, 2020: 30-1, 116, 152; Goodhart, 2020: 75-7) to Young's repeated and increasingly angry attempts (1994, 2001, 2006) to get across, to politicians especially, that his dystopian fantasy, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958), was intended not as an endorsement of meritocracy but rather as a warning against its unremitting pursuit. What is emphasised, following Young, is that insofar as success is regarded as merited, as the result of ability and effort, those who succeed are encouraged to believe that their advantaged positions in society are well-deserved – 'meritocratic hubris' – regardless of the role played by sheer luck both in having talent and the opportunity to use it (cf. Frank, 2016). At the same time, those who do not succeed are left to draw the unforgiving conclusion that they are lacking in ability and/or idle, and thus *un*deserving. In Young's own words, which Sandel (2020: 152) quotes, 'It is hard indeed in a society that makes so much of merit to be judged as having none. No underclass has ever been left as morally naked as that.'

However, what *is* then new in the work of Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart alike is the idea – though in fact one imaginatively anticipated by Young – that the adverse psychological effects on those who are taken to be lacking in merit, in a society where meritocratic discourse prevails, have *political* consequences. Individuals who are so demeaned, they maintain, become open to the appeals of populist movements and parties, characterised by a hostility to the elites that an envisaged, but in fact still largely sham, meritocracy throws up, to the views these elites express, and to the institutions they dominate.[3]

[3] Young's fantasy ends with the overthrow of the meritocracy as the result of an alliance between the Conservative Party, favouring a return to hereditary principles, and the

In more detail, this new claim starts out from a consideration of what has followed from the acceptance by mainstream parties of an education-based meritocracy as a prime political objective. First of all, it has been assumed – mistakenly – that in such a meritocracy social mobility will increase and that this will in turn serve as the solution to the problem of social inequality (see esp. Sandel, 2002: 69-71, 85-7). Thus, for Tony Blair, not only were his priorities 'education, education, education' but, further (speech, June 2002), he saw mobility as being, in itself, 'the great force for social equality in dynamic market economies'; likewise, Hilary Clinton (speech, September 2016) wanted 'a true meritocracy' because she was 'tired of inequality'; and Theresa May (speech, September 2016) proposed overcoming the 'injustices' of social inequality through a meritocracy based on a widening of educational opportunity that would promote mobility. Second, while questions of class inequalities of *condition* were in this way effectively sidelined, even on the left, questions of racial, ethnic and gender inequality came to be given a leading importance. In the UK, New Labour set up the Equality and Human Rights Commission to deal with these and various other inequalities – from which, however, inequalities of class were excluded. Third, the idea inherent in the discourse of meritocracy that individuals' social destinies ultimately lie in their own hands – are their personal responsibility – was made increasingly explicit, and given an underlying moral force. Not only were the 'smart' valorised as against the 'dumb' but further the 'makers' were morally contrasted with the 'takers', the 'strivers' with the 'skivers', the 'grafters' with the 'shirkers'. In the US, Obama repeatedly asserted that 'You can make it if you try' (Markovits, 2019: 61-2; Sandel, 2020: 34-5). In the UK, David Cameron, on his favourite theme of 'the Aspiration Nation', described himself as engaged in a battle against those who were not hard workers, and against socialists who excused low expectations and blamed social disadvantage: 'That's who we're fighting against, and we know who we are fighting for: for all those who work hard and want to get on' (Conservative Party Conference speech, 2012).

members of a newly formed Populist Convention, among whom technicians and women were prominent. Some suggestion that 'political' meritocracy – the domination of parties and governments by the highly educated – could lead to populist reaction can be found in Bovens and Wille (2017).

Against this background, the argument then goes, those who have not succeeded in meritocratic terms not only feel socially marginalised – 'left behind' – in the context of an economic and social order within which credentialised cognitive ability is at premium, they also feel deceived, disparaged and disregarded. For these people, as Sandel puts it (2020: 73-4), either an education-based meritocracy has not lived up to its promise – a greater equality of opportunity has not in fact been created – or, if it has, they have lost out and it is their own fault. Further, a prevailing source of discontent among the 'losers' is the belief that while other forms of inequality and disadvantage have become a focus of concern among political elites, the inequalities that blight *their* lives – that curtail *their* opportunities – are ignored because they are people who 'do not count'. A crucial sociopolitical shift thus occurs. Purely economic, class discontents become transmuted, and at the same time *widened*, into *status* discontents (Goodhart, 2020: 3-4; Sandel, 2020: 115). Disaffection arises among the 'undeserving' essentially as a result of their status derogation. Their material disadvantages and problems remain unalleviated but at the same time they experience a growing separation, in terms of their perceived social and human worth, from those of high ability – or at least from those so certified academically – who, they feel, now look down on them from the higher levels of the status hierarchy.

For the status deprived, the appeals of populism are then rather obvious, and especially as compared with what Goodhart (2020: 149) calls the 'double liberalism' – both economic and social – as espoused by New Labour in the UK and the New Democrats in the US in their search for greater electoral support from among meritocratic winners. For the losers, nativism, nationalism and anti-elitism provide attractive bases of a form of identity politics through which they may regain some degree of self-esteem and pride or, as Markovits suggests, that can at least serve as an 'anesthesia' or 'narcotic' that 'deadens the internalized shame of nominally justified social and economic exclusion'. And from this point of view, as Markovits goes on to observe (2019: 63-5), populism has to be seen not simply as 'a spontaneous eruption of malevolent resentment' but rather as 'a natural and even apt reaction to extreme meritocratic inequality' – in status as well as in material well-being. In similar vein, Sandel and Goodhart concur in regarding the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK and Trump's presidential victory in the US as alike resulting,

in significant part, from populist protest voting that was an understandable response to 'a profound status shift' in favour of the cognitive elite (Goodhart, 2020: 28), and one that expressed a 'galling sense that those who stood astride the hierarchy of merit looked down with disdain on those they considered less accomplished than themselves' (Sandel, 2020: 72).

As an example of 'the view from above', both Markovits (2019: 61) and Sandel (2020: 118) quote Hilary Clinton's remark during the 2016 US presidential campaign that half of Trump's supporters were a bigoted 'basket of deplorables' who were 'racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, you name it'. An example in the British case would be Prime Minister Gordon Brown's accidentally recorded comment, when campaigning at the 2010 General Election, that a working class woman was a bigot because she challenged him over East European immigrants 'flocking into' Britain. The critical stance taken in regard to such instances is not intended to deny bigotry. It centres on the lack of empathy that is revealed – the 'empathy wall' (Hochschild, 2016) – and on the disregard of the question of *why* bigotry should exist.

To repeat, the case thus made out for a meritocracy-populism connection has some evident plausibility – the authors in question write well and persuasively. But there are two crucial links in their chain of argument where greater empirical support is clearly called for. On the one hand, status is seen as transcending class as the social basis of populism; on the other hand, status concerns are seen as deriving from failed political attempts to create an education-based meritocracy while meritocratic discourse is still current. In short, if meritocracy is a source of populism, status is the crucial mediating factor. Does evidence in fact exist that is of relevance? We consider the two links in turn.

Status and populism

Over the last two decades, sociologists in the US and the UK alike (see e.g. Hechter, 2004; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Chan, 2010; Goldthorpe, 2012; Ridgeway, 2014) have shown an increasing concern with the analytical potential of Max Weber's distinction (1922/1968, vol. 1: 926-40) between class and status, for long discussed in sociological texts but little exploited in empirical research. In

brief, class refers to the different positions individuals hold in the social relations of economic life – in labour markets and production units; status refers to their positions in differential association in the more intimate aspects of social life, in particular commensality and connubium: status equals are those who eat together and sleep together.

So far as politics is concerned, a finding of initial relevance is one reported by Chan and Goldthorpe (2007: Table 7), drawing on the British Social Attitudes Survey. They show that, despite the fact that individuals' class and status positions are correlated, the correlation is not sufficiently strong to prevent class and status from being associated with their sociopolitical attitudes in quite different ways. In particular, a notable contrast exists with left-right and libertarian-authoritarian attitudes as measured by standard scales (Evans, Heath and Lalljee, 1996). Left-right attitudes are strongly associated with class as determined by the EGP schema (Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero, 1979) – those in less advantaged class positions are more left-wing – but no significant association exists with status according to a scale based on the occupational structure of close friendship (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2004). However, libertarian-authoritarian attitudes are strongly associated with status – lower status individuals are more authoritarian – while no significant association exists with class. An indication is thus given that individuals of relatively low status could, across some range of class positions, be potential recruits to socially conservative populist movements or parties claiming to uphold national culture and its values, while showing hostility towards social practices or groupings seen as deviant from and disruptive of these values. Three more pieces of research can then be noted that treat the politics of social status more directly.

Gidron and Hall (2017, 2020) examine the relationship between social status and support for populist parties across a wide range of European countries for which comparative survey data are available. They use a 'subjective' measure of status based on where individuals place themselves on a 10-rung 'social ladder'. From multivariate analyses that also include respondents' income, education and occupation, they find a strong association between low levels of subjective status and voting for populist parties. Further analyses that they report then indicate that individuals who support populist parties, on the right especially, are less

motivated by economic and redistributional concerns than by concerns over their marginalisation and lack of social recognition. They are thus highly responsive to populist attacks on the sociocultural effects of globalisation and mass immigration and on the elites that are seen as complicit in, and benefiting from, these developments.

Gidron and Hall's work is impressive in its coverage but questions can be raised over their measurement of status. Individuals' own assessments of where they stand on a social ladder that is given no specific characterisation are difficult to interpret. They could reflect their views on their relative positions in, say, the distributions of income or education rather than in a hierarchy of differential association. However, two further studies, both using the Chan-Goldthorpe scale previously referred to that captures status position in this latter, objective sense, lead to findings that are in fact much in line with those of Gidron and Hall.

Carella and Ford (2020) report on research into the sources of electoral support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), prior to the EU Referendum of 2016 – this having been a matter of disagreement between Ford and Goodwin (2014, 2016) and Evans and Mellon (2016). Ford and Goodwin maintained (2014: 270) that UKIP's 'distinctive social base' was in the working class and in particular 'among older blue-collar workers with little education and few skills', who felt economically marginalised by deindustrialisation and politically marginalised by the Labour Party's increasing focus on 'the centre ground'. However, Evans and Mellon, argued – and presented evidence to show – that UKIP's support was wider, comprising not only working class defectors from Labour but also significant numbers drawn from the 'petty bourgeoisie' of small proprietors and employers and self-employed artisans and also from technicians, supervisors and lower-level managers who were previously Conservative voters. What brought these groups together, from differing class positions, was their general social conservatism and more specifically their concern over rising immigration, especially from EU 'accession' countries after 2004.

Carella and Ford provide a convincing resolution of this issue. Using the 2015 sweep of the Understanding Society Survey, they include individuals' status, according to the Chan-Goldthorpe scale, along with measures of their class

(National Statistics Socioeconomic Classification), education and income, in a multivariate analysis with party preference as the dependent variable. They show (2020: Table 3) that a strong association exists between status and UKIP preference – the lower an individual's status, the more likely he or she is to favour UKIP – and that once status is in the analysis no association is present between class and UKIP preference. A negative, association also exists between educational level and UKIP preference but status is clearly of independent importance.[4] In short, while Evans and Mellon were correct in claiming that UKIP support was not limited to the working class, UKIP was more than simply a party dependent on an ad hoc cross-class coalition or on an alliance of individuals who just happened to hold similar sociopolitical attitudes. It had a social structural basis of support in the lower ranges of the status hierarchy.[5]

Chan et al. (2020), likewise draw on data from the Understanding Society Survey but for a period around the Brexit vote of 2016 when a question was included identical to that asked in the referendum. On this basis, they seek to evaluate two narratives concerning Brexit – the movement for which could be regarded as populist in inspiration. One narrative sees Brexit as a revolt of the economically disadvantaged, the other sees Brexit as being more socioculturally influenced and as expressing a resurgence of values associated with nativism and nationalism. Overall, Chan et al. conclude (2020: 19) that there is evidence for both narratives but that, on balance, it is the latter that has the stronger backing. In the present context, it is the analysis made of the part played by class and status that is of central interest. As Chan et al. observe (2020: 6), if Brexit was primarily driven by economic issues, then Brexit support should be mainly stratified by class; but if

[4] Carella and Ford go on to show (2020: Figure 5) that analyses of support for populist parties in nine other European countries produce broadly similar findings. Such support is not associated with class but it is in general associated with low status and low educational level.

[5] It is in this regard important to note (see Chan and Goldthorpe, 2004: Tables 2 and A1) that in the status scale used proprietors and managers in small-scale manufacturing and also in construction, transport and services have relative low status, not greatly superior to that of many manual workers: i.e. while in different class positions to the latter, they differ rather little from them in their patterns of association, as indicated by the occupations of their close friends.

national identity and cultural values were chiefly involved, then stratification by status rather than by class should be apparent.

Chan et al. use the same measures of both status and class as do Carella and Ford and their results prove to be remarkably consistent with those that the latter report on preference for UKIP. Under the multivariate model that Chan et al. deploy (2020: Tables 1 and 2), there is no significant association between class and favouring Brexit but a pro-Brexit position is associated with low status and also with low educational level. The education effect is the stronger but, controlling for education, that of status remains substantial. Further, Chan et al. find (2020: Figure 5) an association between individuals' positions on Brexit and their patterns of cultural consumption that is likewise independent of educational level. Those who are cultural omnivores, consuming many different genres of music and the visual arts, show a strong tendency to oppose Brexit, while those who are cultural univores, consuming popular genres only, show a similarly strong tendency to favour Brexit. Since it has been elsewhere established (Chan, 2010, 2019) that these differing patterns of cultural consumption are associated not with class but with status and also with differing value orientations on a 'local-cosmopolitan' dimension, the view that Brexit was an expression of status politics is reinforced.

In sum, there is quite substantial evidence for the idea that insofar as populism has a grounding in social stratification, it is with status rather than with class that it is primarily linked.[6] And, it may be added, the argument to this effect, as advanced by Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart, together with the empirical support that can be provided for it, points to a way of making good a rather evident shortcoming in some other recent literature.

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[6] The issue may be raised of whether what is important here is simply low status *per se* or the experience of declining status. On the basis of their subjective measure of status, Gidron and Hall tend to take the latter view, but the empirical evidence for the awareness of such a decline is questionable (Oesch and Vigna, 2020). What may, however, change is the *expression of* objective status inferiority or superiority. Some decades ago there was much discussion of the 'decline of deference' on the part of those in inferior status positions; today, what may be happening is an increase in derogation on the part of those in superior positions. As Weber recognised, status orders are always likely to be in differing degree accepted or subject to challenge or reassertion.

For example, Inglehart and Norris (2017) and Norris and Inglehart (2019), in advancing a general theory of the sources of populism – and also in applying it to Brexit (2019: ch. 11) -- speak of a shift from class politics to value politics, the latter turning on a socially conservative and authoritarian 'cultural backlash' against the values of 'post-materialism'. But this shift appears to have no social basis other than some decline in economic and physical security, felt especially by the poorly educated members of older birth cohorts. Likewise, Fieldhouse et al. (2020: 181-4), using British Election Study data to analyse Brexit support, link this to low education and older age, and then introduce authoritarian as opposed to libertarian values as a further explanatory or perhaps – it is not entirely clear – mediating variable. Given the association of the value divide in question with status, as demonstrated by Chan and Goldthorpe, it would seem that, in both these cases, thinking in terms of a shift not from class-based to value politics but from class-based to status-based politics, as in the research previously reviewed, might have proved more revealing. Bringing status into the analysis, whether at a theoretical or an empirical level, could allow differing value orientations to appear less 'free floating' and as having a specific social grounding and rationale. It may, moreover, be noted that the claim that support for populist movements and parties is concentrated in the poorly educated in older birth cohorts implies that, as Norris and Inglehart put it (2019: 16), 'the cultural cleavage in the electorate is likely to fade over time through demographic trends'. However, given that low status is also a factor in such support, over and above education and age, it might well be the case that the appeals of populism prove more persistent.

MERITOCRACY AND STATUS

Evidence relevant to a possible link between meritocracy, in practice and discourse, and status discontents is far more difficult to come by than that which points, rather convincingly, to a link between such discontents and support for populism. There is, however, in the British case at least, some evidence that, while indirect and not of compelling quality, could be thought suggestive. This comes from discussions in focus groups, as interpreted by Mattinson (2020), who organised groups in three places located behind the supposed political 'Red Wall' – Accrington, Darlington and Stoke-on-Trent – that collapsed at the 2019 General

Election.[7] All participants were former Labour voters who had switched to the Conservatives, and, we are told, all were men and women falling into the Market Research Society's C2, D and E 'social grades'. While this in itself is not very informative as regards either their class or status, from the occupations that are mentioned – bricklayer, lorry driver, taxi driver, carer, catering worker, hairdresser, shopkeeper, café proprietor, works technician, site manager – it would seem that the large majority of those involved would be in the lower ranges of the Chan-Goldthorpe status scale. From the focus group discussions, as reported, two main themes emerge of relevance in the present context.

First, participants showed a strong awareness of the *lack* of opportunity in their communities, especially for young people, and whether in education, training or employment. Previously, when local industries had flourished, apprenticeships and other forms of training were readily available leading to jobs that, even if demanding and sometimes dangerous, were secure, relatively well paid, and 'respected'. All this, it was felt, had been lost – had in fact been 'taken away' – with traditional skills being made worthless. There was therefore strong resentment among participants of any suggestion that their present circumstances were of their own making. People in their communities believed in hard work, and still did work hard, but now mostly in low skill, insecure, poorly paid, and sometimes demeaning jobs, simply because there was no alternative (Mattinson, 2020: 22-9, 61-6, 85-6). There is no indication that questions of meritocracy figured in any direct way in the focus group discussions. But it would seem reasonable to suppose that had the idea been raised that a meritocracy rewarding ability and effort, and founded on equality of opportunity, existed or was being created, this would have been met with scepticism if not derision.

[7] Our reservations about the quality of evidence derived from focus groups have two main sources. First, there is no guarantee that the views expressed by participants are representative of those prevailing among the collectivities from which they are drawn, and simply insisting that it is *qualitative* research that is being undertaken (Mattinson, 2020: 10) in no way overcomes this problem. Second, it is difficult to know how far views emerging from a focus group are a – possibly ephemeral – product of the social dynamics of the group, and including of its 'mediation', rather than forming part of participants' 'mental furniture'.

Second, a generally critical stance was taken up against those who might be regarded as the cognitive elite – the meritocratic winners – or at all events if this elite could be equated with graduates. Degrees were regarded as appropriate qualifications for established professionals, such as doctors or lawyers, but otherwise doubts were expressed about the social, if not the individual, value of the increase in what one participant called 'fancy degrees'. Moreover, the division between those not having a degree and those so favoured was often seen as a modern version of 'us and them'. Young people especially, who had degrees but limited life experience, were thought to 'look down' on 'little people' who lacked their educational accomplishments. Resentment appeared most marked where it was felt that either an intellectual or a moral ascendancy was being claimed. In the case of Brexit, which most in the focus groups supported, anger was expressed over graduate Remainers implying that Leavers were 'misguided', if not 'ignorant' or 'stupid'. And strong objections were made to accusations of 'racism' being levelled against those who questioned uncontrolled immigration on the basis of direct experience of its impact on their communities. Politically, these views then translated into a deep disillusionment with the Labour Party. This was seen as now dominated by graduate metropolitan elites – whether Blairite or Corbynite – obsessed with political correctness, and more concerned with telling the people they were supposed to represent that they were 'wrong' than with trying to understand the conditions under which they were living and their responses to these conditions (Mattinson, 2020: 7-8, 47-8, 88-9, 91-3, 128-31, 227-8).[8]

To repeat two points already made: populist support clearly extends beyond Labour defectors, and accounts of what emerged from focus group discussions cannot be regarded as carrying decisive evidential weight. Nonetheless, it is difficult to ignore the degree of consistency that exists between the views prevailing in the groups – in Mattinson's interpretation – and the argument

[8] Although apparently not mentioned in the focus groups, the 'rejection of Islington' was classically illustrated in the angry response to the posting by Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South and Finsbury, of a photograph of a white van parked outside a house bedecked with St George's flags on the day of the Rochester by-election of 2014. The by-election was won by UKIP with Labour coming third. The house-owner, a car dealer, gained widespread support in denouncing Mrs Thornberry as 'a snob', and she was sacked from her position in the shadow cabinet.

advanced by Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart: that the failure of supposedly meritocratic social selection to create a greater equality of opportunity, together with its consequently discordant discourse, give rise to a powerfully adverse reaction on the part of those who have not benefited from such selection – a reaction grounded in their sense of status derogation. Of particular note is that the social division of which focus group members appeared most conscious was not a class division as, say, between employers and workers with conflicting economic interests. It was what could be readily seen as a status division between graduates and those lacking higher education, with the latter strongly resistant to attempts by the former to unduly assert a position of social superiority.

What is now required is appropriately designed survey research that could more thoroughly test the idea that the persistent, but persistently failing, pursuit of an education based meritocracy, in a context in which, to revert to Young's phrase, 'so much is made of merit', leads to a sense of widening status inequality and related disaffection. Such research would serve not only to throw light on the sources of the increasingly well-established connection between – low – status and populist politics; it could also, given the importance that mainstream parties of the right and left have alike attached to the creation of such a meritocracy, carry potentially large implications for future policy and politics.

CONCLUSIONS

Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart follow earlier critics in maintaining that little progress has been made, or is indeed likely to be made, in transforming modern societies into education-based meritocracies; and this view, it can be said, is very largely underwritten in the social science literature. Social inequalities in educational attainment and in relative chances of social mobility have proved highly resistant to change, despite the range of policies that have been aimed at their reduction. These authors' concerns are, however, normative as well as empirical. They see the very idea of meritocracy as being one that is open to serious question both morally and politically. Morally, it is unclear that the talented do 'merit' – deserve – the extent of the rewards that, at least in capitalist

market economies, they receive, if only because of the degree of luck that is involved their success. Politically, the discourse of meritocracy, and especially in the context of a failed meritocracy, is then corrosive of any sense of community. As experienced from below, the hubris of meritocratic elites becomes 'the politics of humiliation' and favourable ground is created for a populist reaction – in Markovits's telling phrase, 'a natural and even apt reaction to extreme meritocratic inequality', evident in economic conditions but also, and if anything more damagingly, in status. At this point the argument does of course move back to the empirical plane, and it may be asked what evidence there is that could underpin the connection between problems of meritocracy and populism that is being claimed.

We have sought to address this question, distinguishing two links in the chain of argument: that between status discontents and support for populism and that between such discontents and the failed practice but continuing discourse of meritocracy. As regards the first link, recent research provides rather strong indications that it does indeed exist. Several studies, covering now a wide range of nations, show that populist movements and parties are better understood as expressions of status than of class politics. Populism finds its strongest support among men and women holding different class positions but who are located together towards the base of the status hierarchy, and who are thus largely separated in their social lives, as also in their sociopolitical attitudes, from those in higher level managerial and professional positions. As regards the second link, the support we can find is less strong, coming in the form of evidence from focus groups that is of uncertain representativeness and reliability. But, such as it is, this evidence does fall clearly in line with the idea that a rejection of the discourse of meritocracy goes together with a sense of resentment against, and division from, those who appear as the beneficiaries of meritocracy – in particular, graduates – and especially insofar as they are seen as taking their educational attainment as a basis for status derogation, for 'looking down' on those they would regard as their social, and often too as their intellectual and moral, inferiors.

The further research that is needed to substantiate what is here suggested could be of more than academic consequence. Insofar as the main line of argument

advanced by Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart can be validated, what follows is that populism is not to be understood simply as a revolt against what could be regarded as ineluctable processes of change following from technological advance, globalisation and deindustrialisation. It has also, in the US and the UK at least, to be seen as a revolt *against a main line of policy* – the whole project of creating an education based meritocracy – which, in only slightly differing versions, has been taken up by mainstream parties of the left and right alike. The key motivating idea behind the project, as often openly expressed its proponents, is that the problem of social inequality can best be resolved through widening equality of opportunity – and of educational opportunity in particular – and thus increasing social mobility. Or, one might say, in the ironic phrase attributed to R. H. Tawney, the aim is to create a greater equality of opportunity to become unequal, albeit with the added belief, or hope, that the inequality that results might be regarded as legitimate because merited. However, what has by now emerged is that that the sustained failure of the project, but together with the persistence of meritocratic discourse, has had a range of unintended consequences that are in many ways damaging – and often to mainstream parties themselves. Serious discontent has built up among those who have lost out and who have come to feel unfairly demeaned in relation to meritocratic winners – with then support for populist, anti-elitist politics being, as opportunity arose, an understandable response.

Markovits, Sandel and Goodhart do not, it is important to stress, seek to reject selection by merit *per se*. They accept that such selection, and associated qualification, is necessary for social positions and roles where specialised knowledge and relevant competences need to be guaranteed: no one would wish to have the services of an unqualified surgeon. Moreover, where selection is made by merit, appropriately defined, and independently of social origins and connections, fairness is served, and at the same time societal efficiency is increased by preventing what would otherwise be a serious wastage of talent. But the crucial yet difficult problem is, as Goodhart puts it (2020:7), that of how to make and to apply a distinction between meritocratic selection systems and a meritocratic society.

The authors in question do each address this problem. Policy proposals are put forward that are focussed not on issues of opportunity and upward mobility but rather on directly reducing both the economic *and* the status inequalities that now so widely separate the supposed cognitive elite from the rest – or, to use Goodhart's terms, that separate head from both hand and heart. For example, the need is urged to reduce the degree of elitism in higher education that is based merely on social advantage, to promote closer links and a greater parity of esteem between academic and vocational education, and, above all, to change the organisation of work and managerial practices so as to increase the number of jobs that offer security, autonomy, and the possibility of enhancing skills and other capacities. For present purposes, it is enough to say that what, overall, is sought is well captured by Sandel (2020: 224) when he speaks of the importance of creating 'a broad equality of condition that enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity – developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem, sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning, and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs'. Or, in other words, what is important is to create a form of society in which the discourse of meritocracy is muted, status discontents are assuaged, and populist politics lose their attraction.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, we are grateful to Leo Carella, Tak Wing Chan, Geoff Evans and Colin Mills.

The UK in a Changing Europe promotes rigorous, high-quality and independent research into the complex and ever changing relationship between the UK and the EU. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and based at King's College London.

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