Belief in a Myth and Myth as Fact: Towards a More Compassionate Sociology and Society

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There exists a fine line that sociologists—and all social scientists—must tread as they try to knit together empirical, objective[1] evidence and participants' subjective realities. It is not an either/or situation. It is not a very easy path to walk down. But it must be done—not only by sociologists, but by all of us. I argue that working out how to value both objective and subjective realities is a central step we must take if we are to move towards a more compassionate society. And a step that we must not leave to junior researchers or postgraduate students to take, but which must be emphasised to undergraduates as they begin their research. To illustrate how I came to this understanding, I think it is instructive to consider one of my own research experiences.

When interviewing a research participant on Zoom a few weeks ago, I found myself particularly struck by something this participant said. Whilst I cannot say exactly what this comment was (the research project is ongoing), I was bewildered at the way a young woman, whose candour and generosity I admired and appreciated, seemed to be denying an aspect of the inequalities prevalent in university life. She denied something I believed I knew to be true. I found myself thinking 'but that's a myth' so 'you're wrong', 'you've been duped', 'you're misinformed'. I even fleetingly considered that my interviewee was under a form of 'false consciousness', the sociological equivalent to 'you're wrong and I'm right— but you can't see it'. It is in order to avoid instances like this in the future, instances where the power dynamics between interviewee and interviewer are at risk of sullying the integrity of the research, that I propose a route towards a more compassionate sociology, one that remains both critical and empowering.

Fortunately, however, I recalled that the growing refrain within the discipline of sociology is 'reflexivity, reflexivity, reflexivity'.

Reflexivity means being alert to and examining your own assumptions, views, and social location within structures and relations of power; it is central to good sociological research. This incident raised the question of how I should represent this participant's views in my work. I considered the option of turning to the corpus of sociological work demonstrating why she is wrong and, in the process, taking away her autonomy and devaluing her views. Or, I could take her own perspective at face value, ignoring the empirical evidence to the contrary. The truth is that neither option is adequate. Instead, we must *all* seek to value objective and subjective realities *simultaneously*. Only then can we completely fulfil the requirement to be reflexive and, in turn, become more compassionate sociologists and, beyond that, citizens.

Unable to detail this specific incident, I want to illustrate what I mean by applying this idea—of valuing both the objective and subjective *simultaneously*—to the mythological status of meritocracy. Meritocracy refers to the idea that intelligence and effort, rather than ascriptive traits, determine individuals' social position and trajectory. I had previously believed meritocracy to be a 'myth' in the UK. Drawing on David Bidney's definition of myth,[2] when referring to meritocracy as a myth, I mean that meritocracy is an idea or concept that is frequently discussed and often believed but, in reality, it is false because it has been shown to be incompatible with scientific and empirical evidence.

Thinking about whether meritocracy is a myth is particularly pertinent in the context of COVID-19. With murmurs of 'life after COVID-19' and 'a return to normal', forms of government relief like eviction moratoriums and furlough schemes have been wound down or withdrawn completely. As these expanded safety nets are dismantled, it is likely that we will return to a government discourse of 'meritocracy' that positions the privileged as deserving of their

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1   It is implicit throughout this essay that completely 'objective' evidence is impossible to achieve given the influence of the researcher on research outcomes, but the term is used here as objective knowledge remains the ideal across large swathes of the social science community.

2   David Bidney, 'The Concept of Myth and the Problem of Psychocultural Evolution' (1950) 52(1) American Anthropologist 16.

dominance and wealth on the basis of 'merit', whilst the dominated and marginalised are rendered responsible for their own hardship because they are neither sufficiently talented nor conscientious. However, given that the fatal impacts of COVID-19 have exposed the persisting fault lines of structural inequality, with mounting death tolls, lockdown restrictions, and concomitant economic shocks disproportionately affecting the marginalised and dominated in society, particularly the working class and people of colour (many of whom are working-class), it raises the question of whether meritocracy was and is a myth.

The meritocratic discourse: level playing fields and worthy winners

Meritocracy, as popularised by Michael Young in 1958,[3] refers to the idea that 'IQ+effort', rather than ascriptive traits (such as class, race, gender, sexuality, or nationality), determine individuals' social position and trajectory. The term has transformed from being a negative slur, as argued by Michael Young and Alan Fox, to a positive axiom of modern life.[4] Jo Littler argues this positive evaluation characterises contemporary *neoliberal* inflections of meritocracy that justify inequalities (conferring meritocratic legitimation) and which are underpinned by individualism and the linear, hierarchical 'ladder of opportunity'.[5]

The current prime minister's narrative of 'Levelling Up' shows meritocratic discourse in action. It is largely a continuation of the rhetoric Boris Johnson deployed as Mayor of London, when he famously 'hailed the Olympics for embodying the "Conservative lesson of life" that hard work leads to reward'—the effort part of the 'IQ+effort' meritocratic formula.[6] Perhaps most revealing of this meritocratic discourse is Johnson's effusive article titled: 'We should be humbly thanking the super-rich, not bashing them'.[7] In this article, he argued the super-rich *deserve* their wealth (meritocratic legitimation) on the basis of their 'merit', that is, their exceptional levels of intelligence, talent, and effort. Thus, he adopts a trope of meritocratic legitimation to justify the gross inequalities between the super-rich and the poor. The implication is that those at the bottom of the social ladder are to blame for their own position.

Fellow Etonian, David Cameron, matches Johnson's meritocratic rhetoric. Cameron's 'Aspiration Nation' discourse similarly assumes all progressive movement must happen upwards, thereby positioning working-class culture as 'abject zones and lives to flee from'.[8] This is epitomised by Cameron's moralised binary opposition of 'skiver' / 'striver'. The rhetorical construction of these

social types denies structural (dis)advantage by 'responsibilising' solutions to inequality as an individual's '*moral* meritocratic task'.[9] Thus, meritocracy assumes a 'level playing-field' or 'equality of opportunity', whilst presenting a moralising discourse that blames or applauds *individuals* for their social position and erases the persistence of structural inequality.

Meritocracy as myth: the following wind of privilege makes for an uneven playing field

If meritocracy was regularly being touted by politicians, why, then, did I consider it to be a myth? To answer this question, we must consider how past and recent scholarship places meritocracy firmly in the realm of myth by showing it to be incompatible with scientific and empirical evidence.

I limit my analysis here to class, despite literature on intersectionality showing that class does not exist apart from other axes of oppression. This focus reflects the long-standing British political obsession with class mobility and that literature on meritocracy has traditionally centred on class inequalities, whereby meritocracy is framed as achievement irrespective of *material* circumstances, for which class is perhaps the most pertinent lens.

My sociological training at undergraduate level has instilled in me that meritocracy as an operational social system—where 'IQ+effort' is the basis of reward and resource allocation in society—is a myth. In traditional class analyses, such as that by Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe,[10] meritocracy is operationalised in terms of employment relations, analysing the relationship between class origins and destinations—coded by occupation—as illustrative of social mobility. Breen and Goldthorpe found that, in Britain, 'merit'—measured as ability, effort, and/or educational attainment—does little to mediate the association between class origin and destination.[11] In other words, in order to enter similarly desirable class positions, children of less-advantaged origins need to show substantially more 'merit' than their privileged-origin counterparts.

Meanwhile, the culturalist approach to class analysis, which emerged in direct response to the deficiencies of traditional class analysis, tells a similar story. A new generation of class theorists, notably Mike Savage and colleagues[12] alongside Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison,[13] criticised traditional class analysis' narrow focus on occupational divisions in class reproduction to the exclusion of cultural processes and markers of inequality. The culturalist approach operationalises a Bourdieusian framework for understanding inequalities. As economic capital was seen as just one aspect of class reproduction, focus shifted to social capital and, especially, cultural capital which exists in three forms:

3 Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy 1870-2033: An essay on education and society* (Thames and Hudson 1958).

4 ibid; Alan Fox, 'Class and Equality' (May 1956) Socialist Commentary 11; Richard Herrnstein, *IQ in the Meritocracy* (Little, Brown 1971) and Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (Basic Books 1973). Also see Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: culture, power and myths of mobility* (Routledge 2018).

5 Littler (n 4) 8.

6 Geri Peev, 'Games Embody the Tory Ethic of Hard Work that Leads to Reward, Says Boris', *Daily Mail* (London, 6 August 2012) <www.dailymail.co.uk/news/ article-2184687/Boris-Johnson-London-2012-Olympics-embody-Tory-ethic-hardwork-leads-reward.html#ixzz2QG4E5oVC>.

7 Boris Johnson, 'We should be humbly thanking the super-rich, not bashing them', *The Telegraph* (London, 17 November 2013) <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/0/should-humbly-thanking-super-rich-not-bashing/>.

8 Littler (n 4) 7.

9 ibid 89–90.

10 Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe, 'Class Inequality and Meritocracy: A Critique of Saunders and an Alternative Analysis' (1999) 50(1) British Journal of Sociology 1; Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe, 'Class, Mobility and Merit: The Experience of Two British Birth Cohorts' (2001) 17(2) European Sociological Review 81; Erzsébet Bukodi, John Goldthorpe, Lorraine Waller, and Jouni Kuha, 'The mobility problem in Britain: New findings from the analysis of birth cohort data' (2015) 66(1) British Journal of Sociology 93.

11 Breen and Goldthorpe, 'Class, Mobility and Merit' (n 10).

12 Mike Savage, Niall Cunningham, Fiona Devine, Sam Friedman, Daniel Laurison, Lisa McKenzie, Andrew Miles, Helene Snee, and Paul Wakeling, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (Pelican Books 2015).

13 Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison, *The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays To Be Privileged* (Bristol University Press 2019).

1. objectified (cultural products, such as book or works of art);
2. institutionalised (educational credentials), and
3. embodied (enduring dispositions of mind and body, such as mannerisms, preferences, language).

In particular, embodied cultural capital can illuminate how often 'IQ+effort' is not recognised as 'merit'. Rather, 'merit' is read off the body through the ways individuals '*perform* merit': for instance, in mannerisms, language, accent, dress, and tastes. Possession of embodied cultural capital is structured by what Bourdieu refers to as the 'habitus': the set of pre-reflexive, pre-discursive dispositions an individual embodies, conditioned by their social position or 'conditions of existence' (proximity to material necessity). In this way, one's habitus is classed. The 'structure' of the habitus generates 'structuring' dispositions, relating to a particular mode of perceiving, inhabiting, and knowing the social world, rooted 'in' the body, including posture, gesture, and taste – embodied cultural capital.[14]

Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison, following this culturalist approach, move beyond the traditional class analysis assumption that mobility finishes at the point of occupational entry. Instead, they view equitable access to the highest echelons of elite professions (such as law, medicine, engineering, journalism, and TV-broadcasting) as crucial to the actualisation of meritocracy: it is not just about who gets in, but who gets to the top. They interrogate inequalities in elite professions, finding that the probability of someone from upper-middle-class origins landing an elite job to be 6.5 times that of their counterpart from working-class origins.[15] They argue that differences in educational credentials cannot fully explain the stubborn links between class origins and destinations. Whilst there are class disparities in levels of education, the percentage of people with a degree or higher obtaining 'top' jobs is 27% for people of working-class origin and 39% for people of privileged origin.[16] These disparities reveal that even if people from working-class origins possess the credentials meritocratic discourse presents as necessary ('IQ+effort'), class hierarchy within elite professions persists.

Friedman and Laurison contend that cultural processes are the cause of these inequalities, thereby exposing the limits of Goldthorpe's more economics-based approach. They argue that what is routinely categorised and recognised as 'merit' in elite occupations is 'actually impossible to separate from the "following wind of privilege"'.[17] Rather than ensuring a level playing field, the assessment of 'merit' is based on arbitrary, classed criteria. For example, recognition of 'merit' depends on 'polish' in accountancy and 'studied informality' in television, both of which 'pivot on a package of expectations—relating to dress, accent, taste, language and etiquette—that are strongly associated with or cultivated via a privileged upbringing'.[18] That is to say, in Bourdieu's terms, performance of 'merit' requires a certain privileged habitus. This enables the already privileged to 'cash in' their 'merit' in a way that is unavailable to the working-class who, due to their class origins, do not possess the requisite cultural repertoire – embodied cultural capital, possession of which is structured by the habitus. The existence and differentiation of an inflexible and durable habitus thus means any universal, objective set of criteria that constitutes 'merit' is an impossibility as is the notion that *anyone* can possess this 'merit.'

Moreover, a privileged habitus is favoured through a process of 'cultural-matching' whereby a 'fit' between employer and employee is sought.[19] 'Fit' is based on relationships forged on cultural affinity which, due to the habitus, usually map onto shared class origins. Since those in senior positions are overwhelmingly from privileged backgrounds, cultural-matching enables the upper-middle classes to advance at the expense of the working-class. The process of cultural-matching becomes self-perpetuating. Yet, as it is couched in veiled meritocratic management jargon, such as 'talent-mapping', cultural-matching operates under the radar.[20] These homophilic bonds enable the privileged to 'cash in' their 'merit' in a way that is unavailable to the working-class who possess a habitus inscribed by proximity to necessity and thus lacking the required embodied cultural capital, producing experiences of 'lack of fit'.[21] Whilst Friedman and Laurison do not explicitly make this connection, I follow Vandebroeck in seeing this 'lack of fit' as the corollary of how every habitus 'seeks to create the conditions of its fulfilment', meaning 'that every habitus will seek to avoid those conditions in which it systematically finds itself questioned, problematised, stigmatised and devalued'.[22] For those of working-class origin, the resultant poor 'fit' leads to an ostensibly *elective* 'self-elimination' from elite occupations.[23] This ensures limited mobility between origins and destinations and suggests that something other than the meritocratic formula 'IQ+effort' is operating as the selection mechanism in elite professions . In other words, there is no point talking about a level playing-field when the wind is blowing so strongly in one direction. Meritocracy thus appears as a myth on the level of empirical, structural reality.

Whilst academic research thus evidences the mythical status of meritocracy as an empirical reality, the state of affairs in politics and the media also encourage similar conclusions. Whilst only 6.5% of the general population attends fee-paying schools, 54% of Johnson's cabinet were privately educated (as of July 2019). The equivalent number for May's 2016 cabinet was 30%; Cameron's 2015 cabinet was 50%; the coalition 2010 cabinet was 62%. Even in Labour cabinets the privately educated were overrepresented: 32% in both Brown's 2007 and Blair's 1997 cabinet.[24] Similarly, a 2019 Ofcom report found that television workers were twice as likely than the average Briton to have attended private schools.[25] The *Panic!* 2015 survey also found that, of those in film, television, and radio, only 12.4% have working-class origins, compared to 38% of the general population.[26] All of this evidence seems to point to an undeniable status of meritocracy as myth.

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14 Dieter Vandebroeck, *Distinctions in the Flesh* (Routledge 2017).
15 Friedman and Laurison (n 13) 13.
16 ibid.
17 ibid 27.
18 ibid 213.

19 ibid.
20 Friedman and Laurison (n 13) 211.
21 ibid 218.
22 Vandebroeck (n 14) 220.
23 Friedman and Laurison (n 13).
24 BBC News, 'Prime Minister Boris Johnson: Does his cabinet reflect "modern Britain"?' (25 July 2019) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-49034735>.
25 Ofcom (2019) *Breaking the class ceiling—social make-up of the TV industry revealed.*
26 Dave O'Brien, Orian Brook, and Mark Taylor, 'Panic! Social class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries' (2018) <https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/panic-social-class-taste-and-inequalities-in-the-creative-industries(0994f056-af25-4615-b97c-d8adc190d5b4).html>; Ofcom (n 26).

A belief in a myth?: 'the playing-field looks fine to me'

These academic findings and research statistics, published in peer-reviewed journals and fact-checked news outlets, are considered reliable, valid, and largely unambiguous. Yet significant swathes of the population continue to believe in meritocracy. Only 14% of respondents to the 2009 British Social Attitudes survey regarded family wealth as important to getting ahead and only 8% saw ethnicity as a decisive factor—a fall from 21% and 16% in 1987. Meanwhile, 84% and 71% believed 'hard work' and 'ambition' were important to getting ahead. This high level of belief in meritocracy may have even increased in recent years. In 2018, Jonathan Mijs found that the recent rise of income inequality has been accompanied by an increase in popular belief in meritocracy internationally.[27] If meritocracy is believed on a significant scale, how can such beliefs be sustained despite contradictory evidence?

It is especially important to ask the question of why those who appear to lose out, precisely because meritocracy is nothing more than a guise for persisting class prejudices, are persuaded by the idea that meritocracy is a true functioning system of reward and resource allocation in our society. Elites have obvious stakes in believing and perpetuating belief in meritocracy if it works to justify their power as deserved and legitimate on the basis of intelligence, talent, and effort. Therefore, I will focus on the so-called losers of meritocracy, or 'skivers' in Cameron's classist parlance.

In order to move towards a more compassionate sociology, it is insufficient simply to look at whether or not meritocracy exists, or how far ingrained prejudices prevent it from being realised. Rather, we also need to take into account the subjective responses to meritocracy of those we study. Failing to consider simultaneously the objective *and* subjective realities of meritocracy means we risk seeing those who believe in it as cultural dupes in a state of ignorance and delusion. Whilst this kind of disempowering analysis can be seen in some sociological writings,[28] there is nevertheless a body of scholars whose work actively seeks to contest and move beyond this. The work of Wendy Bottero on social inequalities and of Lauren Berlant on her concepts of 'cruel optimism' has shaped my thinking on this and both are discussed briefly below.[29] Robbie Duschinsky and colleagues also provide a way through these thorny issues when discussing the psychiatric concept of 'flat affect'. They argue against the totalising resistance/compliance binary in the social sciences and humanities that is 'too quick to divide actions into compliance with or resistance to power'.[30] They contend that this binary obscures the many strategies individuals engage in to negotiate 'compromised, valuable freedom' in conditions not of their own choosing. Whilst this scholarship is crucial, students—particularly undergraduates—have to seek out this work as it is not part of most compulsory syllabi. Even in optional modules and papers, it is often only touched on briefly and indirectly in discussions of researcher reflexivity. Meanwhile, the objective and 'scientific' nature of social sciences seem to be a crucial lynchpin around which all undergraduate learning turns. Alternatively, the student has to be lucky enough to have a supervisor that will guide them in this direction. I believe research would become not only more nuanced, but more compassionate, if scholarship like that of Bottero, Berlant, and Duschinsky, and the notion of valuing objective *and* subjective realities simultaneously, became a staple of undergraduate sociology courses. More than this, it would help us become more compassionate people outside of the classroom and lecture hall too.

Favouring objective, empirical evidence, which points to the nonexistence of meritocracy, over subjective feeling and meaning-making means failing to consider the seduction and benefit of meritocratic belief in providing meaning and order to one's life. Christopher Paul overcomes this problem, recognising that meritocratic belief is 'understood as a great liberator, freeing citizens from an aristocratic past based on inheritance and lineage'.[31] Given this historical reference point, meritocracy is consented to as it seems 'fair' and 'just'. However, because meritocracy structurally disadvantages the dominated (working-classes), such belief can be characterised as a 'cruel optimism'. Lauren Berlant conceptualises 'cruel optimism' as the affective state produced under neoliberalism which encourages optimistic attachments to a brighter, better future, whilst these same attachments and beliefs are simultaneously 'an obstacle to our flourishing'.[32] In other words, meritocratic belief can provide a sense of hope which is difficult to argue with.[33] Berlant recognises this process of meaning-making through belief, arguing that hope can bind together a chaotic neoliberal world 'into a space made liveable…even if that hope never materialises,'[34] just as hope for meritocracy as a structural reality may never materialise.

A myth as fact?

On the one hand, we have seen that empirical evidence suggests that the recognition and categorisation of 'merit' is based more on possession of classed embodied cultural capital than on 'IQ+effort'; meritocracy as an objective social system is a myth. On the other hand, belief in the meritocratic formula at a subjective level is clearly not mythical, but a strong ideological force in British society. The existence of belief in the meritocratic formula at a subjective level means we cannot label meritocracy 'just a myth' and proceed with our analysis heedlessly. As David Bidney recognised as early as 1950, 'the very fact of belief implies that subjectively, that is, for the believer, the object of belief is not mythological', but 'an effective element of culture.'[35] Ultimately, if people find meaning and sense in a meritocratic idiom, acting on the basis of meritocratic belief, sociologists must be cautious in imposing alternative categorisations and identifications in the teeth of lay peoples' denials. This is exactly what almost occurred when I was interviewing a research participant a few weeks ago.

27 Jonathan Mijs, 'Visualising Belief in Meritocracy, 1930–2010' (2018) 4 Socius 1.

28 I contend that such analysis is seen in Littler (n 4) and that many Bourdieusian analyses edge very close to falling into this trap as well, such as Friedman and Laurison (n 13).

29 Wendy Bottero, 'Class Identities and the Identity of Class' (2004) 38(5) Sociology 985, and *A Sense of Inequality* (Rowman and Littlefield International 2018); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press 2011).

30 Robbie Duschinsky, Daniel Reisel, and Morten Nissen, 'Compromised, Valuable Freedom: Flat Affect and Reserve as Psychosocial Strategies' (2018) 11(1) Journal of Psychosocial Studies 68.

31 Christopher Paul, *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture is the Worst.* (University of Minnesota Press 2018) 44–45.

32 Berlant (n 30) 1.

33 Naa Oyo A Kwate and Ilhan H Meyer, 'The Myth of Meritocracy and African American Health' (2010) 100(10) American Journal of Public Health 1831.

34 Chase Dimock, "'Cruel Optimism' by Lauren Berlant' *Lambda Literary* (30 July 2012) <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2012/07/cruel-optimism-by-lauren-berlant/>.

35 Bidney (n 2) 22.

Thus, meritocracy is a myth at an objective level, but also exists as ideology, meaning subjective belief in this ideology is far from a myth in British society. Because it is believed true, meritocracy is not a myth to those who believe it, but a myth *only* to those who know and believe it to be false. This brings us to the problem of why, so long as some people *believe* in meritocracy, it is impossible to unproblematically label it as a myth despite research suggesting meritocracy has no empirical reality.

I draw here on conceptualisations of ideology. Since meritocracy comprises a system of beliefs constituting a general worldview that works to uphold particular power dynamics between the dominant (presented as the deserving 'winners' of meritocracy) and the dominated (presented as unmeritocratic and undeserving), it operates as an ideology.[36] Michael Freeden extends this view, defining ideology as 'particular patterned clusters and configurations' of decontested 'political concepts' not external to but existing *within* the world.[37] This is helpful for two reasons.

Firstly, the notion that ideology exists *within* the world highlights how ideologies have material effects: if believed, they influence how we act and behave, as seen in processes of 'self-elimination' (whereby individuals from marginalised or dominated backgrounds do not enter elite jobs, not because they lack ambition or aspiration, but as a reaction to or an anticipation of the kinds of barriers they will face there).[38] Moreover, belief in meritocracy—that we had lost our meritocratic way and *needed* to recapture it—is, David Goodhart argues, at the heart of the contemporary anti-elitist, populist challenge.[39] This belief in meritocracy was an underlying part of both Trump and Brexit's appeal, political changes that re-organised and shaped the world in which all must participate. Therefore, even if meritocracy is a structural mirage, belief in it as ideology still has material, real-world effects. Sociologists, then, seem to have an additional task. It can no longer suffice to evidence the absence of meritocracy as a functioning social system in society. That is to dismiss it as a myth and to overlook these real-world effects. Instead, sociologists need to grapple with the more complex and less neatly categorised implications of the persistent belief in meritocracy, even by those it disadvantages. I agree with Stuart Hall, one of the founding figures of British Cultural Studies, that ideology 'concerns the ways in which ideas of different kinds grip the minds of the masses and thereby become "a material force"'[40] and I suggest that scholars who dismiss meritocracy as myth fall prey to the mistaken traditional philosophical distinction between thought and action, isolating them in separate, impermeable spheres with potentially deleterious consequences.

Secondly, in Freeden's theory of ideology, we are presented with the notion that there is no 'absolute truth' since all concepts are 'essentially contestable', with as many potential meanings of concepts and ideas as there are human minds.[41] Whilst this is a rather extreme and destabilising stance, it highlights how belief is subjective, contextualised, and personalised, meaning meritocracy cannot be completely and unequivocally tarred with the brush of mythology.

These two points—that meritocratic belief has real-world effects and meritocratic belief as subjective reality—highlight why, so long as *some* people believe in it, meritocracy cannot *merely* be a myth. Bottero argues that 'the asymmetrical distribution of resources tends to worry sociologists more than it worries lay actors', suggesting that 'discussion of such issues must draw on the language of perceived injustice and conflict which emerges from people themselves.'[42] However, the language of injustice and conflict does not always and for everyone refer to meritocracy. Rather, meritocracy is instead often spoken of in terms of legitimate inequality.

Towards a more compassionate sociology – and beyond?

We cannot deny that sociology (and social sciences more broadly) is and should remain an empirical discipline, but nor can we deny that an approach which puts greater emphasis on lay actors' own beliefs and consequent action is *also* within sociology's remit. Indeed, an important tenet of sociological training is the 'Thomas Theorem'*:* 'If [people] define their situations as real, they are real in their consequences'.[43] This is a tenet that seems to be offered to students and young researchers only *after* their undergraduate studies, and even then it is not always followed. Instead, this tenet should become crucial to any undergraduate sociological training. Sociologists and other social scientists must continue to analyse and expose how power is operating and so cannot take people's own perspectives at face value since they may potentially 'misrecognise' the power inequalities experienced. Yet social scientists must also avoid, as Berlant puts it, 'shit[ting] on people who hold to a dream'.[44] What I have been arguing for here is a sociology that avoids this by making the distinction between the objective, empirical myth of meritocracy as a social structural system (based on the 'IQ+effort' formula), and belief in meritocracy as a subjective reality which is not a myth because it has real-world effects on and meanings for people's lives. Consequently, meritocratic belief becomes a material force that can only be confined to the mythological sphere at the price of a limited understanding of the real-world effects it has. That is, meritocracy may be a myth to some, including many sociologists, but it is an integral cultural element for many.

This two-pronged argument that calls for encompassing objective *and* subjective realities simultaneously extends beyond the issue of meritocracy. For example, it can help us understand why women—not just men—believe that gender equality has been achieved. It can help us understand why people hold onto conspiracy theories. It can help us understand why people in urban, developed cities practice witchcraft or spend hours logging sightings of UFOs, to name just a few. Reflecting on this conclusion is crucial given social sciences' (like sociology, law, and politics) tendency to focus on empirical reality, rather than subjective belief. Without the latter, simple conclusions that meritocracy is *merely* a myth or that my research participant was *merely* suffering from 'false consciousness' risk alienating and dismissing the existence of many whose lives take meaning and action from such beliefs. What this essay ultimately aims to do, therefore, is to caution social scientists, particularly

36 Jo Littler, 'Ideology' in Jonathan Gray and Laurie Oullette (eds), *Keywords for Media Studies* (New York University Press 2017) 98.

37 Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford University Press 1996).

38 Friedman and Laurison (n 13).

39 David Goodhart (2017) cited in David Civil and Joseph J Himsworth, 'Introduction: Meritocracy in Perspective. *The Rise of the Meritocracy* 60 Years On' (2020) 91(2) The Political Quarterly 373, 376.

40 Stuart Hall, 'The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge 1996) 26.

41 Freeden (n 38) 53.

42 Bottero, 'Class Identities' (n 30) 995.

43 WI Thomas and DS Thomas, *The Child in America: Behaviour Problems and Programs* (Knopf 1928) 572.

44 Berlant (n 30) 123.

undergraduate students, in their analysis and exposure of objective reality, to not dismiss point-blank individuals' subjective reality. Whilst researchers must always be awake to power dynamics that may go unnoticed by the individuals they study, this essay suggests sociology (and other social sciences) perhaps needs to be more reflexive, aware that its claims to *inclusivity* and *criticalness* may be undermined as its empirically focussed, objectivity-driven approach risks ostracising the very people who, in its aim to bring inequalities to the forefront, it intends to empower.

This idea, that we must avoid shitting on those who believe in a dream, despite empirical evidence of its nonexistence, should not just be taken up by sociologists, but by all of us. As this essay has outlined, it can help us—academics and students in elite institutions especially—understand why people voted for Trump or Brexit, for instance. It will stop us from dismissing and even dehumanising others point-blank and instead open up channels of empathy, compassion, and communication, something which I hope will be present in all my future research interviews and which I fear was not present in the interview that sparked this essay.