Meritocracy and Parentocracy – mutually exclusive or complementary?

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**Introduction**

An important function of the education system is to allocate life chances to individuals (Goldthorpe, 1996; Yair, 2007). How this allocation process works and which effects it has on society and individuals is one of the classic research problematiques of educational sociology (cf. Becker, 2011). Over the years, researchers have produced a wealth of empirical investigations of and theoretical approaches to this problematique.

Over the last 20 years, a proposition put forward by the British educational sociologist Phillip Brown in the *British Journal of Educational Sociology* in 1990 has attracted considerable interest.¹ According to Brown, meritocracy in education was replaced by an “ideology of parentocracy” in the United Kingdom and other Anglo-Saxon countries around 1990. Instead of the meritocratic principle, according to which life chances are to be allocated following individual merit, parents’ wishes and resources now play the main role. In the following discussion, this proposition was taken up by other researchers and also applied to other countries than the United Kingdom. 25 years after the publication of Brown’s article, google scholar reports that it has been quoted nearly 400 times in documents included in the google database (28.09.2015: 396 quotations). Brown developed his proposition with the Anglo-Saxon countries and especially the United Kingdom in mind; in the meantime, other authors have applied it to countries as diverse as France, Japan and China (cf. e.g. Darchy-Koechlin & van Zanten, 2005; Igarashi, 2012; Wu, 2012).

Thus, Brown’s “parentocracy”-proposition seems to have resonated a great deal with scholars studying the allocation of life chances through the education system. However, some of its elements merit a closer, critical look. Few observers of the education system would dispute that parents’ wishes and resources play an important role for how life chances are actually allocated to individuals. However, if one looks at the normative level, the

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¹ Brown has modified his argument in an interview that appeared in 2010 in a French journal (Brown & Duru-Bellat, 2010). However, the version of his argument that created most impact remains the one of 1990.
picture changes: far from being replaced by an “ideology of parentocracy”, meritocracy is still the main legitimatory norm for the allocation of life chances and the prime justification for the existence of social inequality in Western democracies. The meritocratic ideal is still firmly in place. This chapter will argue that rather than the one replacing the other, meritocracy and parentocracy have been co-existing for a long time, the one on the level of legitimatory ideology, the other on the level of how the education system actually operates and interacts with society as a whole.

The tension between the normative level and the level of the education system’s actual operation is particularly obvious in elite institutions (in the sense of institutions producing social elites, such as British public schools). Using the case of Eton College as its main example, this chapter will study the tension between the normative level and the way in which admittance and financing actually operate. It will compare the manner in which Eton College presents itself to potential customers in its school brochures with the factors determining how pupils are admitted and how their attendance at these schools is financed. The chapter ends with a general discussion of the relationship of meritocracy and parentocracy. First, however, we need to clarify the central terms and main conceptual tools used by Brown and in this chapter.

**Meritocracy and Parentocracy**

“Meritocracy”

The term “meritocracy” goes back to the dystopian, satirical novel *The rise of the meritocracy, 1870–2033: An essay on education and equality*, published by the English educational sociologist Michael Young in 1958 (see also Aas, 2006). In this novel, Young portrays a fictitious future English society which is organised according to strict meritocratic principles. An individual’s social position is determined by his or her “merit”, which is defined as a combination of “intelligence and effort” (Young, 1958, 94). Through the course of the years, it becomes possible to determine an individual’s intelligence (as the immutable part of merit) more reliably and earlier and earlier in the life course. Thereby, a group of people that is proved to be highly intelligent is separated more and more distinctly from another group that is not. Through homogamy amongst the intelligent, a self-reproducing, elitist caste emerges that is sharply divided from the mass of the population.

A society organised along these principles may be just in the sense that life chances are allocated strictly according to merit, primarily following the distribution of intelligence amongst the population. However, at the same time, it produces a large mass of individuals whose chances of rising in the
social hierarchy are stifled from the start on a scientific-rational basis. At the end of the novel, the pent-up frustration of this mass, which does not even have a theoretical chance of entering the elite, leads to a revolutionary uprising in the course of which the narrator of the novel is killed.

Meritocracy was thus originally a term with negative connotations. In Young’s novel, the strict application of meritocratic principles leads straight into a social dystopia. This is in stark contrast to how the term is used today. In contemporary political discussion, the term is usually used without these negative connotations (cf. Baez, 2006), a remarkable re-interpretation in light of the context in which it was coined.\(^2\)

Ansgar Allen (2011) has pointed to the fact that the concept of meritocracy has changed since the times when Young’s book was written. Young’s definition “merit=ability plus effort” was formulated at a time when “ability” was primarily operationalised as intelligence. Intelligence in turn was seen as genetically predetermined and unchangeable over the life span. Also, at the time when the novel was written, concepts of the “planned society” and “social engineering” where much more prevalent than they are today. Social engineers often aimed at matching individual abilities and social and occupational roles (in the sense of the ideal of “right man at the right place”, see Waldow, 2007). These concepts have largely vanished as guiding ideals of social and economic policy-making. Their place was more or less taken over by the idea that individuals and organisations are situated in a kind of market, in which there is competition between individuals, educational institutions and employers and in which individuals look for a place according to their abilities and aspirations. A perfect matching of ability and position in working life and society is no longer intended. Finally, Brown himself has pointed to the fact that the nation state is no longer the frame of reference for the meritocracy (cf. Brown & Tannock, 2009), which was still self-evident for Young.

Despite the changes that the concept of “meritocracy” has undergone, it is still a constitutive part of the “normative self-definition” of Western democratic societies (Solga, 2005, 23) in the sense that it is the prime legitimation for the allocation of life chances to individuals and the main justification of social inequality. Concrete conceptions of what constitutes merit and how it should be determined can vary considerably between societies (see Waldow, 2014; Zimdars, 2007, 14), but the “meritocratic minimum” shared by these societies is that individual merit should be decisive for the allocation of life chances, not ascriptive criteria such as ethnicity, social background or wealth. As merit is a latent variable, it needs to be operationalized in order to be used for the allocation of life chances. This is where education comes into

\[^2\] Michael Young (2001) has harshly criticised Tony Blair’s affirmative use of the term “meritocracy”.
play, as educational certificates are the main “currency” (Deutsch, 1979, 393) in which merit is expressed.

Education-based meritocracy has been around for a long time. The meritocratic idea arose parallel to the decline of estate society as guiding principle of social reproduction. The educational historian Hartmut Titze (1996) sees the late 18th and early 19th centuries as the crucial periods for this transformation. According to Titze, by the late 19th century the ideological transition was complete: the advantages of “selection according to education” over the selection criteria of estate society where no longer even theoretically in doubt.

“Parentocracy”

According to Phillip Brown (1990), meritocracy, in turn, is at the moment being replaced by something new. Brown claims that the British education system is rapidly losing its meritocratic character and entering a new phase, which he calls the “third wave”. Similar processes are taking place in the education systems of other Anglo-Saxon countries such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

According to Brown, this “third wave” was preceded by two earlier waves of mass schooling: first, a period in the 19th and early 20th centuries in which “mass schooling for the working classes” was introduced (Brown, 1990, 65). During this phase, education was supposed to reinforce rather than to overcome existing social distinctions (Brown, 1990, 67). This first wave was followed by a second wave, meritocracy, in which merit was supposed to be responsible for the allocation of life chances. According to Brown, this wave began about 1944, i.e. with the passing of the Butler Act, which for the first time provided free secondary schooling for everyone (on the Butler Act see Jeffereys, 1984).

With the ideological sea change that took place in the late 1970s, the second, meritocratic wave started to be superseded according to Brown by a third, parentocratic wave. At the time he wrote his article (1990), this change was not yet complete according to Brown. In the parentocracy, “a child’s education is increasingly dependent upon the wealth and wishes of parents, rather than the ability and effort of pupils” (Brown, 1990, 66). This formulation echoes Michael Young’s definition of merit mentioned above (“merit=ability plus effort”). Brown explicitly characterises the parentocracy as an “ideology”, which implies that it does not just describe an actual property of how education systems work, but applies to the normative level.

According to Brown, parentocracy was victorious not due to parents’ pressure, but due to actions of the state. It was pushed through by a precar-
ous coalition of traditional conservatives and market radicals. According to
the conservatives, the comprehensivization reforms carried out by the La-
bour government in the 1960s had destroyed educational standards. Accord-
ing to the market radicals, marketization and privatization would lead to
educational improvement for all. In the parentocracy, Local Authorities are
largely stripped of their powers and parents can freely choose a school for
their children on a market. Schools are to receive incentives to keep “cus-
tomers” (i.e. pupils); on the other hand, they can be closed if customers fail
to show up (“survival by results”). A precondition for an educational market
of this type to work is a rigorous test regime which provides parents with the
knowledge they need to make informed choices.

With parentocracy, the state gives up the goal of equality of opportunity;
this goal is replaced by the goal of freedom of choice. This shift is justified
by the radically libertarian argument that the safeguarding of equality of
opportunity through the state constitutes an infringement of individual libe-


Parentocracy in this sense is not coterminous with a return to estate soci-
ety in relation to the allocation of life chances. However, one parallel between
estate society and parentocracy is that ascriptive criteria rather than merit are
to play a major role again in the allocation of life chances: in estate society,
birth is decisive for the allocation of life chances, in the parentocracy, it is
mainly wealth.

Meritocracy and Parentocracy Are on Different Levels

However, the large amount of evidence showing how important parents’
wishes and resources are when it comes to the life chances of their offspring
is no proof that meritocracy as a guiding normative ideal has weakened.
Parentocracy has not superseded meritocracy; rather, meritocracy and pare-
tocracy operate on different levels that are only loosely coupled, in some
ways conflicting with each other, in other ways complementing each other.
Discussing the relationship of meritocracy and parentocracy using the con-
ceptual vocabulary provided by neoinstitutionalist organizational analysis
may make this clear. In order to do this, the basic neoinstitutionalist concepts
of “formal structure” and “loose coupling” need to be introduced.

Formal Structure and Loose Coupling

According to Meyer and Rowan (1977), organizations need to be perceived
as legitimate by their environment in order to survive. Organizations can
gain legitimacy through providing a certain service for their environment.
Particularly if this service is difficult to define or measure, an additional type of legitimacy production can become more important than actually providing the service. Conforming to certain “myths” structuring an organization’s institutional environment can also generate legitimacy. These “myths” are “institutionalized rules” or “prescriptions” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 343–344) that according to Francisco Ramirez (2012, 7) can be described as “symbolic accounts that tell us who we are”. To the individual, these myths tend to be perceived as unalterable. Important myths that structure modern society are “progress”, “justice” or “scientificalness” (on the latter see Drori, Meyer, Ramirez, & Schofer, 2003). For example, a hospital is considered legitimate by its environment (and thereby eligible for financing by the health insurance system) by treating patients in a certain way that conforms to the myth of scientificalness, not through healing them (which one would assume is the real service the hospital performs for its environment). Just like the hospital’s institutional environment, the institutional environment of the education system is heavily structured by myths. Among these is the meritocratic myth.

Neoinstitutionalist organizational theory distinguishes between an organisation’s formal structure, which an organisation presents to its environment and with the help of which it legitimates itself, and the organisation’s actual mode of operation (Brunsson, 1989; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). There can be significant differences and tensions between these two; they are only “loosely coupled” (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). If the tensions between formal structure and actual mode of operation become too obvious, they can threaten the organisation’s legitimacy. The tensions can be disguised or neutralised in various ways, however (for examples see below).

The conceptual tools presented in this section shall now be applied to an empirical case in order to make the relationship between meritocracy and parentocracy clearer. The problem of meritocratic selection is particularly salient in the elite sector of the education system (i.e. in the sector of the education system that produces social elites), as the life and occupational chances distributed here tend to be particularly coveted. Their allocation is under particular legitimatory pressure. It is particularly interesting to juxtapose the formal structure and actual mode of operation of providers of formal education in this sector. The ways in which these schools, universities etc. present their formal structure should provide information on which institutionalized myths are particularly strong in their institutional environment. Thus, they should provide clues for answering the question of whether the meritocratic ideal has been supplanted by an “ideology of parentocracy” or not. The empirical case discussed here is Eton College, an institution of elite education par excellence.
Eton College: Formal Structure and Actual Mode of Operation

Eton College as part of the independent school sector

The proportion of pupils attending the independent sector of the English school system is at about 6 per cent and has remained surprisingly constant over the last 40 years (cf. Office for National Statistics, 2010, 29–30). The independent sector is quite diverse and does not only comprise elite schools. However, some independent schools play an extremely important role for elite reproduction in England, especially the old public schools belonging to the so-called “Clarendon Nine” (Walford, 1990, 1). Eton College heads this group more or less unchallenged and thus stands at the pinnacle of the English hierarchy of independent schools. Eton has about 1,250 pupils between 13 and 18 years of age, all male.

Many parts of the British elite are dominated by alumni of independent schools (Hartmann, 2008; Milburn, 2012). In 2008, more than three quarters of all CEOs of the largest 100 British companies had attended one of the 27 most respected public schools, eleven of them Eton (Hartmann, 2008, 119–120). Before the cabinet reshuffle in autumn 2012 four members of David Cameron’s cabinet were Old Etonians, including the Prime Minister himself. More than half of the cabinet members had attended independent schools (Burn-Murdoch, 2012). This strong dominance of former independent school pupils and especially Old Etonians in politics also extends to other sectors of the elite, such as the church, the military and the media (Hartmann, 2007).

Eton violates the meritocratic norm in several ways: First, Eton is an all-boys school. Second, inherited privilege seems to play a role for school choice and admittance. According to the school, about 40 per cent of the newly admitted pupils have a family connection to Old Etonians, i.e. alumni of the school (Eton College, 2012c). Third, the financial burden of sending a son to Eton College is considerable. In 2014, school fees were set at 34,434 pounds per year (Eton College, 2014). This is more than the average yearly pay of a British wage earner (2013: 27,000 pounds before tax [Office for National Statistics, 2013]). However, it has to be taken into account that not all pupils pay the full fee (see below).

Thus, concerning the actual mode of recruiting pupils, Eton College seems to operate in an extremely parentocratic way; inherited and financial privilege seem to go hand in hand. How does this relate to the way the school presents itself to the outside world?
How Eton College presents itself to the outside world

One way in which Eton College presents itself to the outside world, especially to prospective pupils and their parents, is through school brochures, which are available in printed form from the school and which today can also be downloaded from the internet. For the purposes of this chapter, the brochures available in the archive of Eton College were subjected to a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2008). As admissions of pupils and financing of attendance are crucial from the perspective of the meritocracy-parentocracy problématique, the guiding questions for the analysis were how the brochures present Eton’s admissions policy and the available scholarships and bursaries and how they are awarded.

The earliest brochure available in the school’s archive, which appears to be the first one produced by the school, dates from May 1959. The introduction of school brochures as such can perhaps be interpreted as an indication that the clientele of the school was widening at this time, making more formalised instruments of information necessary. At a time when Eton was mostly attended by pupils possessing a family connection to Old Etonians (which, as was mentioned above, even today is true for 40 per cent of the pupils attending Eton), a school brochure may have seemed less necessary.

From 1959 to the present day, the school brochure was revised over and over again and its contents extended. On a general level, it can be said that the discourse of the brochures became more and more meritocratic over time in relation to how the admission and selection procedures and the awarding of scholarships are portrayed. This can be interpreted as a sign that pressure to present the school as following meritocratic principles has increased over time.

Since the foundation of the school in the late Middle Ages (see Card, 2001), Eton has awarded scholarships to particularly able pupils (see below). It is striking that in the course of the time period analysed here, Eton increasingly established scholarships for a clientele that through its social background was not predestined for attending public school. The “scholarship ladder” offered by Eton starts on the level of preparatory school (i.e. fee-paying private schools preparing for independent school). The brochure for 1973/1974 mentions the “Junior Scholarships” for the first time (on this category of scholarship see also Card, 1994). Not only did these scholarships support boys attending Eton, but also the preparatory schooling leading up to Eton. The brochure for the school year 1988/1989 mentions the “Sixth-Form-Scholarships” for the first time. These are supposed to enable particularly able pupils from the state school sector to attend the Sixth Form at Eton. The most recent addition in this category of scholarships are the “New Foundation Scholarships”, which were first mentioned in the brochure for the school year of 2007/2008. These are aimed at “academic high-flyers with all-round qualities” (Eton College, 2012b, 3). Their target group are pupils...
who have not been to a private preparatory school and whose families cannot afford Eton’s school fees.

When it comes to admission/selection procedures, we encounter a similar picture to the awarding of scholarships. Before 1990, parents registered their son long before he had reached the age of 13 (often straight after birth) with a housemaster. Provided they passed the Common Entrance Examination, pupils would join that house on entering Eton. Around 1990 this was replaced by an interview and test-based admission procedure. The brochure for the school year of 2004/2005 remarks in this context: “An old system which allowed registration at birth has been replaced by a process of universal assessment.” According to the brochure, a particularist admission system based on personal relations was replaced by a rational, universalist procedure. Later brochures underline that special educational needs such as dyslexia are being taken into consideration in the admission process. The brochure for the school year of 2012/2013 has the following to say about the admission procedure:

Eton recruits a diverse intake of about 260 talented boys each year from a very wide range of schools nationwide and overseas. Eton is academically selective […] Eton’s aim is to encourage applications from candidates with as diverse a range of backgrounds as possible and is committed to equal treatment of candidates regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, other protected characteristics or social backgrounds (Eton College, 2012b, 2).

In later sections, the brochure points again to the different forms of financial support that are available.

Parts of the quote read as if they had been directly transferred from the Equality Act passed in 2010 (e.g. speaking of “protected characteristics”), an act that in its very first section stipulates that public authorities in exercising their functions must “have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage” (Great Britain, 2010, s1,1,1).

Stressing that “Eton is academically selective” and that pupils come to Eton from a “very wide range of schools” are supposed to underline that the privilege of an Eton education can be neither bought nor inherited and that Eton pupils may constitute an elite, but an elite based on merit, i.e. an elite that is compatible with the meritocratic myth. In an interview with the journalist Nick Fraser (2006, 42), Sir Eric Anderson, Provost and former headmaster of Eton, sketches out the vision of a “merit-based, snobbery-free Eton utopia”. According to Anderson, the pupils of the school are to represent a cross-section of society. The interviewer, an Old Etonian himself and very favourably inclined towards the school, comments drily that up to now, Eton at best provided a cross section through the British upper class.
In its school brochures and through other channels Eton thus presents itself as a stronghold of meritocracy. This tendency, as it is reflected in Eton’s school brochures, has become stronger in the course of the post-war era, particularly from the mid-1970s on, i.e. exactly at the time when according to Brown an “ideology of parentocracy” began replacing meritocracy. The brochures also envision a future in which Eton is getting more and more meritocratic (see e.g. Eton College, 2012a).

The meritocratic rhetoric in Eton’s school brochures can be seen as a way of handling the tensions and inconsistencies between the school’s “formal structure” and actual mode of operating, i.e. the requirements made by the meritocratic myth on the one hand and the school’s actual mode of admitting pupils and how the vast majority of them finance school attendance on the other. It is a well-known fact in organisational sociology that stressing certain traits of an organisation’s formal structure can compensate for the organisation not conforming to these aspects when it comes to the organisation’s actual operations (Brunsson, 1989). In this light, meritocratic rhetoric on the level of formal structure thus can partly compensate parentocratic tendencies in how the school, its admissions system and financing operate. Another strategy for reconciling inconsistencies between formal structure and the actual way an organisation is operating is by pointing to a “better future” that the organisation is actively working towards (Brunsson, 1989, 172–173), a strategy also employed by the school brochures.

Meritocracy – just an ideological smokescreen?

In the light of what has just been discussed, it may seem that the meritocratic rhetoric of Eton’s school brochures merely serves the function of an ideological smokescreen to camouflage the school’s actual parentocratic mode of admitting pupils and financing its operation. However, this would be too simple a view. At least, it is not the whole story.

Firstly, the meritocratic rhetoric of the school brochures is not necessarily the result of a conscious, deliberate conspiracy. Pierre Bourdieu (2002 [1986], 290) has warned against a “naively Machiavellian view” when it comes to interpreting the function of seemingly charitable conduct (i.e. conduct that appears not to serve the self-interest of a certain social group or class) as a mere strategy of “class appeasement”, since “the most sincerely disinterested acts may be those best corresponding to objective interest”. Thus, the actors involved do not necessarily attempt to consciously hide their “real” motives (e.g. preserving the advantages and privileges of their social class), but may be truly aiming at making their school more meritocratic when introducing scholarships bursaries etc. (see also below), even if this may in actual fact serve to conceal the continued parentocratic mode of operation.
Secondly, “loose coupling” of formal structure and actual mode of operation is not coterminous with “no coupling at all” between the two. Formal structure can and does have an influence on how an organization operates, even if this influence tends to be indirect and distorted. Thus, in some public schools there seem to be attempts to genuinely make admission and financing more meritocratic. For instance, Eton College actively works towards collecting money to enhance its endowment so 70 boys can receive full fee remission and 25 per cent of boys at the school are financially assisted (Eton College, 2013, 6), aiming at making attendance of the school possible for a wider social clientele. In earlier announcements, even more ambitious aims concerning the widening of bursary schemes were stated (cf. Leach, 2008).

Incidentally, Eton’s introduction of scholarships for able pupils who would not be able to afford the school fees without a bursary is a return to the school’s original purpose. Originally, the school was supposed to enable 70 “poor scholars” to receive a free education. Only in the second half of the 19th century were the public schools – including Eton College – “privatised” and their system of financing based on fees (Shrosbree, 1988). To this day, 70 pupils receive the status of a “King’s Scholar” or “Colleger” on the basis of an examination; this is connected to a reduction of the school fees by 10 per cent and a means-tested bursary if needed. In the school brochure on Sixth Form Scholarships, the school makes this connection to its tradition explicit, i.e. Eton College underlines the fact that the school has always provided support for the able, but needy.

Other prestigious independent schools such as St. Paul’s School in London have instigated even more radical measures than Eton College, redirecting money that used to be used for scholarships to assist with fees and aiming to become completely needs-blind in its admissions policy over the course of 25 years starting in 2006 (when this plan was first announced, the news made it onto the *Times’s* front page as the main headline [see Frean, Miles, & Rumbelow, 2006]). In its “Visions for the future”-document, which is available on the school’s website, the school discusses this under the heading “Create a Meritocracy” (St. Paul’s School, no year). Other independent schools, such as Dulwich College, are running similar schemes (Boone, 2007; Frean et al., 2006). The Sutton Trust, a charity whose motto is “improving social mobility through education” (Sutton Trust, no year), runs the so-called “Open Access”-programme. This programme aims to make entrance into the country’s 100 leading independent day schools exclusively merit-based with the aid of public money (Sutton Trust, 2012).

Making attendance to public schools needs-blind costs a lot of money. There are different ways of raising this money. Dulwich College, for example, supplements its drive to go needs-blind with the revenue generated by the creation of international satellite campuses (Boone, 2007). However, another very significant source of funds for schemes such as the one pursued by Eton or St. Paul’s is donations. In this context, a prime target group are
the school’s alumni. The alumni often send their children to the school they themselves attended; it was mentioned above that about 40 percent of the pupils attending Eton College have a family connection to an Old Etonian. Thus, exaggerating only slightly, it could be said that the alumni of these schools are asked to donate money that will make it more difficult for their children to secure admission to these schools by widening the clientele that can seek entrance. Making schools needs-blind does not just increase the chances of attendance for a group of potential pupils that formerly was underprivileged (i.e., bright children from poor families), but also decreases the chance of admission for a formerly privileged group that could more or less buy their way into the school (provided they passed the Common Entrance Examination). This is a much more explosive matter, especially as the formerly privileged group (or rather, their parents) are supposed to (partly) pay for the change in the form of donations.

This defies explanation in a crude materialist way in the sense of families safeguarding direct reproduction of their social privileges. If meritocracy was nothing but an ideological smokescreen with no effect on how schools and admissions actually operate, schools would not take real steps to make entry needs-blind. Also, donating money to one’s old school can be seen as a way of safeguarding the value of one’s education retrospectively. Elites still seem to have to legitimate themselves as being selected on the basis of merit. The symbolic value of having attended a particular public school probably also increases in retrospect if the school appears as the producer of an elite based on merit, not merely on social class. This can provide an incentive for alumni to donate money that is supposed to make their former school more meritocratic.

Thus, the meritocratic ideal does seem to have some effect on the actual operation of schools and the way they interact with their environment. Whether this leads to any changes in the way social privilege is passed on through education that affect a larger group of people is a different matter, however. So far, there is no reason to get overly excited about the progress of meritocracy in public schooling. The impact of initiatives like those mentioned above on the system as a whole should not be overestimated: The Sutton Trust itself estimates that if its “Open Access”-scheme was implemented full-scale (i.e. if 100 independent day schools would participate), it would affect less than one per cent of current day school pupils (Sutton Trust, 2012, 23). So, despite the fact that admission to some schools may become more meritocratic through the scheme, it would not change anything in how life chances are allocated to the majority of pupils and how social advantage is reproduced inter-generationally. In addition, the number of independent schools that are actually keen on implementing needs-blind admission is not overwhelming. Possibly, it is the schools at the top of the status pyramid, such as Eton College, that feel the pressure most to legiti-
mate themselves by demonstrating that their existence is not in conflict with the meritocratic myth.

Conclusions

Whether the education system as a whole has come to operate in a more or less meritocratic way over the last few decades and – related to this question – whether the education system’s parentocratic traits have grown stronger or weaker is not easy to answer (cf. Goldthorpe, 2013). It is also unclear whether the myth of meritocracy will survive in the long run and what might replace it (cf. Souto-Otero, 2010). It seems obvious that the rise of the market as a mechanism of resource allocation, favoured by many even in areas where it formerly did not play a major role, has changed the conditions under which the myth of meritocracy exists and operates, as Brown and Tannock (2009) have rightly noted.

However, that does not mean that the meritocratic myth is a thing of the past. Meritocracy is still firmly institutionalised as a “normative self-definition” of Western democratic societies. There are no indications that it has been replaced by an “ideology of parentocracy” in the sense of a system in which wishes and wealth of parents – rather than merit, however defined – are supposed to determine pupils’ life chances, neither in England nor in other Western democratic societies.

Brown uses the term “meritocracy” to denote a particular period of time, namely the period between the passing of the Butler Act in 1944, which made secondary schooling in Britain universally accessible, and the ideological sea change of the late 1970s, epitomised by the educational reforms of the Thatcher administration. Reserving the term “meritocracy” for this period on the one hand underestimates to which degree the meritocratic myth is still alive today, as was shown above. On the other hand, using the term “meritocracy” to denote this particular period of time also obscures the degree to which the British system of education and British society actually operated along parentocratic lines even during the period of time identified by Brown as the heyday of meritocracy. It can be shown empirically that many sectors of the British elite were even more strongly dominated by the alumni of independent schools and especially Old Etonians than they are today (cf. Hartmann, 2007, 116–119). When it comes to the role of public schools in reproducing the British elite, the most interesting point is perhaps not changes between the different “waves” described by Brown, but the strong continuity between them.

Parents’ wishes and wealth and other aspects of a child’s social background have played an important role in how life chances are allocated for a long time. In traditional estate society, following in one’s parents’ footsteps socially and occupationally was the standard and largely unquestioned mod-
el. Since the end of estate society and the rise of the meritocratic myth, simply passing one’s social advantages on to the next generation has not been as easy as before. Now, to a significant extent parents have to funnel their ambitions through the education system, taking the detour via schools and other educational institutions when passing on social advantages to their children (Baker & LeTendre, 2005, chap. 3). Thus, it seems to be more apposite to see parentocracy not as an ideology that has replaced meritocracy, but as a permanent companion to meritocracy on the level of how the education system actually operates and interacts with society as a whole.

In this paper, the relationship of meritocracy and parentocracy was treated with the analytical toolbox of sociological neo-institutionalism, situating meritocracy primarily on the level of formal structure and parentocracy on the level of how the education system actually operates and allocates life chances. This helps to avoid two traps: On the one hand, the social reality of the allocation of life chances does not appear crypto-idealistcally as an imperfect realisation of the idea of meritocracy. On the other hand, the meritocratic ideal does not just appear in a naïvely materialistic way as mere ideology in the Marxist sense, i.e. as superstructure that conceals the real power relations, although this is surely part of the story. However, merely pointing to the fact that formal structure and actual mode of operation are only loosely coupled is not entirely satisfying either; rather, the exact nature of the interplay of formal structure and actual mode of operation has to be specified through empirical examinations of concrete situations, such as the one sketched here.

References


