

Meritocracy: the third way and the effervescence of capital

Del Forno, Massimo; Di Gregorio, Marco

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Del Forno, M., & Di Gregorio, M. (2018). Meritocracy: the third way and the effervescence of capital. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review*, 18(4), 669-687. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-61148-4>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/1.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/1.0>

Meritocracy: the Third Way and the Effervescence of Capital

MASSIMO DEL FORNO*
(University of Salerno)

MARCO DI GREGORIO**
(University of Turin)

Abstract

Since the social-democrats dismissed the communist utopia and privileged instead the idea of a well-being founded on the production-consumption cycle, the Western electoral competition has been increasingly focused on the capitalist economy. Accordingly, the political dynamics shifted from the class conflict to the regulation of markets. On the social side, the removal of the previous conflict has freed the “spirit of capitalism” that has been able to settle even more pervasively in the symbolic relations between people. This new philosophy of money triggers a social game played on competition and the reward mechanism derived from it. In this sense, meritocracy is the criterion for governing this new order of capitalism. Within this context, this article discusses the contribution of the left movements and parties, in their historical-social evolution, to the construction of a meritocratic principle in Europe. It also investigates the political process that led the left to a strategic choice, among the other possible options for renewal: namely, to give up to the struggle against capitalism and privilege a progressive accommodative logic with regard to the market. We argue that this choice was based both on values and interests shared by political actors and was supported at a theoretical level by a group of intellectuals who recognize themselves in the Third Way. Based on the above, the article shall identify the main stages in this political change, by using an appropriate selection of discourses and texts that refer to Third Way, analyzing them through a sociological perspective.

Keywords: meritocracy, “Third Way”, capitalism, the left, social democracy.

* Massimo Del Forno teaches Methodology of social science and sociology of the body at the University of Salerno, where he is a member of the Social Policies Observatory (delforno@unisa.it).

** Marco Di Gregorio is a Ph.D. student in Social and Political Change at the University of Turin and a member of the Social Policies Observatory at the University of Salerno (marco.digregorio@unito.it).

The Death of Socialism

Since the late 1980s, Europe has entered into a particular political congeries. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of Communism as historical experience, but the conditions which made it possible had some severe impacts on the overall political project led by the left parties, such as the downgrading of the ideological loading and the crumbling of the class conflict, with its usual forms of struggle and criticism. Meanwhile, the globalization of the markets was gnawing away that room for maneuver which allowed the state to support the population with redistributive and cost-containment policies. The free movement of capital was going side by side with loss of sovereignty of nation-states, dictating a new form of economic organization based on labour and productive forces mobility. This aspect was even more evident after the formation of a European bloc extended to the countries of the East, which, once free from Soviet influence, entered as full competitors in the goods and labour market. The consolidation of this new geopolitical structure, realized at the expense of the states' ability to offset domestic economic imbalances, brought companies and workers into direct contact. Capitalism, left free to express itself and expand in all its power, was going to break the old banks made up of established institutions to guarantee security and social peace. Thus, the new challenge of the modernization would have been faced both on the technological innovation front and on the valuation of human capital, with a large-scale unbridled competition between businesses, and between people to access the labour market.

On the one hand, many greeted this change as an opportunity for rebirth and as a turning point towards a better future for all; on the other, the challenge posed by the enlargement of the single market caused many concerns, especially in those countries burdened by a ferruginous bureaucratic machine and by a labour bargaining that was not adequate to the changes taking place. Furthermore, the shift in the center of gravity of the economy aggravates the inequalities between the territories based on their center-peripheral location. On these themes, other more general problems that had been overlooked by the old politics emerged, such as the social and environmental impact of industrial development and the ruinous decline of the middle class, with its heavy load on the amount of inequalities.¹

Faced with this mass of problems, both the neoliberal policies and the socialist ones, hitherto shaped on assistentialism and defence of acquired rights, no longer offered convincing ideas and solutions to their electorates, whose emancipation led them to judge less dogmatically the political alternative

¹ Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXI^e Siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2013.

between left and right.² Communism had fallen, but the issues of fairness and social justice, as well as all the problems related to the class conflict, had remained on the ground. *Victorious capitalism*, emerged triumphant against the forces who resisted, would have to face a situation that it was neither willing nor able to stand. “Everyone knows now” that the market economy had won its challenge against the planned economy;³ that someone from the left wing interpreted this as “the end of history”, perhaps many would never have expected it. In this political climate, also supported by the new wind that was blowing from Europe as a “bearer of wellbeing” and opportunities, the left wing faced an intricate knot to be solved. On the one hand, it was essential to safeguard some values of socialism, if only to justify the representation of an electoral body of secular extraction and belonging to the labour force; on the other, their political practice could no longer insist on old warhorses, now considered losers even by left-wing voters.

This narrative seems to contradict Schumpeter’s predictions: even if the capitalist system, left free to grow in the long run, was able to produce wealth and prosperity that would satisfy the needs of everyone, “its very success undermines the social institutions which protect it, and ‘inevitably’ creates conditions in which it will not be able to live and which strongly point to socialism as the heir apparent.”⁴ Schumpeter did not share socialist ideas, yet he admitted that capitalism could end up with endogenous causes and that socialism, its opposing force, would have collected its inheritance. The point is that, once the experience of socialism has ended, they now seem not to remain alternatives to capitalism, as Giddens also emphasizes. “Socialism is dead [...] No one any longer has any alternatives to capitalism; the arguments that remain concern how far, and in what ways, capitalism should be governed and regulated.”⁵

Really, Schumpeter guessed it: “[t]here are in fact socialists who believe that the capitalist order is gathering strength and is entrenching itself as time goes on, so that it is chimerical to hope for its breakdown.”⁶ Since capitalism appears inevitable, it is not easy for a left-wing party to inherit these problems, both for its regulation and for the safeguard of those values to which Europe does not want to renounce after the shock of the world wars. The problem, therefore, becomes how to renew the social basis for the maintenance of the market economy by safeguarding the values of freedom, equality, and solidarity

² Norberto Bobbio, *Destra e Sinistra: ragioni e significati di una distinzione politica*, Roma, Donzelli, 1994.

³ Romano Prodi, *Il capitalismo ben temperato*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1995, p. 11. The author’s translation from Italian.

⁴ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942), London, Routledge, 2003, p. 61.

⁵ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, pp. 43-44.

⁶ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism ... cit.*, p. 62.

in the *horizon* of capitalism and not in opposition.

On closer inspection, however, from Schumpeter's own lesson we also learn that if we want to prevent the capitalist order from collapsing, we must provide it with continuous support and a social basis that is accomplished both in the institutional form and in the individual *conduct*. "[T]he capitalist order not only rests on props made of extra-capitalist material but also derives its energy from extra-capitalist patterns of behavior which at the same time it is bound to destroy."⁷

As had already happened with the *Protestant ethic* for the birth of capitalism, it was needed a *new spirit* that would push towards a new idea of economic and social progress, based on *equal opportunities*, leaving citizens free to compete for individual success. This historical conjuncture was favourable to the opening of a political space with reformist tendencies able to interpret global change, to mobilize individuals, stimulating them to seize the opportunities generated by the transformations underway, and to respond to the demand for security. The new reformist vision, which tended to bring together the old political demands of the left with the interests of Capital, shook many prominent figures of European socialism, including Tony Blair. Aiming to put together State and market and to conflate them into a new centrality, he rode the reformist wave with policies intended to boost entrepreneurship and to foster competition on the labour market. Over time, Tony Blair, supported by a group of intellectuals, dropped the traditional socialist vision, centered on the assurance and protection of workers, preparing the culture for a "politics of doing" that goes under the name of Third Way.

The Backdrops of the Third Way

We cannot pull the role played by Blair for establishing the Third Way away from a discourse on the failure of neoliberal policies related to the experience of Thatcherism and its strong opposition to the Beveridge model. Thatcher blamed the welfare state for an irresponsible and even delusional attitude to the illusion of being able to replace private individuals in many cases, satisfying them in their needs. This political orientation was not dictated mainly by an ethical conviction, but by practical reasoning. Thatcher did not have great consideration of the market. However, she considered it an unavoidable and unchangeable reality, so that it was necessary "to push people into the freezing waters of the free competitive market so that they could learn to swim alone and regain their original autonomy corrupted by the continuous

⁷ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism ...* cit., p. 162.

and illusory caresses of the State.”⁸ Subsequently, they looked at free competition under market economy as the “springboard” to create dynamism for the economy that, subordinately, would have generated an *instrument-effect* for the community. In *Reinventing government* – a kind of occult manifesto of neoliberalism – Osborne and Gaebler well-argued these ideas. The autonomous individual must not execute orders or be dependent on the State that assists them but pursues their private interests. The State with its forms of assistance generates dependence on individuals and is an obstacle to the personal fulfillment. On the other end, the market is our true nature: it reflects the real human conditions where everyone struggles to survive; a jungle where the individual forges, becomes autonomous, produces and consumes, thus providing for their own needs.⁹ We cannot fail to underline the fetishism of such statements. If, on the one hand, the market gives autonomy to individuals, on the other, it makes them tools for production and consumption, exposing them to serious risks of exclusion.

After all, Thatcher too wanted to bring the reasoning on the level of equality of opportunities, but she found the opposition from the conservatives right, who tended to maintain the status quo and privileges. The end of Thatcherism did not have a strong ideological influence on Blair’s New Labour, but on the level of praxis: the possibility of founding a principle of equality on *equal opportunities*, but regulated on the functioning of the market, proved to be a failure experience. Moreover, taking the state completely out of the market economy did not suit anyone, not even the so called anarcho-liberals. Rather, they wanted to make the state functional to the games of an economy with an “armed hand”. Although there was the political interest to change the concept and image of the State among the public, regarding the economics they need for the state to maintain the legitimate use of force, to play its neutral role in guaranteeing free competition market, private property and security. No liberal would ever have thought of giving these tasks to a private. Meanwhile, a compromise was reached for a European social model, converging the many political visions and interests on the principle of subsidiarity, with a precise Dictation whose essential characteristics, in extreme synthesis, relate the reformulation of some themes like autonomy, freedom, equality, responsibility in the *horizon* of the *general interest*.¹⁰ By inverting the paradigm of classical economics, the principle of subsidiarity states that *private interests* can be achieved only in the *general interest*, which always precedes it. The autonomy of the person cannot only mean “freedom to” but must include the “freedom

⁸ Massimo Del Forno, *Nel complesso mondo del welfare: idee, metodi e pratiche*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016, p. 45. The author’s translation from Italian.

⁹ David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing government: how the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector*, New York, Plume, 1992, p. 23.

¹⁰ Massimo Del Forno, *Nel complesso mondo del welfare ... cit.*, p. 37–41.

from” those impediments due to illness, poverty, ignorance, segregation, etc.¹¹ The Dictate fixed some common foundations of social justice that could be shared both from the right and from the left wing but, in realpolitik, it could give rise to different interpretations and methods of employment.

Especially, Blair tried to merge the drift of socialist and liberal thought into an original model, giving life to a hybrid system in which the State was understood as a service provider to the same rules of the market, playing the double role of activist and regulator.¹² Even on labour policies, Blair was much closer to Kohl than to his direct French colleague Jospin, believing that to grant growth and jobs there was a need for more private initiative and less presence of the state. He then found the backing of the Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who is a prominent ally of the Third Way current. The two shared the idea of a necessary renunciation of class conflict, compensated by the adherence to individualist values borrowed from liberal thought. This can be read in the manifesto where they present the common vision of Third Way and the New Center for the renewal of social democracy in Europe: “we share a conviction that traditional conflicts at the workplace must be overcome.”¹³

In the attempt to provide the corporate-like governance to the public institutions, Blair was in some ways inspired by the ordoliberal Freiburg school, focused on bureaucracy and meritocratic principle in the distribution of resources, rather than by the less moderate Chicago School of Milton Friedman. The political commitment of Tony Blair and the other Third Way politicians met with the militancy of a group of intellectuals who helped to set up the ideological manifesto of the new social democracy, taking on the leading role for the renewal of the left and orientation for praxis. In the same year of *Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue*, the famous *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* by Giddens was published. In this book, the arguments in favour of the Third Way are more theoretical and critical. The two texts are the subject of special attention for their significant implications on the problems of meritocracy.

The Challenge of the Third Way

Giddens seems to insist rather obsessively on the end of socialism whose

¹¹ Amartya Kumar Sen, *Development as freedom*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999.

¹² Ugo Ascoli and Costanzo Ranci (eds.), *Dilemmas of the welfare mix: the new structure of welfare in an era of privatization*, New York, Kluwer Academic, 2002, pp. 71–74.

¹³ Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way/Die Neue Mitte*, London, Labour Party, 1998.

“spectre”¹⁴ would remain. It represents the reflection of “values and ideals that drove them”, remained unresolved and unrealized, yet nevertheless “intrinsic to the good life that it is the point of social and economic development to create.”¹⁵ The renunciation to the socialist ideal requires a new definition of freedom and equality transposed to diversity as a value in itself and to the multiplicity of interests. Giddens too stresses the importance of gathering individualistic demands from Thatcherism to respond to the changed basis of consensus determined by the failure of the socialist project, reformulating some politically strategic concepts such as those of equality and freedom, rights and obligations.

“Equality and individual freedom may conflict, but egalitarian measures also often increase the range of freedoms open to individuals. Freedom to social democrats should mean autonomy of action, which in turn demands the involvement of the wider social community. Having abandoned collectivism, third way politics looks for a new relationship between the individual and the community, a redefinition of rights and obligations. One might suggest as a prime motto for the new politics, *no rights without responsibilities*.”¹⁶

“*No rights without responsibilities*” sounds like a “motto” only seemingly. Actually, the implications are not without consequences, both at the level of theory formation and of praxis. There is an idea of common life aimed to neutralize the ontological and epistemological contrasts that were crystallized in the visions of right and left, making them conflate in a theory of praxis. The Third Way’s theorist strips the concept of equality of its references to the state of nature and to ethical and ideological issues; then, he turns it in the inclusion-exclusion couple. In particular, “the new politics defines equality as inclusion and inequality as exclusion.”¹⁷ Equality becomes the requirement of equal opportunities and falls into the category of the *means*, as it is instrumental to achieve inclusion. The meaning of inclusion is different if the reference is to the state or to the market. According to market rules, inclusion consists of the active participation of individuals in the production/consumption cycle. In the form of the exchange expressed by the Marxist formula C-M-C (commodity - money - commodity), the worker has just his own workforce to offer as the first term, subjecting himself to the “game” of the supply and demand on the labour market and to its self-ruling inclusion-exclusion mechanisms. According to the State, inclusion means citizenship that is the complex relationship between rights and duties. The point is that in the Third Way “responsibilities” replace “duties”. The operation is not merely a new semantic classification but

¹⁴ “Socialism and communism have passed away, yet they remain to haunt us”. Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* ... cit., p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 65.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 102.

subordinates the enforcement of the rights to individual conduct. Giddens conceives responsibility as a mutual obligation between the individual and the community.¹⁸ In these terms, this is quite understandable if not taken for granted. However, we need to go deep to grasp the nuances of this reasoning that takes the form of a dispositive that shifts the attention and interest towards the mechanisms of inclusion in the labour market. The new task of the state consists in the “redistributing the possibilities” and no longer in ensuring and entitlements, if not as a residual function of the welfare system in order to “provide for the basic needs of those who can’t work”.¹⁹ As much as Giddens himself warns about the dangers of a social order too much focused on the ethics of work, in the Third Way’s society, “work remains central for self-esteem and standard of living”, so “access to work is one main context of opportunity”.²⁰ The other, closely linked to the first, is the education, so that “investment in education is an imperative of government today, a key basis of the ‘redistribution of possibilities’”.²¹ For Blair and Schröder as well “lifetime access to education and training and lifelong utilisation of their opportunities represent the most important security available in the modern world.”²²

Assuming a new role to play, the state becomes an investor inciting the challenge and promising to reward all those who face *the risk*. “Risk draws attention to the dangers we face [...] but also to the opportunities that go along with them.”²³ In this respect, risk should not be understood solely as “a negative phenomenon, something to be avoided or minimized”, but rather as “the energizing principle of a society that has broken away from tradition and nature”²⁴ which excites people to participate in the challenge of modernization. This is what Giddens means by “positive welfare”, “to which individuals themselves and other agencies besides government contribute and which is functional for wealth creation.”²⁵ For the “Social Investment State”,²⁶ acting on possibilities means “harnessing the positive or energetic side of risk”²⁷ and stimulating people’s will to contribute to the common effort,²⁸ offering in return for one’s sacrifices the promise of *self-realization* and the award of *public success*.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 37.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 110.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 103.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 109.

²² Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way ...* cit.

²³ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way ...* cit., pp. 62-63.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 109.

²⁵ *Idem*, p. 117.

²⁶ *Idem*, p. 99.

²⁷ *Idem*, p. 106.

²⁸ Romano Prodi, “Prefazione”, *La terza via. Manifesto per la rifondazione della socialdemocrazia*, Anthony Giddens, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 1999 [*The Third Way: the Renewal of Social Democracy*, 1998], p. 11.

“The state should not row, but steer: not so much control, as challenge²⁹ [...] we want a society which celebrates successful entrepreneurs just as it does artists and footballers [...] a competent and well-trained workforce eager and ready to take on new responsibilities [...] a social security system that opens up new opportunities and encourages initiative, creativity and readiness to take on new challenges.”³⁰

The energies produced are released on the free competitive market, and “[p]roduct market competition and open trade is essential to stimulate productivity and growth.”³¹ In this race for progress, the notion of equality moves away from the old conception of social justice linked to the right and the law. There is a shift of meaning from the right to *merit* that exerts a generative power that stimulates competition in all areas of social, political and economic life.

“The promotion of social justice was sometimes confused with the imposition of equality of outcome. The result was a neglect of the importance of rewarding effort and responsibility, and the association of social democracy with conformity and mediocrity rather than the celebration of creativity, diversity and excellence.”³²

In the interpretative grid by Titmuss, this style of conducting social policies corresponds to the *industrial achievement-performance* model of welfare. In this “phase”, the response to social needs is based on merit, measured on the worker’s productive capacity, and Welfare is a “handmaiden” to the economy.³³

In the preface to the Italian edition of the *Third Way* by Giddens, Romano Prodi extends the meritocratic criterion to the evaluation of the social policies with some rather acrobatic reasoning. If public action consists in pushing individuals to participate in the game of the market, the social policies themselves must be legitimized on the same test bed, using market logics.

“Public action [...] must demonstrate on the ground that it has been able to mobilize otherwise mortified energies, which has been able to bring forces condemned to languish in assistance or to take refuge in informality, if not in illegality, in the circuit of the economy and trade. It must demonstrate that it has been able to reawaken the activities of innovation, research, and development, the races towards great changes in society.”³⁴

The reasoning could hold up in the abstract. Let’s see what happens when

²⁹ The metaphorical expression “not row, but steer” may have been taken from David Osborne, Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing government ... cit.*, p. 25.

³⁰ Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way ... cit.*

³¹ *Ibidem.*

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ Richard Morris Titmuss, *Essays on the welfare state*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1958.

³⁴ Romano Prodi, “Prefazione ... cit.”, pp. 11-12.

ideas, methods, and practices are combined together, by bypassing the value reference. Putting together ideas, methods, and practices without maintaining value assumptions upstream crushes the interest in achieving efficiency measured on the data offered by the market, pretending that this also verifies the criterion of effectiveness. All of this leads to improper inclusion strategies that do not neutralize the risks associated with exploitation and malfeasance. An example of this might be the solution proposed by Blair and Schröder to tackle the problem of structural unemployment due to the discrepancy between the skills acquired with education and the demands of companies that change rapidly with technological development.

“The labour market needs a low-wage sector in order to make low-skill jobs available [...] Part-time work and low-paid work are better than no work because they ease the transition from unemployment to jobs. New policies to offer unemployed people jobs and training are a social democratic priority – but we also expect everyone to take up the opportunity offered.”³⁵

Those who accept a low-skill job for a low-pay prove to be responsible by taking up the challenge. The effort will be refunded by the state that will supplement its salary, recognizing that it would save compared to an unemployment benefit. All this leads to a big meritocratic misunderstanding related to the many possible interpretations in the fields of law, politics and economics.

The Meritocratic Misunderstanding

One of the controversial aspects of the Third Way is the ambiguous position towards the *merit* that gives rise to an evident aporia. From the material considered for this study, the *merit* enters and exits the arguments according to the functions it must perform, as a method to be used or as an ideology to avoid when distinguished as the ordering principle of society as a whole. For the particular clarity on the detrimental effects of meritocracy, it is worth quoting the following phrase by Giddens:

“a radically meritocratic society would create deep inequalities of outcome, which would threaten social cohesion. Consider, for example, the winner-take-all phenomenon, a demonstrable effect in labour markets. Someone who is only marginally more talented than another person may command a larger salary than the other. [...] a meritocratic society would also have a great deal of downward mobility. Many must move down for others to move up. [...] For not only would groups of people be at the bottom, but they would know their lack of ability made this right and proper: it is hard to imagine anything

³⁵ Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way ...* cit.

more dispiriting. [...] In any case, a fully meritocratic society is not only unrealizable; it is a self-contradictory idea. [...] In such a social order, the privileged are bound to be able to confer advantages on their children, thus destroying meritocracy.”³⁶

Prodi too resumes the argument against meritocracy. He senses the danger that comes in giving a mythological character to the *merit*, exceeding the boundaries of its mere functional use that consists in stimulating the will of people in facing the risks of self-realization through reward devices.³⁷ Here, the *aporia* consists in carrying on two contradictory reasoning and wanting to consider them equally viable. Meantime, we note the poor and bare-boned use of “limited meritocracy”,³⁸ a notion only named by Giddens and never defined in its theoretical and semantic implications. The clumsy attempt to stem the “merit” in an inclusion theory could legitimize critical and mischievous thinking to suppose that this is just an expedient to support the political class in igniting a collective effervescence that would give a new impulse to the economic growth, without leaving the capitalist order and its ritual matrix.

We do not want to state that the protagonists of the Third Way have actively worked to establish a meritocratic order. Not everyone, at least. But if there was a political force capable of generating the conditions for the rebirth of meritocracy in today’s society, this was precisely the Third Way. For reasons of space, we cannot account for the many speeches, announcements, and lines from the repertoire of politicians and intellectuals which support our hypothesis. The risk of tripping over rhetorical vices can be easily assumed by the logic of argumentation and by the vague and emphatic style, with its frequent recourse to *pathos*. Of course, there is no single example we could apply to all because of the many nuances occurring in the writings and speeches: we just list some of them.

- We live above our possibilities. Roll up your sleeves!
- This is the time of courage, that doesn’t exclude anyone and leaves no alibi to anyone.
- There comes a moment when courage must be stronger than comfort and hope must take the place of resignation.
- You have to sweat and fight, be ready to get back into the game. If you want a guarantee, then buy a toaster!
- You can be successful and care; ambitious and compassionate; a meritocrat and a progressive.³⁹

These empty and self-referential statements can be explained just as a rhetorical strategy to arouse public opinion. If you want to think badly, it is as if they somehow wanted to keep the “reins” of the population on the one hand

³⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* ... cit., pp. 101-102.

³⁷ Romano Prodi, “Prefazione ...” cit.

³⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way* ... cit., p. 105.

³⁹ Apart from the first, that is a platitude, the three statements belong to Matteo Renzi, and the latter is from Tony Blair, *A Journey*, London, Hutchinson, 2010.

awakening enthusiasm, and, on the other, channeling it in ways functional to the capitalist economy.

Meritocracy and the Ritual of Capitalism

By referring to Durkheim's theory, we can identify in the Third Way's program some elements of the meritocratic discourse that fit into the ritual structure of capitalism in terms of myth, belief, cults, and rite.⁴⁰ Capitalism, like religion, may be regarded as a well-founded form of delirium.⁴¹ We are not interested now in demonstrating that capitalism *is* a religion, but we propose to apply to capitalism the *elementary form of the ritual* that allows its reproduction.

Renouncing to reflect its own choices in the flow of history, The Third Way inevitably eludes the problems of conflict and shift its political horizon from the universal social safeguards (that are the historical contribution of socialism) to the interest on practical aspects of life, expressed however in symbolic form as personal achievement and success (“[v]alues that are important to citizens”⁴²). However, rights might be in the way:

“ [t]oo often rights were elevated above responsibilities, but the responsibility of the individual to his or her family, neighbourhood and society cannot be offloaded on to the state.”⁴³

The shift from universalism of rights to the recognition of merit has, in the Titmuss model, a reactionary character: the state is no longer the guarantor of rights but agrees with the market in generating opportunities that people must know how to grasp. The main task of the Third Way is “to develop a society of “responsible risk takers” in the spheres of government, business enterprise and labour markets.”⁴⁴ For this very reason “[m]odern social democrats want to transform the safety net of entitlements into a *springboard* to personal responsibility.”⁴⁵ “Springboard”, “race”, “effort”, “challenge”, “footballers”: they are all terms that refer to the practice of sport emphasizing individual performance in a sort of race where the winner gets the prize. As was already expected by Max Weber, the *myth of success* in the *victorious capitalism* tends to become associated with agonial passions, feeding off contents from sports

⁴⁰ Gianfranco Poggi, *Émile Durkheim*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2000.

⁴¹ Massimo Rosati, “Introduzione”, *Le forme elementari della vita religiosa: il sistema totemico in Australia*, Émile Durkheim, Massimo Rosati (eds.), Milano, Booklet, 2005 [ed. or. *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*, Paris, Alcan, 1912], p. 28.

⁴² Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way ... cit.*

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way ... cit.*, p. 100.

⁴⁵ Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way ... cit.*

life.⁴⁶ The metaphor of jumping on the springboard describes a structured performance along a series of steps: taking risks with responsibility, effort, springboard boost, success (or failure). Joining the jumping game means to want to be included in society and materially celebrating the *cult of merit* in its liturgies, no matter the outcomes nor the impact. All these elements that appear perfectly harmonized in the *dogma* of the Third Way, taken analytically reveal some real problems. Swapping a *safety net* for a *springboard* under the feet of a poor or a millionaire it is just not the same. The extent of the risk and the effort depends on the material and immaterial resources that each person has, as well as on the *capabilities*. Giddens too notes that the new principle of inclusion, while appealing to everyone's will, has different impacts on different people. For an unemployed person, swapping unemployment benefit for activation policy means to have the practical experience of the duality of the norm that, on the one hand, forces to actively search for a job, even if disqualified and underpaid, and on the other, enables to perform the inclusion. The idea of inclusion called in the motto "no rights without responsibilities [...] must apply not only to welfare recipients, but to everyone."⁴⁷ Even a rich man is recalled from the principle of inclusion to the cult of merit, participating actively in the labour market by reinvesting his capital to pursue the *myth of success*. In this case, however, the political action described by Giddens is limited to the appeal to the will. We feel the lack of a critical theory, such as the Marxist one, accounting for historical reason and highlighting the relations of power and the structural aspects that affect the social distribution of chances and resources.

The Meritocratic Principle as Dispositif of Exclusion

In his "manifesto", Giddens investigates the issue of inequality by linking it with certain social problems. The first concerns the unacceptability of suffering due to absolute poverty, illness and all forms of inability to work. He liquidates this problem committing it to the residual function of the welfare system. Social democrats "should move away from what has sometimes been in the past an obsession with inequality"⁴⁸ and promote through the positive welfare those differences which concern interests, cultures, as well as the skills and talents that everyone can use to achieve personal success together with economic and social growth. The problem comes if society does not employ this variety properly: "[a] highly unequal society is harming itself by not making the

⁴⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (1905), London, Routledge, 2001, p. 124.

⁴⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way ...* cit., p. 65.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 100.

best use of the talents and capacities of its citizens.”⁴⁹ Reconstructing the reasoning, a rather curious anthropological vision emerges. On the one hand, people are rationally inclined to avoid taking risks, even using strategies of “moral hazard [...] as a shelter from the labour market”; on the other, the *calling towards success* consists in taking risks as opportunities for inclusion (and going to work).⁵⁰ To summarize, the political dictate of the Third Way converges the collective structure (state, market, civil society) and individual action toward a virtual center. Everyone must do their own part: society must make sure that everyone is in the ideal position based on talent and skills, and individuals must commit themselves to achieve together personal fulfillment (*success*) and the common good (understood here as *progress*). “The most important task of modernisation is to invest in human capital: to make the individual and businesses fit for the knowledge-based economy of the future.”⁵¹

This way of understanding is closer to Gary Becker’s one, which resolves the “human capital” in an economic sense as the result of a process of “humanization of capital”. The skills, like other goods, can be spent, acquired and accumulated, so the key to success is to invest in yourself as an enterprise invests in the market.⁵² The shift towards instrumental rationality, with a strong emphasis on personal conduct, is a suitable reason that leads from merit as a factor of attraction within a capitalist ritual to the meritocracy as an ordering principle based on rational calculation, which hatches in itself the germ of exclusion.

Michael Young stressed this point in his very compelling book *The rise of the meritocracy*. It is a political fiction novel where a sociologist investigates the role of the left party, then passed to the opposition, in the advent of the meritocratic society that still rules in 2038. In the dystopia described by the book, society is divided into two classes: the intelligent persons, committed to intellectual professions, and the stupid people, employed in manual activity.⁵³ Young’s vision serves to underline the paradox whereby merit, once principle for social inclusion, can become selection criteria and dispositive of exclusion. We are going to support this argument piecing together the elements we have identified.

The meritocratic order is applied in two acts: first comes the *redistribution of possibilities* that creates the first principle of exclusion between those who participate in the game and those who do not; then, comes the *selection on merit*. The overlapping of redistribution of the possibilities to

⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 42.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, pp. 114-116.

⁵¹ Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder, *Europe: The Third Way ... cit.*

⁵² Gary Stanley Becker, “Investment in Human Capital: A Theoretical Analysis”, *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 70 n. 5, 1962, pp. 9-49.

⁵³ Michael D. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1958.

actual conditions of access has been a fallacy of the Third Way. We must not delude ourselves that redistribution policies would balance the scale and calm the competition to access and its selective nature. It is understandable that the public investments on disadvantaged people must involve one's effort and responsibility, however, they cannot pretend that at the admission test this effort does not make its pressure felt. Neither effort nor pressure is the same for everyone. Thus, a first pretense is realized that consists in fixing a "zero point" in which there is "equal equality for all".

A candidate	-6 _ _ _ _ _	0	_____ 4
B candidate	- 3 _ _ _	0	_____ 5

The zero in the example represents the moment when two candidates are sitting to a competitive entrance examination. Having started from an unequal condition, the two have so far faced a different effort both in intensity and duration. Since the moment when equal opportunities are taken for granted, the reward nature changes. Before the welfare system supported for the effort held by one's will and capabilities, now merit is measured on the outcome of the test. The dashed lines indicate that all the amount of effort preceding the "zero point" is not relevant for assessment under this criterion, so the race for success automatically becomes a peer competition.

The second pretense is claiming to assess the merit objectively. To make people equal before the merit, they claim to minimize discretion by avoiding any possibility of subjective evaluation using standardized, structured, and directive tests. In some cases, certain signals of value could integrate previous experiences into the test outcome, for example, you gain a point for having a degree.⁵⁴ The sum of the scores on each parameter represents merit. Back to our example, to apply such a merit-based assessment means rewarding the A candidate who scored 5, despite his overall effort allowed him to cover 8 degrees (from -3 to 5). The B candidate scored only 4 but covered 10 degrees (from -6 to 4). What is rewarded is not the individual effort, but merit that has a value in itself. This method of assessment transfigures meritocracy, formerly limited to an energizing function, into a dispositif of exclusion.

There is a paradox about responsibility: on the one hand they say to the people "we can!" (or, maybe, "we can do it!"); on the other, they entrust the

⁵⁴ There are many arguments supporting the abolition of the legal value of diplomas and grade point average in the name of meritocracy. In Italy, one of the first and most influential examples, was the contribution of Luigi Einaudi ("Vanità dei titoli di studio", in: *Scritti di sociologia e politica in onore di Luigi Sturzo*, Torino, 1947; "Per l'abolizione del valore legale del titolo di studio", in *Scuola e Libertà*, Torino, 1955); among the most recent there is the proposed law C. 1031/2018 signed by Maria Pallini of the Five Star Movement who advocates the prohibition to request presentation of the final grade in public tenders.

choices on the life of people to anonymous and impersonal procedures, thus highlighting a deep distrust in the human. Zygmunt Bauman refers to this trend of modern society as a phenomenon of *adiaphorization* that moves people away from their moral responsibilities, delegating to bureaucratic or technological devices.⁵⁵ Along with equality, even freedom is in danger. It is not at all obvious that the choice of parameters determining the inclusion or exclusion takes place under conditions of equality. People are often forced to submit to the *dispositif* because of its power to enable, but they cannot affect the definition of the criteria. The penalty for dissent is the exclusion. While democracy, at least ideally, also protects dissidents and those excluded, the meritocratic order split the population into worthy and not worthy ones, responsible and irresponsible ones, winners and losers, showing the dark side of the motto “no right without responsibility”.

Inclusion is the right to access a difference that is to say better living conditions: a new job, a career advancement or, however, an improvement in personal status. The first pretense, which postulates that redistribution of possibilities is *sufficient causation* for equal opportunities, is a *functional necessity* for the meritocratic order. Rationally, if you doubt whether the competition is fair, the procedure and the outcomes will be delegitimized; but subordinating the functioning of the *dispositif* of exclusion to the substantial realization of a condition of equality in opportunities definitely would not be rational: this would lead the system to paralysis. It is rational, therefore, to settle for a criterion of formal equality that thus ends up legitimizing not only the differences in outcomes but also the dismissed inequalities in the starting conditions, classifying both of them as merits and demerits. A residual ethical justification for those who get the right to access a difference is provided by the *trickle-down theory*, that the meritocratic *dispositif* receives from liberalism. Even if unfair, the advantage granted to a few would correspond to a *general interest* as the attempt in “making the best use of the talents and capacities” of population: this is the third pretense. Better performances, in this sense, would be obtained with a progressive improvement of the merit measurement tests. The sociologist in Michael Young’s book tells how the meritocratic society managed to improve the IQ test to the point of identifying the specific talent of each future citizen and worker at the age of 3 years.⁵⁶ This masterpiece is very incisive in warning us about the methodological problem: meritocracy can barely measure the aspects visible to a limited number of parameters, but it is insensitive to the complexity of the nature of man and his activities. Admitting it does not mean to renounce at all to comparing and assessing since no

⁵⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragment: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 149.

⁵⁶ Michael D. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy ...* cit.

indicator is universally effective, and no metric objectively measures merits. Rather, criticizing meritocracy is an invitation to be wary of any formulation of merit to measure one's superiority or excellence over the others. Each evaluation, including the choice of adequate indicators and parameters, must be traced back to the human responsibility that is always subjective.

The three pretences of equality of opportunities, objectivity of parameters, and realization of the general interest as an *instrument-effect* of the division of labour on merit, make superfluous the realization of an ideal discursive situation and the very existence of a world of life. If all individuals were able to achieve success by their own merits, even if supported by the state that invests on them, facing the continuous challenges with a new sense of responsibility that spurs them to take risks as opportunities, then we would no longer need for democracy giving voice to minorities. Hence, the sense of life, even for the left wing, moves from the struggle for collective rights to the competition for individual success.

Believing in Meritocracy

Although we are not living in a meritocracy, the dispositif of exclusion is working in many areas of society. Often, we witness situations in which the ritual takes on a violent form, as Durkheim suggested in his famous work.⁵⁷ Widening the gaze, some contingent issues such as the inefficiency of the state, the financial crisis, the "global risk", the need to remain at all costs in the free competitive market, show how despite all the individual's efforts it is always possible to fall behind, and therefore the promises of personal fulfillment and common good are not met.

At the end of our reasoning, a question remains to be answered. Why notwithstanding the failures are there people willing to believe in the meritocratic order? For a comprehensive answer, more space and a more in-depth analysis would be needed. We limit ourselves just to offer indications for a possible reading key.

As we have seen, even if the values recalled by the Third Way's program are expressed in symbolic form, they correspond to objective contents that become functional to mobilize the population, feeding belief in something which one needs to depend. The need to work for a living, especially, brings people together on a common field that is the labour market. A competition that ignites souls comes on, whose stake is inclusion. In this sense, effervescence

⁵⁷ Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*, Paris, Alcan, 1912.

comes before belief.⁵⁸ The repetition of these practices feeds the belief in those narratives capable of justifying the continuous effort of people, especially of those who fail.⁵⁹ The elements of the discourse most effective in reinvigorating the ritual, gradually get the appearance of myths, even taking notions by previous frames. This happens, for instance, with those elements from the classic *self-made man* that enrich the contemporary myth of success as personal fulfillment.

People draw on elements of the culture in which they are immersed and use them to give meaning to everyday life, assuming them as sacred objects of the same reality without ever questioning their beliefs.

According to Pierce, doubting on your own belief is just a philosophical activity, rather than a practical one because in everyday life lingering doubt deeply involves the psychology of people. “Doubt is an uneasy and dissatisfied state from which we struggle to free ourselves and pass into the state of belief; while the latter is a calm and satisfactory state which we do not wish to avoid, or to change to a belief in anything else.”⁶⁰

Therefore, the belief has an eminently practical function: it stabilizes us and makes us capable of organizing our behavior and to be ready to take opportunities. James too argues that believing reinforces our psychology and improves our performance. Hence, believing is more an arrangement of the body than of the mind.⁶¹

Even those who are damaged by the dispositif of exclusion hardly turn against it. Rather than delegitimizing the whole system, and thus admitting the futility of your efforts, you might feel that you have not done enough, looking for new opportunities to test yourself and trusting in the future success; or you might accuse other people of corruption, blaming for the non-objective judgment. Even those who fail incorporate the truth of the meritocratic principle, together with the order that underlies it. Thus, the disposition to believe becomes a compulsion to repeat that structures and reinforces the dispositif of exclusion more and more. In this feedback loop, the meritocratic principle from a *means* to welfare becomes an *end in itself*: to reach high scores on the parameters for the assessment, which lose their value as signals of a virtuous conduct. At the level of practices, even if the competition is played in a highly regulated arena, competitors will begin to look for shortcuts by circumventing the rules. Also, in this sense, we can talk of “moral hazard”: even without questioning the belief in meritocracy, the actors are rationally oriented to achieve their goals with the means at their disposal. In this way, the

⁵⁸ *Idem*, pp. 273-282.

⁵⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1997.

⁶⁰ Charles S. Pierce, “The Fixation of Belief”, *Popular Science Monthly*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1877, pp. 1-15.

⁶¹ William James, *Essays on Faith and Morals*, New York, Longmans, 1943.

meritocratic dispositif does not reward worthy people but reproduces the relations of power according to the capitalist order. Focused on the task of proving our merit by raising scores on parameters, we are not able to recognize in the other a person to be cared for and not just an opponent. Losing sight of the responsibility towards each other, we also lose the genuine significance of the values of equality and freedom that we placed as pillars of our civility.

The renewal of the extra-capitalist basis of the capitalist order was a convenient operation even for the right-wing liberals. However, the impacts of this operation can go far beyond expectations. The meritocratic spirit breathed in the new order has renewed an effervescence that has been brought back to the ritual of capital, leading to a new form of socialization of the psyche and regulation of the bodies. Thus, meritocracy is becoming an instrument that affects workers and the excluded from the work life, eroding guarantees and protections. In its political implementation, the Third Way ended up becoming something we may call, in a metaphorical way, “the punch of the neoliberal armed hand”.