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Review: The Tyranny of Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America by Lani Guinier

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Book Review

The Tyranny of Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America. Lani Guinier. 2015. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. 160 pp.
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What is merit? How do we define and (mis)apply the concept? Are there are alternatives to narrowly-defined conceptions of merit, such as the SAT? These are questions central to Lani Guinier's book *The Tyranny of Meritocracy.* The text is divided into two sections: The first is a searing critique of limited views of merit that dominate contemporary college admissions; in the second, Guinier offers possible solutions to the current system which she labels *testocracy.* The text reinvigorates the debate about the nature of merit, challenges readers to unpack superficially "objective" measures of merit, while reframing higher education as a public, collective, democratic good. Reader beware, however, while the critiques of the current system are well founded, the proposed solutions fall short in realizing the potential of the text.

Guinier opens by tracing the history and misapplication of the term "meritocracy." Initially offered as a satire of how social elites justify their elevated social position, *meritocracy,* now represents a legitimized way of sorting people based on perceived ability (p. xi). That is, there are arbitrary characteristics and measures that are used to justify elite social status. In particular, she is highly critical of *testocracy* or, "an aristocracy determined by testing that wants to maintain its position" (p. 18). She details how frequently the SAT is more accurately measuring race and SES instead of actual merit (pp. 20–21). While she is not the first to lodge this criticism, it is a welcome reminder. Guinier then proposes that *democratic merit* should be the foundational value of higher education. She elaborates:

> . . . the form of merit that views higher education, at least partially, as a public good. As such, admissions criteria should continuously be reassessed for the degree to which they help the institution and its constituents to make present and future contributions to society, that is, our democracy. (p. 29)

Theoretically, this proposition represents a dramatic, even radical, ideological shift from contemporary neoliberalism where a college education is an individual asset instead of a public good (Gildersleeve et al., 2010). It calls for diversification of higher education along race and SES lines, while also considering what students to do post-graduation. It centers the question, how much are they using their education to "give back" to society? Thus, democratic merit represents a challenge to the individualism of neoliberalism, while offering a new educational vision based on democratic values.

Guinier then dedicates the second half of the book to detailing promising educational reforms that promote democratic merit. Unfortunately, this section is also the weaker part of the text. For example, she profiles the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) schools, and with the anti-democratic foundations of KIPP it is unclear why Guinier used them as exemplars. KIPP is part of the "no excuses" educational movement for low-income, minority students (Lack, 2009). KIPP schools are corporately funded, the school day is extended, and the central focus is on discipline, order, manners, and hard work (Ravitch, 2010). The pedagogical method is constant drilling for memorization and a borderline militaristic schooling (Lack, 2009). This "banking model" of education, Freire (2001) argues, is profoundly anti-democratic. He elaborates, "The teacher of geography who truncates the curiosity of the student in the name of efficiency of mechanical memorization hampers both the freedom and capacity of the adventure of the student," (Freire, 2001, p. 57). In a similar vien, Sondel (2015) argues that KIPP schools primarily train low-income, minority students to become neoliberal cogs instead of democratic citizens.

Guinier further argues that valuing non-cognitive attributes such as *growth mind set* (p. 97) and *grit* (p. 104) instead of test scores could democratize higher education. While an interesting premise, it is problematic for three reasons. First, we do not know what fosters grit.[1] Second, the focus on individual attributes ignores the structural conditions that create marginalization in the first place, and students only need to be gritty to the extent that their environment is toxic. Third, how could assessments of grit or growth mindset aid admissions? Incorporating a grit scale on an application would mean those who can find the grit scale online would check the desirable answers (e.g., be more "gritty"). This is, in part, why Duckworth and Yeager (2015) agued that non-cognitive measures can be important for offering alternative means of predicting success, but they are not yet ready for "prime time."

When there are arenas Guinier highlights that do show promise, such as the nonprofit Posse Foundation, these proposed solutions are also problematic for a few reasons. The core of Posse is having students from traditionally underserved backgrounds but who also show academic promise gain access to elite higher education as a group (or *posse*). This is a fascinating way to push minority students to collectively succeed in higher education, especially since academically talented "solo status" students frequently underperform and may even drop out. This compelling story of success begs larger questions about democratic meritocracy in higher education. What is an institution of higher education to do with this information aside from recruit more Posse students? How should they change their current policies? From the text, the answers are unclear.

While not the core of Guinier's argument, her critiques of affirmative action create tensions within the overall thesis. For example, she argues that affirmative action was a "distraction" because it reinforced limited views of meritocracy (p. 23). She additionally argues that affirmative action essentially ran its course (pp. 33–41). However, she subsequently explores Anita Woodley's studies (p. 107) where groups perform best by having gender balance. Guinier's dismissal of affirmative action plans overlooks the fact that White women are the single greatest beneficiaries of affirmative action historically (Crosby, 2004).

Therefore, Guinier offers a promising solution (diverse learning environments) while undercutting a programmatic means to get there (affirmative action).[2]

Overall, Guinier is reopening an important conversation in U.S. education by questioning the objectivity of merit as measured by standardized tests. The focus on democratic values will leave many soul-searching, grappling with how their institutions can be venues that promote democratic values. However, the proposed solutions are either anti-democratic (e.g., KIPP), not practically applicable (e.g., grit), or not scalable (e.g., Posse).

To make this review a constructive critique instead of simply a critique, I offer some promising examples of democratic merit. If readers are looking for community-oriented schooling based on democratic principles that challenges students to use their education to give back to their communities, I suggest exploring the work occurring in East Oakland's Roses in Concrete Community School.[3] If Guinier is correct that testocracy is the antithesis of democracy, then we need to find the conditions necessary for test-optional schools to undercut the testocracy and enhance democratic participation.[4] If enhancing civic engagement is a core component of democratic education, undergraduate diversity experiences are an important means to that end because they are related to increased civic attitudes and behaviors (Bowman, 2011). Within this context, and contrary to Guinier's persistent critique, affirmative action is an integral component of democratic merit because no other program has been as effective at diversifying higher education (Crosby, 2004). Guinier's text reignites conversations about the nature of merit, but readers should exercise caution when engaging with the proposed solutions.

Notes

[1] http://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_the_key_to_success_grit/transcript

[2] Guinier makes the same argument with the same logical tension when describing the work of Scott Page who demonstrated that in-group racial diversity trumped in-group ability in terms of collective output (p. 111).

[3] http://rosesinconcrete.org

[4] I use "conditions necessary" because some research indicates this movement among selective liberal arts colleges does little, currently, to enhance equity (Belasco, Rosinger, & Hearn, 2015).

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