

17. Specters of Merit: On the Architecture of Fictional Realities in Late Capitalism

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*“There must be some way out of here,” said the joker to the thief
“There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief
Businessmen, they drink my wine, plowmen dig my earth
None of them along the line know what any of it is worth”*

*“No reason to get excited,” the thief, he kindly spoke
“There are many here among us who feel that life is but a joke
But you and I, we’ve been through that, and this is not our fate
So let us not talk falsely now, the hour is getting late”*

All Along the Watchtower, Bob Dylan,

Abstract: My essay will be undertaking a critical, but also a very intimate phenomenological investigation into meritocracy as a constitutive fiction of late capitalist social ontology. I will be Drawing primarily on the philosophical frameworks of Karl Marx, Jean Baudrillard, Martin Heidegger, Lauren Berlant, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, and make an astute and cutting argument that the enshrined meritocracy functions in the glass ivory towers of the corporate Leviathan are not merely an ideology in the classical Marxian sense, that is, as *false consciousness masking real relations of production* but as a hyperreal structure: a simulacrum that has dissolved the very distinction between its own image and the reality it purports to represent. Meritocracy is not a lie about the worldhood of economic life, but an attempt at the replacement of the worlds reality regarding the economic base and the diffusing power relations.

I will attempt to proceed through several analytic stages: an archaeological excavation of meritocratic mythology, a phenomenological account of its lived experience as what I term productive opacity, a Baudrillardian reading of its simulacral character, a structural account of its role in legitimating precarity, and a final reckoning with the political

consequences of *naming it as fiction*. Throughout, a persistent undertone haunts the argument, the intuition, impossible to fully articulate, that the meritocratic order possesses an inhuman coherence, a kind of geometrical perfection indifferent to the phenomenological implications and structural injustice it produces, as though it had been designed by an intentionality with a severe indifference to the human condition.

Keywords: meritocracy; fictional reality; late capitalism; hyperreality; Baudrillard; Boltanski and Chiapello; Heidegger; Berlant; productive opacity; simulacrum; precarity; cruel optimism; ideology; phenomenology; social ontology

I. Prologue: The Architecture of the Unnameable

There is a particular variety of dread that does not announce itself once the subject is integrated into the organizational structure of a corporation. It does not arrive in the form of a recognizable and imminent threat which is tangible and palpable, such as a malevolent face, a drawn or semi-concealed weapon, or a letter bearing bad news. It rather saturates the texture of the everyday, the ordinary. It lives in the fluorescent hum of the open plan office, in the cheerful language of the performance monthly, quarterly or annual review, in the LinkedIn post exuberantly and jubilantly celebrating a colleague's promotion with forty-seven reactions shaped like hands pressed together in prayer, pulsating hearts or another symbolic signifier of approval. It is the dread of a world that has organized itself with perfect efficiency around a performative and constitutive principle that turns out, upon sufficiently close philosophical examination, to be empty and that has made this emptiness invisible by filling it with the noise of a never-ending aspiration.

Meritocracy is the name of this principle, this undisputed doxaic framing which is the meta-narrative of the entirety of economic life. We could also say that meritocracy is the name we have given to an image of a principle. The distinction matters enormously, and elaborating it is the central task of this essay. My claim, stated in its boldest form, is this: *meritocracy as it operates in the social formations of late capitalism is not a description of how social rewards are actually allocated, nor a normative ideal toward which existing institutions imperfectly strive*. It is a fictional reality, a construct that has achieved, through mechanisms I will analyze in detail, the ontological status of the real. It does not describe the world, but replaces a portion of the world with itself.

The philosophical arsenal I will deploy are diverse, but they share a common teleological maneuver toward the question of how human beings come to inhabit structures of meaning that work against their interests all while resisting demystification attempts from any direction, not because subjects are insufficiently cognizant to see through them, but because the structures in question have colonized the very perceptual and evaluative ideological apparatus through which demystification might proceed. Marx identified this problem as the mystification inherent in commodity relations; Heidegger disclosed its ontological depth in the concealment that belongs to the structure of everydayness; Baudrillard pushed the analysis further by arguing that the very distinction between representation and reality has collapsed; and Berlant traced, with a precision that cuts close to the bone of contemporary political phenomenology, the affective mechanisms through which subjects remain attached to the conditions that diminish them.

I would also want to put a word about the essay's unusual affective register. Throughout the argument, the readers will encounter a recurring sense, potentially difficult to place, of something that exceeds the categories being deployed. Meritocracy, I will suggest, has an inhuman quality. Not cruel in a metaphysical, psychological or anthropological sense, and not indifferent in the way that indifferent subjects are indifferent or resigned. Something more like the indifference of a vast and intricate mechanism that processes human lives according to parameters it did not choose and cannot revise, and that would continue processing them in the same way whether any consciousness observed the process. This quality is real. Acknowledging it is part of what rigorous analysis of late capitalist social ontology requires.

We will proceed as follows: Section II will account for an archaeological excavation and interpretation of meritocratic mythology, tracing its historical formation and its structural function. Section III will develop a phenomenological analysis of how meritocracy is lived, introducing the concept of productive opacity. Section IV will sharply apply Baudrillard's theory of simulation as a razor to dissect the meritocratic order, arguing for its specifically hyperreal character. Section V will examine the structural relationship between meritocracy and precarity. Section VI takes up the question of critique and its limitations. Section VII offers a provisional conclusion from the standpoint of political philosophy.

II. Archaeology of a Fiction: The Historical Formation of Meritocratic Mythology

i The Term and Its Discontents

The word “meritocracy” was coined by the British sociologist Michael Young in his 1958 satirical dystopia, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, as a term of derision, a name for a nightmare in which social stratification achieved an unprecedented legitimacy by grounding itself in individual cognitive capacity rather than birth, wealth, or connection.¹ Young's satire was catastrophically misread. The term migrated from his pages into policy discourse and eventually into the common vocabulary of market (and political) liberalism, where it shed its critical valence and became a straightforwardly affirmative description of a desirable social arrangement. Young lived long enough to observe this migration with horror and professed his objections as late as 2001, two years before his death.²

The misreading was not accidental. It indexes something structurally significant about the ideological operation of meritocratic discourse: the capacity to absorb and integrate critique, to metabolize the terms of its own negation and excrete them as affirmation. This operational capacity will concern us throughout. For now, it is sufficient to note that meritocracy, as a concept available for ideological deployment, arrives already marked by the violence of misappropriation. It is born as fiction in a doubled sense: *as an acknowledged literary invention, and as a misrepresentation that its misreaders took for description.*

ii.ii The Myth of the Blank Slate

Meritocratic conception rests on a foundational myth: that socioeconomic competition can be conducted on a level field, and that the outcomes of such competition, such as the distribution of income, status, authority, and security, genuinely reflect the differential merits of competitors. This myth requires, as its enabling condition, the fiction of the blank slate: the presupposition that individuals enter competition with

¹ Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870–2033: An Essay on Education and Equality* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958).

² Michael Young, “Down with Meritocracy,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2001. Young observed with characteristic irony that the term had been hijacked by precisely the managerial class he had satirized.

no structurally significant advantages or disadvantages, such that differential outcomes can be attributed to differential effort, talent, or virtue.

The empirical demolition of this presupposition is by now thoroughly accomplished. The accumulated evidence from different disciplines including, but not limited to economics, sociology, developmental psychology, and neuroscience converges on the conclusion that outcomes are overwhelmingly shaped by factors over which individuals have no control: *the income and educational level of parents, the quality of available schooling, neighborhood effects, access to social networks, the structural conditions of the labor market into which one graduates, and crucially, because its acknowledgment is so fiercely resisted, the class-marked character of evaluative categories themselves.*³ Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital demonstrated that the very dispositions that institutional evaluation treats as evidence of individual merit, a certain ease with language and a specific vernacular, familiarity with canonical texts, particular modes of self-presentation are themselves the sedimented products of class position, transmitted through the habitus and valorized by a field whose criteria of evaluation reflect the interests of those who already possess the required capital.⁴

I have not invented warm water with the statements above. What is philosophically interesting is not that these empirical facts exist, but that their existence has been so thoroughly insulated from any practical effect on the meritocratic imaginary. The blank slate has been empirically discredited for decades. Meritocracy operates as though this discrediting had never occurred. This normative insulation is itself what requires further analysis, and it is here that the concept of fictional reality becomes indispensable.

³ For a comprehensive review of the empirical literature on intergenerational mobility and structural inequality, see Miles Corak, "Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 27, no. 3 (2013): 79–102; and Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality Is Better for Everyone* (London: Allen Lane, 2009).

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.

ii.iii The New Spirit and its Meritocratic Grammar

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's magisterial study, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, provides an essential analytical resource for understanding how meritocratic ideology achieved its contemporary form and durability.⁵ Their central argument is that capitalism sustains itself not through brute coercion alone, but through the generation of normative frameworks, "spirits" that provide the participating subjects with the axiological conditioning and motivational resources to engage with its demands. The spirit of capitalism in any given era must be capable of responding to what Boltanski and Chiapello call "*artistic critique*," the critique directed at capitalism's alienating, inauthentic, and top-down hierarchical character by absorbing the terms of that critique into a transformed and perpetual self-presentation.

The specific genius of late capitalism's spirit, as Boltanski and Chiapello document through a close reading of management literature from the 1960s to the 1990s, is to have incorporated the libertarian, neo-liberal and anti-hierarchical demands of the artistic critique into a new organizational grammar: the network, the project, the portfolio, the "connector" that, while genuinely restructuring the surface forms of work, intensifies its underlying demands and further attenuates the social protections that earlier forms of labor organization had constructed.⁶ Meritocracy occupies a central position in this new spirit. It provides the grammar through which the network's differential rewards are legitimized: those who thrive in the projectified, flexible, hyper-individualized labor market do so because they deserve to thrive. They have cultivated the right skills, developed the right networks, and demonstrated the right initiative. Their success is their merit made manifest.

What Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis reveals is that this meritocratic grammar is not simply imposed from above by ideological state apparatuses in the Althusserian sense. It is actively embraced, reproduced, and elaborated by the very subjects it subordinates. Workers in the network economy do not merely submit to meritocratic evaluation. They internalize its categories, apply them to themselves and their peers, and experience their own failures as evidence of personal inadequacy. The ideology does not require external enforcement because it has be-

⁵ Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57–105.

come the medium of self-understanding. This is, I will unapologetically argue, precisely the condition that makes it hyperreal in Baudrillard's sense, but we are not yet at that point in our analysis.

III. Productive Opacity: A Phenomenology of Living Under Merit

iii.i The Structure of Meritocratic Experience

What does it feel like to live inside the meritocratic order? The question is not rhetorical, and its phrasing is deliberate: meritocracy is not first encountered as a theory of distributive justice or a set of institutional rules, but as an affective and temporal orientation to the world—a pervasive mood that colours how one experiences effort, failure, self-worth, and the passage of time. Social science, focused on structural analysis and aggregate outcomes, can demonstrate that meritocratic promises are empirically unfounded, but it cannot disclose how those promises come to be lived as self-evident features of one's own situation. This is precisely what phenomenology can reveal. What Heidegger called *Stimmung* (mood or attunement) designates the way in which a world is always already disclosed to us through an affective tonality that precedes and conditions any explicit thematic awareness.⁷ Meritocracy, I will argue, has colonised this pre-reflective stratum: it does not merely present itself as a doctrine one might accept or reject, but saturates the background mood through which the subject encounters its own possibilities—an internalised attunement of anxious striving that is felt before it is thought.

The dominant mood of meritocratic existence is, I would suggest, a peculiarly structured form of anxiety. Not the existential anxiety that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time*, the anxiety that individualizes *Dasein* by confronting it with its own groundlessness and the own most possibility of death, but rather an anxiety that systematically deflects from this groundlessness by supplying an apparently inexhaustible series of proximate concerns. In the meritocratic order, one is always already behind. There is always another credential to acquire, another skill to develop, another network to cultivate, another performance metric to

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), §29–30. For the concept of *Stimmung* as attunement, see also Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

optimize. The horizon of sufficient merit recedes as one approach it. This recession is not accidental. It is structurally generated by a system that requires the continuous production of motivated subjects who will accept its terms.

iii.ii Productive Opacity and the Misrecognition of Structure

I want to introduce the concept of *productive opacity* to name a specific phenomenological structure that the meritocratic order systematically (re)produces and exploits. *By productive opacity I mean the following: the structural determinants of one's socioeconomic situation—class position, labour-market conditions, inherited capital—are not hidden from the subject by simple ignorance or lack of information; rather, they are rendered experientially inaccessible because the interpretive categories available to the subject systematically redirect every outcome back to individual qualities such as effort, talent, or character.* The opacity is *productive* in a double sense: it produces a specific form of subjectivity—the self-optimising individual who reads success, failure, security, and precarity alike as verdicts on personal merit—and it channels the energies that might otherwise be directed toward collective transformation into an unending cycle of individual self-improvement that acquires, under late capitalism, the ritualistic character of an organised faith.

This concept has a clear genealogical relationship to Marx's concept of ideology and Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition (*méconnaissance*).⁸ But it is intended to capture something phenomenologically more precise: not merely the false attribution of outcomes to the wrong causes, but the active shaping of perceptual and affective experience in ways that make structural analysis feel both cognitively difficult and motivationally threatening. To recognize the structural character of one's situation is, within the meritocratic order, to risk losing access to the subject's self-understanding that makes continued effort possible. Productive opacity is thus not merely an epistemic error but a maladaptive mechanism of psychic survival.

Heidegger's analysis of *das Man*, the anonymous “they” through which Dasein ordinarily understands itself and its possibilities of be-

⁸ Karl Marx, “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), in Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52–65.

coming, is relevant here, though it must be deployed critically.⁹ *Das Man*, for Heidegger, is the mode of average everydayness in which Dasein takes over its own self-understanding from the public interpretations of the world circulating in the social field. Meritocracy functions as a powerful configuration of *das Man*: it provides the shared interpretive vocabulary through which individuals understand their own position, possibilities, and worth. But it does so in a way that systematically misaligns this vocabulary with the actual structure of the situation. *Das Man*, in its meritocratic configuration, speaks the language of individual agency and desert while presiding over a world shaped by structural forces that individual agency cannot meaningfully address.

iii.iii The Cruel Optimism of Meritocratic Attachment

Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism provides a further illumination of the affective structure of meritocratic life.¹⁰ For Berlant, an attachment is cruelly optimistic when the object of desire, the thing toward which one's life is organized and one's energies directed, itself constitutes an obstacle to the flourishing it promises. The classic example in Berlant's analysis is the "good life" fantasy that organizes so much ordinary aspiration in American life (*and as the Rammstein song claims, "we are all living in America"*): the job, the house, the family, the accumulated security that is supposed to constitute a flourishing life. This fantasy, Berlant argues, has become cruelly optimistic under the structural conditions of late capitalism: the precarious labor market, the financialized housing market, and the attrition of social provision have made the fantasy practically unrealizable for a large portion of the population, yet the fantasy continues to organize affective life and foreclose the development of alternative orientations.

Meritocracy is precisely such a fantasy in Berlant's sense. It promises that effort, talent, and virtue will be rewarded, that the connection between merit and outcome is real and reliable. This promise organizes the life projects of millions of subjects who sacrifice present comfort, foreclose alternative possibilities, and endure the indignities of an authoritarian hierarchical order in exchange for a future payoff that the structure of the system makes

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §27. For a critical appropriation of *das Man* for social theory, see Herbert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, Division I (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 143–62.

¹⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

systematically unlikely to materialize. The cruelty of the attachment is that abandoning it feels like abandoning the self, because the self has been constituted through the attachment. To cease to believe in meritocracy is not merely to revise a political opinion, it is to face the possibility that one's suffering has been for nothing, that the sacrifices made in the name of a promised future were made to a god that was never there.

There is something here that exceeds the ordinary categories of political analysis. The meritocratic promise is not merely a lie in the sense that it says something false about the world. It is a lie that has been woven into the structure of the self, such that its exposure threatens not merely belief but an identity. This is the affective depth of productive opacity: the subject has an investment in not seeing that makes seeing not merely difficult but dangerous.

IV. The Hyperreal Order of Merit: Baudrillard and the Collapse of Reference

iv.i Simulation and the Four Phases of the Image

Jean Baudrillard's account of simulation, developed most fully in *Simulacra and Simulation*, provides the theoretical framework that most precisely captures the ontological status of meritocracy in late capitalism.¹¹ Baudrillard proposes that the image and, by extension, any representation, pass through *four* successive phases in its relationship to reality. In the first phase, the image is a faithful copy of a real referent. In the second, it masks and distorts a basic reality. In the third, it masks the absence of a basic reality. In the fourth phase, Baudrillard associates the image with late capitalism; *it bears no relation to any reality whatsoever, having become its own pure simulacrum*.¹²

Meritocracy, in the philosophical case I make, has passed through all four phases and currently inhabits the fourth. At its historical origin, the meritocratic ideal may have had some referential content, some actual and tangible correspondence with social reality in specific institutional contexts where differential effort and ability genuinely tracked differential outcomes. This corresponds to Baudrillard's first phase. Dur-

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹² *Ibid.*, 1–7.

ing the twentieth century, meritocratic discourse masked the basic reality of structural inequality while pretending to describe a neutral allocation mechanism, representing this second phase of (de)volution. As the structural evidence against meritocracy accumulated and became widely evident, the discourse shifted into a mode of masking the absence of its own referent, the third phase, in which the language of merit continued to circulate even as it became increasingly detached from any empirical correspondence. And now, in the fully developed form of late capitalist meritocracy, we find ourselves in the fourth phase. The discourse of merit no longer refers to any reality, nor does it mask a reality, nor even an absence. *It simply is*. It has become the social real.

iv.ii The Hyperreal and the Foreclosure of Critique

The specific power of the hyperreal, as Baudrillard analyzes it, is that it forecloses critique by making the very category of a reality against which it might be measured inaccessible. The classical mode of ideological critique, Marxian demystification, operates by revealing the gap between representation and reality. It shows that what appears to be natural is in fact historical, that what appears to be universal is in fact, that what appears to be just is in fact the expression of class interest. This critique requires a reality to appeal to a factual order of social relations that ideology distorts and that analysis can recover.

But if meritocracy has become hyperreal, this critical strategy is unavailable. There is no reality of individual merit to which the ideology of meritocracy could be contrasted as a distortion. There is no neutral observation point from which the gap between the image and the real could be perceived. The image has colonized the real so thoroughly that the distinction between them is no longer operative. What would it even mean to say that merit is “really” absent from a social allocation process, if the category of merit has itself become the criterion by which the process is organized and experienced? The hyperreal is impervious to demystification, not because it is too powerful to be challenged, but because there is nothing behind it to be revealed.¹³

¹³ For the political implications of this impasse, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), especially chapters 1–2, where a comparable but structurally distinct account is given through the Lacanian concept of ideological fantasy.

This is the specific horror, and there is no less appropriate word of meritocracy's hyperreal character. Classical ideology at least pointed toward something. It was a false description of real relations. One could, in principle, point to those relations and show the ideological falsity. The hyperreal image points to nothing. It is its own ground. And it organizes with extraordinary efficiency, with a kind of geometrical and overall mathematical modelling precision the lives of millions who are participating in it, whose phenomenology and its quite often existential and clinical symptomatology, serves as evidence of their own inadequacy, and who would continue to participate even if every empirical fact about social mobility and structural inequality were made available to them, because the facts would be processed through evaluative fragmented epistemic categories that have themselves been constituted by the hyperreal order.

iv.iii The Obverse: The Deserving and the Undeserving

The hyperreal meritocracy necessarily generates its own shadow ontology: *the category of the undeserving*. If the meritocratic order is real, if outcomes genuinely track merit, then those who fare poorly must have fared poorly for reasons internal to themselves. The precarious worker, the unemployed, the poor: all these typizations are produced by the meritocratic imaginary not merely as losers in a neutral competition, but as bearers of a deficit of merit that their outcomes reveal. The social construction of the “*undeserving poor*,”—~~a~~ “a category whose genealogy in Anglo-American political discourse is long and well-documented¹⁴, is not an accidental feature of meritocratic ideology but its structural necessity. The hyperreal system requires subjects who confirm it through their failure as surely as it requires subjects who confirm it through their success.

What is philosophically striking about this *shadow ontology* is the affective investment it attracts from those who have internalized the meritocratic imaginary. The contempt directed at the perceived non-meritorious is not simply a political opinion. It is an affective requirement of a self that has constituted its own worth through the meritocratic system. To acknowledge that the “*undeserving*” are structurally pro-

¹⁴ For the political implications of this impasse, see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), especially chapters 1–2, where a comparable but structurally distinct account is given through the Lacanian concept of ideological fantasy.

duced is to acknowledge that one's own worth is structurally produced, and this acknowledgment threatens the entire ideological apparatus of meritocratic self-construction. Contempt is thus, in part, a form of self-defense: an expulsion of the threatening recognition that one is, oneself, an effect of conditions rather than a cause of outcomes.

V. Meritocracy and the Architecture of Precarity

v.i The New Economy and its Subjects

The relationship between meritocratic ideology and economic precarity is not contingent. *It is structural.* The specific form of precarity that characterizes late capitalist labor markets (*If we can call them that at all*) characterized by short-term contracts, portfolio careers, gig work, the dissolution of long-term employment relationships, and the transfer of economic risk from firms and states to individual subjects¹⁵ requires, as its ideological condition of possibility, a framework that attributes outcomes to individual characteristics rather than market structures. Meritocracy provides this framework. It is not merely that meritocracy is used to justify precarity after the fact; it is that the normative grammar of meritocracy was elaborated in conjunction with the organizational transformation of capitalism, as Boltanski and Chiapello's historical analysis demonstrates.

The “flexible” economy needs flexible subjects, that is subjects who will accept the dissolution of stable employment, the multiplication of performance evaluations, the demand for continuous self-improvement and self-marketing as normal features of an ever-increasing competitive landscape that rewards excellence and appropriately penalizes inadequacy. Meritocracy supplies the normative framework that makes these demands legible as fair. The precarious worker who cannot find stable employment is invited to understand this not as evidence of a structural failure of the labor market but as a signal to invest further in their own human capital, to develop new skills, to become more competitive, and to better differentiate their personal brand. The solution to the structural problem of precarity is always, within the meritocratic imaginary, the individual solution of becoming more meritorious.

¹⁵ Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

v.ii *The Self as Capital and its Existential Costs*

The injunction to become more meritorious takes a specific form in late capitalism: it requires the construction of the self as a form of capital, which is what Michel Foucault, in his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, analyzed as the neoliberal conception of *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of the self.¹⁶ The Foucauldian analysis of neoliberal governmentality converges here with the phenomenological account developed in the previous section. The subject interpellated by the meritocratic order is not merely asked to perform well, it is asked to understand itself as a project of human capital investment whose value is continuously assessed by the market. This understanding colonizes domains of life that are not, in any direct sense, economic: intimate relationships, leisure activities, and even therapeutic practices are drawn into the orbit of meritocratic self-construction and evaluated in terms of their contribution to personal development and competitive positioning.

The existential costs of this colonization are substantial. Heidegger's analysis of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) — the mode of existence in which *Dasein* owns its own possibilities rather than merely inheriting them from *das Man* provides us with a useful critical reference point, though one that must be deployed with full awareness of its limitations.¹⁷ The subject constituted by meritocratic self-capitalism is, in Heidegger's terms, radically inauthentic: it takes over its own possibilities from a social field that has pre-specified what counts as valuable, what counts as success, and what kind of self is worth being. The language of individual development and personal merit is, paradoxically, the language through which a profound heteronomy is maintained: the subject believes it is freely developing itself when it is in fact conforming to a template produced by the requirements of capital accumulation.

This is not to say that all striving, all development, all cultivation of excellence is reducible to the alienated self-valorization that the meritocratic

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), especially lectures 9–12.

¹⁷ For a balanced critical appropriation of Heidegger's concept of authenticity, see Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Taylor's analysis is more sympathetic to the authentic ideal than the argument developed here, but his account of its distortions under modern conditions is directly relevant.

order demands. The critical move is *not to* condemn effort but to insist on the distinction between effort as an expression of genuine care for possibilities that matter to one as a particular existing being, and effort as the anxious response to a competitive pressure that imposes its categories of value from without. The meritocratic order systematically confuses the two, deliberately. It colonizes the vocabulary of vocation, calling, and authentic self-realization and deploys these terms in the service of an imperative that is, at bottom, the imperative to remain competitive in a labor market structured by forces entirely indifferent to any individual's flourishing.

v.iii The Spatial and Temporal Architecture of Merit

The meritocratic order also has a specific spatial and temporal architecture that deserves analysis. Spatially, it is organized around what we might call *zones of hypermeritocratic concentration*: the global cities and concrete hellscape of New York, London, Zurich, Singapore, and Hong Kong, in which the material rewards of the meritocratic order are most densely concentrated and most visibly displayed. These zones function as attractors in the meritocratic geography: they draw the “talented” from the periphery and organize the aspirational geography of the globally mobile professional class. Their existence simultaneously produces and confirms the meritocratic narrative: here, concentrated in these luminous centers, is the proof that merit leads to reward.

What is ridiculously obscured by this spatial arrangement is the relationship between the meritocratic centers and their peripheries, not merely economic peripheries but the vast supply chains of labor, resource extraction, and manufactured goods that make the “*knowledge economy*” of the meritocratic core possible. The financialized, credential-intensive labor of the global city rests on a material infrastructure whose workers are entirely outside the meritocratic imaginary, or rather, are inside it only as confirmed non-meritorious: the warehouse worker, the delivery driver, the care worker, the factory operative. These figures are necessary to the meritocratic order not merely economically but ontologically, they provide the contrast against which the meritorious subject defines itself.

Temporally, the meritocratic order is organized around what might be called the deferral structure: the systematic postponement of reward, flourishing, and rest to a future that is perpetually receding. The student defers gratification in exchange for credentials, the entry-level worker defers in exchange for promotion, the mid-career professional defers in

exchange for security. At each stage, the payoff is projected into a future that, when it arrives, reveals itself to be a new platform for further deferral. Berlant's analysis of "*slow death*," the gradual attrition of life under conditions of structural impossibility, names the temporal experience of this deferral structure from the perspective of those for whom the promised future never arrives.¹⁸

VI. The Limits of Critique: Why Knowing Does Not Suffice

vi.i The Paradox of Reflexive Captivity

A persistent difficulty confronts any critical analysis of meritocracy as a fictional reality: the analysis is inevitably conducted by subjects who are themselves embedded in the meritocratic order and who deploy, in their critique (in many cases, an attempt thereof), capacities and credentials that the order has produced and validated. The philosopher who demystifies meritocracy does so from a position of intellectual distinction that is itself, within the meritocratic imaginary, a form of merit. This is not merely an *ad hominem* problem or a question of hypocrisy. It is a structural feature of what Bourdieu called the scholastic point of view, the detached, contemplative, critical position that certain institutional configurations make possible and that is itself a product of the very system it purports to analyze.¹⁹

The reflexive captivity of critique, its entanglement in the conditions it criticizes, does not, of course, invalidate the critique. But it should prevent us from imagining that intellectual demystification, however thorough and rigorous, is itself sufficient to produce any transformation in the structures it analyzes. This point, which Marxist theory has grappled with since at least the debate between the young Marx and the Young Hegelians, takes a specific form in relation to the hyperreal. If meritocracy is a classical ideology, a false representation of a real state of affairs, then correct representation might, in principle, correct it. But if it is a hyperreal structure that has colonized the very categories through which reality is perceived, then correct representation cannot reach it, because it operates at a level that precedes and conditions representation.

¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2007): 754–80.

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 1–34.

vi.ii What the Critical Gesture Can and Cannot Accomplish

What, then, can my or another critique do? I want to be precise about the limitations of my analysis, because imprecision generates false hope, and false hope is, as we have seen, itself a mechanism of the meritocratic order's reproduction. What my (attempt) critique can accomplish is the following: *it can render explicit the structure of productive opacity, making the mechanisms by which the meritocratic order achieves its lived naturalness available for inspection.* It can map the genealogy of meritocratic categories, showing their historical contingency and the specific configurations of power that their naturalization served. It can articulate the affective structure of meritocratic attachment, providing vocabulary for the experience of those who sense that something is wrong with the order they live under but lack the conceptual resources to specify the wrong.

What my critique cannot do, or rather, what it cannot accomplish alone, is dissolve the hyperreal order by demonstrating its fictional character. The demonstration is necessary but not sufficient. As Baudrillard himself acknowledged, the strategy of revelation is a strategy that the system has already incorporated. It processes critique as one more form of intellectual production, assigns it a market value, rewards those who produce it with the distinctions of the meritocratic field of cultural production, and continues exactly as before.²⁰ Someone like myself who publishes an ambitious critique of meritocracy advances his studies through the exercise of what the system will read as merit. The system is not embarrassed by this. It is constituted to absorb it.

vi.iii On the Persistence of the Inhuman

There is a quality of the meritocratic order that resists comprehension through purely sociological or political categories, suggesting something those categories cannot fully capture. This quality is what I have been calling its inhuman character, that is, its capacity to process human lives with a precision and efficiency that no human intention could produce or sustain, and that seems to operate according to a logic orthogonal to

²⁰ Baudrillard's most explicit treatment of the system's capacity to absorb critique appears in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Sage, 1998), and in the later work *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993).

human flourishing. Baudrillard touches on this in his description of the system's "*divine indifference*" its capacity to absorb everything, including its own critique, and to continue.²¹

The persistence of the inhuman, the sense that one is dealing with something that exceeds the categories of human agency and human intention, is not, I want to be careful to say, a mystification. It is a real feature of complex socio-economic systems operating at scales that exceed any individual's or institution's capacity to oversee or direct. The meritocratic order is inhuman not because it is the product of supernatural design, but because it is the emergent property of billions of individual decisions, institutional arrangements, technological configurations, and normative frameworks that have crystallized, over decades, into something that no one chose and that no one, acting individually, can change. It confronts each of us with what Sartre called the *practico-inert*: the sedimented result of past praxis that presents itself to current practice as the fixed character of the world.²²

Acknowledging the practico-inert character of the meritocratic order is important for two reasons. First, it resists the voluntarist fantasy that individual refusal or individual insight can dissolve the structure. One does not exit the meritocratic order by simply refusing to believe in it, any more than one exits the weather by refusing to believe in meteorology. The structure will continue to evaluate, rank, reward, and punish, regardless of one's personal attitude toward its legitimacy. Second, and this is more uncomfortable, it suggests that the inhuman quality of the system is not contingent on any particular actor's malevolence, which means that the identification and removal of malevolent actors would not, in itself, change the system. There is no cabal, no inner circle, no group of sinister architects. The system's designers are themselves its products.

²¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 159–64.

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004), 79–168. The concept of the practico-inert is central to Sartre's social ontology and designates the way in which past human praxis confronts current praxis as inert necessity.

VII. Political Consequences: On Living Within the Uncanny

vii.i The Uncanny Dimension of Late Capitalism

Freud's concept of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*), the sense of something simultaneously familiar and strange, of an encounter with something one knows but cannot place, a recognition that carries a charge of dread rather than comfort²³ applies to the meritocratic order with some precision. It is familiar because it is the air we breathe, the language we speak when we talk about ourselves and each other, the framework within which we have constituted our self-understanding. It is strange because, upon reflection, it discloses itself as something other than what it claimed to be not a neutral allocation mechanism but a fictional structure that organizes suffering on a vast scale while presenting that suffering as evidence of individual inadequacy.

The uncanny quality of this recognition, the dread that attaches to the moment when the familiar reveals its strangeness, is not a sign that the recognition is incorrect. It is the appropriate affective response to an accurate perception. The feeling of wrongness that many subjects carry about the world they inhabit, which meritocratic discourse perpetually recruits back into projects of individual improvement, may be a more reliable guide to social reality than the cheerful narratives of aspiration and reward that currently dominate public culture. Attending to this wrongness, resisting the imperative to sublimate it into motivation, is itself a form of political practice.

vii.ii What Remains: The Work of Collective Reconstruction

I want to avoid, in conclusion, the triad temptations of apocalypticism, fatal eschatology and false consolation. The analysis I have conducted does not lead to the conclusion that the meritocratic order is permanent or that resistance to it is futile. Complex social structures are historical. They have conditions of possibility that are themselves historical, but they can be changed, although the conditions under which they can be changed are not freely chosen by any individual or movement. The *practico inert* is not eternal inertia. It is the sedimented result of past collective action, which means it is,

²³ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 217–56.

in principle, open to reconstitution by future collective action.

What the analysis does suggest is that the form of opposition that is most necessary is not the form that the system most readily absorbs: individual optimization, meritocratic success within the existing order, the use of one's accumulated cultural capital to critique cultural capital from within. What is required, and what the system systematically impedes, is the reconstruction of collective forms of life that provide alternatives to meritocratic self-understanding. This means not only the political project of rebuilding labor and social institutions capable of providing security outside the meritocratic competition, but the more intimate project of reconstituting the forms of mutual recognition through which human worth is experienced and affirmed.

Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* (being with) names the ontological dimension of this project.²⁴ *Dasein* is always already constituted through its relations with others. There is no solitary, atomic subject that could then choose to enter social relations. The question is always which forms of being with are actually operative in a given historical formation. The meritocratic order produces a specific form of being-with, the competitive being-with of rivals in a zero-sum field of distinction that systematically obscures the more fundamental forms of mutual dependence and care on which any social life, including the most competitive, actually rests.

The political project of opposition to the meritocratic order must include the work of rendering these more fundamental forms visible and cultivating them as the basis of alternative social arrangements.

vii.iii On the Courage and Determination Required

This is difficult. It requires a kind of courage that is not the courage celebrated by the meritocratic order, the courage to compete, to take risks in the service of individual advancement, to persist in the face of setbacks. It requires, rather, the courage to relinquish the meritocratic self-understanding that structures one's sense of personal worth, to acknowledge the structural character of one's situation without thereby abdicating responsibility to act, and to invest in collective projects whose outcomes are uncertain and whose rewards are not individual. It requires

²⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §26. For a critical feminist reading of *Mitsein* and its political implications, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

what one might call courage of the common, the willingness to bet on forms of solidarity and mutual recognition that the dominant normative treats as naïve, inefficient, or merely sentimental.

The fictional reality of meritocracy will not be dissolved by philosophical argument alone. But philosophical argument can clarify what is at stake, name the mechanisms through which the fiction reproduces itself, and articulate the contours of what a different social ontology might look like. In a world organized by the hyperreal, even this clarificatory work has value, not because it will change the system directly, but because it refuses the productive opacity on which the system depends, and insists, in the face of that refusal, on the possibility of seeing clearly.

VIII. Conclusion: The Fiction and the Real

Meritocracy is a fiction that has achieved the status of the real. It does not describe the world; it has replaced a portion of the world with a simulacrum so thoroughly elaborated that the distinction between the image and what it displaces is no longer, in ordinary experience, available. It produces subjects who understand their own worth through its categories, who experience structural outcomes as personal verdicts, and who invest their emotional lives in promises whose structural conditions of fulfillment have been systematically dismantled.

The analysis I have pursued traces this fictional structure through its historical formation (Young, Boltanski and Chiapello), its phenomenological character (Heidegger, Berlant), its ontological status (Baudrillard), its structural function (Marx, Bourdieu, Foucault), and its political implications. The theoretical resources are diverse, but the diagnosis is convergent: the meritocratic order is a mode of social organization that simultaneously legitimates radical inequality, forecloses structural critique, produces individualized self-blame as the dominant response to collective conditions, and perpetuates itself through the affective investments of its own victims.

None of these analyses is, by itself, politically sufficient. The gap between understanding a structure and transforming it is enormous, and the analysis itself has acknowledged the mechanisms by which the structure absorbs critique. But understanding is not nothing. In a social order characterized by productive opacity, the capacity to name the mechanisms of one's own mystification is a minimal condition of political subjectivity. It does not guarantee anything. It is simply where one must begin.

There is, finally, a sense in which the analysis resists its own conclusion. The meritocratic order is so thoroughly constitutive of the philosophical domains in which this essay is written and will be read that no position outside it is available from which to pronounce its final judgment. My essay is itself a performance of a certain kind of attempted distinction, conducted within a credentialing institution, evaluated according to criteria of intellectual merit. To pretend otherwise would be dishonest. What can be said, honestly, is that the analysis attempts to be reflexive about this entanglement, to be clear-eyed about the conditions of its own production without thereby surrendering the critical content that those conditions have also made possible.

The architecture of the fictional real is elaborate. It has been constructed over decades by millions of actors who did not, individually, choose it. It is maintained by billions of daily acts of interpretation and evaluation conducted by subjects who are, for the most part, simply trying to survive within its terms. It is inhuman in the precise sense we have analyzed, for it exceeds any individual intention, any institutional design, any malevolent conspiracy. It simply is, with the terrible impassivity of a geological formation. And yet, because it is historical, because it was made, however anonymously, it can, in principle, be unmade. The conditions of that unmaking are not available to philosophical analysis alone. But philosophical analysis can at least name what needs to be unmade. My essay has attempted to do that, however inadequately, and with full awareness that the attempt is itself a performance within the order it criticizes.

The phenomenological dread that meritocracy produces is real. The suffering it organizes is real. The fiction that legitimates suffering is not. Holding these three propositions together without collapsing the first two into the third, or the third into the first two, is, I would suggest, the philosophical minimum that honesty about the human condition currently demands.