

“The Myth of Meritocracy”- Stephen McNamee

The American Dream: Origins and Prospects:

In the image of the American Dream, America is the land of opportunity. If you work hard enough and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success. No matter where you start out in life, the sky is the limit. You can go as far as your talents and abilities can take you.

Although most Americans enthusiastically endorse this image in abstract terms (Huber and Form 1973; Kluegel and Smith 1986; Ladd and Bowman 1998), their lived experiences often tell them that factors other than individual merit play a role in getting ahead: “It takes money to make money” (inheritance); “It’s not what you know but who you know” (connections); “What matters is being in the right place at the right time” (luck); “There is not an even playing field” (discrimination); and “He or she married into money” (marriage).

Americans have great ambivalence about economic inequality. Indeed, Americans often simultaneously hold contradictory principles about how income and wealth should be distributed. While most Americans, for instance, proudly proclaim the virtues of “getting out of the system what you put into it” (meritocracy), they also steadfastly defend the right of individuals to dispose of their property when they die “as they personally see fit” (inheritance). These beliefs, however, pose a fundamental contradiction between freedom of choice at the individual level and equality of opportunity at the societal level. Simply put, to the extent that income and wealth are distributed on the basis of inheritance, they are not distributed on the basis of merit.

The principle of meritocracy is closely tied to the idea of the “American Dream.” The latter term was first popularized by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 best-selling book, *The Epic of America*. Adams defined it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, which opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (1931, 404). In a general way, people understand the idea of the American Dream is fundamentally rooted in the historical experience of the United States as a new nation of immigrants. Unlike European societies historically dominated by hereditary aristocracies, the ideal in America was that its citizens were “free” to achieve on their own merits. The American Dream was the hope of fulfillment of individual freedom and the chance to succeed in the “New World.”