

from: Charles McCreery, *The Abolition of Genius*, forthcoming

## VI

### **Qualifications and the Hereditary Principle**

#### **Selection by qualifications *versus* selection by patronage**

There is a certain irony in the socialist's objection to the hereditary principle. What he or she professes to find objectionable about it is that it gives preferment to people not on grounds of native ability but on the apparently irrelevant and accidental grounds of ancestry. However, as selection procedures become more and more 'democratic' what happens is not that people are selected purely on their ability to do the job; instead the privilege of birth is replaced by a new sort of privilege, that of having the right psychological attitudes.

The more those responsible for selecting people for advancement feel answerable to others for the suitability of their choice, the more likely it is that they will pick the 'safe' candidate, i.e. the one who will give offence to the least number of people by displaying the most acceptable psychology.

At first sight it might appear that the more and more widespread use of 'qualifications' as the criterion of advancement, rather than the question of who the candidate knows or what his ancestry is, would provide more opportunities for the really able individual. However, curiously enough the person of genius may actually suffer more under the modern 'democratic' system than he would have done under the old method of string-pulling by individuals.

Under the old, undemocratic system there was at least a sporting chance that the individual of genius might find the support of some rich, influential or aristocratic personage who would use his social leverage to advance the genius's career, even if the genius happened to have no social leverage of his own, due to a lack of the right academic qualifications or an unprestigious social background. It is irrelevant what may

have been the motives of the string-puller concerned. He may sometimes have had an economic motive for supporting the able man; perhaps this was part of the reason for the sixth Duke of Devonshire helping Paxton — a desire to increase the value of his estate. Alternatively, a patron may simply have wanted the cachet of having recognised and helped advance the career of a man of outstanding ability; maybe this idea entered the mind of Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand, Duke of Brunswick, who supported Gauss. Or the patron may even have had a moment of disinterested generosity and wished to see an able man given his chance, as may have been the case with Sir Isaac Barrow's recommendation of Newton for a professorship, or Professor Henslow's recommendation of Darwin as naturalist for the Beagle. Whatever the motive, in each case the effect on the man of genius was the same: he obtained an advantage, of which he was able to make good use, which he might not have obtained through his social background or his academic qualifications alone.

A point to notice about the new method of advancement by qualification is that it provides mean people with a cast-iron excuse for not promoting a manifestly able individual who happens not to have acquired the right passport from society. Once you have laid down 'objective' requirements for filling a given post, such as a given number of degrees, a certain quantity of 'training' or 'experience' and so on, those responsible for handing out society's favours can always say of the exceptional individual: 'He just did not have the right qualifications,' even if they suspect he is the best man for the job. Or perhaps I should say, especially if they suspect it.

### **The domination of committees**

There is a socialist criticism of universities that became fashionable in the 1960s to the effect that they were insufficiently 'democratic'. What the collectivist appears to have against academics is not that they are elected by committees, but that the committees that elect them are not big enough.

As a matter of fact there was still some hope for the man of genius, albeit a very small one, while the collective bodies that brought about preferment in the academic world were rather notional and influence might really be concentrated in the hands of just one man. In those days Sir Joseph Barrow might recommend Isaac Newton for a

professorship and get his way although the proposed candidate was only twenty-four. Humphrey Davy might take on a Michael Faraday as his research assistant although the latter had never been to a university.

Of course such happenings may always have been rare, and the Davy-Faraday case illustrates one reason why. Davy later fell out with Faraday because the erstwhile pupil began to disagree with his master on a point of scientific theory and the erstwhile pupil proved to be right. An illustrious academic who promotes a bright young man or woman obviously runs the risk that his protégé's lustre will eventually dim his own.

Clearly the likelihood of a professor giving way to an impulse of disinterested idealism or generosity may never have been very great. However, the modern collectivist evidently feels that it would be safer if the professor were kept out of temptation's way entirely. To this end it is desirable that he should not be master in his own house and that his thinking about who should be promoted should be conducted with a large number of people looking over his shoulder.

### **Genius and early academic performance**

Another point to notice about the modern method of promotion by qualifications is that it puts a great premium on the individual of genius being able to function within the academic system early in life.

However, Havelock Ellis remarked that even among geniuses who have shown some sign of precocity there was a type which may 'show only average, and even much less than average, aptitude for ordinary school studies, but be at the same time engrossed in following up his own preferred lines of study or thinking . . .'<sup>1</sup>

Ellis characterised some of the individuals in this class as follows:

'The second group, comprising those children who are mostly indifferent to ordinary school learning but are absorbed in their own lines of thought, certainly contains a very large number of individuals destined to attain intellectual eminence. They by no means impress people by their "precocity"; Scott, occupied in building up romances, was a "dunce"; Hume, the youthful thinker, was described by his mother as "uncommon weak-minded". Yet the

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<sup>1</sup> Havelock Ellis, *A Study of British Genius*, Hurst and Blackett, London, 1904, p. 137.

individuals of this group are often in reality far more “precocious”, further advanced along the line of their future activities, than the children of the first group [those men of genius who showed an extraordinary aptitude for acquiring the ordinary subjects of school study]. It is true that they may be divided into two classes, those who from the first have divined the line of their later advance, and those who are only restlessly searching and exploring; but both alike have really entered on the path of their future progress.’<sup>2</sup>

Incidentally, I feel there is a curiously anachronistic flavour about this passage, with its implication that a genius might divine the line of his later advance entirely on his own, without the help of an agent of the collective such as a Careers Guidance Officer.

Ellis further considered that many of those men of genius whose biographers explicitly said they were not precocious, belonged in reality to this same group, viz. those who were already absorbed in their own lines of mental activity. He considered that many of them were ‘really just as “precocious” as the other; thus Cardinal Wiseman as a boy was “dull and stupid, always reading and thinking”; Byron showed no aptitude for school work, but was absorbed in romance, and Landor, though not regarded as precocious, was already preparing for his future literary career.’<sup>3</sup>

We may imagine Byron's lack of success at school work, though it may have made large stretches of his life irksome and tedious at the time, did not cause him sleepless nights about his future career. With the prospect of a private income to sustain him in his chosen course regardless of whether that course brought him any earning power, no doubt he could afford to regard his lack of academic success with equanimity.

It is interesting to imagine how different his psychological position might have been under a socialist system, with no prospect of inheriting a private income or ever accumulating the capital to provide himself with one. In such a society one of the more congenial ways of earning a living for a literary person might seem to be that of becoming a university don, for which early academic success is more or less essential.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 138—9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 140-1.

Perhaps the collectivist will argue that Byron would just have buckled down to his school work and made a success of it once he realised that his future livelihood might depend on it. He would have realised that his literary destiny must wait, no matter how urgent its promptings might have seemed at the time.

Perhaps the collectivist should consider the possibility that the conflict between Byron's internal inclinations and his perception that his future viability might depend on his overruling them might have made him even less efficient at school work, not more so.