

# Mediocracy

‘*Mediocracy* will not be popular with educational and artistic bureaucrats, or with those who depend on them financially. Unlike official pronouncements on these matters, Tassano’s entries are short, well-written, to the point and often amusing, and provide well-chosen examples of the trends so many of us deplore.’

**Professor Anthony O’Hear**

‘Tassano expertly skewers politically correct pomposity, and looks beyond the smooth, bland surface to the rough, pungent reality beneath our commonplace assumptions.’

**Dr. Madsen Pirie**, President, Adam Smith Institute

‘As Tassano shows, the words we use really matter. Read this book and gain important insights into the way that the cultural elite’s language works to disorient public debate.’

**Professor Frank Furedi**

‘A remarkable indictment of our failure to protect proper standards. Tassano has mastered the evidence and details the sorry story stage by stage. Upsetting to read, and undoubtedly right.’

**Alexander Deane**, author of *The Great Abdication*

also by Fabian Tassano

## The Power Of Life Or Death

‘A terse, clear, incisive, intellectually first-class study of the growing power of doctors and of the lack of effective checks upon the too easily concealed but surely numerous abuses of that power.’

**Professor Antony Flew**

‘His view goes straight to the medical jugular.’

**Nature**

‘Tassano presents hair-raising case studies ... his book is a timely polemic.’

**Cristina Odone**, *Literary Review*

‘I would not recommend this book as comfortable bedtime reading ... If you like an intellectual challenge this one is for you.’

**British Medical Journal**

Fabian Tassano

# **MEDIOCRACY**

**Inversions and deceptions  
in an egalitarian culture**

Oxford Forum

First published 2006  
by Oxford Forum

© 2006 Fabian Wadel

Printed and bound in Wales by  
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion SA44 4QL

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Distributed by Book Systems Plus, Station Road, Linton, Cambs CB1 6NW, UK

ISBN 0-9536772-6-5

Cover image: Henry Moore, *Reclining Figure* © Tate, London 2006,  
reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation.  
Photograph of the author by Cherry-Ann Ballantyne LBIPP.

**[www.celiagreen.com](http://www.celiagreen.com)**

# **MEDIOCRACY**

**Then will the earth have grown small, and upon it  
shall hop the Last Man who maketh all things small.**

Nietzsche

# A fable

**O**nce upon a time there was a world which was culturally productive but rather inegalitarian, called Telluria. In Telluria, cultural progress depended on the existence of exceptional ability. Although innovations were often extended by the efforts of others, the original ideas for them came from a small number of highly gifted individuals.

The possession of exceptional ability in Telluria was predominantly a function of inherited characteristics, though favourable conditions could help. To be a cultural innovator required a high degree of innate talent and a high degree of innate ambition. If a Tellurian had those qualities, and was able to obtain opportunities to use them, they would become an innovator, otherwise they would not.

In any society, the opportunity to be culturally innovative requires freedom from having to earn a living in the conventional way. In Telluria this was possible because individuals were permitted to accumulate private surpluses, known as capital. Such surpluses arose because Telluria had markets for goods and services, and money as a medium for exchange. Private capital enabled a number of people to live as they pleased, without needing to satisfy the wishes of the community or its representatives.

Opportunities for a Tellurian innovator arose either when they acquired some capital, usually by gift or legacy from a relative; or when

they were sponsored by a wealthy individual, usually in exchange for some rights in the resulting product. The fact that gift, legacy and sponsorship occurred in Telluria reflected a general recognition that abilities were innate, that culture depended on exceptional individuals who needed support, and that such support was not going to arise by any other means. It was accepted that there were differences in talent, and the existence of competition was regarded approvingly as a relatively benign expression of innate drives. The concept of the individual, as an entity distinct and independent from the society which contained him, was regarded as an important part of having a civilised society.



After a few centuries of markets and capital, Telluria had reached impressive levels of cultural output. Because of the heritability of talent and ambition, and the possibility of passing on the financial advantages acquired through aptitude, an entire social class developed in which exceptionality became relatively likely. This class became closely identified with the production of culture, and also with its consumption.

At first, the Tellurians were pleased with this outcome. It made them feel that theirs was a society to be admired and envied. The quality of life improved enormously, in terms of both necessities and leisure activities. Their culture stimulated and inspired the Tellurians, and encouraged them to have profound thoughts about life and the cosmos. It also increased their respect for the individual, which tended to make them behave somewhat better towards one another than they had previously done.

From the outset, however, there had been sceptics of culture who questioned the value of something which placed so much emphasis on the vision of individual innovators and which, the sceptics argued, threatened to undermine established values and hence the social cohesion of the community.

After a while, as culture and cultural innovators increasingly dominated the social and economic landscape, the sceptics' influence began to strengthen. More and more Tellurians began to feel uncomfortable with the degree of influence which innovators, and the class they mostly came from, had attained.

Some Tellurians began to question the existence of private surpluses. They began to regard it as inappropriate that some individuals were able to determine their lives without referring to the wishes of the community. They began to look back nostalgically to a time when that kind of autonomy would have been unthinkable. They began to argue that right and justice lay with the community as a whole, not with individuals, and that the community had lost its rightful claim to arrange everyone's lives as it saw fit.

This discomfort about culture, privacy and autonomy spread, and started to feed on the envy which many Tellurians felt for the advantages of the wealthy and for the special status of innovators. Tensions also developed among the new culture-oriented social class as it expanded. Some of its members started to worry that a finite amount of reward for innovation was being divided among an increasing number of potential innovators. They sensed that their status needed to be protected, and that this could be achieved by maligning rival innovators, or even by attacking their own class.





*In response to these tensions, Telluria began to develop an ideology which proclaimed the virtues and rights of the community, and which denigrated the significance of the individual. As this ideology was elaborated, it increasingly queried the supposed merits of the prevailing economic system. It questioned whether markets satisfied genuine wants or simply manipulated people's foolishness, and whether the distribution of surpluses reflected anything that could be ethically or even economically defended.*

*It was pointed out that economic inequalities between people, which resulted from the interaction between individual differences in ability and the workings of the markets, were not ones which had been explicitly sanctioned by the community. Inequality, both economic and cultural, began to be criticised. Any attitude which appeared to justify the existence of either type of inequality was attacked as 'elitist'.*

*The cultural benefits of the existing system were also disputed. It was debated whether culture was worth having if it appealed differentially to different classes. It was questioned whether 'quality' meant anything with regard to culture, or whether any product with recognisably cultural features should count as good culture. It was particularly questioned whether cultural output depended on exceptional individuals, as had been thought – and indeed whether the concept of 'exceptional individual' was meaningful – or whether these were simply myths created to justify a dubious social system.*

*A new philosophy started to become dominant, according to which the opinion of the community – meaning the opinion of an elite who (it was supposed) represented community interests – was the appropriate*

critterion of *what should happen in every area of life*. The opinion of the elite was also increasingly taken to be the appropriate criterion for deciding what was true or real.



**I**n spite of their enthusiasm for egalitarianism, and their rejection of exceptionalism, the Tellurians wanted their world to continue having activities they could identify as culture and cultural progress. This was partly so they would not feel they had lost anything, and partly so that their society could not be criticised by outsiders.

They therefore developed a substitute culture, financed from the public purse, which they argued was just as good as the original. In fact, they claimed, it was in many ways better. It was less elitist, because it tended to be that either the majority of people enjoyed it or, more typically, that no one did. It was more sophisticated, because it involved more technology and was often expensive. And it could be regarded as more progressive, because it tended to undermine the old beliefs about culture, markets and the significance of the individual.

This replacement of old culture with new required the redefinition of many old concepts, in line with the new, revolutionary philosophy. For example, since 'reality' was now understood to mean 'the world view of the elite', the meanings of teaching and learning had to be moved away from 'acquisition of facts' and towards 'acquisition of socially approved viewpoints'. Art, music and theatre were no longer about subjective aesthetics or private enjoyment but about the expression of political positions, and existed primarily in order to challenge the old-fashioned social order. To analyse or criticise came to mean, 'to question references to pre-revolutionary concepts'.

As the idea of being able to assess culture objectively was progressively abandoned, the criterion for what constituted 'good' economics (physics, philosophy, literary criticism etc.) became that of whether the techniques used were those currently approved by the community of socially accredited economists (physicists, philosophers, literary critics etc.). Technique therefore became very important as a marker of quality, and as a result became so complex that even accredited practitioners had difficulty comprehending the output of their own disciplines.



However, after a few decades of this pseudoculture, which was predominantly boring and/or repellent, Tellurians became disillusioned with the whole idea of culture, and henceforth restricted themselves to a diet of soap operas, game shows and pop music.



## **mediocracy**

**n. 1** the rule of the mediocre.

**2** the triumph of style over substance.

The following is a guide to cultural terminology in a mediocracy. For each term, the entry gives examples of incorrect and correct usage, one or more illustrative quotations, and commentary about the term and phenomena associated with it.

Where a term is printed like *this*, it is being used in its mediocratic sense, which is likely to differ significantly from the original meaning. The reader should refer to the relevant entry for the appropriate definition.

# Ability



**Innate quality enabling a person to excel in a number of areas.**



**Tendency to perform well at a specific task as a result of training.**

No one has ever created outstanding accomplishments without undergoing a lengthy period of careful preparation. Ordinary people can gain the same skills that have been cited as proof that an individual was innately gifted.

Professor Michael Howe

In a mediocracy, we are required to think of ourselves as products of society. The concept of innate ability is considered threatening, as it implies an area that society may not be able to control. A simple way of minimising intrinsic differences between individuals is to stress those aspects of the person common to everyone, e.g. physiology, ageing, sex.

Mediocratic *research* is devoted to the thesis that apparent ability is the result of a favourable environment. In other words, that anyone can be a political leader, intellectual or artist, if only provided with suitable conditions.

# Abuse



Hostility towards bourgeois individuals.



Behaviour within the family that conflicts with contemporary concepts of fairness.

Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek's depiction of abuse derives from her understanding of capitalism. Her characters are incapable of liberation because they have internalised a consumer ideology that treats people as objects to be accumulated or discarded.

*The Literary Encyclopedia*

Mediocrity poses as the champion of empathy and tolerance. Its cultural output, on the other hand, more often expresses **assertiveness** (i.e. aggression). Ostensibly the assertiveness is aimed at the enemies of egalitarianism – men, capitalists, conservatives, the bourgeoisie. Ultimately, however, everyone is considered a fair target.

Behind the rhetoric against abuse, an increase in interpersonal aggression is actually regarded as desirable. It helps to destabilise the private sphere and can be used to justify intervention. However, condemning aggression in specific circumstances is a useful way of attacking things that are not sufficiently communal, particularly family relationships.

# Academia



**Environment which provides intellectuals with administrative and domestic support.**



**State institution for generating ideologically appropriate research.**

American philosophy is a vast and industrious enterprise. There are 10,000 professional academic philosophers. About 4,000 new philosophical books and articles are published every year.

*Philosophy for Beginners*

Old-fashioned academia provided freedom for what mediocracy considers the wrong sort of people, i.e. those with their own minds. The updated version has a profusion of highly trained mediocrities, and exists to generate *research* that is sufficiently vacuous to be unthreatening. As with other areas of culture, an ersatz version more effectively displaces the genuine form than does simple suppression.

If ten thousand professional philosophers wrote five academic papers a year for a hundred years, might one of the papers contain a profound observation? Perhaps, but if so it would be an unintended result from the point of view of mediocracy.



# Academic



**Intellectual provided with resources to use his abilities in the way he sees fit.**



**Trained person employed to publish papers and maintain high standards of *awareness*.**

**Academics should have less freedom of expression than writers and artists because they are supposed to be creating a better world.**

Professor Barbara Johnson, Harvard

The ideal academic in a mediocracy is a highly trained hack. Someone with some intelligence but negligible interest in reality. Someone who can crank out verbiage with a sheen of respectability, but who does not want to make intellectual progress.

The safest kind of academic output is that which says nothing at all, but in a way that demonstrates facility with the techniques *de jour*. That is usually sufficient to permit ascension of the career ladder. More points can, however, be scored with output that conveys the correct sentiments or that generates desirable conclusions.

The mediocratic attitude to academics who do not generate ideologically acceptable material at a sufficient rate is that they should not be promoted, or should be relegated to the fringes of the system. Those who go so far as to contradict the ideology will be sacked.

# Academic theory



Models for explaining the world.



The abstract ruminations of academics, intended to demonstrate technical expertise.

Literary theory is unsettling. It brings assumptions into question, in what is often a forbidding and arcane style. Of course theory is difficult, but simply assuming that it is all empty rhetoric keeps you from confronting the real questions that it raises.

*Critical Terms for Literary Study*

The purpose of mediocratic theory – whether in physics, economics, or literary studies – is to reinforce the mediocratic ethos. Theoretical output must comply with the following principles to ensure that this goal is met.

- Complex terminology must be employed.
- Mathematical symbolism should be used if possible.
- Meaning must be either obscure or, ideally, absent.
- An *egalitarian* and/or *physicalist* perspective should be conveyed, preferably by implication rather than explicitly.
- Bourgeois values should be attacked, or at least not supported.
- One should aim for a tone of grim seriousness, although
- humour may be used to deflate, provided the targets of deflation are bourgeois concepts, e.g. ‘freedom’, ‘objectivity’.

# Accessibility



**'Cultural output should be comprehensible and appealing.'**



**'Cultural output can only be understood by the trained, but this category should include all social groups in the correct proportions.'**

Under New Labour, museums and galleries are required to classify their visitors by class and ethnicity and then seek to mirror in their attendance the proportion of each of the designated groups within society as a whole.

*Guardian*

Accessibility of culture is an oxymoron in a mediocracy. Mediocratic high culture is not accessible, even to relatively intelligent people, nor is it intended to be.

Mediocracy proclaims its rejection of elitism. What it actually rejects is not elitism but a particular kind of culture – the kind which might make people feel good, or illuminated, in undesirable ways. Demanding accessibility is a useful way of degrading or eliminating such culture.

To the extent it is retained, the old bourgeois culture must be **cartoonised** in order to fit with egalitarian ideology. By contrast, there is little attempt to make the new mediocratic culture more digestible, as it can safely be assumed that such culture is already conveying the correct messages.