

The meritocracy of preservation: Reimagining merit beyond production

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Abstract

Meritocracy is often discussed as an issue of distributive justice – that is, as the fair allocation of resources. Capitalist organizations are frequently structured around meritocracy, rewarding people hierarchically according to their talent and hard work. Amid concerns that these organizations also contribute to sustaining the ecological crisis, how does meritocracy contribute to, or maintain, environmental damage? In this Connexion piece, we explore this issue. Our analysis identifies a dominant system embedded within capitalism, which we call the Meritocracy of Production. This system views the world primarily as a collection of exploitable resources, rewarding maximization, efficiency and innovative exploitation aimed at unlimited outputs, often justifying extensive resource extraction with little regard for socio-ecological consequences. By contrast, we discuss practices (e.g. bricolage, upcycling, low-tech) that exemplify a Meritocracy of Preservation. This alternative emphasizes sustainable co-existence and collective robustness, valuing dignified, respectful and interdependent relations within ecological and social environments. It rewards practices that sustainably contribute to co-habitation and co-existence. We argue these two meritocratic systems are ontologically equivalent, each offering distinct worldviews, narratives and modes of engagement with the world. People and organizations navigate tensions between these poles by borrowing discursive and representational elements from both systems. While these elements simultaneously influence everyday practices, capitalist organizations are heavily skewed toward the Meritocracy of Production, placing little emphasis on valuing efforts of dynamic preservation—that is, on amplifying the worth and dignity of multiple things-in-the-

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world, not as a return to a pristine past, but as their ongoing rearrangements to enable their cohabitation. Recognizing this interplay highlights the need to shift towards greater ecological balance and environmental responsibility.

Keywords

Creative preservation, creativity, ecology, innovation, meritocracy, post-growth, resource, resourcification, sustainability

Introduction

Most organizations have yet to address solutions for climate change, biomass extinction, acid rain, highly polluted air or drinkable water (Wright and Nyberg, 2017). In their business-as-usual operations, they promote economic growth at the expense of the worker and the environment (Chertkovskaya and Paulsson, 2021). The current ecological crisis is a nexus of multiple crises composed of, and maintained by, intertwined economic and non-economic struggles (Fraser, 2023). According to Fraser (2023), the capitalist system not only causes the ecological crisis but also a multitude of social crises. For the author, capitalism – defined as an institutionalized societal order – expropriates non-economic means from the periphery to integrate these into the economic core for the functioning of goods production, saleable products, and margin profits. This expropriative action of transferring resources from the periphery to the productive core yields profit, to the detriment of the social and ecological systems that are drained.

In this article, we explore what seems to operate as a driving, eco-destructive, force within capitalist organizations: meritocracy. It is defined as a system of selection, distribution and justification of the allocation of resources on the basis of individual merit – that is, on talented hard work (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2021; Young, 1958). The foundation of meritocratic systems is that those at the top of the social ladder accumulate power (*cratos*), which increases their ability to extract and use resources in a competitive market (Heinberg, 2021).

Meritocracy is often discussed and critiqued with regard to issues of distributive justice, centring on the question: ‘Which resources should be allocated to whom, how and in what proportion?’ (Lamont and Favar, 2017; Sandel, 2021). In this article, we problematize meritocracy in a different light. We critique the very meritocratic notion of transforming entities into resources. We examine meritocracy in terms of its contribution to (a) the maintenance of the socio-ecological status quo in relation to entities turned into resources, and (b) the justification of resource extraction and exploitation that depletes resources, impoverishes human relations, and leads people to occupy the world rather than co-inhabit it alongside other species (Haraway, 2013; Ingold, 2007; Morizot, 2022).

This problematization allows us to analyse meritocracy as a general term that comprises two poles. The first is what we term a *Meritocracy of Production*. As we discuss below, the Meritocracy of Production is the valorization of the effective capacity of producing by mobilizing each and every available resource to this end, including the human ability for creativity and innovation. This type of meritocracy, we argue, is the most prevalent and hegemonic form. It shapes the world and contributes to the ecological crisis through how it approaches people, things, processes, places, natural elements and so on. The Meritocracy of Production essentializes natural entities into fixed categories for predetermined end goals, treating them as static resources. These resources are then utilized and discarded once they have served the purpose of enabling production. The Meritocracy

of Production rejects, and makes secondary, all practices that do not subscribe or contribute to this mode of creative production.

The second pole of meritocracy emerges precisely when one values those secondary practices. To discuss the merit inherent in these practices, which appear counter to production and resource consumption justified by radical innovation, we draw on a recent concept called ‘creative preservation’ (Verger et al., 2024). Verger et al. (2024) discussed practices that prevent the decay of existing material, processes and ideas by updating, adapting, or re-expressing them in alternative ways, thereby exploring their multiple uses.

These practices include bricolage, upcycling, low-tech and craft. Bricolage, for instance, has been explored as a means of challenging organizational norms through residual means (Duymedjian and Rüling, 2010). It consists in re-arranging these residual means and processes to adjust to the needs of situations (Gisquet and Duymedjian, 2022). By doing so, bricolage preserves those means which others may see as worthless.

Upcycling appears to offer potential for community-building, reconnecting people through exploring the possibility of reuse from old things (Bridgens et al., 2018; Wegener, 2023). Re-employing old materials effectively preserves them and increases their perceived worth.

Low-tech, which entails practices of bricolage and upcycling, holds promise for downscaling energy and resource use, empowering people to advance towards collective and convivial sufficiency (Banerjee et al., 2021; Bobulescu and Fritscheova, 2021).

Craft, which leverages traditional means, has been framed as a way to contribute to organizational imaginaries that are more attuned to one’s environment (Bell et al., 2021), fostering a desire to preserve people’s authenticity in one’s work, engaging with human-centric processes rather than standardization and efficiency, and moving away from purely production-oriented goals (Rennstam and Paulsson, 2024).

The concept of creative preservation links these practices through their relation to materiality, specifically the means by which objects are transformed into resources and maintained by continually exploring ways to extend their lifespan for the benefits of groups and communities (Verger et al., 2024). Creative preservation practices contribute to caring, repairing, maintaining, and prolonging the life of things. We use the word ‘preservation’ not as an attempt to return to a pristine, idealized past, but as an ongoing exploration of how people and things can coexist through the richness of their alterity—a relational ontology of creativity one could find emerging in the work of Verger and Duymedjian (2020).

Although such practices might be subsumed *under* the Meritocracy of Production (akin to a Marxian view in which reproduction is subsumed under production systems), in this article, we propose a different perspective on the relationship between these practices of preservation and the Meritocracy of Production. We discuss them as organizational practices that exist in their own right, not encompassed within production. They may constitute another form of organizational merit – one we term the Meritocracy of Preservation.

In this article, we articulate how people are placed in tension between the Meritocracy of Production and the Meritocracy of Preservation. As we discuss, these two types of meritocracies have markedly different relationships with the entities referred to as ‘resources’. On the one hand, the Meritocracy of Production essentializes resources as single-use entities to meet production goals, ultimately contributing to the ideal of surpassing human and material limits. On the other hand, the Meritocracy of Preservation explores the multiple lives of things as entities that connect to a broader milieu of living and non-living matter. It recognizes that these items are not reified in a stockpile of resources, ready to be picked, but are entities that have been ‘ressourcified’ by people (Corvellec and Paulsson, 2023; Himley et al., 2021). In the Meritocracy of Preservation, there is no ideal of going *above* and *beyond* things. Rather, it is about going *along* things (Ingold, 2007);

exploring their life cycles as much and as far as possible, while preserving the worth (dignity) of those things. We return to these considerations in the Perspective section of this article, where we highlight how organizational change may be brought about through a shift in narratives: from emphasizing the merit of production and efficiency to making room for the merit of preservation and robustness.

The meritocracy of production

A brief history of meritocracy as talented, creative, hard work

The term ‘meritocracy’ was formally coined in Michael Young’s (1958) *The Rise of Meritocracy: An Essay on Education and Equality*. Meritocracy was initially used pejoratively by the author to describe a 1870–2033 caste society where social status, wealth and privileges were earned through merit rather than birthright (Allen, 2011). Young (1958) defined merit as ‘I.Q. + hard work’ and positioned meritocracy in contrast to aristocracy. While the aristocratic system attributed status and privileges by birthright, race and breeding, the meritocratic system allowed claims to these same privileges on the grounds of hard work, talent and socially recognized accomplishments (Daniels, 1978; Markovits, 2019).

As Young (1958, p. 51) discussed, a ‘shortage of resources’ meant that society had to choose between priorities, dividing ‘the gifted and the ungifted. . . where the gifted received their due’ and had to have ‘more generous endowments’ than the rest. The relationship to scarce resources is thus the central articulation point of meritocracy. It is this scarcity that justifies the need to select those deemed worthy of acquiring them. The question around the allocation of resources challenges us to decide how to reward those people who compete and contend to obtain limited rewards, placing some in positions of elite winners above others (Civil and Himsworth, 2020; Hearn, 2021; Noble and Roberts, 2022). This is why meritocracy has been predominantly discussed as a matter of distributive justice (Allen, 2011; Brown and Tannock, 2009; Civil and Himsworth, 2020; Darnon et al., 2018; Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2021).

Throughout the years that followed the publication of *The Rise of Meritocracy*, Young’s critique of this distributive system began to fade and thinkers started to embrace it as an ideal to be pursued. Tied to the praise of effective hard work, the meritocracy framework sparked discussions around how to design an educational system that would select people based on their excellence and outstanding abilities (Eckland, 1980; Gascoigne, 1984; Hathaway, 1984). Meritocracy was seen as a path to upward social mobility that would not be exclusively dependent on excellence in education but also on job experience (Wilson, 1970). This upward social mobility would translate into higher social status, better access to resources and privileges recognized by society – it was considered fair, they thought, because it was merely the consequences of hard work, effort, and talent (Sandel, 2021). Work was, and still is today, the cornerstone of meritocracy as a means to production. In this sense, in a post-war economy, Riesman (1967, p. 897) called for meritocracy to build a society based on ‘maximum productive efficiency’.

Around the same period, discussions began to emerge about the need to increase ‘creative productivity’ (Guilford, 1950, p. 444), leveraging the ‘economic value of new ideas’, as ‘[o]ne scientist or engineer discovers a new principle or develops a new process that revolutionizes an industry’ (ibid., p. 446). In this account, meritocracy articulates a hierarchy of people based on their gifts and abilities to move society forwards through creative productions, spurring research on creative geniuses (Simonton, 1999), organizational factors contributing to workers’ creativity (Amabile et al., 1996), and outstanding creative achievements (Carson et al., 2005). Meritocracy thus underwent a major transformation when it placed creativity at the service of production.

This may partly explain why the standard academic definition of creativity refers to it as the *production* of ‘original and valuable products and ideas [which] depend on the current market’ (Runco and Jaeger, 2012 p. 92). In a neoliberal paradigm, where competition and efficiency against others are the key defining terms (Foucault et al., 2008), creativity becomes an instrument subsumed to production (Illich, 1973, pp. 62–63). Creativity, as Leavy (2002) titled his publication, is ‘the new imperative’ for organizations – a recurring theme in more recent pieces (Kajzer Mitchell and Walinga, 2017; Markovits, 2019, p. xiii). Creativity is heralded as central to the success and thriving of organizations (Mumford, 2011), thus justifying the imposition of a creativity imperative on all strands of organizational operations (Reiter-Palmon and Hunter, 2023).

Organizations are expected, and even urged, to valorize ideas that are useful and original/novel as criteria for allocating resources and social recognition because these ideas contribute to a market economy that generates profits (Amabile, 1982; Amabile and Kramer, 2011; Amabile and Pratt, 2016). As stated in the introduction to the recent second edition of the *Handbook of Organizational Creativity*, ‘these days are less about convincing others that creativity matters and more about separating the novel wheat from more derivative chaff’ (Reiter-Palmon and Hunter, 2023, p. 3). Not all ideas hold the same merit.

Contemporary organizations have embraced this neoliberal creative agenda through entrepreneurial competition (Hearn, 2021). Today, this competition for limited and desirable elements called ‘resources’ adds the element of ‘originality’ as a third component to Young’s (1958) meritocratic equation of ‘merit = hard work + intelligence’. In a market society, the assumed uncertainty of the world justifies the production of a large catalogue of new products to adapt to the changing demands of clients, technological evolutions, or geopolitical changes. This entails providing as many novel/original and useful/meaningful ideas, products or processes as possible to ensure the adaptability and growth of organizations (Amabile et al., 1996; Runco and Jaeger, 2012). What is pursued in modern meritocracy is how to remain on the cutting edge of innovation to win market shares in a capitalist system without compromising the imperatives of production. Innovation is placed at the service of ever more diversified, effective, and efficient production.

For Richard Florida, the rise of the creative class has been the underlying force that has contributed to shaping society and the economy (Florida, 2014; Florida et al., 2015). The creative class refers to workers in science, engineering, architecture, design, writing, visual art, music, business and other professions where creativity is part of their daily work. Florida (2014, pp. 56–57) postulates a direct link between the creative class and meritocracy, stating that these workers strongly value merit, hard work, challenge, and achievement. As the author puts it, the creative class has contributed to the ‘disappearance of dress codes and the advent of flexible hours, the respect for diversity and the meritocratic values that creative people bring to the workplace and society’ (ibid., p. ix).

But precisely, what are the effects of those meritocratic values (or, more broadly, of the meritocratic system) on society? What could we analyse if we set aside the consideration of meritocracy as a form of distributive justice to focus, instead, on the implications of meritocracy for the broader ecosystem in which it is embedded? We explore these questions in the following section, as we turn to characterize this form of meritocracy as the Meritocracy of Production.

The critique of the meritocracy of production

We draw a connection between meritocracy and resources, proposing that previous discussions on meritocracy have taken for granted that resources are simple things to be extracted for exploitation, reward, and consumption (Castilla and Benard, 2010; Markovits, 2019; Sandel,

2021). Critical geographers remind us that resources are created as such when we fragment things as ontologically separate entities, allowing their integration into resources of value for human goals (Valdivia et al., 2021). It is precisely this common sense that needs to be critiqued (Himley et al., 2021).

We define the Meritocracy of the Production as:

... a system that supports and rewards the capacity to produce unlimited quantities of quality outputs (i.e. products and services), whatever it takes. It assumes that the world is a collection of resources to be optimally extracted and exploited solely for the purpose of production. The system is (re)generated by innovation as fuelled by creative (i.e., novel and useful) ideas. It gives little or no consideration to (a) what these elements might be or do beyond their predefined use and (b) the broader consequences of exhausting these resources.

We begin with the implications of the Meritocracy of Production on the first category of ‘resources’: people. The Meritocracy of Production imposes an order at various levels, structuring relationships between people within the hierarchy of a social ladder. The leading experts at the top of the meritocratic ladder obtain the right and privilege to extract human resources in order to enact their plans and schemas (Feldman and Worline, 2011). The most deserving individual is positioned at the top of the pyramid, with others placed below, in hierarchical order of their merit. The Meritocracy of Production is always characterized by dissatisfaction with one’s condition and place within organizations. The entire system of meritocracy is designed to push individuals to extract themselves from their social strata and condition, striving to rise above others (Sandel, 2021). It is a system in which the ‘sky is the limit’ (sic).

Fraser (2023) might argue that, as a system of capitalism, meritocracy imposes a pre-eminence of the core over the periphery (e.g., farmers living in the countryside are often perceived as less deserving than innovators or engineers in the capital and also have less power over people); and a hierarchy in activities, where the most abstract activities are the most praised (Lévi-Strauss, 1966). As discussed in Duymedjian and Rüling (2010, p. 141), these abstract practices are acclaimed because they are derived from ‘general and institutionally legitimized laws’ that are defined a priori and operate at a distance from the empirical reality of the world. They valorize hyper-specialized individuals who hold expert knowledge on ‘the structural characteristics of things to which general rules can be applied, as well as the predetermined ways of using his [or her] resources’ (ibid., p. 141).

Prolonging the Taylorian tradition, these individuals are held dear for their intelligence and creative ability to advance science and industry (Guilford, 1950, p. 444). According to Markovits (2019, p. xiii), ‘[a]lthough meritocratic energy, ambition and innovation have transformed the mainstream of human history, meritocracy concentrates these vibrant wellsprings of creativity in a narrower and narrower elite’.

Discussions from creativity researchers, however, nuance this claim, as they argue that such creative potential is not restricted to elites. Both workers’ and engineers’ abilities to generate novel ideas and products are considered valuable resources that managers seek to leverage for a competitive advantage (Guilford, 1950, p. 446; Leavy, 2002; Reiter-Palmon and Hunter, 2023). For that reason, the Meritocracy of Production motivates organizations to identify and avoid what Sternberg (2021) refers to as ‘unidentified creativity’ in workers (see also Kaufman and Glăveanu, 2022). As he states, ‘[t]here also may be people, not just products, with unidentified creativity. These people, living in conditions that never give them a chance to exhibit their creativity, are lost precious *human* resources’ (Sternberg, 2021, p. 5, our emphasis).

The second implication of the Meritocracy of Production concerns *natural* resources. How does the Meritocracy of Production contribute to sustaining a system that damages our ecosystem through resource consumption? In our account, the Meritocracy of Production contributes to sustaining extractivist modes of relations with humans and the wider ecosystem. We define extractivism as the cultural and ideological rationale premised on developmentalism and social welfare, which motivates the extraction of ‘natural resources’ from one geographic zone, often a colonial periphery (Szeman and Wenzel, 2021). There can be no Meritocracy of Production without the act of extracting elements and displacing them from the periphery (e.g., natural forests) to the core (e.g., globalized organizations that sell furniture) – what Fraser (2023) refers to as ‘cannibal capitalism’. As Fraser (2023) discusses, this *modus operandi* of the capitalist system causes it to devour itself, as it expropriates, extracts and exploits the elements of the very ecosystem it depends on, without replenishing it or caring for its repair once it has been damaged.

Typically, ‘resources’ are understood as things in themselves that exist out there in a largely external Nature, providing a sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). In this view, elements such as location, specialized installations and human expertise and skills are considered resources because they contribute to organizational performance and are, therefore, valuable (Barney et al., 2001, p. 200). In a global context that recognizes the Fraserian impoverishment of such ‘resources’, the Meritocracy of Production raises teleological or end-goal questions about which objectives should take precedence over others. That is, about whose personal goals should be prioritized and allocated more resources than the goals of others.

For instance, large furniture-selling organizations compete for market shares – that is, for a portion of consumers’ capital. To achieve this, each organization must differentiate itself and produce novel products that capture buyers’ attention, satisfying their needs and wants. The creativity of designers, consultants and marketing teams (to name only a few) enables the imagining of new furniture and its advertisement, aligned with the company’s brand vision, which is typically determined at the higher levels of the hierarchy. Once an idea is validated by the company, a logistical system is set in motion to ensure the extraction of the required natural resources, in accordance with the top-down decision-making process.

To give another example, in research, recognized professors often have the financial resources to recruit research assistants to collect data, using physical resources to do so (e.g., taking a fossil-fuelled vehicle to visit multiple sites). The result of this data collection contributes to scientific production and, as a practice, often prefigures follow-up activities (Schatzki, 2003, p. 210), thereby consuming additional physical resources (e.g., flying to present research at a conference in a foreign country).

The Meritocracy of Production justifies the intensive extraction of natural elements as necessary resources to realize a vision of progress. It praises the expertise of highly qualified individuals with a top-down vision for using those resources (Duymedjian and Rüling, 2010; Lévi-Strauss, 1966). It also leverages the creativity of workers whose abilities allow them to recombine those resources (Busch and Barkema, 2021; Sonenshein, 2014). As Fisher et al. (2021, p. 2) put it, those workers ‘must. . . creatively and effectively use resources under their control’ precisely because of their increasing scarcity – a scarcity that is likely to increase along with ecological damage.

Those elements referred to as ‘resources’ are not things already complete in themselves but elements extracted from one system of relations to be integrated into another system of relations, sometimes in a different form (Valdivia et al., 2021). According to the manifesto of resourcification proposed by Hultman et al. (2021), the act of turning something into a resource ties together complex and hybrid relations between different types of elements (e.g., living organisms with materials, artefacts, ideas, or capital). For the authors, resourcification is also performative; labelling something as a ‘resource’ is often sufficient to make it so and legitimize it as such. This

resourcification process, Hultman et al. (2021) add, contributes to the creation of resources within a system, insofar as the creation of something as a resource necessitates other things to be turned into resources. In this sense, resourcification is a ‘creative process. . . [which transforms] stuff of our environment into a form [i.e.] usable and serviceable to human beings’ (De Gregori, 1987, p. 1241). It is this creative element in resourcification that brings us to a counterpoint to the Meritocracy of Production.

The meritocracy of preservation

A system in tension with the meritocracy of production

While the Meritocracy of Production largely overlooks considerations for prolonging the life cycles of already extracted resources and the consequences of their exploitation on the planet, we now turn to discuss another, distinct form of Meritocracy. This alternative revolves around the endorsement of a different relationship with resources, focussing on their re-use, re-employment, and re-assembling of means at hand.

We call this the Meritocracy of Preservation, which we define as:

. . . a system that praises modes of sustainable co-existence within a shared milieu. It demands continuous consideration to the interdependent relations among the various things-in-the-world. The system recognizes the singularity of a network of relations as the foundation of collective robustness. It assumes the world as a web of interdependencies to be respected, maintained and stewarded. The system considers (a) the generative potential of existing relations to create new uses, meanings and values and (b) the need to prevent the negative long-term consequences of degradation, depletion, and loss.

Verger et al. (2024) have provided examples of practices that engage in the reusing of previous elements. Calling this ‘creative preservation’, they propose that practices like bricolage, upcycling, low-tech or craft pivotally engage in a stance different from disruptive innovation: creative preservation practices are characterized by caring, repairing, maintaining, and prolonging the life of things. For the authors (*ibid.*, p. 277), through these practices, people adopt a respectful attitude towards the resources they use. As they explore existing things through their new uses (e.g., new functions within new arrangements, in new places, or for new purposes), they effectively increase their social value, practical value and/or economic value. This contributes to amplifying people’s perception of the worth and dignity of what others might see as disposable waste. As a result, creative preservation practices foster greater consideration and respect for these items and things, thereby strengthening people’s rationale for further preservation.

Haraway (2013, p. 19) viewed respect as ‘to hold regard, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem’. While the Meritocracy of Production also revolves around the notion of respect, it is understood in the context of hierarchical relations of order between individuals. For instance, one may feel obliged to respect individuals because society esteems their talent and effort – a respect accompanied by the recognition that some hold more power over others. In the Meritocracy of Production, individuals are not seen as companions (they do not share anything). On the contrary, they are competitors for a pool of limited resources extracted to enact a scheme to reap prestige and rewards (Markovits, 2019).

The notion of respect put forward by Haraway (2013), however, is markedly different: it is reciprocal and rooted in the concept of companionship – a perspective that aligns closely with what Verger et al. (2024) discuss in their concept of creative preservation. As Hodder (2011, p. 155) reminds us, ‘subject and object, mind and matter, human and thing co-constitute each other’ – humans and things are entangled. Ingold (2007) espoused a similar view, suggesting that an

ecology of life should be understood in terms of how individuals inhabit their milieu, not simply how they occupy it. Aligning with Haraway's (2013) notion of respectful companionship, Ingold (2000) advocates for paying close attention to the things-in-the-world, not as 'resources' to be extracted for our use, but as entities that constitute the very possibility of our lives.

The Meritocracy of Production represents a mode of relating to the world in which individuals see themselves as occupants, aiming to map out and control every aspect within their reach. This meritocratic system postulates destruction as a condition for production. Destruction may be explicit, as in creative destruction or planned obsolescence (Schumpeter, 1962), or implicit in its impact on natural and social environments through resource extraction (Fraser, 2023; Himley et al., 2021). The Meritocracy of Production revolves around a system that praises upward movement rather than lateral exploration in our relations with the things-in-the-world (Ingold, 2007, p. 89; Himley et al., 2021).

As an opposing tension, the practices that could be valorized in a Meritocracy of Preservation involve moving 'along, not up' (Ingold, 2007, p. 89). Ingold (2007) advocated for moving along things while paying attention to and respecting their history and the paths they have travelled – recognizing the interdependence between people and the things that constitute their milieu.

The Meritocracy of Preservation situates itself on equal footing with the Meritocracy of Production, rather than as a secondary, inferior or supportive system to it. Contrary to the Meritocracy of Production, which makes secondary those behaviours deemed irrelevant when measured against the hegemonic ideal of production, a Meritocracy of Preservation could appreciate those very practices in their own right, as they contribute to the 'reimagining of new modes of dignifying relations, in finding ways to cohabit with the complexity of the material and living world' (Verger et al., 2024, p. 278). Theorizing both a Meritocracy of Production and a Meritocracy of Preservation provides a framework for analysing how concrete practices exist in tension between these two poles, while never losing sight of their mutual influence. Any given practice might resonate more strongly with one pole, but it invariably navigates the tensions evoked by the presence of the opposite.

The circular economy, for instance, tends to resonate more with the preservation pole by recognizing the inherent dignity and reusability of objects that the production pole might dismiss as waste. However, it remains tied to production systems, the outputs of which are embraced within a Meritocracy of Production that impacts ecosystems (Corvellec et al., 2022). On the other hand, Silicon Valley culture, for example, values inventions, innovations and success as the work of single, gifted individuals (Noble and Roberts, 2022). While heavily skewed towards the Meritocracy of Production pole, this still integrates elements of preservation. For instance, companies recruiting these gifted individuals as human resources are likely to aim to retain their employment for as long as possible – though this concern is perhaps less applicable to the natural resources they exploit. We propose that articulating this tension between the merit of producing and the merit of preserving opens up intriguing avenues for understanding how organizations think highly of practices that remain ecologically harmful (Nyberg et al., 2022; Wright and Nyberg, 2017).

A new lens on resources, merit, and innovation

We think that the Meritocracy of Preservation may be articulated around the appreciation of a different relationship with those things turned into resources. Critics of the productive modes of operation of capitalism have implicitly approached the question of preservation. Gorz (1980), for instance, highlighted how all cultures modify their environment and that, consequently, the sustainable inhabitation of one's environment entails two crucial aspects. Firstly, there is a need to adopt practices for managing and conserving one's stock of resources. Secondly, economic

production should not exceed the environment's capacity for renewal. In a global system where the prevailing approach is the continuous production of new products and services, preservation is an overlooked aspect that could be valued within organizations. Our contribution adds some nuance to this claim: creative preservation (Verger et al., 2024), invites us to understand 'preservation' not as a return to an idealized, pure past, nor as the mere conservation of things as resources for production, but as an ongoing exploration of how people and things can coexist through the richness of their alterity and the mingling of their syncretic relational arrangements.

Several authors have proposed a critical view on the notion that resources are not simply 'out there', ready to be taken as they are, but are constructed to align with one's wishes and ends. These include Resourcing Theory (Feldman and Worline, 2011), resourcefulness (Fisher et al., 2021), and the concept of (de)-resourcification (Corvellec and Paulsson, 2023). Both Resourcing Theory and resourcefulness may fall short in critically examining the way individuals relate to things turned into resources. Resourcing Theory posits that resources are created by individuals to enact a schema or a desire to act upon the world, which appears to assume a separation between person and world (Feldman and Worline, 2011). Resourcefulness, on the other hand, supports entrepreneurial, creative efforts in 'using, assembling, or deploying resources in creative ways in order to overcome an impediment' (Fisher et al., 2021, p. 6). However, these perspectives leave us with a sense of incompleteness, as they fail to address whether the resources in question are newly extracted or pre-existing, and how people preserve or care for them throughout the process.

Valdivia et al. (2021, p. 1) remind us that resources are, in fact, 'entities that are regularly disentangled from their existing relations and incorporated as part or fragments within other sets of relations, in order to fulfil a promise'. Degrowth thinkers Corvellec and Paulsson (2023) have advocated for the de-resourcification of natural entities that capitalist systems have intensively drained, proposing the introduction of new systems of relations to resources, for example, through organizations centred on thrift shops and sharing. For them (*ibid.*, pp. 5–6), 'resourcification starts from what is already here, in our communities. New types of interactions and novel knowledge might re-introduce alternative forms of creating resources'.

We interpret these authors' proposition as a call to introduce organizational shifts in how people engage with the sharing and exchange of already-produced materials – elements that, once again, place the Meritocracy of Production in tension with the Meritocracy of Preservation. These items were first produced in a system that esteems the creation of novel products before being integrated into a system where people develop regard for these already-extracted, turned-into-products resources.

Our analysis of a Meritocracy of Preservation aligns with more recent discussions in other fields. In creativity research, Verger et al. (2024, p. 275) explored similar ideas in their 'ethos of creative preservation', stating that '[c]reative preservation practices [e.g., bricolage, upcycling, low-tech, craft] demonstrate that certain groups and individuals can contribute to rethinking and reimagining ways of flourishing in terms of resources, sobriety and care, by exploring and recombining the possibilities inherent in what already exists'. Similarly, in the field of degrowth, Heikkurinen (2024) discussed the need to shift our relationship with the entities of the world. He advocated for what he calls *metamorphosis*, that is, letting things unfold without transforming them. We think this may be difficult to implement without passing through what Heikkurinen (*ibid.*, p. 53) calls *reforming*, which 'is to reuse the already available elements and order them to create a somewhat different kind of form'. Likewise, the field of critical management and organization studies has recently seen an emerging interest in 'craft imaginaries' for organizing a post-growth society (Bell et al., 2021; Rennstam and Paulsson, 2024). Leveraging craft practices may indeed contribute to envisioning new ways of engaging with the future through the depiction of 'alternatives to the modernist, globalized organization of production and consumption' (Bell et al., 2021, p. 13).

According to Bell et al. (2021, p. 11), it is the support of making through traditional skills and aesthetic qualities that can foster craft imaginaries within organizations. Following the discussion proposed by Verger et al. (2024), we believe that craft not only opens up new organizational imaginaries and ways of doing things but is also inherently tied to the practice of reusing and reassembling old and discarded materials. Rennstam and Paulsson (2024) proposed the concept of craft orientation to acclaim human engagement over machine control, standardization, and efficiency. They discussed how craft could infuse work with meaning, wherein one engages with resources as epistemic objects – that is, as ‘worthy of engaged and long-term practical attention’ (ibid., p. 5). Rennstam and Paulsson (2024), like Bell et al. (2021) and Verger et al. (2024), put forward arguments for the support of modes of production as convivial endeavours (see also Verger, 2024). Merit, as interpreted here, is not tied to the production of exceptional outputs but to engaging with what is already present, holding it in high esteem and preserving what is perceived as worthy.

A Meritocracy of Preservation could therefore entail seeing merit in the creation of new values and uses for what already exists, particularly through the exploration of creative means for preserving what we consider worthy of attention (Haraway, 2013; Rennstam and Paulsson, 2024; Verger et al., 2024). The things one turns into ‘resources’ are not only valuable because they enable us to enact the schemes we have in mind (Benjamin, 2015; Feldman, 2004; Himley et al., 2021). These entities are valuable in their own right, as habitats for other species with which we are entangled. For instance, by exploring the multiple uses and rearticulations of already-made wooden planks rather than aiming to cut down trees, one effectively preserves the planks and the uncut trees that serve as habitats for species. Hence, a Meritocracy of Preservation could encompass both (a) the praise of preserving the things-in-the-world by exploring how they can be used and rearranged (Verger et al., 2024) and (b) the recognition that, by preserving these means, we also preserve habitats for other species deserving of our esteem and regard (Haraway, 2013).

Rather than focussing on the exploitation of what we think we need to have more of, the Meritocracy of Preservation opens up the possibility to analyse the true creative effort and value in preserving ‘what is’. Such a Meritocracy of Preservation could value creative efforts that contribute to building relationships of companionship with one’s milieu (Haraway, 2013, p. 32). In a context where the norm is the production and consumption of ever more of the things we create, cultivating a Meritocracy of Preservation in organizations could involve valuing efforts to live in sufficiency – that is, ‘living with enough for having a good life, and not more (for the sake of more)’ (Demaria et al., 2019, p. 435).

A revision of the notion of merit in organizations – from the merit of production to the merit of preservation – could hold dear the gestures that sustain the world, embracing the sufficiency of the resources available. This mode of organizing might value endeavours that contribute to preserving what is perceived as worthwhile without striving for exceptionality. For Haraway (2013, p. 32), it is the narrative of human exceptionalism that creates a division between nature and culture, blocking any possibility of *becoming with* other species and the things of our milieu in a mode of companionship. Implementing a Meritocracy of Preservation would mean no longer to tear oneself away from the world but to support efforts to prevent the decay of the things that enable us to cohabit in the world with both humans and other-than-humans. We present a summary of these two meritocracies in Table 1.

Perspectives

The Meritocracy of Production has gradually become embedded in our culture through institutions and narratives that take it for granted. We propose that the introduction of the Meritocracy of Preservation within organizations could be gradually actioned through a shift in organizational

Table 1. A summary of the meritocracy of production and the meritocracy of preservation.

Focus	The meritocracy of production	The meritocracy of preservation
Definition	A system that supports and rewards the capacity to produce unlimited quantities of quality outputs (i.e., products and services), whatever it takes. It assumes that the world is a collection of resources to be optimally extracted and exploited solely for the purpose of production. The system is (re)generated by innovation as fuelled by creative (i.e., novel and useful) ideas. It gives little or no consideration to (a) what these elements might be or do beyond their predefined use and (b) the broader consequences of exhausting these resources.	A system that praises modes of sustainable co-existence within a shared milieu. It demands continuous consideration to the interdependent relations among the various things-in-the-world. The system recognizes the singularity of a network of relations as the foundation of collective robustness. It assumes the world as a web of interdependencies to be respected, maintained, and stewarded. The system considers (a) the generative potential of existing relations to create new uses, meanings and values and (b) the need to prevent the negative long-term consequences of degradation, depletion, and loss.
Core principle	Rewarding production of unlimited quantity of quality outputs	Praising sustainable co-existence and collective robustness
Fundamental worldview	World as collection of exploitable resources	World as web of interdependencies of singular states of the things-in-the-world
Key criteria	Quantified outputs, maximization, efficiency, effectiveness, scalability	Quality of dignified, respectful, and interdependent relations
Rewarded practices	Effective and efficient production practices, possibly improved by innovativeness	Creation and maintenance of sustainable relations between things-in-the-world
Drivers for creativity and innovation	Exogenous: market-driven	Endogenous: creation and maintenance of relations
Temporal consideration	Exclusively future-oriented decoupled from the past; time mastering through project management	Considering past, present, future; attentiveness to the immediate situation, that is, the temporal dynamics of things-in-the-world
Ontological equivalence	These two meritocracies are not mutually exclusive. They are ontologically equivalent because both define a worldview and a way of entering into relation with it. Actors navigate tensions between these ideal meritocratic poles by borrowing from them all or part of their discursive and representational elements. These two poles simultaneously intervene, to varying degrees, in concrete practices, thus explaining tensions between our engagement with production and preservation.	

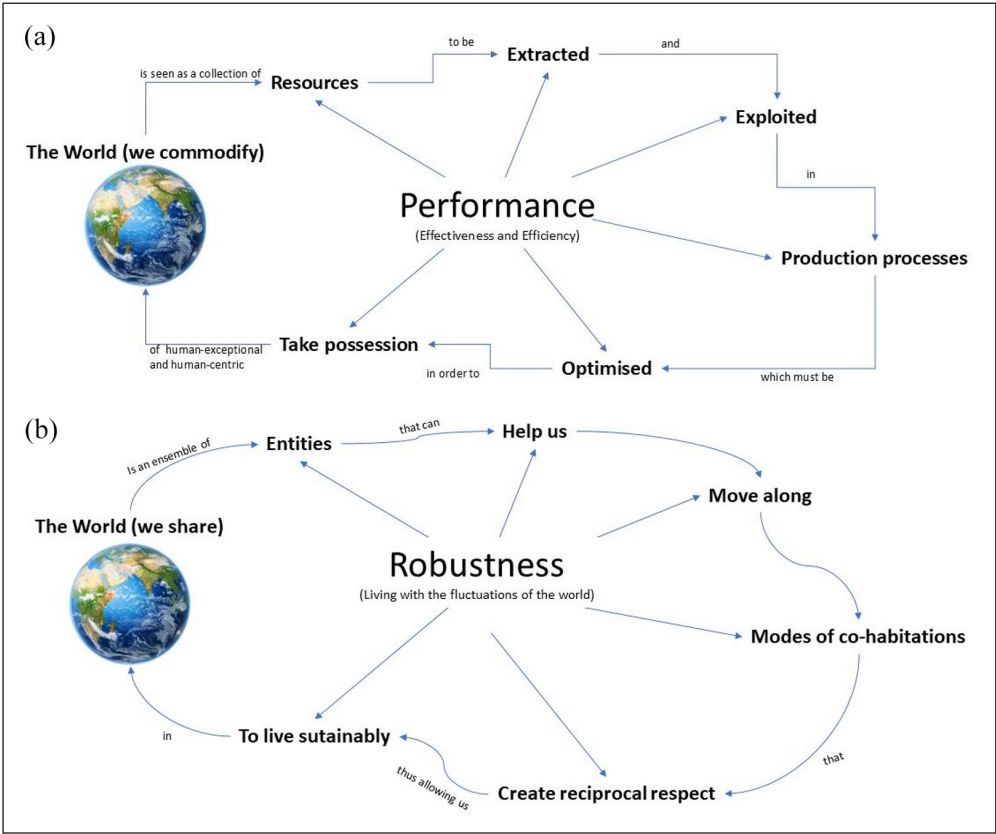


Figure 1. Figure 1(a) The narrative of the meritocracy of production. (b) The narrative of the meritocracy of preservation.

narratives. Narratives provide a device that can construct organizational change, individual and collective identities, and the legitimation of resource acquisition (Garud et al., 2014; Vaara et al., 2016). They are, thus, interesting entry points to implement organizational change. In Figure 1a and b, we summarize the two modes of meritocratic narrative discussed throughout this article. We propose these two narrative poles based on the assumption that people would likely navigate between these two ways of narrating their valorization of work and effort as embedded in their milieu: the representation of the meritocracy of production and the meritocracy of preservation.

These two representations can be seen as mirror images, where the depiction and terminology of the meritocracy of production can be substituted, in organizational discourse, for that of a meritocracy of preservation. The expectation is that by introducing the Meritocracy of Preservation as an opposite pole in tension with the Meritocracy of Production, one would provide alternative narratives for organizations to consider. This might reduce engagement in what we have discussed in this paper as the eco-destructive stance of a full-blown Meritocracy of Production. Indeed, one of the most powerful and detrimental aspects of capitalism is that its narrative makes it appear as the only viable way of organizing society (Buch-Hansen, 2019; Koch, 2019).

By suggesting another approach to the concept of merit, embedded in the support of practices that prolong the life cycles of existing things that have been turned into resources, we aim to propose different ways of esteeming practices that, to this date, have been made secondary within

productive systems. The Meritocracy of Preservation consists of valuing how people inhabit their milieu with others and how they attend to the life of the people and things they are interdependent with (Himley et al., 2021; Ingold, 2007; Verger et al., 2024). This represents a different narrative that may be cultivated within organizations.

Figure 1a summarizes the narrative of the Meritocracy of Production as we discussed it throughout this article. As outlined, this has been the dominant narrative since the end of the 1950s (Darnon et al., 2018; Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2021; Young, 1958). The main tenet of the Meritocracy of Production is performance through efficacy (i.e., reaching one's productive goals) and efficiency (i.e., attaining these goals through minimal resource usage). It is the type of meritocracy Riesman (1967, p. 897) desired to build a society on the basis of 'maximum productive efficiency'.

The Meritocracy of Production holds in high esteem those exceptional individuals who contribute to fuelling the production side of the capitalist system, which, in a neoliberal/competitive market, is bolstered through innovation and creativity (Florida, 2014; Leavy, 2002; Stiegler, 2022). The narrative of the Meritocracy of Production positions merit as a matter of performance at each stage of the process. We depict this using straight arrows to further represent that this narrative does value work that goes 'straight to the point', from point A to point B, in the most effective and efficient way possible (Ingold, 2007).

The narrative upheld in the meritocracy of production, as depicted in Figure 1a, is articulated through the following general narrative: the world is seen as a *collection of resources* to be *extracted* and *exploited in production processes*, which must be *optimized* to *take possession* of, and *produce things in*, a *commodified* world, in which human is *exceptional*, and *central*.

Figure 1b proposes an opposite narrative that may be put in constant tension to this narrative: the Meritocracy of Preservation. The central tenet of this narrative is the preservation and prolonging of the life of things and people as a contribution to the robustness of systems, that is, their ability to maintain ecosystems robust in the face of internal and external fluctuations (Grumbach and Hamant, 2020). The narrative of the Meritocracy of Preservation revolves around a world people share in an interdependent light. Merit can be narrated in light of 'the relative contribution of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the resilience of the system. . . [through the creation of] randomness, slowness, fluctuations, redundancy and incoherence' (Grumbach and Hamant, 2020, p. 4).

Articulating a narrative around the need to contribute to the robustness of our systems would support the value of preserving the multiple ties that people, organizations, and socio-ecological systems weave together. The cost-cutting measures implemented by the Trump administration in early 2025, along with the actions of the Department of Governmental Efficiency (DOGE), are effectively embedded within a Meritocracy of Production. In its pursuit of productive efficiency, it severs 10 000 people's lives and their ability to support others in navigating and adjusting to events that impact nations (Demirjian et al., 2025). By leaning more towards the Meritocracy of Production than Preservation, the DOGE effectively unravels the ties that contribute to the robustness of interconnected systems.

To the contrary, a narrative articulated around the merit of preservation may be about how people contribute to go along with things, exploring the multiple ways of interacting with the socio-material world, in an ethos of reciprocal respect (Haraway, 2013) and cultivation of esteem and regard for the things we co-habit (and interact) with (Bell et al., 2021; Corvellec and Paulsson, 2023; Verger et al., 2024). The respect entailed in the Meritocracy of Preservation involves the exploration of the possibilities of the things-in-the-world, by giving them values that emerge from their different modes of relations (Verger et al., 2024). We depict this counterpoint – this parallel narrative put in tension with another one – by using more flexible arrows to represent the valorization of going along and meshing with those fluctuations (Ingold, 2007).

The contrapuntal narrative of the meritocracy of preservation, as presented in Figure 1b, can be expressed in the following general narrative: the world is an ensemble of *entities* that can help us *move along modes of co-habitation, creating reciprocal respect* and allowing us to *live sustainably* in the world we *share*.

This narrative of the Meritocracy of Preservation revolves around the ability to make these entities deploy their multiple possibilities (through interactions), moving away from the rigid functional fixedness embedded by design in the Meritocracy of Production process (Glăveanu, 2016, 2023). The Meritocracy of Preservation entails a narrative about whether one increases or diminishes the potentialities of those things, valorizing practices that command a respectful regard for how they contribute to building ways of navigating the fluctuations of one's milieu (Grumbach and Hamant, 2020). Conceptualizing a merit of preservation allows us to understand merit in terms of the exploration of the possibilities of being and becoming in relations with and between things.

We call for the merit of considering that the things one disposes of mindlessly, quasi-automatically, are entities that used to be included in a network of relations for other people and, often, other species too. A proposal for a Meritocracy of Preservation aims to de-essentialize our simplistic view of resources as given. It highlights how what we have turned into resources are more than atomic elements for production ends – they are fundamentally relational pieces, extracted and displaced from one set of living relations to another (Valdivia et al., 2021, p. 1). This view opens up a new perspective on meritocracy. It allows us to explore the emerging properties of how entities enter and are maintained in relation with one another. Just as the Meritocracy of Production valorizes talented hard work in the creative transformation of resources, a Meritocracy of Preservation would support the inherent hard work in understanding and contributing to the complex relations people have with their social, natural, and material milieus. As an axiological system, it aims to recognize the merit in prolonging the life cycles and addressing the needs of all the things with which we are interdependent. The meritocracy of preservation acclaims those bonds that constitute the very conditions of our co-existences and the future weaving of relations with the things-in-the-world.

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Author biographies

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