



Towards meritocracy: What can science fiction teach us?

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The dynamics of social inequality are among the key research topics at the WZB. However, we seldom concern ourselves with future scenarios, since explaining the complex societal present keeps us busy enough! That said, we are quite certain that social justice issues will continue to play an important role in the future. Interestingly, art often offers a more acute analysis of future trends than does science. Take, for example, how popular culture tackles the idea of meritocracy.

Perhaps surprisingly, the origins of this concept lie in the marriage of the socialist movement with science fiction. Michael Young, British intellectual and Labour MP, coined the term meritocracy in his satirical essay “The Rise of the Meritocracy” (1958). The essay explores a dystopian society, set in the then distant year of 2033, which is based upon a stringent system of test-based selection of the so-

cial elites. This theme is echoed in works as diverse as *Brave New World* and the more recent *Divergent* series of popular books and movies. In accordance with the formula $IQ + effort = merit$, suitable people are chosen hierarchically for all social positions. The author warns against a society in which social inequality is ideologically enshrined on the grounds of improved societal efficiency. Young’s chief criticism is that distributing resources and opportunities on the basis of intellectual ability cannot be just, because intelligence is not a matter of purely individual merit, but is, to a considerable degree, an inherited and immutable trait. The author argues that those on the losing end of the genetic lottery ought not be punished for it as well.

The Brazilian Netflix series “3%,” has taken a fresh look at the subject of equal opportunity in a science fiction context. In a post-apocalyptic world of the



Photos from the Netflix series “3%.”

future, a social elite comprising a mere three per cent of the population has emerged. These select few live with myriad amenities and high-end technology on an idyllic island, while the remaining 97 per cent toil in poverty and neglect. The only hope for upward mobility is to pass a rigid social selection procedure that tests not only cognitive and social intelligence, but also willpower and assertiveness. Under the motto “you create your own merit,” a new generation of the 3 per cent is anointed from among the 20-year-olds in each cohort. Legitimated by the belief in meritocracy as a universal good, the system is accepted and supported even by the majority of the poor 97 per cent despite the immense social inequality. The search for meaning in life and the belief in the possibility of salvation, even if only for the coming generation, induces the underprivileged classes to accept the extreme inequality of their world order.

What lessons can we learn from this, and what links these dystopic visions to emerging future trends? Since the PISA shock – in the first PISA ranking in 2000, Germany disappointingly came only 21st among the 32 participating countries – more knowledge tests are being carried out in German schools. It is hoped that, in the long term, the findings will

influence policy and enhance Germany’s competitiveness while simultaneously dismantling barriers to social mobility. Young’s satire and the “3%” series dramatically show that equality of opportunity is impossible as long as intellectual ability alone is the basis for the distribution of resources and opportunity. This points to a difficult dilemma: what better serves society – ruthless efficiency or broad equality?

Spoiler alert:
This article contains information about the first season of the TV series “3%.”

In this regard, a look at PISA champion Singapore is interesting. In that country, meritocracy reigns as the core philosophy of the state. A great deal of value is placed on education and learning success. In the future, however, the government wants to hold fewer examinations in the hope of reducing the negative consequences of learning stress on mental health. There is already evidence that ambitious parents are rejecting this approach and replacing the cancelled state tests with private testing in hopes of gaining an edge. This flaw where the rich could side step the system is seen in Young’s fictional meritocracy too. In the story, it proved ultimately impossible to prevent rich parents from influencing the selection process and led to grave problems leading to the 2033 revolt against the regime.

The advocates of meritocracy in “3%” see only one feasible way to prevent resources being inherited leading to the creation of a stagnant ruling oligarchy and their solution is to make entry into the elite conditioned upon voluntary sterilization. The 3 per cent are rendered unable to produce offspring, so as to prevent the transmission of privilege across generations. Even with this radical protection in place, the series implies that truly equitable selection of the meritorious remains impossible. Despite the immense cost and refined technological assistance, the diligent gatekeepers still fail to guarantee a flawless selection process resistant to corruption and exploitation.

The most radical real demand for enhancing social mobility is an inheritance tax of 100 per cent. This is a utopian – and questionable – proposition. If we, as a society, are serious about equal opportunities, however, raising inheritance tax rates in EU countries to some degree, should, perhaps, be considered. Current research should examine the empirical content of the meritocratic principle more closely. Taking an interdisciplinary methodological approach, our research group will, in the coming years, be producing the first robust findings on how effort differs across social classes. Meritocracy is a potent narrative, but – unfortunately – the realization of true equality of opportunity still appears to belong to the distant future.

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There'll be more room for research, but also for meeting and communicating. In October 2018, the foundation stone was laid for the extensions: Two storeys are being added to block E of the new building, the “Basilica,” located at the National Gallery end of the site (see page 91). The following items were sealed into the “foundation stone” for posterity: the construction plans, a copy of the Berlin daily “Tagesspiegel,” a USB stick with the WZB Imagefilm – and a talisman.

Laying of the foundation stone for the extension to the WZB 2018 (Photo: Martina Sander).