ALESSANDRO DIVIDUS

THE SOCIETY OF INCOMPETENTS: CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY AND MERITOCRACY

Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse some contemporary dystopian novels that incorporate elements referring to the ideas of equality and merit, in order to examine how authors develop these concepts within the plots of their novels. In the first part of this study, however, Lesley P. Hartley's dystopia, published in 1960, will be examined to provide a sense of continuity between the more contemporary works of dystopian literature focused on meritocratic and egalitarian themes within the Anglo-Saxon cultural environment. The selection of these works is not random but it is due to the presumed similarity of the themes addressed by the authors and the sense of continuity they provide to the debate. Obviously, the analysis of these novels cannot be done without a necessary reference to Michael D. Young's *The Rise of Meritocracy*. Nevertheless, this article is not in any way centred on Young's figure – references to his work and ideas are solely for comparative purposes – nor on the positions of British socialists. Such a research project would require a much broader scope, which is beyond the objectives of this article. Furthermore, the objective of this work is to highlight how some of the insights contained within the plots of the examined dystopias can provide useful tools for interpreting the existing tension between certain principles underpinning various European constitutions. These insights help bridge the gap between the idealistic foundations of these constitutions and the reality of political and social life.

Some of these principles, for example, are explicitly expressed within the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Indeed, the Preamble of CFREU, solemnly proclaimed in December 2000, sets out several basic and founding

Storia e Politica, XVI n. 3, 2024, pp. 893-920

principles to be respected and promoted by all member countries. «The Union», as stated in the Charter, «is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity»[1]. In Art. 21 of Section III – the one devoted to the question of equality –, the principle of non-discrimination is enunciated in which it is stated that: «Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited»[2]. The principle of non-discrimination is what guarantees that formal equality before national and European legislation and gives everyone without distinction the opportunity to take part in the achievement of a common good[3]. The common good is, therefore, a collective enterprise that requires the commitment of everyone who accepts and shares the values of the Union, without any distinction related to the nature of the individual. On the other hand, regarding the protection and promotion of one's individuality, the Charter reaffirms the inalienable principle of the freedom and security of a person. Art. 14 of Section II states that: «Everyone has the right to education and to have access to vocational and continuing training». In the same way, Art. 15 states that: «Everyone has the right to engage in work and to pursue a freely chosen or accepted occupation»[4]. Everyone is not only guaranteed, as provided for in Articles 7, 10 and 11, the protection of private property, freedom of thought and

[1] "Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the European Union", in *Official Journal of European Communities*, 2000/C, 364/8. Available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf. Accessed on 2 May 2023.
[2] Ivi, C 364/13.
[3] Perhaps even more radical from a social perspective concerning the principle of equality is Art. 3 of the Italian Constitution, which states that: «Tutti i cittadini hanno pari dignità sociale e sono eguali davanti alla legge, senza distinzione di sesso, di razza, di lingua, di religione, di opinion politiche, di condizioni personali e sociali». The following website was used for the reference to the Italian Constitution:
https://www.governo.it/it/costituzione-italiana/principi-fondamentali/2839#:~:text=3,di%20condizioni%20personali%20e%20sociali.
Accessed on 10 June 2024.
[4] Ivi, C 364/11.

freedom of expression, but also the right to free education and free choice of occupation. The principles of equality and freedom are values universally shared by all European and Western liberal democracies whose purpose is to promote the good of the whole community and to foster a sense of personal realisation in harmony with one's nature. These two principles thus serve as social bonding and as a means of measuring the functionality of democratic institutions. However, the balance between these two elements of democratic life is always about to be challenged. One of the main factors of imbalance and instability, especially in contemporary times, is related to the concept of merit.

The concept of meritocracy became part of the modern political vocabulary during the first half of the post-World War II period, particularly within the British social and cultural context. The use of this term was first introduced by British industrial sociologist Alan Fox in a 1956 article, "Class and equality" (Fox 1956: 11-13), and then taken up two years later by Manchester sociologist Michael D. Young in his famous dystopian work *The Rise of Meritocracy* (Young 1956). The purpose of the two authors, who come from a distinctly socialist orientation, is to criticise a specific ideological drift within liberal-democratic societies. As Salvatore Cingari points out in his recent work on meritocracy, Fox's original intention was to first remove a problem of an ideological nature, i.e. the belief that those who enjoy certain privileges must consequently also enjoy all others (Cingari 2020: 24). Fox and Young's criticism was directed against a dangerous trend towards which Western culture was heading. In democratic societies that had abolished or were progressively abolishing all forms of discrimination based on race, gender, religion or social class, new forms of social distinction were reappearing in different guises, challenging the very values of democracy. Democracy, founded on the assumption that citizens choose their future – as also expressed in the abovementioned Articles 14 and 15 of CFREU – was slowly giving way to meritocracy (Williams 1958: 10; Cf. Cingari 2020: 34), i.e. a society in which a distinction is made between the most and least deserving and in which only the former is given the chance to realise their vocations. As rightly observed by Young

«By imperceptible degrees an aristocracy of birth has turned into an aristocracy of talent» (Young 1958: 38; see Lasch 1995; Cf. Cingari 2020: 106).

In the wake of these insights, many philosophers and political theorists began to seriously consider the problem of meritocracy. Some of them took the distance from a meritocratic conception criticising its anti-democratic implications (Rawls 1971: 73-74), or emphasising its irreconcilability with the natural distribution of economic resources (von Hayek 2011: 162). Others argued for a meritocratic view of society (Nozick 1974; Bell 1972: 29-68)[5], in line, in their opinion, with the values of individual freedom. Some others, instead, proposed a readjustment of meritocratic principles with those of fairer social justice (Walzer 1983: 129-139). Finding an unconditional solution to the issue of meritocracy is, therefore, no easy task, since the same authoritative voices in the world of philosophy disagree on many fundamental points, first and foremost that of identifying what merit means. As Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller state: «[there are] key individual factors usually associated with the meritocratic formula for success: innate talent, hard work, proper attitude, and playing by the rules» (McNamee – Miller 2014: 16). Thus, as underlined by Hardy Jones, the issue of meritocracy seems to be part of the dilemma between inclusion and efficiency (Jones 1977: 221-226). The main issue, however, is that the meritocratic state model is slowly undermining the principles of the social democracies created at the end of World War II and weakening the foundations of civil society. Appeals to the meritocratic principle by politicians from European countries that have always been opposed to the libertarian logic have increased dramatically over the last twenty years (Cingari 2020: 138-195).

Following the same pattern, a part of the literature is also changing direction about the meritocratic theme[6]. Fear of the

[5] Scattered references to the idea of merit are present throughout R. Nozick's work.

[6] Obviously, this discussion cannot be generalised, as there is also an increase in literary production on the opposite (anti-meritocratic) side. See, for instance, Christina Dalcher's *Master Class* (2020) or Lavanya Lakshminarayan's *The Ten Percent Thief* (2023).

egalitarian principle is again becoming part of common feeling, giving rise, in the minds of some authors, to dystopian scenarios in which individual merit, competence and efficiency are sacrificed in the name of a flattering of differences. The analysis of these works gives a very accurate overview of some issues that are now at the centre of the academic debate and presents the fear of egalitarianism in a way that in some respects evokes the classic totalitarian fear of the 20th century connected, however, to forms and dynamics related to contemporary problems. The aim of this article is therefore not to take a position in favour of or against the meritocratic principle, but solely to outline the tension that arises between the notions of merit and equality in the novels under examination.

1. *Different faces, same masks. Egalitarian fears in L. P. Hartley's dystopian novel*

The image of a dystopian society in which meritocratic values prevail over those of social justice is clearly expressed in the well-known Young novel, which is now regarded as a point of reference for all scholars dealing with the topic. The same Rawls, in his famous *A Theory of Justice*, refers to Young's studies on the subject of meritocracy, inviting the reader to further explore the issue through the reading of *The Rise of Meritocracy* (Rawls 1971: 106). Much less popular than Young's work, however, is the dystopian novel by the British writer L. P. Hartley who, in 1960 – only two years after the publication of Young's work –, published a novel entitled *Facial Justice*. This dystopian novel, although not as well-known as the one by Young, is included in Anthony Burgess' *Ninety-nine Novels* as one of the best novels in the English language since 1939. As Burgess states: «This is no Orwellian future. […] This is a brilliant projection of tendencies already apparent in the post-war British welfare state but, because the book lacks the expected horrors of cacotopian fiction, it has met less appreciation than *Nineteen Eighty-Four*» (Burgess 1984: 75).
Hartley's work, unlike Young's, does not focus specifically on the subject of meritocracy, but on the much broader subject of justice, which also deals contingently with the idea of merit.

Throughout the novel, the idea of justice is almost contested between two opposing visions, i.e. that of equality and that of merit. It is no coincidence, therefore, that even a very keen observer of the subject of meritocracy such as the British political philosopher John Gray underlines the importance of Hartley's novel (Gray 2019)[7], particularly concerning his ability to highlight the existing tension between merit and equality. Hartley's work echoes the dystopian novel *Anthem* (1938) by Russian-American philosopher Ayn Rand, especially about the fear of an egalitarian future in which individual differences are flattened if not completely annihilated[8]. However, it is important here for two elements in particular, which link directly to the meritocratic narrative. Firstly, there are explicit references to the idea of merit in Hartley's work. Secondly – and this is perhaps the most interesting aspect – Hartley's novel, despite being written in a later period than Young's and coming from the same cultural context, positively emphasises the concept of merit. Hartley's work is therefore relevant to the subsequent analysis of some contemporary dystopian novels that, as in *Facial Justice*, argue against the egalitarian idea and give prominence to notions of merit and competence.

The dystopian future imagined by Hartley is that of a society forced to live in underground caves due to a devastating nuclear war that has decimated the entire earth's population[9]. In Britain, the alternative to a life hidden in caverns is offered by a mysterious dictator, who inspires a large number of survivors

[7] «Merit and equality are inherently antagonistic values. A number of recent studies have argued – correctly – that the meritocratic claims of western liberal societies are at best partly justified, if not actually fraudulent. But a society that was perfectly just by meritocratic standards would be extremely unjust in egalitarian terms. […] If you aim to correct randomness in human fortunes, you may end up in the dystopian world of L. P. Hartley's *Facial Justice* (1960), in which people who are "facially over-privileged" are encouraged to have their looks surgically altered».

[8] Rand's novel also has many similarities with the dystopian work *We* (1920-21) by the Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin. Coming from the same cultural background, both emphasise the fear of a loss of individual value at the expense of a collective will. For further insights into Rand's work see Mayhew (2005); Merrill (2013); Gotthelf – Salmieri (2016).

[9] The idea of men forced to live in caves is very similar to the Wellsian image of the Morlocks described in *The Time Machine* (1895).

to follow her to the outside world and create a new society. This new society is kept under control by the dictator and her ministers and is founded on a collective sense of guilt for the events that led to the nuclear disaster. The main character of this novel, a young woman named Jael 97, is found guilty of having a face that is too well looking compared to all other female faces and therefore condemned, according to the regime's laws, to replace her face with a synthetic face that would make the rest of the female population feel comfortable. Reported to the Ministry of Facial Justice, Jael is accused of being an "Alpha" (Hartley 1987: 2)[10], i.e. a facially privileged woman, and thus sent to the Equalization (Faces) Center to normalize her face with a "Beta" version[11]. At this Equalization (Faces) Center, Jael meets another woman, her friend Judith, who was sent there at the behest of her husband to have her face made an upgrade from "Gamma" minus to "Gamma" plus, i.e. one level below Beta. As Marylin Jurich rightly pointed out: «in *Facial Justice*, "the face" is a metaphor […] because of what that face conceals and reveals, how the face masks or expresses the truth. "The face" also represents guilt, defiance, and spiritual perfection. […] And as their female faces are discarded, remodelled, camouflaged, dissolved, so too are their identities» (Jurich 1994: 148-149).

In this type of society, every character of individuality is perceived as negative, even their physical appearance. Everyone must be brought up to the same level because it is the desire to stand out and prevail that has led humanity to its self-destruction. What nature has given to human beings to make them unique and incomparable is wrong and it is up to society to correct this mistake. In the dialogue between the two women, this fact is evident: «"[…] we know that Excellence belongs to the Elect" […]. "We mustn't try to rise above each other". "But you're not trying. You were born good-looking. It was natural".

[10] The use of the Greek alphabet is a clear reference to Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932).

[11] It is interesting to note that in Hartley there is the kind of anti-egalitarian fear in which the concept of equality overlaps with that of homologation. His observations are very similar to those of F. Fukuyama and his concept of 'isothymia', where the radicalisation of the egalitarian principle leads not only to legal equality but also to equality of physical appearance. See Fukuyama (1992).

"Nature is nasty", Jael said. "Nature is nasty", repeated Judith» (Hartley 1987: 6). In this brief conversation between the two friends, it is possible to perceive all the guilt felt by the inhabitants of this dystopian society, where differences are a detriment caused by nature.

Facial Justice is a work that is the consequence of the era in which the author writes, an era in which there is strong condemnation and fear of totalitarian regimes, especially the Soviet one. In this sense, it does not differ much from other dystopian works critical of totalitarian regimes and their egalitarian excesses. However, it differs from other dystopias in the particular references to the notion of merit and its use for the idea of equality and fairness, a recurring element in contemporary dystopias that will be analysed hereafter. In the course of the novel, as Jael has now been "betified" against her will and, after various events, joins a resistance group against the dictatorial regime, proposals to replace the idea of equality and fairness begin to emerge. The conspirators meet secretly to discuss democratically the principles on which the new society should be based. Turning to the other conspirators, the Chairman asks: «"Has anyone any suggestions, [...] for an attractive-sounding synonym for unfairness?"» (Ivi: 91). To this question, one of the conspirators replies: «"Couldn't we bring in the idea of merit?"» (*Ibidem*). This is the first time that reference is made to the idea of merit in the novel. The introduction of the concept of merit, following Hartley's narrative line, gives rise to a lively debate among the conspirators. The protagonist's answer to the question posed by one of her fellow conspirators is extremely significant. As Jael replies: «I don't think you'll get very far with merit [...]. Merit has always been at discount with the Dictator. Merit needs effort and we aren't supposed to make an effort. Let the worst man win» (*Ibidem*)[12]. Jael's words are of great importance for what concerns the notion of merit and the value that individual realisation has within a dystopian society in which a dictatorial power forces everyone into equality. The reference to the concept of effort introduces one of those principles that the same Rawls, several years later, would identify as

[12] The association between the idea of merit and that of effort are also present in David Karp's dystopian novel *One* (1953).

one of the two main elements of merit together with the notion of talent (Cingari 2020: 70)[13]. A personal effort to achieve a purpose is a purely individual element. As such, power, in the society described by Hartley, can not allow anyone to express their individuality and thus not even make an effort towards the realisation of something worthwhile. Once the merit obtained in recognition of individual efforts is removed, individuality itself is also lost. Also emerging from this approach is another characteristic of merit emphasised by von Hayek, namely the distinction between the value of an action and its result, which, in von Hayek's view, corresponds precisely to the expectation of merit (Ivi: 49). The reply of the Chairman to Jael's remarks seems to follow the same line of argument. As the Chairman states in agreement with Jael:

> I'm afraid you're right […]. Merit has been soft-pedaled for a long time, because it leads to Bad Egg. I beg your pardon, Jael, to envy. We mustn't be better at anything than our neighbors. Or if we are, and it sticks out a mile, we must remember that they are better at something else than we are – even if they aren't. The word may have dropped out of the language. It is ages since I saw or heard it used (Hartley 1987: 91).

There were times, says the Chairman, when society was organised according to the idea of merit. But this era, as well as the very idea of merit, is now forgotten. Those ages have now been forgotten because unfortunately – as the Chairman's words suggest – the idea of merit led to a distinction between the better and the worse in society, and this distinction consequently caused envy. Merit in itself is not a negative element but it turns bad when it matches power and becomes instrumental in the hierarchisation of society. It is therefore an evil when it comes to meritocracy. For this reason, a society founded on meritocratic domination ended up destroying merit itself, nurturing in individuals the fear of appearing different from others because of their personal qualities. The only value worth preserving is that of fairness because, as one of the conspira-

[13] It is also important to note that effort + talent is the formula that determines the level of IQ, as Young points out in the novel.

tors claims: «The merit of fairness is that there's no merit in it» (*Ibidem*).

At this point, however, all the conspirators seem disoriented, because each of them is terrified of breaking the principle that obliges them not to prevail over the others, even if their idea should be the most original. However, «Even here», Jael says, «the best suggestion wins» (Ivi: 92). Merit is a quality that speaks for itself and can not be silenced. The problem for the conspirators is to find a principle that makes unfairness an acceptable ideal without going back to the notion of merit. Many proposals are made but none seem to satisfy all conspirators:

> [The Chairman said] I propose 'Careers for the Courageous'. […] "I doubt if the public are ready for it", one of the men said. "Courage is at a discount and careers are quite *démodé*. […] What use is courage, unless you have need of it? By eliminating danger the Dictator has eliminated courage". […] "How about 'Advancement for the Able'?", someone suggested. "Too challenging. Why should you be abler than me?". […] "What about 'Advancement for the Ambitious'?". "You can't be ambitious on bromide" (Ivi: 93).

None of the proposals meets the criteria of neutrality. Each distinction revolves around the concept of individual quality and raises the same issues related to the concept of merit. But when all ideas seem to be exhausted, a proposal is made that meets with general approval. «How about Bet on yourself?» (*Ibidem*), one of the conspirators wonders. The idea of the bet is accepted by all because it finally seems to be the most neutral solution possible, which nevertheless overcomes the obstacle of arbitrary unfairness. When distinctions based on qualities socially recognized as superior cannot be used, because they are arbitrary social constructs and therefore considered unjust, the only possible solution is to accept the inevitability of social distinctions and rely on chance to create them. There is no merit in winning a bet and no one can complain, because the outcome is left entirely to luck (*Ibidem*). If the individual does not have the authority to decide by which criteria to apply forms of discrimination, then it is chance or luck that decides the distribution of merits. The hierarchisation of society, therefore, occurs in a random or, more precisely, heteronomous manner.

The arguments put forward by the conspirators and the solutions they adopt do not differ much from some of the theses exposed by von Hayek in his *The Constitution of Liberty*, who seems very sympathetic to the issue of meritocracy and close to the positions held by Young (von Hayek 2011: 162). In his work, von Hayek makes some points regarding the nature of merit and the distribution of resources that, although related to an economic discourse[14] and foreign to Hartley's narrative, come very close to the same conclusions. Firstly, von Hayek recognises the subjective value that is conferred on any element, in this case, merit, capable of making a qualitative distinction between individuals. Any value judgment is always conditioned by the society and culture of reference. As he states:

> Reward according to merit must in practice mean reward according to assessable merit, merit that other people can recognize and agree upon and not merit merely in the sight of some higher power. Assessable merit in this sense presupposes that we can ascertain that a man has done what some accepted rule of conduct demanded of him and that this has cost him some pain and effort. Whether this has been the case cannot be judged by the result: merit is not a matter of the objective outcome but of subjective effort (Ivi: 158).

Deriving a person's social recognition from society's opinions is a purely arbitrary act and von Hayek, although differently, also addresses the problem of the arbitrariness of social distinctions. The problem is the same as that discussed by the conspirators in Hartley's novel, namely that of finding an element that justifies unfairness without an aspect of arbitrariness. Merit, as also confirmed by von Hayek's views, is an authoritarian element that threatens individual spontaneity. However, the question of the existence of distinct individualities and their inevitable differentiation on a social level remains open. Nevertheless, even in this second issue, there are some interesting similarities between von Hayek's and Hartley's conclusions. While

[14] Von Hayek's positions are used here only to highlight their similarity to the theses expressed in Hartley's novel. For further and more detailed discussion of von Hayek's positions see the more recent literature: Dardot – Laval (2013); Brigati (2015); de Carolis (2017); Roncaglia (2019); Hoerber – Anquetil (2020).

the conspirators in Hartley's novel conclude that they must entrust the fate of social diversification to the bet, hence to chance, von Hayek, on the other hand, relies on the heteronomous intervention of the free market to create a social equilibrium. Whether by chance or another external factor, the distinction and hierarchisation of society seem an inevitable fact, a system that tends to recreate itself autonomously even without human intervention. The problem faced by the conspirators in Hartley's novel thus results in a real dilemma that is confirmed, especially in contemporary times, by the stark reality of the facts. The words of von Hayek in *Law, Legislation and Liberty* make this very clear:

> It certainly is important in the market order (or free enterprise society, misleadingly called 'capitalism') that the individuals believe that their well-being depends primarily on their efforts and decisions. Indeed, few circumstances will do more to make a person energetic and efficient than the belief that it depends chiefly on him whether he will reach the goals he has set himself. For this reason this belief is often encouraged by education and governing opinion [….]. But it leads no doubt also to an exaggerated confidence in the truth of this generalization which to those who regard themselves (and perhaps are) equally able but have failed must appear as a bitter irony and severe provocation. […] It is therefore a real dilemma to what extent we ought to encourage in the young the belief that when they really try they will succeed, or should rather emphasize that inevitably some unworthy will succeed and some worthy fail […] (von Hayek 1982: 74; Cf. Goldthorpe – Bosco 1994: 35).

2. *Same problems, different forms. Egalitarian fears in L. Marinoff and R. Grant's dystopian novels*

Hartley's dystopian narrative, especially in terms of its reference to the notion of merit, has not received the same attention as Young's famous work, which is completely focused on the theme of meritocracy. This may be mainly due to two factors: one of a historical-political nature and the other more directly related to the narrative structure of his work. Regarding the historical-political element, Young's work served as a functional tool for all those who, since the end of World War II, have been striving to redefine Western liberal-democratic models. This is

evidenced by references in the writings of various political theorists and philosophers, whose aim was to further develop the concepts of social justice and inclusion.

From this point of view, Young's work certainly offered theoretical insights that served to highlight the problems that Western states had to face in the short and long term to give liberalism a more universally sustainable form. His work warned against the possible meritocratic drifts of liberal societies that would lead again, in the wake of the old liberalism, to a worsening of social inequalities. The fear of a meritocratic order thus reflected a general concern about an uncontrolled individualistic principle that would undermine the need to make the liberal democracies, in a period of political bipolarity, the most attractive political orders for the greatest number of the population. Hartley's work, on the other hand, was more oriented towards the criticism of an extreme principle of egalitarianism that, in realities not too distant from the author's dystopian imagination, was easily identifiable with totalitarian regimes of socialist nature. In this sense, Hartley's work did not represent an innovation from the point of view of dystopian literature.

Besides the historical-political factor, the lack of interest in Hartley's work may also be due in part to the novel's narrative structure. How Hartley marginally deals with the subject of merit and his not entirely clear-cut positions on it – as is also evident from his analogies with von Hayek – may lead the reader to overlook some insights that offer a different perspective on the concept of merit. His point of view is not entirely critical, but very ambiguous about the possible development of a society in which the merit principle is completely excluded. Of course, Hartley's positions are completely unrelated – for obvious chronological reasons – to the discussions on the problems of a meritocratic society. This argument, apart from Young's work, will only become part of the political debate from the protest movements of 1968 onwards. Since those years, the attention and the number of studies on the subject of meritocracy started to grow exponentially. The term 'meritocracy', used with a negative or positive connotation as the case may be, has thus be-

come part of the political vocabulary of many leading figures in European politics and beyond[15].

Despite the growing interest in the subject of meritocracy by historical-philosophical studies, little interest has been devoted to it by dystopian literature. However, a small number of dystopian novels on the subject of meritocracy have begun to circulate in recent decades. Two novels in particular – Marinoff's *Fair New World* (1994) and Grant's *Incompetence* (2003) – draw attention to fundamental concepts underlying the more general notion of meritocracy. Their approach, at first glance favourable to the notion of merit and thus opposed to Young's reading, may seem almost somewhat caricatural towards egalitarianism and its principles. But a closer analysis of their works reveals a critique of anti-meritocratic positions that is very similar to some of the observations raised by the same critics of meritocracy. One of the main problems seems in fact to be related to a particular aspect of the egalitarian principle, i.e. that of equality of opportunity and outcomes, both expected and not expected, reflected in social and labour organisations. The problem of the principle of equality of opportunity had already been highlighted by Rawls, who proposed as a solution the introduction of the difference principle (Rawls 1971: 75-108). Problems with the principle of equal opportunities are also pointed out by other authors, who are for and against the meritocratic view, such as D. Bell, M. Walzer and J. Gray. The core of this problem is expressed very clearly by Gray. As he states:

> Equal opportunity is not a simple value. It can promote inclusion, but it also serves another ideal-reward according to merit. Meritocracy has never had a good press in Britain. It has been scorned as uncaring by the egalitarian left, while both neo-liberal and patrician Tories have repudiated it as a mean-spirited conspiracy of arrivistes. [...] Yet when social positions are neither fixed in traditional hierarchies nor levelled into egalitarian indifference, there is no alternative to meritocratic distribution. It is the only efficient way of allocating unequally attractive positions which can be defended as fair. Inclusion and meritocracy can conflict. Inclusion widens the scope of open competition, but it does not ensure equal chances of success. In some contexts, such as the

[15] In the above-mentioned volume on meritocracy, Cingari points out this development very clearly.

"winner-take-all" global markets in talent […], meritocratic competition widens inequalities. […] meritocracy can work to promote exclusion. […] A modern, post-social democratic conception of social justice will be concerned to satisfy basic human needs as well as to foster inclusion and meritocracy. It will acknowledge that these values can conflict. […] Those who think of politics as an open-ended, pluralist enterprise will see them as evidence that our values are richer and more complicated than allowed for in Rawlsian philosophy (Gray 1997).

In light of Gray's observation, who is a very sharp critic of the direction in which Western liberalism is heading, it is possible to understand the reasons that prompted Marinoff and Grant to imagine these two dystopian worlds. In their novels, the apparent irreconcilable relationship between the value of equality and that of merit is the central theme. Their position in this regard, however, aims to highlight the absurdities that can arise in a society focused solely on the value of equality. Such a society ultimately neutralizes any form of individual recognition and, therefore, the appreciation of these differences at a social level.
In *Fair New World* – a title that echoes Huxley's masterpiece –, Marinoff (who published the work under the alias Lou Tafler) imagines a world now composed of three different nations, all three made up of both men and women, but each dominated by a different cultural aspect. These three societies, called Feminania, Bruteland and Melior, are in a perpetual state of conflict with each other. Like all conflicts, theirs is not only based on territorial issues or the supply of natural resources but also irreconcilable ideological reasons. While the inhabitants of Harmony, the capital of Melior, live in a utopian society in which men and women coexist harmoniously and in which the interest in obtaining political power is not only unwanted but is even seen as a hindrance and a distraction from the true interests of each citizen, the inhabitants of the other two nations live in deeply dystopian societies. The two nations represent the extremes of the concept of political correctness and inclusion which are now widely debated in Western societies.

The citizens of Bruteland are the perfect representation of the concept of role inequality due to their privilege of being male and thus physically overpowering their surroundings. They are true brutes who give vent to the primal male instincts.

They live on violence, alcohol and the law of the fittest (Tafler 2019: 61-93). Women play such a marginal role in their society that they are considered mere sex objects to possess to satisfy their innermost instincts or simply to perform domestic tasks. In their imagination, life is like the Wild West, with no laws except those of violence and with a booty that is, as is often the case in Hollywood portrayals, a defenceless young woman[16]. The words spoken over the radio while one of the brutes is at the wheel of his car are very revealing about it: «"Breaker breaker, good buddies," crackled the CB, "my handle's Eagle Eye. We gotta O.K. (shoot-out: derived from the legendary O.K. Corral) onna corner o' Wayne an' Eastwood… started with a fender-bender, now they're slappin' leather."» (Ivi: 63). Their society is extremely unfair and unjust. It is the perfect counterpart of Feminania and is, in the author's mind, the extreme representation of the stereotype of a patriarchal society. However, the description of a society of brutes has a very specific narrative purpose in Marinoff's novel, namely to draw attention to what happens at the opposite extreme in Feminania's society. It could almost seem that Bruteland is the materialisation of the deepest nightmare of the inhabitants of Feminania.

Political correctness taken to the extreme prevails in the nation of Feminania. The people's slogan is "justice is fairness" (Ivi: 11), which, as the author reminds us in the prologue, stands for trying to right past wrongs with future redistributions (Ivi: 3). The principle that governs the life of inhabitants and political institutions is not that of non-discrimination, but that of reverse discrimination[17]. Equity is no longer a universal value, but a means to be used to balance the lack of equity of past times, which means replacing one domination with another, at least until it has produced the same distortions and remained in power for an equivalent period. In Feminania, career advancement and the distribution of roles within society do not

[16] The cult of masculinity and the reduction of women to mere sex objects evoke the dystopian scenario described by Katharine Burdekin in *Swastika Night* (1937).

[17] The principle of reverse discrimination is used, especially in the 1970s by scholars of American background, with a positive meaning. Several works have been published on this subject such as Nagel (1973); Thomson (1973); Feinberg – Gross (1975); Goldman (1975).

follow a criterion based on personal merit, but rather on the level of disadvantage a person has suffered throughout his or her existence, which is also perceived as belonging to a disadvantaged category in history. Any personal difference, even if only related to different gender membership – which can therefore lead to a different development of qualities that the opposite sex does not possess – is not permissible. In the Age of Fairness (Ivi: 9), even fundamental works of science – books such as the *Origin of Species* and the *Complete Works of Freud* – are forbidden and usually burnt in a ceremonial ritual (Ivi: 13). The whole of society is radicalised and kept under control with the terror imposed by the principle of fairness, also through a language reformulation that is careful not to allow any distinction to leak out. Everything takes place under the watchful eye of the GEQUAPO (Gender Equality Police) (Ivi: 15).

Within his work, Marinoff uses the stratagem of exaggeration and polarisation of concepts, so that the guiding values of brutes and feminanias are almost caricatured. His aim is a polemic against what he considers now to be a gender war fought on the field of equality. But the purpose of his work is not only this. In the legitimate fight for the legal equality of genders and for the recognition of the value of every individual beyond any consideration of gender, skin colour or religious belief, the question of merit comes up again. The exaggeration of the theme of his dystopia is a denunciation of the dangers towards which the author's society is heading. This condemnation is corroborated by the author and many of his colleagues' first-hand experience of the concrete effects of certain types of reverse discrimination policies happening within a very specific cultural and working environment, i.e. the Canadian academic world. As Daphne Patai writes in the *Introduction* to his novel: «When Lou Marinoff, using the pen name Lou Tafler, first published his dystopian satire *Fair New World* in 1994, he called it his "farewell gift to Canada," where gender equity laws made it impossible for him to get an academic job» (Ivi: xi). Marinoff is forced to leave his country and work in US universities because of certain ideological policies implemented by the Canadian authorities to regulate university recruitment. Many examples – too long to be quoted in full in this work (Ivi: xiii-xx) – are given

in Patai's *Introduction*. Most of these examples are a list of university recruitment advertisements which, as Patai states, are very far «from anything resembling the meritocracy practiced in Melior» (Ivi: xiv). To clarify Marinoff's personal experience and positions, it is useful to quote in full the testimony of one of his friend and university colleagues, Hardy Orbs[18], who, in the *Foreword* to Marinoff's work, states that:

> I first met Lou Tafler when we were hired to teach at the same universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tafler had been hired to teach ethics. I had been hired to teach logic. […] Not only did we enjoy each other's sardonic sense of humor, […]. It also turned out that we shared a secret. The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the introduction of an oppressive climate of intellectual conformity within the western world's universities. […] Qualified academics were denied faculty positions, simply because they failed to toe the politically correct party line. Chief among the beliefs being enforced was the claim that because women had been denied their place within the academy for centuries, it was only right that they now be given preferential treatment in hiring. […] When asked at job interviews about my opposition to reverse discrimination, I said it was clear a fallacy to equate reverse discrimination with non-discrimination. Being opposed to reverse discrimination did not imply being opposed to equal rights for women and men, or for gays and straights, or for any other groups in society. In fact, just the opposite. […] Older members of the university community shared this common-sense, […]; but among the younger, more politically influential ideologues, this view was seen as unspeakably naïve (Ivi: xxiv-xxvi).

The same fate was shared by many of their colleagues from the most diverse disciplines: philosophers, poets, jurists and mathematicians (Ivi: xxix-xxxi). These episodes, drawn from Marinoff's real experience and then caricatured in the course of various events narrated in his novel (Ivi: 53-56)[19], reveal how certain dynamics linked to the idea of merit clash with policies of a different ideological nature. The recruitment procedure – at least according to Orbs' testimony – is not based on individual merits, which are independent of the individual's background,

[18] Hardy Orbs is also the name of one of the characters in the novel.
[19] The same events relating to the university recruitment process are narrated in the story that takes place in the nation of Feminania.

but only on a numerical and proportional allocation of representation quotas[20]. If the maximum number of male representation has been reached within the university staff, then the remaining positions must be allocated to the other respective under-represented categories, whether they are more or less deserving of the position (Ivi: xxv).

According to Marinoff, this kind of policy can have several negative effects on both the individual and social levels. One of the most interesting negative effects highlighted by Marinoff from the point of view of the individual is what, in his work *The Big Questions*, he identifies as the process of dehumanisation. What makes Marinoff's remarks in this regard interesting is the nature of the dehumanised subject, since, as Marinoff says, it is not the individual disadvantaged by reverse discrimination who feels a sense of uneasiness, but rather the one who has suffered a kind of positive discrimination. He states that: «Providing people with unmerited rewards also dehumanizes them, and is likewise offensive and harmful» (Marinoff 2003: 94). To support this hypothesis, Marinoff mentions the case of one of his students:

> This case comes from one of my philosophy courses at City College in New York. 1 had graded a quiz, and one of the students, Alicia, asked to see me after class. "Did 1 really earn an A on this quiz," Alicia asked, "or did you just inflate my grade to make me feel better?" Considering the quality of her work, I thought this was an odd question. "In my courses," I replied, "students get the grades they earn. Your work merited an A, so I gave you an A." To my surprise, upon hearing this, she actually burst into tears: out of gratitude for having her excellence recognized on its own merits. Then she explained to me that she had transferred from another well-known university in Manhattan, where she had been repeatedly offended (but not yet harmed) by the

[20] The debate on representation quotas is extensive and warrants a more in-depth analysis than can be provided in this context. Its relationship with the concept of merit is also highly controversial, as demonstrated in Nicholas Lehmann's work *The Big Test. The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999). However, this article confines itself to presenting Marinoff's views on the matter, particularly those expressed in his dystopian writings and substantiated by the arguments presented in *The Middle Way. Finding Happiness in a World of Extremes* (2007).

university's widespread practice of inflating grades for "visible minorities," lately known as "diverse" students (Ivi: 92-93).

The case of the student reported by Marinoff highlights some problematic situations. The subject involved perceives herself as a worthless individual because her value is exclusively linked to the group to which she belongs. Her merit is secondary to her socio-cultural background. This almost paradoxical tension within the principle of reverse discrimination is a problem pointed out by the same Gray in his analysis of the limits of social justice theories. As he states: «Being identified as a victim of injustice has become a kind of privilege, handed out to favoured groups and denied to others according to the shifting diktats of progressive opinion» (Gray 2023). But the danger of not considering the negative effects on the individual dimension is not the only issue. One of the issues closely linked to that of merit – particularly if considered according to an operational and efficiency logic of society (see Bresser-Pereira 2001: 363-373) – is that of competence. The idea of competence is deeply influenced by the value system applied to redistribute social functions. A policy that does not adopt a system of distributing social roles based on the competence of those in a given position faces problems of dysfunctionality. It is also true, however, that in an extremely mechanised society oriented towards the optimisation of all aspects of life, there is the danger of associating competence with the idea of competition, thus creating a society in which those who are not competent do not merit certain roles and are therefore useless – in the sense of non-functional – for the progress of society. The issue of competence thus opens up another important and controversial question linked to that of merit[21]. Many authors have focused their studies towards this issue, emphasising its positive and negative aspects and looking at possible remedies[22]. But what is never-

[21] This does not imply that those who advocate an anti-meritocratic stance support the idea of weakening the role of competence in society. Rather, it suggests that the diminishment of competence could be an unintended consequence present in a non-meritocratic society.

[22] This topic, which is very wide-ranging and debated, can not be explored in depth here. For a more detailed discussion see Butler (1978); Sandberg (2000); Bernhardt – Câmara – Squintani (2011).

theless important to point out here is the effect that the idea of competence – and its opposite – has had in the collective imagination.

Marinoff contingently addresses the issue of competence within his novel, linking it to the subject of meritocracy as one of the negative effects of an allocation of human resources that are not based on the idea of merit (Tafler 2019: 56-57). In contrast, the concept of competence becomes central in the dystopian novel, *Incompetence*, published by British author Rob Grant. In this dystopia with ironic overtones, Grant imagines a futuristic European Federal Union (United States of Europe) (Grant 2003: 6) populated by individuals completely incompetent in their roles. According to the Article 13199 of the Pan-European Constitution, «No person shall be prejudiced from employment in any capacity, at any level, by reason of age, race, creed or incompitence» (Ivi: 1)[23]. For too long, people have suffered unjust discrimination and the only possible solution to avoid similar policies is to abolish all types of discrimination. But the abolition of discrimination, in Grant's novel, does not only mean the abolition of those discriminations that degrade human beings and create a social hierarchy based on distinctions of sex, race, age, religion or political belief. Discrimination also means attributing merit, i.e. a value, to one individual over another based on a talent that other individuals do not possess, because, after all, the attribution of talents is an arbitrary operation determined by social recognition. If an individual's talent and competence are rewarded with the assignment of a role suited to his or her abilities, then this is discrimination, because it is the society in which the individual acts that determines the type of talent needed to fill that role.

The protagonist of Grant's novel is a mysterious detective – whose pseudonym is Harry Salt – who works for a secret agency in search of the murderer of his mentor, Klingferm, who apparently died in a lift accident in Rome. In the search for the culprit, the protagonist travels through several European countries – such as Italy, France, Austria and Germany – and comes into contact with numerous people, each incompetent in his

[23] The word 'incompetence' is purposely misspelt.

role. From doctors to policemen and lawyers, all of them play roles they are unable to fulfil. The result is chaos in the investigation that considerably slows down the solution of the case and leads the protagonist into countless vicissitudes bordering on the paradoxical.

The abolition of all kinds of discrimination, including that relating to individual competence, is not the only important element within Grant's dystopia. The offence of discrimination on grounds of incompetence is the result of a process of over-legislation that aims to regulate any aspect of individual life. Anyone who does not comply with the laws and regulations issued by the United States of Europe is sentenced to prison. However, the laws and regulations do not only cover crimes that harm other people and the community's good but also those that do not meet certain standards of equality and uniformity. «Have you taken a look around here?», Klingferm says, «We're hopeless. […] We imprison greengrocers for selling carrots that aren't the right shade of orange. We churn out a hundred new laws and regulations every day, so fast we can't keep up, and turn the entire population into unwitting criminals» (Ivi: 67). European over-legislation results, according to Grant, in a largely dysfunctional system (*Ibidem*). In this large pan-European family, incompetence and dysfunctionality intertwine and feed off each other. Behind the principle of formal equality that governs the life of millions of people, hovers the spectre of fear of the other, of his diversity and resentments. Legislation that does not take into account differences and changing needs, following formal equality as the only guiding principle, can only lead to dysfunctionality and general resentment. Instead of creating harmony in differences, the United States of Europe created a unity without distinction. In the long run, this policy will again exacerbate mutual resentment. As Klingferm states: «OK, we're nominally united, but the Greeks hate the Turks, the Italians hate the French, the French hate the Germans, and the Germans hate everyone… […]. We can't agree on anything important» (*Ibidem*). Decision-makers must be competent, they must therefore be able to recognise differences and harmonise them, and to harmonise differences they must be

able to recognise and value the qualities of each one. This is true both on an individual and collective level.

At first glance, Grant's political opinions may seem anti-European. They fit perfectly into the critical line of the anti-Europeans who campaign for Britain's exit from the EU. However, Grant's argument is not about Britain's exit from the EU as a solution to the problems his country was experiencing, but rather to highlight issues that subsequently led much of the population to vote to leave[24]. The satirical remarks within his dystopia are a way of drawing attention to the structural problems of the European Union. Among these, the way to balance the idea of merit, competence, the principle of equality and non-discrimination plays a key role.

Conclusions

Coming to an objective conclusion on the subject of merit and meritocracy is not an easy task. The lack of a universally agreed definition of the nature of merit is in itself sufficient evidence to decree the impossibility of an objective analysis of the subject. Moreover, the lack of objectivity is also compounded by the multiplicity of variables related to the idea of merit as those of competence, functionality, efficiency or talent. Each variable that constitutes the idea can be interpreted from a different perspective and thus intrinsically and irreversibly modify the concept. Besides the difficulty of defining the parameters of merit, it is also necessary to make a distinction between merit and meritocracy, i.e. a society founded on the power of merit. In a meritocratic society, merit is no longer merely the recognition of an individual's intrinsic worth, but is transformed into an instrument to maintain and perpetuate power. A meritocratic society manipulates merit to reintroduce an unequal hierarchy

[24] There is no intention whatsoever to provide an explanation or interpretation of the factors that led to Britain's exit from the European Union. Rather, emphasis is placed on the importance of Grant's novel within the dystopian genre, particularly in its examination of the intricate relationship between the UK and Europe. Indeed, references to Grant's work can also be found in Lisa Bischoff's *British Novels and the European Union DysEUtopia* (2023).

and undermines efforts towards the project of creating common welfare and individual self-realisation. Such a society dangerously resembles the one described by Young in his dystopia and rightly justifies the fears and criticisms raised against the idea of merit. Merit thus fully fits into the debate between the common good and individual self-realisation, further complicating the search for a fragile balance. The difficulty of finding a balance between two extremes, i.e. that of common good and self-realisation, is well highlighted by the dystopias analysed in this work. However, these novels follow a different narrative line from that provided by Young and stand, only apparently, in antithesis to it. While Young emphasised the dangers of a merit-centred society, the other authors focused on the effects caused by a society in which merit is completely missing. Their analysis points out a very important aspect: once all unequal discrimination due to factors such as age, gender, race, religion or political belief has been abolished, the only mechanism left to distribute roles within society is that of merit. Currently, merit is the fairest individual element to establish a person's qualities without prejudice. However, merit becomes problematic when the natural qualities worthy of meritorious recognition are decided a priori, as is the case, for example, in the US society, where the introduction of IQ tests is a highly discriminating component that depreciates human worth by calculating only an abstract and controversial level of intelligence. In this case, merit is again associated with the intrinsic natural qualities of the subject and used as a means of discrimination. This interpretation of merit becomes functional to manipulate the means and channels to obtain and maintain positions of power. A possible alternative to this view could be to disjoin merit from the individual component and judge merit based on actions aimed at the good and well-being of others. In this way, merit would be decoupled from the individual component and measured based on the contribution that each individual – given his or her abilities – makes to the increase of the common good. The topic is therefore highly complex and, beyond any attempt to offer a definitive answer, this paper sought to offer, through an analysis of contemporary dystopias on merit and the principle of equality, useful perspectives for further discussion.

Bibliography

BELL DANIEL, 1972, "On meritocracy and equality", *Public interest*, 29, pp. 29-68.
BERNHARDT DAN – CÂMARA ODILON – SQUINTANI FRANCESCO, "Competence and Ideology", *The Review of Economic Studies*, Vol. 78, No. 2 (2011), pp. 487-522.
BISCHOFF LISA, 2023, *British Novels and the European Union DysEUtopia*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
BRESSER-PEREIRA LUIZ CARLOS, 2001, "Self-Interest and Incompetence", *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, Vol. 23, No. 3, pp. 363-373.
BRIGATI ROBERTO, 2015, *Il giusto a chi va. Filosofia del merito e della meritocrazia*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
BURGESS ANTHONY, 1984, *Ninety-nine Novels. The Best in English since 1939*, London: Allison & Busby.
BUTLER F. COIT, 1978, "The Concept of Competence: An Operational Definition", *Education Technology,* Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 7-18.
CINGARI SALVATORE, 2020, *La meritocrazia*, Roma: Ediesse.
DARDOT PIERRE – LAVAL CHRISTIAN, 2013, *La nuova ragione del mondo. Critica della razionalità neoliberista*, Roma: Derive e Approdi.
DE CAROLIS MASSIMO, 2017, *Il rovescio della libertà. Tramonto del neoliberalismo e disagio della civiltà*, Macerata: Quodlibet.
FEINBERG JOEL – GROSS HYMAN (ed. by), 1975, *Philosophy of Law*, Encino: Dickinson.
FOX ALAN, 1956, "Class and equality", *Socialist Commentary*, May pp. 11-13.
FUKUYAMA FRANCIS, 1992, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press.
GOLDMAN ALAN H., 1975, "Reparation to Individuals or Groups?", *Analysis*, (35), pp. 168-170.
GOLDTHORPE JOHN H. – BOSCO NICOLETTA, 1994, "I problemi della meritocrazia", *Stato e mercato*, No. 40, (1), pp. 7-40.
GOTTHELF ALLAN – SALMIERI GREGORY (ed. by), 2016, *A Companion to Ayn Rand*, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons.
GRANT ROB, 2003, *Incompetence*, London: Gollancz.
GRAY JOHN, 1997, "Goodbye to Rawls", *Prospect*, 20 November.
_____, 2019, "The deluded cult of social justice", *UnHerd*, 16 October.
HAMOWY RONALD (ed. by.), 2011, *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek. Volume XVII: The Constitution of Liberty*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
HARTLEY LESLIE POLES, 1987, *Facial Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

HOERBER THOMAS – ANQUETIL ALAIN (ed. by), 2020, *Economic Theory and Globalization*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
Jackson Ben, 2007, *Equality and the British Left. A study in progressive thought, 1900-64*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
JONES HARDY, 1977, "Fairness, meritocracy and reverse discrimination", *Social Theory and Practice*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 211-226.
JURICH MARILYN, 1994, "A Woman's Two-Faced, or The Doppelgängerin Unveiled", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 6, No. 2/3, pp. 143-165.
LASCH CRISTOPHER, 1995, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, New York-London: W.W. Norton & Co.
LEHMANN NICHOLAS, 1999, *The Big Test. The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux.
MARINOFF LOU, 2003, *The Big Questions*, New York: Bloomsbury.
_____, 2007, *The Middle Way. Finding Happiness in a World of Extremes*, New York-London: Sterling.
MARKOVITS DANIEL, 2019, *The Meritocracy Trap. How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*, London: Penguin Press.
MAYHEW ROBERT (ed. by), 2005, *Essays on Ayn Rand's Anthem*, Oxford: Lexington Books.
MERRILL RONALD E., 2013, *Ayn Rand Explained. From Tyranny to Tea Party*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court.
MCNAMEE STEPHEN J. – MILLER ROBERT K. JR., 2014, *The Meritocracy Myth*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
NAGEL THOMAS, 1973, "Equal Treatment and Compensatory Discrimination", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, (2), pp. 348-363.
NOZICK ROBERT, 1974, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, New York: Basic Books.
RAWLS JOHN, 1971, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge: Belknap Press.
RONCAGLIA ALESSANDRO, 2019, *The Age of Fragmentation. A History of Contemporary Economic Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
SANDBERG JORGEN, 2000, "Understanding Human Competence at Work: An Interpretative Approach", *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 9-25.
SANDEL MICHAEL J., 2020, *The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good?*, London: Allen Lane.
TAFLER LOU, 2019, *Fair New World*, Cardiff (CA): Waterside Publishing.
THOMSON J., 1973, "Preferential Hiring", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, (2), pp. 366-369.
VON HAYEK FRIEDRICH A., 1982, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, London: Routledge.

_____, 1960, *The Constitution of Liberty*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
WALZER MICHAEL, 1983, *Spheres of Justice. A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, New York: Basic Books.
WILLIAMS RAY, 1958, "Democracy or Meritocracy? A vision of society in A.D. 2034", *Manchester Guardian*, 30 Oct., p. 10.
YOUNG MICHAEL DUNLOP, 1972, *Is Equality a Dream?*, London: Rita Hinden Memorial Fund.
_____, 1958, *The Rise of Meritocracy*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Abstract

THE SOCIETY OF INCOMPETENTS: CONTEMPORARY DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY AND MERITOCRACY

Keywords: Meritocracy, Dystopia, Equality, Competition, Discrimination.

The spectre of equality represents a threat to the free spontaneity of the individual and is often used as an element to depict aberrations in which citizens of imaginary civilisations are controlled by totalitarian powers. Apart from the great figures of dystopian literature, mention may be made of Rand's novel *Anthem* or Hartley's *Facial Justice*. In both dystopian novels, the principle of equality is the means used to reduce the value of individuality and annihilate human nature. However, as affirmed by many constitutional charters of contemporary democracies – like the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union –, the principle of equality is a useful instrument to avoid discrimination based on gender, race, religion, etc. This indicates the existence of an undeniable tension concerning the role and functions of the principle of equality. One of them is what John Gray identifies as the opposition between equality and meritocracy concepts.

This seemingly irreducible contrast is the central subject of two modern dystopian novels: Marinoff's *Fair New World* and Grant's *Incompetence*. The latter narrates the events of a cynical detective in search of a murderer who will take him on a journey far and wide within an imaginary Europe, the United States of Europe, where the incompetence of people and institutions reigns supreme. In this case, equality does not transform the institutional structure of European states by making them authoritarian but creeps into democracy itself by making it dysfunctional. The innovation of these novels lies in the

emphasis on a new dimension of the fear of egalitarian danger. This is no longer evident in the contrast between democracies and totalitarianism but is hidden in the plots of the democracies themselves.

ALESSANDRO DIVIDUS
Università degli Studi di Torino
alessandro.dividus@unito.it
ORCID: 0000-0003-4481-7939

EISSN 2037-0520
DOI: 10.69087/STORIAEPOLITICA.XVI.3.2024.09