

## Meritocracy: Allocation of Social Positions or Economic Rewards?

---

Irene Prix: Limits of Meritocracy. How Fields of Study and Gender Segregation Affect Social Stratification in Finland. Turku: Research Unit for the Sociology of Education, University of Turku, 2014, 197 s. ISBN 978-951-29-5695-1.

---

The doctoral thesis of Irene Prix aims to subject the idea of meritocracy as a principle of social stratification to closer scrutiny, both theoretically and empirically. The topic is relevant scientifically as well as from the perspective of public debate, e.g. with regard to the debate on income inequality. Prix asks: What do we actually mean if we see meritocracy as an ideal?

The thesis consists of three original empirical articles, with Prix as the sole author. The first

article deals with trends of gender segregation in education across educational levels in Austria and Finland, the second looks at gender differences in occupational stratification among higher education graduates in four countries, and the third one presents analyses of the joint impact of educational level and field of study on earnings stratification in Finland. The summary section not only summarizes the content of the articles, but also adds a major contribution in the form of a long theoretical essay that explores the role of individuals' achievement in previous scholarship on social stratification. The main argument here is that even though the idea of basing the *social positions* of individuals on individual merit is old, the idea of allocating *economic rewards* based on individual achievement is new, and that sociological status attainment research is most compatible with this idea. Also the limits of individualistic accounts of status attainment are emphasized.

The empirical findings demonstrate that the advantage of a higher educational level, in terms of attaining a higher occupational status or higher earnings, depends on the field of study. Furthermore, this advantage depends on gender, and the differences between fields are related to gender seg-

regation in education. Altogether, the argument of the thesis is that the effects of educational level on status attainment are not uniform, and this challenges individualistic, meritocratic accounts of social stratification.

The first article is rather descriptive and less tightly connected to the overall aim of the thesis, concerning the limits of meritocracy, than the other two articles. The second one is an ambitious attempt to assess the complex interdependencies between the effects of gender, gender segregation in the field of study, the type of degree, and the employment sector on occupational status in four countries. There might be even too much complexity in the design of this article, but Prix still manages to draw sound conclusions. Nevertheless, I see the third article as the collection's strongest one. It has a sturdy theoretical basis, which is tied clearly to the empirical analysis, which again demonstrates skilful use of quantitative research methods without excessive complexity. The summary section presents a very ambitious theoretical assessment. It mostly succeeds in its goals, even if some arguments would still need clarification, and some claims are debatable. The theoretical discussion nevertheless has a strong plot that the reader can follow throughout, making

it enjoyable to read. The original articles and the summary section form a coherent whole, even if the scope of the summary article is wider than that of the empirical articles.

It is especially due to the theoretical essay that the thesis stands out. Prix has put a lot of effort into the discussion that begins from Plato, covers selected Enlightenment thinkers, and ends up in sociological critiques of meritocracy, such as those offered by feminist scholars. She demonstrates convincingly that in past thinkers' views on social stratification, meritocracy does not necessarily entail higher economic rewards for those seen as merited, and that the "meritocratic story" is insufficient when explaining social stratification.

Considering the main shortcomings of the essay, the first is that the concept of meritocracy could have been defined more clearly. Prix portrays the (contemporary) concept of meritocracy in short as "the idea of favouring achievement over ascription as the overriding principle for both selecting and rewarding individuals within the hierarchy of social positions" (p. 95). However, there is some ambiguity in the more detailed definitions, namely whether educational level is equated with ability and skill, and whether

material rewards are distributed based on individual performance or on the characteristics of the individual's social position, qualification or work. The second main shortcoming of the essay is not demonstrating clearly enough that the idea of meritocratic allocation of economic rewards is indeed found in status attainment research as an idea *separate* from the meritocratic selection into social positions. Rather, income, as well as occupational status and prestige, are all presented in the thesis as indicators of social position used in status attainment research.

The individualistic tendency of status attainment research is demonstrated more clearly. Prix argues that explanations of status attainment have focused mostly on the relative importance of ascription versus individual achievement, especially educational qualification levels, and that the importance of institutional characteristics of educational systems and of political and economic contexts in the labour market have been neglected.

The empirical articles demonstrate strong theoretical and methodological skills as well. Prix is able to use simple empirical observations, such as the dependence of the effect of educational level on education-

al field, to challenge a whole research paradigm. Altogether, the thesis is a valuable reminder of the limits of methodological individualism.

**Timo M. Kauppinen**