

Meritocracy as an Ideology for Neoliberalism: A *Korean Case*

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Abstract

This paper considers meritocracy as a new social problem in Korea that has emerged since the IMF crisis in 1997. Drawing upon Daniel Markovitz' recent analysis of meritocracy in America, I emphasize the connection between the neoliberalization of society and the popularization of the belief in meritocratic justice. I pay particular attention to the controversy over the conversion of irregular workers at the Incheon International Airport Corporation into regular employees and show that this severe conflict among people who do not belong to the few rich illustrates the deceptive nature of meritocracy. As I argue, it not only widens the wealth gap between the wealthy few and the many poor but also engenders various forms of antagonism in society, transforms humans into a form of capital, incapacitates the register of the societal, and stirs up animosity towards discussions of political correctness. My claim is that while meritocratic rules are essential for a modern democratic and liberal society, they should be regarded as rules subordinate to a higher moral and political principle, such as solidarity.

Keywords: Meritocracy, neoliberalism, fairness, justice, solidarity

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I. Introduction

As is well known, the term “meritocracy” was coined by the British politician and sociologist, Michael Young. In his 1958 essay *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Young predicted that a future British society where individuals would be judged and rewarded based on their intelligence and aptitude would become a new class society ruled by a few elites. Today, we can observe that meritocracy has become a popular and dominant doctrine in Korea, enticing people with its seemingly egalitarian promise to assess individuals based on their skills, capacities, competencies, and aptitude, while disregarding factors that are not attainable by one’s efforts, such as wealth, familial background, and social status. However, there are mounting concerns about the adverse effects of meritocracy, such as the widening wealth gap, increased social division, and a declining quality of life. This suggests a significant disparity between the ideals of meritocracy and the reality on the ground, prompting questions about the relationship between these social problems and the concept of meritocracy. Is the issue a failure to establish a perfect meritocratic system, or is it an inherent flaw within meritocracy itself? If the former is the case, our efforts should be focused on reforming social and legal institutions to effectively implement meritocracy throughout society. However, if the latter is true, we must challenge the prevailing discourse of meritocracy and explore alternative perspectives on social justice.

In the following sections, I will examine some examples of Korean meritocracy, with particular attention to the recent controversy surrounding the conversion of irregular workers at the Incheon International Airport Corporation to regular workers. My argument centers on the notion that these issues represent new social problems stemming from meritocracy and that meritocracy serves as an ideology for neoliberalism. Throughout this study, I will emphasize the importance of considering the historical context of meritocracy and the danger of naturalizing it. By exclusively taking up the concept of meritocracy, which entails the distribution of social resources based on merit rather than wealth or social status, we can identify similar social and political phenomena across different times and places that could

be regarded as instances of meritocracy. For instance, we can trace back to Plato's *Republic* and recognize his idea of rule by a philosopher-king as a classic example of meritocracy. However, an ahistorical understanding of meritocracy of this kind carries the risk of obscuring the historical specificity of today's meritocracy and the urgency of the social problems it engenders. Especially when considering today's Korea, understanding the emergence and development of meritocracy as a dominant concept of social justice requires placing it within the context of the global expansion of neoliberalism since the fall of the Eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War. In this regard, I will draw upon Daniel Markovitz' recent analysis of contemporary American society, where he discusses the concept of the meritocracy trap and provides insightful characterizations of meritocracy as a neoliberal ideology. Building upon Markovitz's critical analysis of the meritocratic-neoliberal complex, I will delve into the moral and political consequences brought about by meritocracy within the context of Korean examples. In conclusion, I will argue that while meritocratic rules for fairness have their place in our democratic-liberal society, they should not be regarded as the fundamental tenets of social justice. Instead, we should strive to develop an alternative perspective on social justice, one that emphasizes the concept of solidarity as a higher principle to which meritocratic rules are subordinated. Thus, this paper, as a whole, pursues a broadly sociological approach to Korean meritocracy rather than a strictly philosophical study. This endeavor aims to contribute to ongoing ethical and philosophical engagements with today's Korean society.¹

¹ While this paper does not directly deal with Confucianism, I believe and hope that my broad sociological approach can offer a concrete and realistic understanding of meritocratic phenomena in contemporary Korean society. Such an understanding is essential for fostering constructive ethical and philosophical reflections, including those rooted in Confucianism. For a more comprehensive analysis of Korean society and its republican character in relation to the Confucian tradition, see in particular Jang (2020).

II. The Case of Incheon International Airport Corporation and Korean Meritocracy

The term “meritocracy” serves as a valuable conceptual tool for comprehending contemporary Korean society, as it sheds light on distinct social phenomena that might otherwise remain obscure. These meritocratic phenomena often manifest in antagonistic ways, as evidenced by the intense controversy surrounding the conversion of irregular works at the Incheon International Airport Corporation into regular employees, the bitter confrontation between misogyny and misandry, and the accusations made by some university students that cleaning workers are infringing upon their right for learning. As I will discuss in the following sections, these social conflicts commonly originate from the widely held belief that social justice depends on ensuring fair competition and that, therefore, a key issue in achieving social justice revolves around ensuring equal opportunities and recognizing individual efforts. This distinctly meritocratic belief further entails the seeming legitimate notions that it is natural and just for more competent individuals to enjoy greater rewards and happier lives, creating a divide between winners and losers. While these meritocratic beliefs may seem appealing, their popularity does not inherently make them natural, right, or just. Instead, the wide acceptance of meritocratic beliefs, in my view, merely reveals their ideological nature. Therefore, it is crucial to examine how those meritocratic beliefs became so prevalent and to analyze the sociological and historical factors at play.

To begin, Korea has undergone a remarkable transformation, both economically and politically. From being one of the poorest countries in the world in the 1950s, it has now become a highly developed nation ranking tenth globally in nominal GDP in 2021 (The World Bank 2023). Its political progress is also noteworthy, transitioning from a three-decade military dictatorship in the 1960s–1980s to a successful democratic government through a series of pro-democratic movements. The democratization of Korea is considered successful not only due to the establishment of a democratic electoral system but, more fundamentally, because of the high level of citizen participation, which is crucial for a thriving democratic society. But the remarkable

development that Korea achieved in a relatively short period of time encountered a crisis in 1997. This year marked a significant turning point in modern Korean history as the country was hit by a foreign exchange crisis, which was part of the Asian financial crisis. Faced with the threat of sovereign defaults, the Korean government resorted to the IMF's bailout program and was somehow compelled to undergo intensive restructuring. This restructuring aimed to align Korea with the so-called global standards. Consequently, restrictions on foreign agencies' investments were reduced, mergers and acquisitions between foreign and Korean financial institutions were legalized, and some public enterprises were privatized. The most significant restructuring, however, was the mass redundancies, which directly impacted on the lives of citizens. Under the guise of "labor flexibility," the use of dispatched labor and temporary positions became commonplace, resulting in significant instability and insecurity for workers. Ultimately, what was normalized was a fierce competition for survival in the flexible labor market, necessitating hard work to succeed in this competition.

Consequently, the comprehensive restructuring initiated in 1997 successfully transformed Korea into a neoliberal society, one that subjects the nation to the supranational influences of financial capital and upholds a set of values that endorse global capital movements, including hard work, relentless competition, and the winner-takes-all principle. In my view, comprehending the rise of meritocracy as a prevailing concept of social justice in Korea requires a thorough consideration of the historical context of the nation's neoliberalization, which began in 1997.

The recent debate on the conversion of irregular workers at Incheon Airport to regular workers vividly illustrates that and how meritocracy gains discursive power under the neoliberal regime. In 2017, the airport announced plans to transition the temporary employment positions of 10,000 workers into regular positions. The plan stipulated that 80% of the 10,000 irregular employees would be hired by the airport's three subsidiary companies, with the remaining 20% being hired directly by the airport as regular workers. There was no dispute regarding the workers who were to be hired by subsidiary companies, but those who

were to be employed directly by the state-run airport company sparked a fierce controversy. Opponents, including young job seekers as well as regular airport workers, argued that it was “unfair” to give permanent positions to irregular workers “without any tests,” especially since getting a job at the airport is already challenging, even with a strong resume and good test results (Jeon 2020, Yonhap 2020). This assertion was inaccurate because those who were to be hired as regular workers after 2017 were required to go through an open recruitment process. Furthermore, irregular workers, including security personnel who had been working at the airport since before 2017, could be considered well qualified for their jobs. Nevertheless, the opponents claimed that the conversion led to “inequality of opportunity, unfairness of the process, and reverse discrimination in the result” (Jeon 2020).

The case of the Incheon Airport above mentioned is just one example that demonstrates how meritocracy has become the primary framework for discussing social justice in Korea. Meritocracy posits that justice is achieved through equal opportunities and fair processes, which are typically ensured through objectively measurable means, often via tests. However, behind these appeals to meritocratic justice, we uncover a complex psychology that goes well beyond the simplistic language of meritocracy. First and foremost, the opponents’ argument reveals their perception of the competitiveness and difficulty of securing a job at the airport. Their feelings of competitiveness and difficulty were so strong that they clung to the distinction between those who passed tests and those who did not. Since a regular position at the airport required a significant amount of effort, they could not recognize as their peers those whom they believed had not exerted the same level of effort as they had. This can be understood as a compensatory mentality, but there is something deeper at play. We need to pay attention, therefore, second, to the fact that in a highly competitive environment, a regular job has become a scarce resource and has gained a sense of class. Getting a regular position, in other words, is no longer just about job security; it has become a symbol of decent social status that is not to be shared with others. What the opponents were actually trying to defend was their privileged status, which they believed they had earned through their efforts, rather than a pursuit of social justice. Behind meritocratic

justice lies a class mindset.

In light of what I have discussed, perhaps we can rightly say that what truly occurred in the Incheon Airport case was a struggle among people belonging to the same lower class under the neoliberal regime, competing for what was perceived as a scarce resource. As I will discuss later, a meritocratic-neoliberal system only exacerbates inequality and divides society into two poles, the few who are rich and the many who are poor. In this class system, neither the regular employees who objected to the conversion nor the irregular employees whose conversion was objected to belong to the few rich.

At this point, it is important to note that neoliberal poverty has little to do with absolute poverty that can be mathematically measured, such as household income. Instead, it is primarily associated with the social, moral, and spiritual marginalization of the many poor or non-elite workers. Therefore, we should recognize that the language of meritocratic justice spoken by the regular workers at Incheon Airport and young job seekers fueled, exacerbated, and justified conflicts among those who are similarly alienated from wealth, rather than leading to the achievement of fairness and justice. In a straightforward sense, the expression of justice as fairness only contributed to the disintegration of society. We should also acknowledge that both opposing parties were operating under the same historical condition of normalizing irregular labor since 1997, which is part of the global spread of neoliberalism. If obtaining a regular position at the airport seems like a scarce resource requiring a challenging qualification test, it is because regular jobs have been replaced with irregular ones, which has now become the norm.

III. Meritocracy as a Neoliberal Ideology

Regarding social phenomena that can be considered in terms of Korean meritocracy, some sociologists have focused on what we might call a Korean mindset or character. For instance, Park (2021) suggests that the concept of equality preferred by Koreans does not center around universal equality applying to all members of society but reflects a

particularist asymmetry between the individual, “me,” and the wealthy, rejecting another psychological analysis that posits Koreans have a pseudo-sociologist mindset based on equality-oriented mentality (144–47). While these psychological approaches offer valuable insights into Koreans’ meritocratic behavior, they carry the risk of naturalizing Korean meritocracy by suggesting, for instance, that the particularistic sense of equality is inherent to the Korean character or mentality. To mitigate this risk, it is important to consider the popularity of meritocracy as a global phenomenon linked to the spread of neoliberalism.

Daniel Markovitz’s recent book, *The Meritocracy Trap*, provides insightful observations about the connection between meritocracy and neoliberalism. Markovitz calls himself a meritocrat in the sense that he had benefited from an elite education system before becoming a Law School Professor at Yale University, and that he now plays a role in producing new elites at this elite training center. Similar to Michael Young, Markovitz acknowledges the pivotal role of education plays in perpetuating a class-based society. Indeed, education is ambivalent because it can serve as a means of upward social mobility, but it can also perpetuate hereditary class succession. Both authors are concerned that in a society that prioritizes competition based on objective measurements of capability, education becomes a means for solidifying the existing class structure. Such a competitive society compels people to make more investments in education than others, and those who can afford more investment will ultimately come out ahead. In this situation, education deepens inequality rather than ensures equality of opportunity.

The essential role played by education for a class society is one of the key points emphasized by both authors of meritocracy, Young and Markovitz. Markovitz, however, offers a more pointed critique of education, arguing that under the regime of meritocracy, schools become places for “accumulating human capital” (2019, 38). He points out that those who successfully pass all the tests required by meritocratic education go on to secure high-skilled, high-paying jobs. These elite workers who earn a high salary in return for their investment of time and effort, nonetheless experience the same pains

as non-elite workers who failed to enter the elite educational system or pass the tests required for getting the high-paying jobs. For those products of the elite educational system end up working as exploited hard laborers in “white-collar salt mines,” including “tech companies, banks, law and consulting firms, and even large corporations” (41). The white-collar salt miners, then, constantly suffer from extreme workloads, pressures to compete, self-instrumentalization, the loss of self, drug addition, suicide, and more. For this reason, Markovitz underlines that the new ruling class, the meritocrats, differ from the aristocrats of ancient times. While old aristocrats were allowed to be idle, indolent, unskilled, and incompetent, and they had the freedom to be themselves, today’s meritocrats are enslaved by the capitalist system and cannot truly be themselves. More significantly, the wealth of meritocrats comes from their own “training and skills,” whereas the old elite acquired wealth from “land and (later) factories” (36). That being said, a meritocratic individual is herself an “asset,” and a meritocrat is an “embodied training and skill, or human capital” (36). To be more precise, a meritocrat can be considered human capital in the sense that she is a product of extensive investments in elite education and serves as a means to facilitate technical innovation, create value, and enable the flow of financial capital. While the classic socialist Karl Marx identified primitive accumulation of capital as the origin of capitalism or of the division between possessors and non-possessors of the means of production, the law school professor at Yale, witnessing the relentless evolution of financial capital, views the accumulation of human capital as the driving force behind capitalism today. For him, today’s schools are places for accumulating human capital.

In accordance with Markovitz’s insightful analysis, we can assert that meritocracy is closely intertwined with a system that considers the human being, conceived as embodiment of training and skills, as the primary form of capital. From this perspective, when a highly skilled worker earns a high income, this is “not on account of any extraordinary effort but rather on account of the economic value of this immense stock of human capital” (36).

As Markovitz emphasizes, meritocracy does not make anyone happy, yet it has become the “dogma of the age”—a general framework

within which most of discussions of economic inequality take place (16). This paradox raises a question of how meritocracy comes to gain such strong persuasive power. Indeed, it is easy to see the intuitive appeal of the language of meritocracy. It offers the promise of fair competition by excluding anything unrelated to an individual's effort from the determination of winners and losers. This simple and concise language creates the appearance that meritocracy upholds our democratic society's rational and egalitarian commitment. However, the promise of meritocracy is purely abstract, while the realities are so complex that it is never possible to entirely separate purely meritocratic elements, achievable solely through individual effort, from non-meritocratic factors. Consequently, it is evident that the ideal of a pure meritocracy is nothing more than a fancy. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the popular belief in meritocracy as a principle of justice arises from people's confusion between reality and ideals. The power of meritocracy lies in its deceitful nature. It assumes an extremely individualist perspective in which all achievements are attributed to a single factor: an individual's effort. This assumption is deceitful not only in its fanciful nature but also in a more insidious sense, as it perpetuates inequality of opportunity by creating the illusion that everyone has an equal chance. It may make it seem, for instance, that education provides an equal opportunity for success, while concealing the fact that educational opportunities heavily depend on their parent's educational, economic, social, and cultural background.

Worth noting with respect to meritocracy's deception is Markovitz's insightful suggestion that meritocracy not only increases inequality but also justifies it through the theory of "good inequality" (14–15). This economic view argues that inequality is justifiable as long as it benefits lower classes through a trickle-down effect. According to proponents of this view, the elite's effective labor generates enough wealth to support everyone, including the losers of meritocratic games. On these grounds, they claim that meritocratic inequality is just as benign as it is harmless. This way, the theory of good inequality turns the conception of inequality as a significant problem into a misconception and gives a moral guise to inequality by portraying it as something positive.

In line with Markovitz's analysis, we can now pin down the ways in which meritocracy serves as an ideology for neoliberal free-market capitalism. As discussed above, meritocratic education and labor transform a natural human being into accumulated capital. But meritocracy goes even further and legitimizes this transformation by promoting testing, competition, and hard work as preferable norms. This ideology that naturalizes these meritocratic norms makes us feel as though we are not living a good life if we fail a test, lose a job competition, or do not work hard. It thus makes it hard, almost impossible indeed, to imagine that there are alternatives to a meritocratic life—ways of life in which we can escape from the treadmill of endless competition without being accused of being lazy. Meritocracy also provides an ideological support for the perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism by justifying and moralizing inequality. As I will later discuss in detail, this purely economic view completely ignores the moral harms of meritocracy. It leads one to believe that moral problems may be treated as insignificant, making it seem that economic efficiency is of the utmost importance, and moral concerns are luxurious. However, as I argue below, the moral harms that meritocracy brings cannot be offset by the wealth that it offers in its association with neoliberalism.

VI. Moral Harms of Meritocracy

In terms of the problems afflicting a neoliberal-meritocratic society, we can first highlight inequality, i.e., the increasing gap between the rich and the poor. But the harms caused by meritocracy extend beyond economic polarization. In addition to the class division between high-skilled elite workers and the rest, we observe various forms of conflict, confrontation, and antagonism permeating society. These social divisions cannot be mitigated by the wealth generated by the meritocratic-neoliberal system, contrary to the beliefs of the theorists of good inequality.

In Korea, social division is manifesting in various forms of conflict. The conflict between regular and irregular workers at Incheon Airport

is one example. Over the last three decades, gender conflicts have also grown increasingly severe, resulting in a bitter confrontation between misogyny and misandry which has become a major societal problem difficult to resolve. Another case is the recent lawsuit filed by three students at a prestigious university against cleaning workers for violating their right to learn due to assembly noise. This incident shows that the close solidarity between university students and workers, which played a key role for the pro-democratic movement during the 1960s to 1980s, has weakened.

Despite the differences among the groups involved and the specific reasons for the confrontations, the conflicts mentioned above share some common factors. Above all, we observe that those conflicts were commonly framed in the language of meritocracy, often invoking the concept of fairness. As we have already seen, the regular workers of Incheon Airport expressed their grievances about the airport's conversion policy as unfair. In the case of the gender conflict, men in their twenties claim that instituting female conscription and removing preferential policies for women is fair, while young women complain that the veteran bonus point system is unfair as it results in fewer job opportunities for them. The accusation made by the three university students is grounded in the belief that it was unfair for current workers to interrupt the future workers' right to prepare for success. These instances of social division converge, second, on the fact that the conflicts occur among people who do not belong to the class of the few rich. Yet, what truly matters is not their social status nor income level, but their sense of being discriminated against. This feeling of unfair treatment is so intense that they come to resent those they believe they are unfairly compared to. Men resent women, and women resent men; the university students accused the cleaning workers, not the university which had the duty to ensure students' right to learn. Therefore, we should understand their appeal to fairness as an expression of their personal frustration and dissatisfaction rather than a genuine demand for social justice.

Considering what has been discussed above, we can now call into question the naïve optimism that prevails in the minds of proponents of good inequality. If the increasing wealth gap between the rich and

the poor is considered on the ground that the great wealth of society as a whole would benefit all members, how, then, can we explain the intense feelings of dissatisfaction permeating our society that are ready to turn into anger and hatred towards others? Why is it that the Koreans in the twenty-first century, who enjoy a high standard of living incomparable to that of Koreans of two or three decades ago and take pride in their country's being ranked among the most developed countries, feel so frustrated, unstable, and desperate? The proponents of good inequality fail to recognize the simple truth that money cannot buy happiness.

In an attempt to address the questions raised above, we can once again refer to Markovitz's analyses of American meritocracy. Markovitz comments that "the middle class has not become poor" but only inherited "a stagnant, depleted, and shrinking world" (2019, 21). At the midcentury, he points out, the middle class enjoyed a decent social status, self-confidence, and substantial wealth, but they were no longer at the center of life in the United States because high-skilled elite labor has taken their place with the development of new technologies. Under this situation, meritocracy morally diminishes the working and middle class by ascribing success and failure to individual responsibility. Meritocracy assumes an extremely individualist foundation, as mentioned above, and portrays success as virtuous and failure as blameworthy. It does so by linking success to the individual's effort, hard work, and sincerity, while associating failure with idleness. While this moral distortion is associated with an individual person's psychology, which is structured and conditioned by meritocratic social settings, Markovitz goes on to highlight a far more serious harm operating at the social and political level. He draws attention to meritocratic elites' "selective" rejection of racial and sexist prejudices as cardinal moral vices and makes a provocative claim that "meritocracy demands extreme vigilance against prejudice in order to shore up the inequalities it seeks to legitimate against their increasing size and instability" (61). He acknowledges that the rejection of racism and sexism fits well to the moral foundation of meritocracy because it would be undermined if any form of prejudice is accepted. However, he draws attention to the reality in which class inequality surpasses sexist

or racial inequality.

Regarding Markovitz's analyses mentioned above, we may not need to delve into the discussion of the relevance of his argument that inequality of class in America has increased to the point where it exceeds the level of inequality among different racial or gender groups. What is of particular interest to us is his point about the monopolization of morality by elite workers. As he shows, meritocratic elites monopolize morality not simply through the meritocratic labor ethics, which gives moral guise to success, but also through their political commitment to anti-racism and anti-sexism. Markovitz does not mean to suggest that anti-racism or anti-sexism is inherently flawed. His concern is rather about the meritocratic reality in which recourse to political correctness work for covering up the increasing inequality of class.² It would be incorrect to say that Korean society is facing exactly the same problems as those that Markovitz suggests are characteristic of the U.S. today. This is especially true given that in the present-day United States, critical engagement in anti-racism and anti-sexism, no matter how deceitful they are, are considered a moral imperative for progressive politics. Despite the differences in the American and Korean political and discursive circumstances, Markovitz's analysis still gives an important clue for understanding the increasing aversion in Korean society to discussions about political correctness. Worth noting in this regard is Markovitz's point about the working and middle class's deprivation of moral language. In his terms, meritocracy "denies ordinary Americans any high-minded language through which to explain and articulate the harms and wrongs of their increasing inequality" (2019, 63). When a notion of merit-based social

² In a similar vein, Nancy Fraser offers a critical viewpoint on new progressive social movements, paying attention to their alliance with neoliberalism. According to her, the egalitarian and emancipatory ideals of feminism, antiracism, environmentalism, and LGBTQ+ rights are "interpreted in a specific, limited way that was fully compatible with the Goldman Sachsification of the US economy (Fraser 2019, 13)." What proved decisive for the collusion of these progressive ideals with neoliberalism, she highlights, was the "fateful" "reduction of equality to meritocracy" as "the progressive-neoliberal program for a just status order did not aim to abolish social hierarchy but to 'diversify' it, 'empowering' 'talented' women, people of color, and sexual minorities to rise to the top" (Fraser 2019, 13-14).

justice, where fairness is the primary principle, becomes the dominant language of a society, the working and middle class are deprived of any discursive means to express their grievances and demand changes to situations they see as unjust. Confined to the sole language of meritocracy, they direct their complaints towards other members who are in the same socioeconomic boat but appear to benefit from the society's egalitarian institutions, rather than addressing the real source of their problems—the meritocratic belief and system itself. This type of political distortion caused by meritocracy can lead to a conservative shift, which contributed to the election of Donald Trump and the conservative party's victory in the Korean presidential election in 2022. The wealth that meritocracy provides can never offset its moral and political harms but rather conceals them.

V. Solidarity: Where We Are Now?

The considerations above, exploring the problems of meritocracy following Markovitz's analysis of the American society, lead us to reconsider what the right question is. Should we, for instance, strive to discover faultless methods for ensuring fairness in competitions? Should we work towards inventing rules that would make the meritocratic principles operate perfectly? But these questions are problematic, I argue, because they presuppose that social justice can be equated with fairness and take this naïve and abstract notion as the golden rule. As the title of Markovitz' work suggests, those questions will only catch us in a trap of meritocracy, reinforcing meritocracy and exacerbating the social problems it generates. If we want to properly address the issue of social justice, it is imperative to move beyond the framework of meritocracy and reduce its social influence. By this, I do not mean that we should completely abandon all meritocratic rules. In a democratic-liberal society, it is indeed just to differentiate job opportunities and incomes based on individuals' competence, capabilities, and performance. However, the meritocratic rule governing fair competition should not be allowed to dictate all aspects of society or an individual's entire life. It should be considered a practical guideline

whose application is guided by a higher, moral principle.

My claim is that we need to subvert the discursive hegemony of meritocracy and work toward creating a counter-hegemony to the ideology of meritocracy. I would therefore like to draw attention to the fact that there is nothing natural in thinking of social justice in distributive terms of fairness. Instead, we can consider social justice primarily in communitarian terms of solidarity and take this as the higher, moral principle for guiding the practical application of meritocratic rules. At this point, Karl Polanyi's concerns about the marketization of society remain relevant. As the meritocratic-neoliberal regime permeates society with the rules of the free market, society must protect itself from dissolution by the market's domination. Consequently, the rule of meritocracy leaves us with an urgent theoretical task of articulating the sense in which we can call a certain collection of people, institutions, rules, and customs a society, particularly in today's neoliberal-meritocratic context. This inquiry into the proper definition of society, which is to be updated to meet today's circumstances, I suggest, is to be pursued through a study of the concept of solidarity, which will serve as a counter-hegemony to meritocracy.

This theory of solidarity that I have just suggested goes beyond the scope of this paper and requires a series of separate serious studies. Instead of attempting to articulate the sense and forms of solidarity we would have to pursue, I would here like to pose a question about our past to clarify again where we are now: have we ever had a society grounded on the principle of solidarity? If we restrict ourselves to the period after the Korean War and if we understand solidarity provisionally in a loose sense of a public bond among citizens, we may well refer to some historical events such as the June Democracy Movement in 1987 and the candlelight rallies in 2016. Assuredly, these sporadic events express a strong spirit of solidarity through which citizens band together to achieve a common, public goal. But the spirit of solidarity should be distinguished from the principle of solidarity used to form a society at the institutional level. If we therefore set aside those events expressing the spirit of solidarity and focus on the formation of modern Korean society at the institutional level, a rather

dispiriting picture emerges. The Korean anthropologist and sociologist, Moon-young Jo's comments on the formation of welfare system in Korea since the 1960s are worth mentioning in this context. She notes that European countries developed their welfare systems with the purpose of managing poverty and unemployment and based them on the principle of social solidarity, prioritizing the working class and poor population (2022, 28–29, 32–33).³ In contrast, Korea did not develop a welfare system aimed at guaranteeing the minimum standard of living for struggling workers up until 1999. During the period between 1960s and 1990s, a set of state-led policies for economic growth—for instance, fiscal welfare by income tax deduction, welfare based on savings, creation of employment through construction projects, etc.—somehow served as an alternative means to the welfare system (34). But those policies for practical welfare, centered on savings and income tax deduction, were beneficial to the high-salary class and the middle class (35). Moreover, as the consecutive enactment of social security systems—Public Officials Pension Act in 1960, Veterans' Pension Act in 1963, and Private School Staff Pension Act in 1973—shows, the professional groups conducive to maintenance of the regime were first included in the welfare system (34). Thus, she underlines that the working class and poor population were excluded from the welfare system, and that the state-led governance of Korea turned welfare into a matter of “inclusion and exclusion, and social abandonment” rather than “incorporation and solidarity” (34). If we define “the social” provisionally as “a discursive, material, and institutional edifice invented for the sake of keeping maintenance and stability of life from the market's destructive power,” then, the Korean form of the social can be said, she suggests, to rest on “surviving strategies of each families” rather than “social security based on communal solidarity” (33).

The above consideration about the formation of the Korean welfare system shows that the spirit of solidarity, which exerted a great power in the democratization of Korea, has not translated into an institutional principle. In this sense, we can say that the modern Korea

³ For her critical remarks on the European welfare system, see in particular Jo (2022, 30–32).

has been formed as a society that is not united through a public bond of solidarity. In relation to this issue of solidarity, we can pose a further question as to whether the remarkable development of Korea, known as the “Miracle on the Han River,” in fact, was not a meritocratic success. This makes us refer to the notion of human capital, which Markovitz used for a critical characterization of meritocracy. As discussed previously, the notion of human capital involves the view of the human being as an asset in which one can invest, and investments that are expected to pay off in the future. More precisely, it presumes that one can invest in people especially through education, training, and health, and that these investments increase their productivity by improving their knowledge and skills (Cf. Goldin 2019, 148). While Adam Smith and Irving Fisher are regarded as the first users of the notion of human capital, it was by the economists of the Chicago School— Jacob Mincer, Gary Becker, and Theodore Schultz, especially—that the notion in question became popular (Cf. Goldin 2019, 148–49). Thus, it is not hard to see that the development of human capital theories since the 1960s goes hand in hand with the increasing awareness that human knowledge and skills are more important than any other factors for technological innovation and economic growth.

Today, the notion of human capital is thus widely used by educators, entrepreneurs, and governmental bodies for setting and achieving various goals. What interests us here is the Human Capital Index (HCI) that the World Bank has been publishing since 2018, as part of their Human Capital Project (HCP). As they present the HCP as “a global effort to accelerate more and better investments in people for greater equity and economic growth,” we notice that they prioritize equity over economic growth and attempt to “close the massive HCI gap in the world” (The World Bank 2021, 1). More precisely, the HCP endeavors to “accelerate towards a world where all children can achieve their full potential,” and the HCI measures “the human capital that a child born today can expect to attain by her 18th birthday” (1). They thus highlights, on the one hand, “how current health and education outcomes shape the productivity of the next generation of workers” and “the importance for governments and societies [to invest] in the human capital of their citizens.” On the other hand, their focus is on

protecting “hard-won advances in human capital, particularly among the poor and vulnerable” (1). Interestingly, four East-Asian countries are ranked among the top four: Singapore (0.88), Hong Kong (0.81), Japan (0.80), and Korea (0.80) (41).

In light of our previous discussion on meritocratic problems, the Human Capital Project by the World Bank appears to involve plural purposes which unlikely fit together. The primary aim of the HCP seems to consist in reducing global inequality by helping underdeveloped countries care the health and education of their children. However, its related aim involves helping these countries increase and accumulate human capital, which is subordinated to the logic of the neoliberal free market, according to our previous discussion. This reveals the fundamentally paradoxical logic of neoliberalism, which is hard to resolve. That is, we cannot but resort to neoliberal means to overcome neoliberal problems. Therefore, it seems that the HCP neglects the logical trap of neoliberalism, even though its practical concerns for and approaches to the poor and vulnerable in the world remain relevant. By implication, it lacks considerations about the future, specifically, what will happen when a poor country becomes developed and ranks high in the Human Capital Index (HCI). As discussed throughout this paper, Korea serves as an example of a country that has successfully developed its human capital but now faces severe problems as a result. From the perspective of a country that has experienced a meritocratic success but is suffering from meritocratic problems, we must offer a prospect for a better future, whether it be on solidarity as I suggested or something else. This is where we are now.

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