

The billionaire Bezos and Amazon Studios promote race and gender quotas

David Walsh
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Following in the wake of similar actions taken by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) in Hollywood, as well as the Disney empire, Amazon Studios—the television and film producer and distributor, and subsidiary of Amazon—has adopted an “Inclusion Policy” that is an unabashed race and gender quota system.

Such policies, which have an obvious public relations value in the present political context but come at little financial cost to giant corporations, have no socially or economically progressive substance. They do not represent any democratizing or, for example, anti-monopolistic trend. Film, television and other media remain firmly under the control of a handful of enormous firms—Disney, Comcast, AT&T, ViacomCBS, Sony and Fox, in particular.

These are not innocent or, even if over-zealous, “harmless” actions. The AMPAS, Disney and Amazon policies will benefit a thin, already affluent layer of African Americans, women, gays and others, but they will not widen the focus of film and television to take in the lives of the great mass of the population and its problems. On the contrary. It may seem paradoxical at first glance, but official “Inclusion” leads, in fact, to a further *social narrowing*, because (a) those to be “included” are simply more representatives of the aspiring and ambitious petty bourgeoisie and (b) the attention of writers and directors is deliberately directed away by these policies from the most pressing contemporary realities—above all, malignant social inequality and the stranglehold that billionaires like Amazon’s Jeff Bezos (who stepped down as the company’s CEO on July 5) currently exercise on American society. In fact, this “directing away” is one of the principal purposes of such quotas.

We noted last September in relation to the Academy’s new “Equity and Inclusion Initiatives”:

“What’s taking place, in effect, is an attempt to impose a second Production Code, the set of censorship regulations, enforced by an infamous political and quasi-religious apparatus, that from 1934 to the mid-1960s severely restricted American filmmakers.”

The original Production Code was enforced by a group of religious bigots, anti-Semites and anti-communists. The current gender and racial quotas are to be policed by “social justice” activists and such. However, like the earlier system, the new regulations, among other things, have a preventive character: they are meant to block American filmmaking as much as possible from undertaking a deep-going (and dangerous, as far as the powers that be are concerned) criticism of society’s foundations, in anticipation of conditions of mass political ferment.

The actual measures proposed by Amazon Studios are preposterous, a formula dreamed up by identity politics-oriented studio executives, lawyers and accountants, without genuine concern for artistic seriousness, skill or experience. To “reduce invisibility in entertainment,” Amazon aims “to include one character from each of the following categories for speaking roles of any size, and at minimum 50 percent of the total of these should be women: (1) lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender non-conforming/non-binary; (2) person with a disability; and (3) three regionally underrepresented racial/ethnic/cultural groups (e.g., in the US, three of the following: Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Middle Eastern/North African, or Asian/Pacific Islander or Multi-Racial). A single character can fulfill one or more of these identities.”

The Inclusion Policy further explains that each “film or series with a creative team of three or more people in above-the-line roles (Directors, Writers, Producers) should ideally include a minimum 30 percent women and 30 percent members of an underrepresented racial/ethnic group.” Amazon proposes similar quotas for each aspect of film and television production.

The Amazon policy statement includes plans to “give priority consideration to people who have been historically marginalized within the industry, including but not limited to disability, sexual orientation, religion, body size, age, nationality, gender identity, gender expression and people at the intersection of multiple underrepresented identities. This aspirational goal will increase to 50 percent by 2024. On

creative teams with fewer than three people, we prefer that at least one Writer, Director, or Producer be a woman and/or a member of an underrepresented racial/ethnic group. A single team member can fulfill one or more of these identities.”

This pledge that the “aspirational goal will increase to 50 percent by 2024” is repeated numerous times. It is both menacing and empty in its bureaucratic-legal doublespeak.

While Amazon Studios disingenuously claims that the “story comes first,” the section on “Inclusive Casting,” for example, asks prospective casting directors, “Have you developed criteria for the roles you will cast? If no, how will you determine who is the most qualified person for the job?” before adding, “Relying on your ‘gut’ or ‘the best person for the job’ are inherently biased processes that may skew your decision making. How will you counter this cognitive bias with criteria in the auditioning process?” By “criteria” Amazon clearly means the appropriate racial, gender and other similar qualifications.

Bezos’s studio grandly announces a commitment to “authentic portrayals.” In a film and television context, one might naively suppose this signifies a commitment to developing scripts and performances that authentically treat individual and collective human behavior, to “getting right” how people act with and towards one another. In fact, however, to Amazon and the upper-middle-class identity politics industry, authenticity means casting “actors in a role whose identity aligns with the identity of the character they will be playing (by gender, gender identity, nationality, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability) and in particular when the character is a member of an underrepresented group/identity.”

Again, this is a race and gender-fixated bureaucrat’s fever dream. Someone has apparently forgotten that if finding the perfect alignment between the identity of the given actor and character is the first priority, that diminishes or pushes entirely to the side the art of acting, and directing, and artistry in general.

In *The Men* (1950, Fred Zinnemann), Marlon Brando (in his first film role) played a wheelchair-bound World War II veteran. Brando checked himself into a Veterans Administration hospital to research the part and apparently remained in a wheelchair on and off the set for the duration of the film’s shooting. Did the actor successfully capture the physical and psychological reality of paraplegia, or would a non-professional paraplegic have been more convincing in the part? The question cannot be answered with absolute certainty, depending on the abilities of the particular “non-professional,” but there is certainly reason to believe that Brando, an able-bodied individual, was capable—because he brought his intellectual and artistic abilities and instincts to bear—of representing a condition that was not his own more

truthfully than someone hired because his identity might have aligned “with the identity of the character.” There are countless other examples one could cite—in fact, virtually the entire history of acting and drama.

In the Amazon policy and “playbook,” the extent to which a film or series might tell the truth about the world in an important fashion never comes up as an issue. Quality counts for nothing here. The quantity of opportunities for individuals from “underrepresented communities (women; underrepresented racial/ethnic groups; sexual orientation; gender identity; people with disabilities)” is everything. This, of course, is another side of the identity politics obsession: the intense desire of certain layers to share in the billions in profits generated by the entertainment industry. Again, the improvement in the conditions of already affluent African Americans, women and others will have no impact on the hardship faced by wide layers of the working population, black, white, immigrant and everybody else.

A genuine broadening of film and television production, which would include representations of truly underrepresented social layers and the appearance of performers from those layers, is urgently needed. But, as we have argued before, that is, above all, a matter of greater *social* inclusion, an interest in and depiction of the circumstances of the vast segment of the population that counts for nothing, and will still count for nothing under the AMPAS, Disney and Amazon strictures, in Hollywood and the entertainment industry as a whole—that is, the great mass of the working population.

Those impressed by the soothing words of Amazon and Disney about “inclusion,” “diversity,” “equity,” “accessibility” and “authenticity” should perhaps consider this. The richest man on the planet, Bezos, and a gigantic conglomerate that has gobbled up much of its competition and pays some of the highest executive salaries in America, Disney, are urging film and television artists to concentrate on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and the rest. Would it not be valuable to explore the economic and social questions they leave out, downplay and ignore—above all, to repeat, social inequality? Steps in that direction would already bring about an improvement in film and television “authenticity.”



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