

## SPECIAL REVIEW ESSAY SECTION

**Michael J. Sandel: *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?***  
London 2020: Allen Lane, 288 pp.

### The Lens of Morality, Dignity, and the Common Good

Can meritocracy become a tyrant, an unjust ruler? Has it? Both answered in the affirmative, these are the central questions of Michael J. Sandel's new book *The Tyranny of Merit*. In a meritocracy, the winners have earned their place, supposedly at least, and so have the losers. What could possibly go wrong? Quite a bit, it turns out. The winners come to suffer from hubris; the losers suffer humiliation. Sandel argues that more than anything else, this is the real venom that has poisoned public life in recent years. Quite apart from its wanting implementation, is meritocracy then even the right ideal by which to run our lives, our societies, our morality?

The venom has a history. Sandel traces it back as far as the schismata in the Christian church, which revolved, *inter alia*, around the question whether absolution can be earned, or whether it is a gift bestowed by the grace of God. If the former, then those who lead morally better lives (as per the standards set by the church) have reason to look down upon their fellow human beings: through their own virtue, they are better Christians than their peers. An interesting corollary of this situation is that God is not omnipotent. In dishing out absolution to the deserving, he is playing by the book.

The dual spirit of meritocracy has never gone away, and once every so often it breaks through the surface beneath which it is always lurking. Meritocracy returned to centre stage in the Reagan era, after which subsequent presidents doubled down on it.

Obama, whom Sandel classifies as an arch-meritocrat, used meritocracy as a means against racism. After all, he himself had been able to rise because he was given the chance; clearly the solution to systemic racism was making society more meritocratic. But Sandel argues that this is replacing one problem with another, and one downcast class with another.

The problem, according to Sandel, is in fact broader. Oftentimes, meritocracy is seen and used as a clean and value-neutral tool (labelled as 'smart'), which solves problems across party-political lines. The left in particular has espoused this construct, which has allowed it to sidestep an actual moral debate for decades. Until the voters walked away. And here we return to the original point, which is the terror that meritocracy unleashes on the souls of those who cannot keep up, and who are now given not only an economic cost to bear, but also a moral one. This was the real cause of Trumpism; not economic circumstances *per se*, but the belief internalised by many Trump voters that they had earned their place at the bottom of society; that meritocracy was not an ideal, but a description of the prevailing state of affairs. A classic case of adding insult to injury, one might say.

Language matters, and Sandel gives a researched account of the change in language used in society as well as by US presidents that signalled the change in perception and that drove meritocracy forward. Sandel finds phrases like 'being on the right side of history', rising 'as high as your talents and hard work will take you', and the like, supposedly signifying the

American dream, to be particularly misplaced, as well as the increasingly prevalent rhetoric of merit and desert, which now applies to health as well as wealth.

Insight into the callous side of meritocracy is not entirely new, as Sandel shows by digging up literature as old as a century that warns against exactly this: for those lower on the socioeconomic ladder, a perfect meritocracy is more emotionally violent than the worst aristocracy. This warning has clearly gone unheeded, but more than that, Sandel also shows how meritocracy harms the winners. Getting to the top does not come without a price, and ranking and grading behaviour becomes part of the winners' personalities. As a Harvard professor, Sandel has decades of first-hand experience to bring to the table on this point. The extensive and expensive preparations that teenagers undertake, which allow them to survive the gauntlet of ranking and grading, makes them internalise a feeling that they have earned their place, but also leaves them empty, unsure, and emotionally vulnerable. And *have* they earned their place? Their hard work is real enough, but building the CV that gets one into a selective college requires resources that most cannot muster. The arguments that talent and the disposition to use it are nobody's own doing, that the set of talents that society rewards is not something anyone controls, and that even the most entrepreneurial spirit benefits from the social and physical infrastructure that others have created, complete the case for the prosecution.

How to get out of this situation? Quoting Yale admissions tutors who believe that a random selection of students who meet certain minimum standards would yield just as good a class of students as the hyper-selected classes that are now common, Sandel proposes that competition for admission to prestigious colleges should assume the form of a threshold selection and a lottery applied to those who meet certain

minimum criteria. This, I might add, would be much more attainable for students from modest backgrounds than the top of a ranking that rewards expensive and exclusive extra-curricular activities like sailing, golf, cello lessons, and so on. In addition, we need to restore the dignity of work, and should give up the absurd notion that financial reward tends to track with the value for society. Further, we should move beyond the credentialism that reserves positions of power and influence almost exclusively for holders of prestigious degrees. Sandel (p. 98): 'It is more than a little troubling to notice that this is a reversion to the way things were before most working people had the right to vote'. We should do away with 'the last acceptable prejudice', that is, prejudice against the uneducated. And finally, we should return to a shared public life, 'a broad equality of condition' (p. 224) that rests on decency and dignity.

Sandel makes a strong case. He presents a shrewd analysis of the amalgam of follies that is our present meritocracy. While his focus is primarily America, much of what he writes applies elsewhere. Some of the book echoes well-known arguments about the failure of the left: its doubling down on deregulation, free markets, and small government, all in the name of meritocracy, instead of implementing traditional policies to protect those in need. But Sandel departs from this well-known critique, his meritocratic slant revealing that the classic materialistic angle of the winners and losers in globalisation misses much of the point. People are more than economic agents. People crave dignity and self-esteem just as much as a bath and a sandwich.

And Sandel is right, of course: every economic theory, right or wrong, intelligent or naive, honest or fraudulent, can serve as a legitimising system for those with an interest in the status quo. If, through effective propaganda, those whom it serves manage

to convince the wider population that an ideology is morally just or indeed that a conception is ideology-free ('smart'), then the riches it bestows upon a small part of the population can go unchecked. And incontestable meritocracy's propaganda potential is: those who deserve more, get more. Who could oppose that? And it is precisely this incontestability that makes it so difficult to pinpoint the flaws. The first response to an emerging unease is sought within the prevailing system of beliefs. Making the world *more* meritocratic, Sandel shows, has been the proposed solution to many a problem. Only when the earth keeps shaking do we inspect the deeper roots of our beliefs. This closer inspection, so goes Sandel's urgent message, should happen now regarding meritocracy.

Although the scope is different, and although the argument is very well made, this is not the first book in recent years to object to the meritocratic enterprise. Piketty [2013] quotes the founding principle of a selective Parisian college as stating that since their place in society is no longer inherited, the elite must now acquire the merits that justify their position: an open acknowledgement of the objective of maintaining a hereditary elite. He also observes the tautology we perpetrate when we ascribe merits to those who earn the big bucks, rather than insisting it should be the other way round. And both Piketty [2015] and Graeber [2018] take the measurability inroads to the problem: the whole idea of marginal productivity, which means that the economic output of a single person can be measured, is largely a theoretical construct that modern concepts of causation directly dismiss [Rothman 1976]. Like meritocracy then, this construct justifies inequalities without making the world a fair(er) place. Graeber also suggests that the popularity of the military among working-class Americans is rooted in the prospects it offers for dignity, success, and a feeling of belonging that is no-

where else to be found. And Sandel's discussion of the role of elite colleges could certainly be informed by the classic works on social reproduction by Bourdieu and Passeron [1990].

The argument could also have been broadened in scope to encompass the love market and aspects of intellectual life. It is well known that assortative mating has increased over recent decades. More and more, the meritocratic winners want their partners to be winners as well, and so finding a partner has, in some circles, become the competition that Sandel so loathes. Sandel mentions health, but not beauty and sex appeal, which are increasingly seen as a function of the talents and efforts of those who possess it, feeding into the hubris of the haves and the humiliation of the have-nots. In fact, even literature, which should convey beauty and sensitivity and brutality and pain, cannot be read nowadays without carefully avoiding the panting praise of the author and book on the dust cover: what prizes have been bestowed on the author, what acclaim they have won.

The philosophical and historical depth of the book notwithstanding, in one respect Sandel perhaps lets himself off too easy. Any system of beliefs and rules, whether it be an old religion or modern civic society and government, is there to make people behave in certain ways rather than others. Where would the church be if a murdering thief had the same chance of absolution as a baker who supplies an orphanage on a non-profit basis? Such a church would make a mockery of itself and would be ignored. There is also human physiology to reckon with: whatever ideology of modesty prevails, the brain finds few things so rewarding as the successful exercise of its faculties – just observe any child. It will be difficult, therefore, under any philosophy to ban hubris from the winners' psyche altogether. If ethics consists in giving a post hoc justification for our gut feel-

ings, which always win in the end, the conclusion then seems to be that yet another post hoc justification has simply reached the limits of our gut feelings. Perhaps the conclusion should just be that we have been overdoing it.

In sum, although the argument could have been made in both broader and deeper ways, it is clear to me that Sandel has written an important book that tells the reader where it really hurts. The simple analysis that the populist backlash is the result of material circumstances has always been too simple, but seeing the case made so well, and so historically and philosophically informed, is particularly convincing. Indeed, one might very well say that the standard analysis of discontent – that the populist backlash has its roots mainly in material circumstances – suffers from the same limitation as the political programme that was its cause: Sandel very convincingly argues that viewing everything through the prism of value-neutral, material circumstances is precisely the problem. Rather, we need to relearn how to talk and behave in terms of morality, dignity, and the common good.

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#### In a World Governed by Merit, All the Poor Are Undeserving

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Brexit, and the rising support for authoritarian figures elsewhere have left politicians and commentators scrambling to understand where politics has gone wrong. These events have been widely interpreted as populist backlashes against rising inequalities, globalisation, immigration, and the elites. But there may be a deeper story that most commentators have missed. Michael J. Sandel argues that at the heart of this widespread popular discontent lie the social attitudes generated by the meritocratic discourse that politicians of all stripes have been pushing for the past four decades. Written in the gripping and accessible style that has become Sandel's calling card, this book mounts a powerful case that Western democracies have gone wrong by putting merit at the centre of politics.

In a meritocratic society, individuals achieve political and economic success based on their abilities and their merits, as opposed to their socioeconomic class. This ideal tells us that, provided we enjoy equal opportunities, any of us can study, gain the skills we need, and rise to the top if we work hard enough. This is, after all, the long-cherished American Dream. The problem with this ideal, Sandel points out, is that it fosters attitudes that are 'corrosive to the common good'. The 'winners' of this competition, often having strived to reach the top, tend to be convinced of their deservingness and superior qualities. Meanwhile, the 'losers' must contend not only with their lack of economic and political standing, but also with whatever purported intellectual and moral failings prevented them from reaching the top. The arrogance of the winners and the humiliation of the losers eventually erode the bonds of equality and of solidarity between citizens. Sandel's ultimate diagnosis, which he de-