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Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?

by **Michael J. Sandel**

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Abstract

Michael Sandel's new book is a methodologically diverse analysis of meritocracy, the set of attitudes legitimizing the rise of inequality and causing xenophobic populism. Sandel traces the birth of the meritocratic culture of the exclusiveness of dignity and desert from the Puritans' idea of providence, Ronald Reagan's undeserving poor, and the Clinton-Blair exclusive focus on education as a solution for every economic problem. Tying societal contribution to satisfying consumer demands, manifested in the sole obsession with GDP as a measure of success, Western society has devalued work and made the university diploma a predictor of wellbeing. Sandel argues for contributive justice, the dignity of work and calls for a return to the common good's politics.

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Inequality and the populist right turn are one of the main topics of our age. The most common explanation has to do with material conditions. Globalization has left large swaths of Westerners behind, and wages have not followed productivity growth or GDP growth. As a result of the widening gap in material conditions, a culture war broke out between the secure and the insecure. But one of the most profound political divides in the West today is between those with university or college education and those without. In the United States in 2016 two thirds of those without university education voted conservative, and even among the wealthy, education predicted a conservative vote, making it the single most important predictor for the xenophobic, authoritarian vote (Enten, 2016). To accurately explain Western politics, therefore, we must look beyond just materialist explanations.

Michael Sandel's latest book does just that. It looks at meritocracy, the ideological system justifying inequality today, and asks just how much political outcomes are influenced not purely by material conditions but also by status, esteem, and dignity.

Ever since the industrial revolution in Britain produced a competitor to the landed aristocracy in a "self-made" affluent class, it has become apparent that the latter holds a smugness and hubris that can exceed the already arrogant attitudes of a nobility that saw itself born into superiority. Historically speaking, meritocracy became a successor to theocracy once capitalism and commerce created exceptional mobility that shattered the old order's rigid stratification barriers. Mobility thus became the very foundation upon which built modern capitalist societies.

There are two problems with mobility, says Sandel. Firstly, it poses as an antithesis to inequality, when it, in fact, ends up justifying it. Equal opportunity, the horizon of progressive politics from centre-left neoliberal parties, and modern Western societies' holy grail of morality omit a debate on outcomes. As long as everyone gets an equal chance, all outcomes become legitimate. The second problem derives from the meritocratic conception of success. The divine-ordained mandate of kings and princes was, understandable as it was for agricultural societies' material conditions, nevertheless silly. A commanding share of one's fate in life was determined at birth, by one's parents. From hierarchical status to career choices to marriage, life flowed in a largely deterministic riverbed. The result was that people never really took life very seriously. Religion defined every aspect of life, and the mortal dimension was only an interlude into the eternal afterlife.

Once it became possible to create a fortune ignoring the traditional hierarchies, the very definition of status changed. It was no longer a matter of family, but a matter of you and your talent. As mobility reshaped society, the affluent increasingly became those seemingly by their own inventiveness, ruthlessness, grit or wit achieved distinction. But now everyone started taking life very seriously. As status was no longer visibly determined by luck, it grew roots and became a tyranny, as Sandel calls it.

When success becomes your own doing, so does failure. Being average is no longer a lack of luck of being highborn. Still, it becomes damnation on your character, your importance, a deep moral accusation and, most importantly, a judgment on your worth.

In recent years admissions to elite universities in the US have been plagued by scandals involving fraudsters who, on behalf of wealthy parents, bribed proctors overseeing the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) and athletic coaches giving applicants better scores and credentials. The scandals revealed a broader problem. On the one hand, the fraudsters' defence was interesting, saying that their workaround was but a cheaper alternative to back-doors already in place where wealthy parents quite legally bought their children's way into the admission by donating multi-million-dollar sums to the universities (Medina, Benner, and Taylor, 2019). The front-door is equally unfair, adds Sandel, citing entire campaigns by parents involving SAT preparation tests, CV building programs where prospective students volunteer purely for credentials or get private tuition, and so on. Because today's meritocratic culture implies that one deserves their status, wealthy parents don't just give their children trust funds, but bribe, invest in their credentials and donate their way into Ivy League.

The context in which this takes place is one of the winners and losers. Societal consensus has it that inequality is best addressed by mobility, articulated through a rhetoric of rising. In a world ruled by merit, success is deserved, as is a failure. This creates not only a social crisis through the politics of injustice, which is pointed outward but a psychological crisis through a politics of humiliation, which is pointed inward. When the common good is defined in terms of GDP, people's contributions to society are defined by the market value of what they sell and the consumer desires they can satisfy. Consequently, the government merit is reduced to technocratic expertise with no sense of community.

Sandel produces a methodologically rich analysis of the culture behind today's inequality. He uses cultural history to dig for the roots of today's addiction to merit and individual success. He points out the Puritans, citing Max Weber (2001), even though formally rejecting it, embedded merit into American culture through their attitudes on the desert. Not only does merit mould American society, but it also informs its supremacist and exceptionalist attitudes toward the outside world. American power and wealth are retroactively understood as moral superiority under the slogan "great because good". The "right side of history" is consistently invoked in a similar argument for understanding might as a virtue (Nordlinger, 2011; Graham, 2015). The "arc of the moral universe" teleologically points toward American leadership and neoliberally defined progress. Providentialism abroad and meritocracy at home thus go hand in hand, and the very idea of American exceptionalism stems from meritocratic, providentialism logic.

Sandel then switches to political and intellectual history, analyses presidential rhetoric, and provides a time frame of meritocracy's rise. He says that the markets were traditionally argued for on two points, utility (or superior productivity) and freedom. Market triumphalism of the 1980s added a third argument, meritocracy, or the idea that they were fair. We know that the inequality so frequently discussed today was born in Reagan and Thatcher's neoliberalism, to which Sandel adds that the toxic culture of meritocracy appeared at the same, too. "Through no fault of their own" was a favourite phrase of Reagan's, but his Democratic successors used it twice as much. It sounds compassionate, but actually is a very sharp division of the poor into the deserving and the undeserving (Reagan, 1987). Those who do not have an apparent external excuse for their "failure" are simply abandoned, creating the neoliberal human residue that 40 years later produced authoritarian, xenophobic populism. The key point here is that even though Reagan laid out the groundwork for meritocracy and inequality in America, it was the centre-left that entrenched this legacy and built upon it. For example, Reagan used "you deserve", which again subtly suggests that some don't, more often than his five predecessors combined. Clinton then used it twice as often than Reagan, while Obama used it three times as often. Another key piece of meritocratic presidential rhetoric is "rise as far as your talents will take you", which uses mobility as a blanket answer to everything.

In light of this, the meritocracy results in a specific kind of prejudice, credentialism. Donald Trump has repeatedly bragged about his high IQ, his education, the academic success of his relatives, his "very good brain" and him being a "very stable genius" (Strauss, 2017; Trump,

2017). He has also put considerable effort into concealing his SAT scores. Apparently embarrassed about his academic success, he threatened to sue institutions that would disclose his academic performance (Ashford, 2019). And consider this response from then-senator Joe Biden after someone from the audience requested he provide his credentials:

"I think I probably have a much higher IQ than you do, I suspect. I went to law school on a full academic scholarship—the only one in my class to have a full academic scholarship ... and in fact ended up in the top half of my class. I was the outstanding student in the political science department at the end of my year. I graduated with three degrees from undergraduate school and 165 credits—only needed 123 credits—and I'd be delighted to sit down and compare my IQ to yours" (Biden, 1987).

Fact-checkers have pointed out that most of the above claims are false, he got a partial scholarship, was toward the bottom of his class and so on, but the point here is that there is unrelenting pressure on public figures to provide credentials. Beyond the almost comic smugness of the two leading politicians of today's America, their insecurity about credentials shows that leadership is legitimised by superior education, academic success, and high intelligence in a meritocratic society.

Sandel calls credentialism the last acceptable prejudice, an "all-purpose rhetoric of credibility". Since the 1990s, education has been the mainstream parties' universal answer to any economic problem. Blair and Clinton were especially prone to this (Macaskill, 1996; Clinton, 1996). Two-thirds of Obama's cabinet went to Ivy League and their response to the 2008 crisis ought to be, says Sandel, understood not only as political payback for massive donations but as the ruling class worshipping the wealthiest as meritocratic supermen, who deserved every penny they earned. Larry Summers, an economic advisor to President Obama, said it shamelessly: *"One of the challenges in our society is that the truth is kind of a dis-equalizer". One of the reasons that inequality has probably gone up in our society is that people are being treated closer to the way that they're supposed to be treated"* (Suskind, 2011, p. 197).

Meritocratic elites turn out to be just as prejudiced as anyone else. Studies show that in Europe and the US the single most disliked group are not the Muslims, blacks or any other obvious choice, but the less educated (Kuppens, Spears, Manstead, Spruyt, and Easterbrook, 2018, pp.

429-447). The less educated than themselves internalize this prejudice and believe that they are in fact to blame for their increasingly undignified existence.

Today only 2% of the ruling class in America and 4% in the UK come from working-class, manual-job backgrounds (Carnes, 2018, pp. 5-6.; Barton, Audickas, and Cracknell, 2020, pp. 11-12; Cowburn, 2017). PhDs are so desirable as a source of legitimacy that plagiarism scandals abound. For contrast, the New Deal architects of almost a century ago, had rather meagre credentials, and decades ago, parliaments were filled with representatives from working-class backgrounds (Frank, 2016, p. 39).

In a meritocracy, higher education functions as a sorting machine, determining who gets to join the "winners". Tracing the history of meritocratic sorting in elite universities, Sandel points out the crucial role of James Conant, the Harvard president. The latter gave SATs the central role they play today. The Ivy League of his time, the first half of the 20th century was an all-male, white, upper-class, protestant, hereditary system of prestigious education. Conant's vision was to make it more egalitarian. His idea of egalitarianism, however, was fiercely competitive and meritocratic. He wanted to sort out the "geniuses from the rubbish", in other words, to replace a horizontal hierarchy with a vertical one. For this purpose, he promoted the use of a World War 1 IQ test, used by the army, which became the SAT test, to determine who deserved the prestige and affluence that an Ivy League education has led to. He was a staunch believer in mobility and referenced Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis that essentialized American culture as mobile, having been formed on the frontier. His "quiet coup" turned out to be a microcosm of what elite education was to become long after he was gone.

In reality, SAT tests are closely correlated with family income. The higher your family income, the higher the SAT scores (Perry, 2019). Meritocracy maintained a hereditary aspect to it. If you come from the top 1%, your chances of attending Ivy League are 77 times greater than if you come from the bottom 20% (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, and Yagan, 2017).

Meritocracy damages the winners, too. Being a Harvard professor and seeing this first-hand, Sandel provides an empathetic look at how brutal the competition for the most selective schools in the world looks like. The "wounded winners", as he calls them, are from a young age forced into a nerve-wracking spiral of hyper-competitive pressure to overtake peers. This "soul-destroying" process is forged in pain: "Prosperous parents can give their kids a powerful boost

in the bid for admission to elite colleges, but often at the cost of transforming their high school years into a high-stress, anxiety-ridden, sleep-deprived gauntlet of Advanced Placement courses, test-prep tutoring, sports training, dance and music lessons, and a myriad of extracurricular and public service activities, often under the advice and tutelage of private admissions consultants whose fees can cost more than four years at Yale“ (Sandel, 2020, p. 167).

Researchers have found that some of the most distressed young people today are those who come from affluent backgrounds: *“In spite of their economic and social advantages, they experience among the highest rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, somatic complaints, and unhappiness of any group of children in this country. When researchers look at kids across the socioeconomic spectrum, they find that the most troubled adolescents often come from affluent homes”* (Levine, 2006, pp. 16-17).

The most troubled adults, however, are working-class. In his last, most powerful, most radical, and most complex chapter, Sandel discusses work culture. He stresses that work is as cultural as it is economic. The diploma divide leaves one side in insecurity and despair. A third of Americans who didn't go to college are unemployed. Life expectancy is decreasing in America due to so-called “deaths of despair”. Self-destructive behaviour resulting in alcohol, drug abuse, and suicide is almost exclusively a non-college-educated phenomenon. Not only mortality but mental health, health in general, ability to work and socialize all vary by education (Sawhill, 2018, p. 18; Case and Deaton, 2020, p. 2, p. 51, pp. 37-46; Eberstadt, 2016). Culture has come to despise the uneducated working-class. This contempt is evident in sitcoms, for example, from the Simpsons to *According to Jim*, where working-class fathers are depicted as dumb buffoons (Butsch, 2003, pp. 575-585; Troilo, 2017, pp. 82-94; Scharrer, 2001, pp. 23-40).

Sandel brilliantly points to the distinction between distribution and contribution. The problem is not only in the economic domain but in the lack of relevance for the producers. In a society where the consumer is front and centre, the producer becomes neglected and forgotten. His work not only earns him less and less in real terms but provides no dignity, as a contribution to society becomes defined in terms of satisfying consumer demands. Thus, redistribution alone cannot solve the problem, as the crux of the problem relates to the contribution, esteem, dignity, and respect for the producers.

Sandel's solutions are changes in taxation, which he points out are partly a judgment about society's contribution. He suggests wage subsidies and reducing payroll taxes, and suggests taxing consumption, wealth and finance.

The college versus non-college-educated divider divides the "winners" and the "losers" of the neoliberal order. The very mobility that broke the ironclad hold of fate by birth over people's lives, in the end, ended up producing a similar divide, this time by talent. The amount of hubris this produces in the "winners" is only matched by the amount of humiliation it bestows on the "losers".

Sandel goes beyond criticising meritocracy's failure to live up to its ideals and questions the idea itself. It is clear we do not live in a truly meritocratic society. The elite universities very disproportionately admit people of means through structural advantages the children of the rich have. But even if the system were complete, we would not arrive at a just society. A hypothetical world where success, status and talent were perfectly correlated, as meritocracy aims to achieve, would, if anything, produce an even more intolerable inequality of dignity and worth as the elites would see themselves entitled to complete emancipation from society and would abandon even the semblance of solidarity they have today.

Recognition of luck as a factor in life outcomes creates humility and solidarity. Disruptions and wars especially have contributed to the embedded, regulated, and redistributive liberalism of the *trente glorieuses* (e.g., Piketty, 2014). Sandel, a Harvard professor, thus proposes a lottery system of admission among qualified candidates to elite universities, to remove a source of individualist hubris, remind future elites that their success is not their only their own, and inject some grace and sense of the common good into them.

Sandel is compassionate, articulate, relevant and original. His analysis links politics, history, culture and philosophy in an interpretative, but factual, account of the right-wing revolution of 2018 and its profound causes. His appeal for the common good is a breath of fresh air in a binary intellectual climate of heartless technocratic liberalism and fascist-adjacent madness.

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