Daniel Markovits: ***The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite***
New York 2019: Penguin Random House, 448 pp.

Approaching the book, I asked myself, could a professor from Yale Law School write a well-documented and theoretically innovative sociological book? The answer is a clear, yes. This book offers the reader a challenging and well-thought-out stance on some current problems affecting the United States. Moreover, it breaks up the positive connotations that are generally ascribed to individual qualities, such as merit and effort. Merit is a fundamental principle in contemporary societies; often seen as a public good that should be preserved to permit the flourishment of a community. A meritocratic society is often presented as the opposite of systems ruled by corruption, heredity, and privilege. Markovits criticises both worlds, showing their similarities and proposing a third way. However, why criticise a merit-based society? Is that the best we could imagine?

Markovits is not the first to cast doubts on a meritocratic society. The sociologist Michael Young did so before him, in 1958, in his book *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. Young described a dystopian society settled in the year 2034 and governed by a meritocratic elite. The book sought out to provide a satirical description of the distortions generated by a merit-based system. However, far from offering an adequate warning of possible dangers, this book seems to have inspired politicians to further pursue the belief in a society based on merit. Meritocracy is rampant in societies today.

The present book is innovative in depicting how merit structures American society. The current elite is defined as workaholic and compared to a jobless working class and a middle class in decline. In the past, the elite used inherited wealth to enjoy free time and comfort. It was defined as the leisure class, and most of its daily activities were dedicated to pleasure and games. Conversely, the poor worked long hours to gain material resources and ensure the necessities of life. In a meritocratic society, the roles flipped. The elite overworks in high-paying jobs, and the poor are jobless or work fewer hours with more time dedicated to entertainment. At the beginning of the 20th century, working-class people were stuck at their job for more than 60 hours per week. Today, the working class works less than 40 hours per week. The once leisure class now works between 50 and 100 hours per week.

Why did the situation change so drastically? In an aristocratic society, social class and economic resources were acquired at birth. In this setting, individuals had no obligation to show that they deserved the material wealth they inherited because of their specific skills, qualities, or hard work. Being born into the right family was enough to gain social status. In a meritocratic society, the elite must earn economic resources by working hard, demonstrating higher intellectual abilities, and showing dedication. Moreover, the payoff for the workaholic elite is enormous. The income of the top 0.1% of the wealthiest individuals in the United States has seen a stunning increase in recent decades.

Schooling is critical to understanding the injustices determined by a meritocratic society. Reform of the British education system seems to have been what inspired Michael Young's book. Similarly, Markovits focuses most of his attention on schooling in the United States. Merit is not given at birth but can be attained through intensive training that is easily acquired with economic resources. Markovits describes how the current US elites spend vast amounts of money to reserve their children a spot in the best schools. The amount of cash spent from the time of birth to the attainment of

a college degree in a top university could well have been transferred in the bank account of the newborn. The sum would have been enough to provide a good life without the coercion of paid work. However, in a meritocratic society, social status and economic resources must be earned, and to this end, intense training is necessary.

The poor lack such economic resources and do not have access to the top institutions. This impedes their social mobility. For example, the empirics expose a problematic gap in educational attainment between the bottom quintile and the top quintile of the income distribution. Moreover, this gap has been increasing in recent decades, exacerbating previous disparities.

The middle class is not exempted from the malaise determined by meritocracy. The gap in educational attainment between the top income quintile and the middle quintile is larger than the gap between the middle and the bottom quintile of income distribution. Similarly, poverty decreased in the last decades, but the income of the middle class has been stagnating. Markovits challenges the claims made by Thomas Piketty in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Piketty explained the increase in inequality and the struggle of the working class as caused by the gap in the income generated by wealth and wages. This idea is well captured in a short formula: R > G. R stands for rent coming from capital and wealth earned by an individual. G denotes the general growth of the economy. In short, Piketty argues that over time income generated by capital outgrows income from paid work. As the rich own more wealth, they are destined to grow wealthier than the working class, which is condemned to just small increases in income. Conversely, Markovits focuses on the disparity in wage growth between social classes. From 1950 to the present day, the income gap between the poor and the middle class decreased. By contrast, the gap between the middle class and the rich increased. Surprisingly, the wage gap that grew even more is the one between the rich and the super-rich. It is always critical to stress how much the top 0.1% earns and how detached it is from the rest of American society. So, the increase in inequality is not a story of wealth against wages, but one in which the super-rich work and earn more than ever.

The increasing gaps in educational outcomes, income, and the labour market are a clear signal of the distortions generated by meritocracy. Social class continues to be transferred from one generation to the next, but the process is justified by merit instead of heredity. Now, schooling enables the stratification of society, as skills and the diplomas from top institutions are provided only to the privileged who are able to pay the high tuition high fees and then gain exclusive access to the best and highest-paying jobs. Therefore, the current meritocratic society appears to have deep flaws and resembles an aristocracy, which Young predicted well in the dystopic book he published in 1958.

In a meritocracy, the elite, the middle class, and the poor live in suboptimal conditions. The elite is locked into a miserable life, filled with work and the pressure to perform in order to justify the social status and economic resources they earn. The middle class is being eroded and losing the competition with the rich, which has widened the gap in educational attainment, earnings, and work opportunities. The poor are losing the status of being the working class and are becoming jobless, economically irrelevant, and dedicated to futile entertainment. For Markovits, these dysfunctions are the inherent cause of the current problems and divisions in the United States. Some of the most acute symptoms are visible in the disparities, life span, substance addictions, and mental illnesses that plague some social groups. Similarly, populism and the intensying po-

litical polarisation reflect the feeling of unfairness among the population that is caused by a rigged system.

It is not always easy to highlight deep societal problems, but proposing solutions to them is far more complicated. Markovits confirms this rule. He devotes little space to possible solutions in the book, and the ones he offers might not convince everyone. Stating the flaws of the meritocratic ideology is an excellent way to start. Next, the author proposes some policies targeting education and taxation. An education system that perpetuates the transmission of elite status needs to be reformed. Democratising schooling opportunities would help a great deal in that it would give a larger proportion of the community a fair start. In practice, this means increasing the number of students in top educational institutions and introducing quotas for students with fewer material resources. Broadening skill acquisition would help make work more accessible to more individuals, resulting in the employment of a larger share of the population and lightening the load on over-workers.

Similarly, proportional taxation of income could make the system more just. Making every income group pay their fair share of taxes enables the creation of resources that could help those who are more in need. The book often makes reference to the post-Second World War world as an example of a fair society. This golden age of equality in the United States offers essential lessons for the current problems. For example, the higher level of taxation and income redistribution coupled with the expansion of the education system worked well in providing to the lower and middle class with essential material resources. In this period, the spirit of the America dream permitted high levels of social mobility. The poor and the middle class could climb the social ladder and reduce the gap with the rich more easily than they can today.

One possible criticism is that the author does not broadly discuss social characteristics such as gender and race. However, the choice is justified by the comparatively smaller gap in life outcomes determined by these characteristics compared to socioeconomic status. Therefore, the author's attention falls on the social trait that causes the most considerable inequalities. However, other social characteristics are not downplayed. Moreover, some social attributes might strongly correlate with socioeconomic status, such as being black in the United States. Similarly, other features might aggravate the inequalities determined by socioeconomic status as disabilities.

Non-American readers might have concerns about the validity of the argument for other national contexts. For example, are European countries trapped by merit? Are the generous Scandinavian welfare states free from the distortions of a meritocracy? Without sound data at hand and a thorough analysis, it is not easy to provide a clear answer to these questions. Nonetheless, Markovits cites Germany as offering an excellent example of an egalitarian schooling system. Here, universities are mostly public and free. Similarly, Norway is praised for its smaller Gini coefficient (an indicator used to capture income inequality), while Sweden is listed as a country where the elite do not work very long hours. In the United States colleges are often private and have high tuition fees, the Gini coefficient there is substantial, and elites are workaholics. These few examples expose how meritocracy is a malaise that significantly affects American society. Nevertheless, Germany and the Nordic countries could also suffer as a result of their fair share of dysfunctions determined by the meritocratic structure of their societies.

The book is powerful in its key arguments and its clarity. It profoundly affects the perception of fairness and justice that make up a good society and reframes the

virtues attached to merit and effort. Merit can be bought and helps to justify and sustain a rigged system that does not work well for all social classes. The dystopic society that was already depicted by Young has proven to become a reality. This book is pushing us to disabuse ourselves of the illusions created by the ideology of meritocracy and create a fairer society that does not justify the allocation of privilege based on merit but looks for more equality.

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References

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Cambridge 2019: Cambridge University Press, 239 pp.

The political and economic contexts of consolidated democracies have changed markedly in recent decades. We have seen an end to the high growth rates of the postwar era, low-income wages have stagnated, intergenerational mobility has declined, and income and wealth are increasingly accumulating in the hands of the few. On the political front, declining popular support for democracy is observed as the traditional party systems are challenged by the rise of radical right parties that promote populist, anti-establishment, and xenophobic attitudes and policies. Add to this the most recent development: a global pandemic that has yielded emergency powers to democratic governments and made society (it is to be hoped temporarily) resemble some Orwellian dystopia in which citizens acquiesce to severely limited freedom of movement and social interactions. In addressing such challenges to democracy, it is hard to think of a timelier book than *Crises of Democracy*.

At its core, *Crises of Democracy* is about democratic deconsolidation. The book adds to a recent surge of academic and popular writings that offer perspectives on the state of democracy that differ widely in their degree of optimism. Yet *Crises of Democracy* is not like many of the other recent contributions. Rather than trying to convince the reader of a certain perspective on the current state of democracy, Przeworski invites us on a tour of the most important academic debates and encourages us to engage critically with the evidence at hand as well as with recent events and developments. Przeworski acknowledges early on that 'some readers will be disappointed by how often' the book fails 'to arrive at firm conclusions', while stressing that 'one should not believe the flood of writings that have all the answers' (p. xii). The book, therefore, is probably best understood as a critical discussion of the state of democracy and of related academic work. It raises many important, and difficult, questions, most of which are left unanswered, but may serve as a source of contemplation and inspiration for future academic work.

The heart of the book is divided into three parts with a clear, logical structure. It starts with the premise that if we wish to understand crises of democracy, we need to clarify what we mean by 'democracy' and 'crisis'. Przeworski adopts a minimalist/electoralist view of democracy and therefore focuses on 'possible threats to elections becoming non-competitive or inconsequential for whoever remains in power' (p. 5). Through a clever discussion of the defining features of democracy, Przeworski unarms critics who advocate for a more particular definition of democracy and clarifies that 'possible threats' should be understood broadly to include attacks on the preconditions of contested elections – such as liberal rights and freedoms – erosion of judicial independence,