

for the common good, and not just intellectual work that requires a college degree. Additionally, Sandel recommends that spurious ideas about merit should be abandoned in favour of a healthy acknowledgment of the role that luck and circumstance play in people's lives.

No doubt that widening the range of lucrative and respected forms of work, as well as embracing the humility that comes with acknowledging good fortune, would be a huge improvement to the status quo. It is unclear, however, whether the solutions that Sandel sketches would ultimately avoid corrosive judgements about people's worth, as opposed to merely redrawing the boundaries between the worthy and the unworthy. Unless he is prepared to argue for a full-blooded egalitarian distribution of outcomes, inequalities of income might combine with ideas about the relative value of social contributions to the common good to suggest that those who earn less are less valuable, and less valued, contributors to society. For suppose that a community democratically decided that being a lawyer was valuable for advancing the common good. Unless everyone else made roughly the same income, a highly educated, relatively higher-earning lawyer would still be susceptible to hubris. After all, Sandel himself tells us that 'social esteem flows, almost ineluctably, to those who enjoy economic and educational advantages' (p. 145). Granted, the lawyer would have to admit that their ability to provide a valuable social contribution was not exclusively their own doing but was due in part to luck. Nevertheless, it would be clear that their contribution was highly valued by society.

In a meritocracy, being worse-off carries the damning judgement that you are to blame for your own failures. Unless Sandel is prepared to say that a lawyer, a lorry driver, and everyone else should enjoy roughly equal income and work recognition, the message sent to those who have

less is just as clear: 'Your social contribution is less valuable to the community, and by extension *you* are less valuable.'

Without a deeper, principled discussion of the feasibility and desirability of incorporating merit into our theories of justice, and without a more fleshed out alternative political morality, *The Tyranny of Merit* falls short of persuading us to abandon the ideal of merit altogether. However, the book achieves one of its key aims of sounding the alarm on the moral and political harm that merit-focused systems, at least as they are today, have done to our communities. The book is relentless, most of all, in its indictment of centre-left elites who are considered guilty of egregious betrayal. They have left the working class they were supposed to champion to fend for themselves against a backdrop of global competition, entrenched inequality, and a harsh rhetoric of personal responsibility for their own failures.

Isa Trifan

University of Southern Denmark  
trifanATsam.sdu.dk

#### References

- Hurka, T. 2003. 'Desert: Individualistic and Holistic.' Pp. 45–68 in *Desert and Justice*, edited by S. Olsaretti. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Nozick, R. 2006. *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Rawls, J. 1999. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schmidtz, D. 'How to Deserve.' *Political Theory* 30 (6): 774–799.
- Zaitchik, A. 1977. 'On Deserving to Deserve.' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (4): 370–388.

#### What about the Dignity of Unpaid Work?

While on the campaign trail for the election that would determine who would succeed Angela Merkel as chancellor in Germany, Olaf Scholz, the leader of the Social Demo-

cratic Party expressed his conviction that 'among certain professional classes, there is a meritocratic exuberance that has led people to believe their success is completely self-made. As a result, those who actually keep the show on the road don't get the respect they deserve. That has to change' [Oltermann 2021]. As it turned out, his words were heavily drawn from Michael Sandel's new book *The Tyranny of Merit*. Sandel is no stranger to criticising how we tend to conflate market prices with value, not least of all because the monetary value markets ascribe through supply and demand is not always a good representation of *worth* [Sandel 2012]. In this new book, however, he takes the argument further and considers whether the pursuit of meritocracy has actually caused more harm than good, culminating in Brexit and the election of Trump, to the point that it might not be worth pursuing meritocracy at all from a justice standpoint.

At the heart of meritocracy is the notion that society should reward the best, the most talented, and the hardest-working among us and not those who happen to be born in a certain milieu or possess or lack particular traits that are beyond their control, such as a particular gender or skin colour. The meritocratic ideal is appealing not only because it promises to deliver greater efficiency – the best or more able are selected – but because it rings just and fair – the rewards equal one's capacity or effort [Tepe et al. 2021]. Sandel presents a number of examples of just how deeply flawed are the mechanisms through which present societies reward merit, so that people can hardly be said to face a 'level playing field'. Even defenders of meritocracy will concede that, but Sandel's issues are deeper, and he questions meritocracy as a goal in itself.

Arguably Sandel's most convincing argument is that 'merit' is no less subject to luck or to 'circumstances beyond our control' (i.e. potentially unfair) than birth is in

the context of an aristocratic regime. It is not just a matter of being favoured because of the family into which one is born, it is also about possessing talents that are in short supply and valued by society at the particular time and place in which one is born. Sandel does not draw on the life-course literature to support his critique – which would have further validated his case – but his argument is very much in line with the concept of 'life-course reflexivity' put forward by scholars such as Dale Dannefer. This presents outcomes as the result of the interaction between social context, contingency, and human intentionality or action. Besides this argument, Sandel contends that a meritocratic system will always instil a sense of undue superiority among the winners and despair and resentment among those who lose out, because it attributes their accomplishments to their own doing, conflating success or failure with virtue or lack of deservingness. The distinction between market value and worth is something that both free market liberalism and welfare state or egalitarian liberalism – arguably the two dominant strands of philosophical and economic thought in the Western world in the past half century – have been careful to state. But in market societies, the conflation of the two is almost inevitable, as money is the yardstick used to measure most things.

When agency (i.e. the notion that one controls one's destiny) meets deservingness (i.e. one gets what one's due), this creates a powerful meritocratic ethic based on individualism and a rhetoric of individual responsibility. This rhetoric of individual responsibility first took root on the right under Thatcher and Reagan and was best summarised by the former when she stated 'there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look after themselves first'. This was soon taken on board by centre-left parties

in the mid-1990s and early 2000s. Not only did they embrace markets as a way to enhance welfare, but this rhetoric permeated discourses and indeed policies that linked access to welfare with deservingness and individual responsibility. Moral hazard concerns therefore came to trump redistributive considerations when thinking about welfare policies. While the deservingness rhetoric took hold of the policy discourse, inequality was widening, while real income stagnated for large shares of the population and social mobility faltered, at least in the United States.

Sandel argues that governments failed to heed these outcomes, partly because they were by then made up of people who not only came to embrace the meritocratic ethos, but turned out to be blinded by the hubris that meritocracy generates in the winners. According to Sandel, this *credentialism* and the technocratic governments and arguments that it spawned played an outsized role in driving the resentment of elites and the growth of populism. Credentialism infused the policy discourse with a sense of inevitability or lack of alternatives, dressing particular political options as uncontested facts – political stances were presented as either ‘smart’ or ‘dumb’, but kept decidedly above the traditional divisions between the ‘right’ and the ‘left’, and thus stripped of their political or moral implications. As it turned out, such governments proved not to be more effective than previous ones, but they were decidedly much less diverse, and their policy discourse contributed to further alienate large sections of voters. Meritocracy provides no antidote against rising inequality. In fact, it acts to legitimise it.

Having delivered a scathing criticism of meritocracy, what alternatives or solutions does Sandel propose? The last two chapters of *The Tyranny of Merit* are occupied with possible actions. First, Sandel turns his attention to higher education, which now commands higher wage premi-

ums than ever, not least because of its role in what economists would call signalling one’s worth through the completion of a higher university degree at one of the top universities. Ivy League universities have, according to Sandel, become ‘sorting machines’ that remain deeply unmeritocratic in their admission processes and have steered away from their educational mission to instil civic values and concern for the common good in their students. Every year, thousands of seemingly equally qualified and able students go through the highly anxiety-inducing process of applying to the top universities, even though only a diminishing share are eventually selected. Sandel suggests that those who meet admission criteria should be selected based on a lottery system. The quality of the student body would likely be similar to that of present cohorts, while saving students the anxiety, reducing incentives to game the system, and deflating the hubris of those who are eventually selected.

In addition, Sandel proposes increasing the overall number of places in higher education and investing strongly in technical and vocational education and on-the-job training. Not only are the latter able to better match the skills in demand from the labour market, but this would be a first step to enhance the ‘recognition of work’. Meritocracy has legitimised ‘the lavish rewards the market bestows on the winners and the meagre pay it offers workers without a college degree’ (p. 198) by entrenching the idea that income earned reflects the value of one’s contribution to society. According to Sandel, economic thinking and policies have for too long focused on our role as atomised consumers and have thus strived to maximise individual consumer utility. This has meant increasing access to goods by lowering prices and, as a consequence, wages. Sandel argues that it is our role as producers that brings us recognition (from oneself and from others), as we contribute our work to provide for the

needs of other members of society, thereby accruing self-esteem. On exactly how to achieve this, however, Sandel is relatively vague, even though he draws from proposals on both sides of the American partisan divide. These include, on the one hand, providing tax credits for workers with low pay and enacting possible restrictions on migration and free trade – proposals he takes from Oren Cass, a former adviser to Mitt Romney's presidential campaign. On the other hand, he also proposes shifting taxation away from productive work and thus advocates for higher taxes on capital gains and especially the introduction of a Tobin tax on speculative capital transactions.

Most of the examples presented by Sandel are rooted in the US context and one wonders how much the arguments presented could have benefited from taking in a broader set of realities and empirical studies. Some readers may find the reliance on a lottery system to allocate university places to be a far-fetched proposal, but this was a long-standing practice among Dutch universities for courses in which the number of applicants exceeded available places. Sandel may be on to something when he intuits that such a lottery system might not really affect the quality of the students, as evidence from the Netherlands seems to confirm [Stegers-Jager 2017]. Conversely, the other proposal for fixing higher education comes very close to setting up the kind of dual track education system that is in place in German-speaking countries in Europe, which has been marred by similar issues of credentialism and inequalities in access based on family background [Blossfeld et al. 2015].

Sandel's critique and call for 'renewing the dignity of work' is still firmly embedded in the concept and value of *paid work* [my emphasis]. Readers will find no word on what meritocracy means for unpaid work such as care and how the failure to recognise the worth of such work is very

much at the heart of the failures of meritocracy. This is an important omission, as Sandel extols the importance of the common good even in the subtitle of this book. Not only does this limit meritocracy to a masculine-centred concept built solely around the transactions that take place in the market, but Sandel would find a lot of common ground with the criticism of markets from feminist economics [cf. Folbre 1995; Nelson 1999].

Sandel is a political philosopher and in this book he traces the roots of meritocracy's hold on the Western world back to the theological discussions on the role of grace and deeds in guaranteeing salvation that took place during the Reformation and Counter-Reformation religious movements in Europe. This is not a central point to Sandel's arguments, but an understanding of just how and why individualism came to gain such a foothold in Western Europe could have perhaps been gained from broader insights from other disciplines such as psychology or anthropology [Henrich 2020]. These insights might be relevant for understanding how best to dismantle the tyranny of meritocracy that the author identifies. For although Michael Sandel has provided us with compelling arguments on the flaws of meritocracy as an ideal, this is still a powerfully appealing concept. After all, even the long-standing Dutch practice of ascribing students to university through a lottery was repealed in 2017.

Ricardo Rodrigues  
European Centre for Social  
Welfare Policy and Research  
rodrigues@euro.centre.org

#### References

- Blossfeld, P., G. Blossfeld and H. Blossfeld. 2015. 'Educational Expansion and Inequalities in Educational Opportunity: Long-Term Changes for East and West Germany.' *European Sociological Review* 31 (2): 144–160.
- Folbre, N. 1995. 'Holding Hands at Midnight: the

- Paradox of Caring Labor.' *Feminist Economics* 1 (1): 73–92.
- Henrich, J. 2020. 'The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous.' New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Nelson, J. 1999. 'Of Markets and Martyrs: Is It OK to Pay Well for Care?' *Feminist Economics* 5 (3): 43–59.
- Oltermann, P. 2021. 'Olaf Scholz: Merit in Society Must Not Be Limited to Top-Earners.' *The Guardian*, 8 September. Retrieved 10 May 2022 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/08/olaf-scholz-merit-society-not-be-limited-top-earners-germany-election>).
- Stegers-Jager, K. 2018. 'Lessons Learned from 15 Years of Non-Grades-Based Selection for Medical School.' *Medical Education* 52 (1): 86–95.
- Tepe, M., P. Vanhuyse and M Lutz. 2021. 'Merit, Luck, and Taxes: Societal Reward Rules, Self-Interest and Ideology in a Real-Effort Voting Experiment.' *Political Research Quarterly* 74 (4): 1052–1066.

### How Do We Decide What Constitutes the Common Good?

In *The Tyranny of Merit*, Michael Sandel addresses social divides in Western society, especially the United States, and looks at how we could work better towards the common good and how this relates to meritocracy. The book offers an insightful and relevant take on the importance of social esteem in politics and showcases Sandel's talent at addressing important issues in an approachable way. Sandel uses the introduction of the book to discuss the recent US college admissions scandal and highlights how it caused a wider debate. While many people specifically criticised cheating and the use of money to enter elite universities through a side door, others pointed out that money has always played an important role in getting the children of the rich and powerful into the most sought-after universities. Proponents of this view would argue that students should not be admitted to universities based on their

background but based on their talent and effort alone. That this is far from being the case is no secret, as Sandel points out. A third criticism, however, argues that there are still deeper flaws in the system. A society that regards higher education as the main prize, as the ticket to getting a well-paying job, is at risk of experiencing not only rising economic inequality but also a widening social divide. With an increasing emphasis on the role of merit in obtaining college degrees and job opportunities, those who end up on top will believe that their success is justified. This is the main inspiration for Sandel's new book.

Meritocracy, as defined by Sandel, is the belief that rewards should only depend on factors that you have control over. In his discourse analysis, however, it becomes clear that this condition is often loosened, to mean effort and talent (for a behavioural experiment, see Tepe et al. [2021]). Sandel argues that there are several problems with meritocracy. First and most obviously, there is the problem of our poor performance on this measure. College admissions are just one expression of a deeper problem. Social inequalities persist and they continue to be inherited, which severely reduces inter-generational mobility. People would, therefore, have every right to be angry about being told that their advancement depends solely on their effort and talent, when this is clearly not the case. Second, it is hard to clearly identify what factors people have control over. How can we venture to adequately design a system in which this distinction has great moral importance?

Third, Sandel argues that even a perfect meritocracy would not be desirable. He rejects meritocracy not only because of how unattainable it is, but because it has harmful social consequences. A system that puts a strong emphasis on assigning rewards based on merit and that highlights individual responsibility risks instilling in its winners a sense of hubris and in its losers a loss of social esteem. In such a society,