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BOOK REVIEW: THE TYRANNY OF MERIT. WHAT'S BECOME OF THE COMMON GOOD?

Lucia Husenicová*

SANDEL, M. J.: *The Tyranny of Merit. What's Become of the Common Good?* [Tyrania zásluh. Čo sa stalo so spoločným dobrom?]. Dublin: Penguin Books, 2021. 272 p. ISBN 978-0-141-99117-7.

“**Sandel** is the most important and influential living philosopher...” a quote from one of the book’s reviews states on the cover printed by Penguin publishing house. And we must agree that *‘The Tyranny of Merit’* is a thought-provoking yet rational, logical, and critical text that keeps the readers interested and makes them question their perceptions and position towards the social reality of the Western society she is a part of.

Like other contemporary social scientists, **Sandel** sets out to find an answer to why many people in most western countries support populist politicians and their policies, even if these are not adopted to improve their living standards. How did we arrive at the point that allowed for four years of the presidency of **Donald Trump** and Brexit? In line with the arguments made by **F. Fukuyama** in his *‘Identity’* (2019) or **C. Crouch’s** *‘Post-Democracy after the Crisis’* (2020), he argues that economic and social factors played a significant role. However, he dedicates more space in his book to how these have impacted the dignity of some people and the general human need for recognition. His main claim is that the current society’s main feature is meritocratic. It was slowly built over the 20th Century with a significant boost after the 1980s, neoliberal economic policies were introduced, and globalisation increased. In his view, meritocracy created a societal division, and two main groups were formed, winners and losers. The divide between them is not only financial, but it also becomes social, cultural, and

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political, leading to the current polarisation we see in many western societies.

In its seven chapters, the book offers a critical conception of meritocracy. It is a deep dive into how society became focused on merit. Tracing its religious background and evolution into a merit-driven education and work environment. It is a critique of not only income disparities and injustice brought by globalisation and neoliberal economic project, but it is also an insight into how some people lost their dignity, and some people gained confidence and hubris. Although at some points the book seems like a defence of white men who suddenly lost their rightful position in the society, the book dives into the features of a society that was built intensively in the last 40 years but whose roots can be traced to the religious traditions in the US.

The book's Introduction focuses on a medialised case in the US. A group of 33 wealthy parents, including some famous Hollywood actors, participated in a cheating scheme to have their children admitted to prestigious Universities. It further focuses on how this scheme was protracted and what methods the parents and the hired consultant company used to increase their children's SAT results. **Sandel** uses this scandal to point out the inequalities in American society, which he assigns to the failure of the vision and idea of meritocracy.

The first chapter, titled '*Winners and Losers*', starts by emphasising a threat the democracy is facing in general, with growing support for autocratic and populist politicians and rising xenophobia. **Sandel** hints that the significant political parties fail to see the reality and understand what is happening in society. They are more focused on a market-oriented, technocratic style of governance, which prevents them from seeing the social reality. In this situation, the populist who points out the issues the people are facing is winning their support. **Sandel** is particularly critical of the rhetoric of rising used by American politicians, mainly from the Democratic Party. He argues that the American dream, the idea that anyone can achieve success in America, the land of opportunity, is not accurate anymore. People are very much aware of that. However, the politicians are still using it to provide a vision and gain support. He uses President **Obama** and his speeches and public statements as a reference point who used the phrase "You can make it if you try" more than 140 times during his eight years of presidency. **Sandel** returns at this point to meritocracy, an idea of a society where people are valued and evaluated based on their merit. Talented people deserve more as their achievements result from their effort. Here he points out the moral dilemma as the meritocratic ideal does not answer why those who are rising thanks to their talents deserve more than those equally hardworking but not possessing skills

that society values. He arrives at a point where he claims that society based on rewarding those who are hardworking and talented and believe they deserve all those rewards lead to the formation of above-mentioned two groups. The other one consists of those who are less fortunate and not awarded for their achievement. This group feels humiliated and resents the first group. Society values those considered talented as they had to achieve it through their effort. In contrast, those on the other side are considered unfortunate and responsible for their failures the same way those on the other side are accountable for their success. He hints at a university degree's value in American society, yet only 20% of Americans have a college degree. At the end of the first chapter, he recalls a book published by British sociologist **Michael Young**, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* in 1958, in which he warned about the impacts of meritocracy on social cohesion as he expected the division into two groups of winners and losers as well as populist tendencies this fact can lead to.

The second chapter provides a “brief moral history of merit” where he explains why a meritocratic society is appealing. Sandel identifies two reasons: 1. an economic system rewarding effort, talent, and initiative is likely more productive, and 2. the meritocratic system renounces discrimination and affirms the idea of freedom – our destiny is in our own hands. Further, the chapter maps the evolution of the meritocratic idea and traces it back to religion based on which God rewards good behaviour and punishes sins. The merit issue can be found in the concept of salvation, which the faithful earn through observing religious rituals and prescribed ways of living. However, there is an issue with this, if God is the one deciding, how can he allow evil things to happen. How is it handled if humans have free will and choose to follow or disobey? In this issue, he brings on the discussions between **Augustine** and monk **Pelagius**, **Luther** and **Calvin**, Puritans, and **Webber's** protestant ethics, which all address the issue of those elected for salvation. Quoting **Webber**, he traces the origin of the tyranny of merit in this sentence: “the fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate... he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he ‘deserves’ it... in comparison with others” (p.42) this applies to how meritocracy works nowadays. However, **Sandel** partially remains in the religious influence when he talks about providentialism that impacted American culture and society in a meaningful manner where success is bound to deservingness and was transformed into what is known as a prosperity gospel. Those who are blessed are healthy and wealthy; those who are not rich and healthy are not blessed. As people are responsible for their fate, those fortunes

are not only masters of their life, but they also have God's grace. This idea is strongly related to American politics and the vision of America as a land of God's grace.

Chapter 3 is titled *'The rhetoric of rising'*, whose central idea is that people earn success through effort and striving. People acquire what they deserve, "success is a sign of virtue." **Sandel** argues that the market-oriented policy adopted in the **Regan** and **Thatcher's** era, which the left-centric governments adopted in the 1990s across liberal democracies, paved the way to the meritocratic rationale: "Provided they operate within a fair system of equal opportunity, markets give people what they deserve. If everyone has an equal chance to compete, market outcomes reward merit" (p. 62) Basically what has happened is that the market-oriented policy and belief that market can address and solve the problems in society enhanced the meritocratic idea of evaluating people based on their effort. People believe that anyone can achieve anything they set their head to. In addition, the neoliberal critique of the welfare state was based on the argument that people should be held responsible for their well-being, and the community should help only those who suffer misfortune. Everyone is responsible for their fate, and everyone gets what they deserve. The rhetoric of what **Sandel** calls deservingness has slowly found its way into American culture and politics. Not only were advertisements based on people deserving things, but politicians in their speeches emphasised it. **Sandel** claims that based on Google Ngram, the usage of the phrase "you deserve" in books tripled from 1978 to 2008. It has slowly grown into politics and philosophy. In the 60s and 70s, American philosophers rejected the idea of meritocracy. Two decades later, they adopted the rhetoric of responsibility, especially in debates on the justice of social programs, as it was necessary to figure out who those who deserve help and assistance from the state were. In addition, the rhetoric of rising and deserving was translated into a social policy of governments led by **Bill Clinton**, **Tony Blair**, and **Gerhard Schröder**, all representatives of centre-left parties who traditionally found support among the blue-collar working class. They all talked about what kind of society they imagined for people, based on equality of opportunity and responsibility for one's faith. Even if this idea might have worked in the late 20th Century after the financial crisis, the centre-left parties lost their appeal to the most working-class, as proven by the election of **D. Trump** and the vote on Brexit.

The fourth chapter focuses on education, or to be precise, on credentialism created when it comes to education. While education is seen as a tool to achieve

social mobility and, therefore, a tool for a wealthy and healthy life, the selection system, especially in the US, is based on meritocratic principles that are not applied or twisted in practice. The first image of the meritocratic principle is the famous SAT. The idea behind the testing was in the 40s and 50s to allow the applicants to be evaluated independently and guarantee that only those most skilful would be accepted. However, SATs today became a tool of inequality and discrimination. Why? In general, the statistics show that the kids from wealthy and stable families who can afford to pay for additional courses and training have a higher chance of receiving a high score than those from humbler social backgrounds or those from the families living on the lowest economic level. At the same time, a college degree becomes an emphasised tool for social mobility and rise within the ranks of society. A college education opens the graduate's door to well-paid jobs, creating an educational divide and deepening the winners–losers dichotomy. In more detail, in a society that emphasises the value of college education, receiving a degree is seen as something the student deserves as the admission process to college, and college environments are highly competitive and require much effort. Based on this, the idea that graduates deserve better-paid jobs because they have devoted much time to their studies is well spread. And, if anyone tries hard enough, he or she will be rewarded with admission, graduation, and a well-paid job. Those who fail to be admitted are seen as those who did not work enough, which leads to the feeling of humiliation. At the same time, they are sentenced to take a lower-level job that does not allow for social mobility anymore in current American society. In this section, **Sandel** is somewhat critical of President **Obama** and the rhetoric he used during his presidency and his emphasis on education as he and his wife rose through education. That shows another interesting phenomenon, **Obama's** administration was formed only by the people with college degrees, most of the graduates of the Ivy League. As a matter of fact, nowadays, most of the politicians in the US Congress have a college degree, and less than 2% of representatives come from a working-class background. Similar numbers can be seen in UK, Germany, France, Nederland, and Belgium. This is yet another reason for the disconnection between the political elite and the working-class population. To summarise, this type of rhetoric creates what **Sandel** calls a 'credentialist prejudice': only people with a college degree are seen as valuable members of society or qualified enough to govern and occupy well-paid jobs. Especially this emphasis on the college education as a prerequisite to govern represents governance as a technocratic issue, which only the educated can understand and blocks those without a degree from

entering the public life and positions of power. This adds to the feeling of resentment and abandonment by the working-class members that transpired in the election of **D. Trump**.

The fifth chapter starts by comparing meritocracy and aristocracy as two types of society based on the division of the population. In an aristocracy, those born into higher social strata are aware that they do not have their position because of their effort, while those born into the lower levels of society know that they cannot change their faith. In a meritocracy, wealthy people believe that their position results from their effort and deserve it. Those below them are not less fortunate but less skilful and therefore deserve their position. Those on the other side see their position as their fault and look with resentment at those above. At the same time, **Sandel** argues that income and wealth are not the only factors people consider. Social standing and self-esteem are also significant. So being poor in meritocracy has a demoralising effect; people partially blame themselves for their failure, especially when living in a society that praises rising. Here **Sandel** returns to **Young's** book, which pointed out the dark side of meritocracy from a moral standpoint as the class gap becomes more expansive in a society where ability serves as a classification point. Those in the upper class know that their position is a reward for their abilities; hence, they deserve it. In this society, the upper class has prejudice toward the lower, less educated group, and they see no reason to engage in discussion with them. **Sandel** quotes **Young**, who in 1958 wrote, "some members of the meritocracy... have become so impressed with their importance as to lose sympathy with the people they govern" (p.118), which for **Sandel** echoes the statement by **Hilary Clinton** of a "basket of deplorables" about Trump supporters. Meritocracy is an ideal vision of society, but can it be just? **Sandel** understands the attractiveness of mobile society for two reasons. First, it expresses freedom – as people's fate is not fixed to the circumstances of their birth. Second, it shows that what we can achieve reflects what we deserve. The naturally following question for **Sandel** is, do we deserve our talents? Here he brings the case of **LeBron James** to the forefront – he earns tens of millions of dollars and plays in a hugely popular game. Is it his doing that basketball is so popular in the US, and are his efforts and sacrifices higher than those of other sportswomen and men that are professionals in games with lesser popularity and audience? Here **Sandel** hints that our success is often not a result of our own doing.

The external circumstances matter and the societal preferences influence what talent is valued more. Based on his account, there are two alternatives to

meritocracy. However, their approach to success is indistinguishable from meritocracy. They both failed to create a society that lacks hubris among the winners and humiliation among the losers, to which meritocratic one is prone. These are **Hayek's** ideas of free-market liberalism and **Rawls's** version of welfare-state liberalism. **Hayek** argues that market outcomes reflect the value consumers place on the seller's goods and services. Merit and value are different. Merit involves moral judgment about what people deserve, while value is measured by what consumers are willing to pay. The money people make does not reflect what they deserve; they are simply the result of offer and demand. For **Rawls**, differences in talent are as morally arbitrary as differences in class – one cannot eliminate the influence of social relations. Yet still, the welfare states that exist do not eliminate meritocracy as the rhetoric of talent, effort and deserve is echoed across most.

The last two chapters focus on **Sandel's** proposal to overcome the tyranny of merit. He emphasises the need to rethink the way we understand success and question the issue that those on top made it on their own, especially in two domains: education and work.

The sixth chapter is dedicated to education, where he maps how education became the place where meritocratic ideas have transformed into reality. He goes back to the 50s and 60s when “competitive college admission as a gateway to opportunity” (p. 156) was new. The intention was to admit those most talented students to the top universities and prevent the formation of “a hereditary upper class” in America. The leading figure in this process was the president of Harvard University, **James Bryant Conant**. He started by creating scholarships for talented students from public schools who were chosen based on the results of tests of intellectual aptitude. It was a version of the IQ test called the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). These tests, over time, started to be used at all universities across the country, and as was shown in previous chapters, they cannot be considered a just method of candidate selection. **Conant** tried to transform Harvard into a meritocratic institution that was a base for a classless American society. Education was the critical tool that allowed everyone an opportunity for social mobility. The education system, in his vision, would become ‘a sorting machine’ that should help assign each person a role in society that has the best use of her talents without any judgments. However, as **Sandel** adds, this vision could not work as it lacks “moral logic and psychological appeal” (p. 173). He points out, “mobile society based on merit though antithetical to hereditary hierarchy is not antithetical to inequality” “system that celebrates and rewards the

best geniuses is prone to denigrate the rest as 'rubbish'. (p. 161) In the second part of the chapter, **Sandel** answers how to make meritocracy in education fairer with a simple proposal of a 'lottery of the qualified.' His idea is that most of those applying for the most selective universities are people with the necessary qualification to become students. Therefore, the most just principle would be a lottery. He admits that some applicants could be assigned two or more tickets based on specific criteria such as their family's income level, ethnicity, race, disability, etc. **Sandel** suggests that the universities could start trying to apply this lottery to fill half of the class to see if it works and creates a more diverse environment.

The last chapter focuses on the workforce and the necessary change regarding the position and evaluation of those who create the working class with no college education. His opening sentence introduces the whole problem of the tyranny of merit when it comes to the working class: "From the end of WWII to the 1970s, those without a college degree could find good work, support a family, and lead a comfortable middle-class life. ... Over the past four decades, the earnings difference between college and high school graduates... has doubled. In 1979 college graduates made about 40 per cent more than high school graduates; by the 2000s, they made 80 per cent more." (p. 197) Together with the relocation of jobs because of globalisation, this trend affected most men without a college education. In addition, in the meritocratic age, the dignity of work started to erode. The value of their work is considered too low in a society based on credentialism, and they appear on the loser side. In addition, in current society, the idea that the amount of money a person earns reflects their value for the whole significantly dominates our way of thinking. He concludes that what draws these people to populism are economic and cultural reasons, as in 2016, working-class men voted overwhelmingly for **Trump**. In addition, the moral damage the working class has suffered leads to the 'death of despair' for white men and women. More people die of drugs, alcohol, and suicide than heart disease. Most counties had a high rate of 'death of despair,' where **Trump** won in 2016 and possibly in 2020. Here **Sandel** hints at another phenomenon that has to do with racism quoting **W. E. B. Du Bois** from 1935, who was pointed out that even the least paid white Americans saw themselves much better when compared to the African Americans as they could exercise their rights which presented them a specific psychological compensation for lower wages. After the civil rights movement, this differentiation was gone. This is an issue that **Isabel Wilkerson** discusses in her book *Caste* (2020). Based on several investigative types of

research done in the US, the low-income working-class members feel disadvantaged by the policy that focuses on inequality, immigration, and minorities. As in the previous chapter, **Sandel** looks at how to solve this situation and how to return dignity to the work. The first proposal comes from a former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, advisor. It focuses on wage subsidies for low-income workers, something some European countries applied during the 2020 lockdowns. The second could be more appealing to progressives. It is related to the necessary reform of the financial industry as, based on data, the financial sector does not lead to more productivity and economic growth, quite the contrary. In this regard, the taxation policy needs to change, and progressive taxation comes to mind here.

In conclusion, **Sandel** talks about two conceptions of the common good; the first is consumerist and the second civic. The first is based on the belief that maximising the welfare of consumers is the goal of society, and democracy is simply economics by other means. The second is achieved only through discussions among fellow citizens about the intents and purposes of the political community. This type of democracy does not require equality of opportunity but equality of conditions. Equality of conditions is **Sandel's** reply to the tyranny of merit. A society where those who do not rise to wealth and position can live their lives with dignity and decency.

Even if the book focuses on the US, there are lessons to be learned for all democratic countries within the neoliberal economic order. To a certain extent, all of them follow the same pattern. Education is presented as a key to improving one's life, as a tool to rise above others, yet letting the uneducated out on the outskirts. It leads to their resentment and support for populist or anti-democratic politicians. Hence it causes a crisis of democracy.