

Michael J. Sandel  
*The Tyranny of Merit.*  
*What's Become of the Common Good?*  
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by Giulia Balossino

What really lies behind the ordinary belief that we should get what we deserve? Arguments from merit are usually grounded in the conviction that reaching the highest positions in society in terms of income and esteem is the primary, if not the only, criterion of success. But the logic of merit is also presented as promoting justice. Higher education is then conceived as the best way to support mobility, which can consequently improve justice. It has been argued that everyone should have the opportunity to get ahead, if they deserve to. Merit has therefore been represented by the expression “I made it on my own”, as a moral justification for those who reach the top and brag about it.

This line of reasoning appears controversial not only in terms of the underlying theoretical and philosophical issues, but also politically, in light of current public debates. At the heart of the problem lies the growing resentment of middle classes against élites, spreading throughout Europe and America. On the one hand, merit is professed as the bastion against nepotism and injustice, as if the problem was the institutions’ incapacity to effectively promote meritocracy. On the other, meritocracy is seen as a dangerous justification of wide ranging inequalities. Once realised, merit can only reinforce the idea that people are divided into winners and losers, and that the former should not care about the latter. If you won, you did it with your talent and effort; if you lost, it is the result of your own failure.

In *The Tyranny of Merit* Michael Sandel aims to dismantle the stubborn convictions and the illusions emerging from the meritocratic ideal that caused what he calls “the populist backlash”. In particular, the book is conceived as the proposal of a cultural, moral and political renewal. Despite the fact that the analysis is focused mainly on the American situation, the book engages the reader by highlighting the effects on our lives of the application of meritocratic principles: success obsession of both parents and children, desperation of losers, loss of trust in political parties and irritation of voters, detachment of the élite from the real problems of people. The different

shades with which these consequences are manifested do not deprive any of our democracies of the necessity or, as Sandel describes it, the special urgency, of reflecting on merit.

The book is composed of seven chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion. The prologue sets up an interesting conjunction of the social crisis generated by the pandemic of COVID-19 and the lack of solidarity caused by meritocracy. This observation, combined with a clear, accessible and well structured stream of thought, is capable of engaging and stimulating any reader, regardless of their expertise.

In the first chapter Sandel identifies the failure of what he calls the rhetoric of rising: the faith in mobility is disappointed by the fact that the social background is the prominent influence in people's flourishing. By referring to Michael Young's anticipation of the populist revolt (Young 1961), the author sheds light on the mistakes of the technocratic approach to politics and underlines the importance of morality and virtues as the solution for the tyranny of merit. Chapter two is devoted to recapping the historical roots of merit: the belief that our good actions are rewarded and our mistakes are punished, the problem of salvation and free-will, the work ethic in the Protestant Reformation and in Calvinism. Notably relevant is the argument on moral deservingness as the cause of success or failure, in terms of wealth but also for our health. It emerges from the linkage between merit and providence and nowadays affects the punitive and arrogant attitudes toward positive or negative natural occurrences.

Chapter three is centred on the failure of the combination of the rhetoric of rising with that of personal responsibility. The sentiment that realising justice was possible only by removing barriers and promoting equality of opportunity grew with the idea that markets could be fair only if people reach their position through talent and effort. Through a discussion of political leaders' choices and attitudes, from Obama to Trump, and with a fine analysis of political language over the last decades, Sandel turns our attention to philosophy. In particular, he sheds light on luck egalitarianism's formula of brute luck (Arneson 2004). The core of Chapter four is the realisation of the élite, with a focus on education and political representation. The opposition of smart and dumb, which lies in the current obsession for credentialism, needs to be overcome by means of a different understanding of the best characteristics for a good government.

Chapter five represents a turning point in the structure of the book. The chapter is devoted to revealing the mistakes behind the current conception of success and the unfairness of merit. Through the analysis of the theories of Michael Young, Friedrich Hayek, John Rawls and Frank Knight, Sandel reveals the gaps that caused the spreading of the meritocratic feeling. This line

of reasoning includes considerations on luck egalitarianism: it seems that the idea of merit emerges in the opposition between chance and choice. Sandel also refers to Elizabeth Anderson's well-known critique of the luck egalitarian perspective.

The last two chapters adopt a positive approach, aptly summed up by Sandel's assertion that "Learning to become a plumber or electrician or dental hygienist should be respected as a valuable contribution to the common good, not regarded as a consolation prize for those who lack the SAT scores" (Chapter 6, *The Hierarchy of Esteem*). The author then sheds light on human flourishing, dignity of work, solidarity and the social significance of taxation, from the perspective of contributive justice. Chapter six is centred on the theme of education and the dramatic effects of meritocracy in the private sphere of lives, from helicopter parenting to the increase of suicides rates. Chapter seven is devoted to the prospected cultural renewal.

Amid the bitterness and the discouragement in recognising that «These are dangerous times for democracy» (Chapter 1, *Winners and Losers*), Sandel proposes concrete interventions to make a difference. For example, in light of the fact that the actual sorting method of best colleges reinforces the meritocratic sentiment, he presents the idea of a sorting lottery: merit will stand only as a minimum threshold over which the candidates would all deserve to be admitted. But the class will be chosen by chance and this will highlight the fact that nobody makes it on their own. The social perception will preserve the students and their families from the obsession with success, and the terror of falling, and at the same time will preserve the promotion of competence. But the most significant contribution of the book lies in the argument on solidarity: Sandel asserts that we should convince people that every role in society has its value. By focusing more on production than on consumption, democracies could restore the dignity to every worker. We should emphasize the need we have of others in order to create collective well-being.

By promoting reciprocal respect and by fighting against the progressive indifference of those with a higher education for the middle class, Sandel also highlights the necessity of changing the left-parties' typical technocratic approach towards political debate. This method, emerging from the meritocratic logic, is based on the idea that only the competent should express an opinion. For those who have been involved in a political discussion, even a domestic one, this analysis will surely ring true. Whether we have acted as the winner or as the loser, or only as an observer, we are used to questions like "How could you vote in this way? I can explain to you what you should believe in" and answers like "I will not listen to you because you are irritating, presumptuous and arrogant, you are convinced of being right only because you have a degree".

It is worth spelling out the key role of esteem in Sandel's analysis. The concept of esteem is recurrent in *The Tyranny of Merit*, mostly appearing in terms of social esteem, but also as self-esteem. It has a key role in the development of Sandel's central proposal, which is that we should dismantle the hierarchy of esteem. Egalitarians belonging to the contemporary trend called relational egalitarianism note that there are some differences of status and esteem that cannot be *prima facie* identified as injustices (Schemmel 2015). In particular, it has been pointed out that there is a logical impossibility to accord the same level of esteem to everyone and that the practice of esteem is unavoidable. What counts is the fact that inequalities of esteem cannot be accepted if they infringe respect, moreover when people could feel humiliated and inferior and there is a risk of threatening the sense of community (Fourie 2015). What should be overcome and condemned is the absence of reciprocal respect. While there surely is a need to further investigate the theme of social esteem, the core of the argument related to merit could be shifted to the importance of self-esteem: élites should have a special attention towards the rest of the community.

Another interesting aspect of the discussion is an unacknowledged resemblance between the author's proposed renewal and that which can be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). One of the most influential authors, politicians and philosophers of Italian history, Gramsci anticipated the idea that democracies should focus on the relation between élites and masses, conceived as a "pedagogic" one. Gramsci wants to put into practice the "historic block", which is based on the assumption that people will respect one-another, convinced that there is no moral superiority. The interests of everyone will be considered important, and values and objectives will be commonly shared. In particular, for Gramsci, the political parties have the role of forging a managerial class aware of its role in the community, in order to preserve what he calls the "spirit of the state", representing the sense of civic and collective responsibility. The "democratic philosopher" will then be able to think for the others, to solve the real problems afflicting real people (Gramsci 1971, 1995, 1996). In key concepts like civic and collective responsibility, respect and attention for people's everyday life, we can see many similarities with Sandel's final considerations.

In conclusion, should merit be extinguished from politics or is there a place for a certain kind of desert in the proposed renewal presented in this book? First and foremost, we need to explore further the differences of status and esteem and how these could be accepted, by focusing on the psychological effects of a certain logic of success. Overcoming the focus on wealth that exemplifies the current characterisation of merit will also be necessary. Nonetheless, it could be argued that a need for merit still remains: we believe each person

should be competent and skilled in her job in order to contribute to the production of the community. People accept the existence of authority and its related responsibilities if they are respected and they understand the reason why a person is in that higher position. Through this line of reasoning we might find it possible to renew not only the culture of our democracies, but also the idea of merit in itself, arriving at an interpretation grounded in the relations between people: a relational view of merit.

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