ings, which always win in the end, the conclusion then seems to be that yet another post hoc justification has simply reached the limits of our gut feelings. Perhaps the conclusion should just be that we have been overdoing it.

In sum, although the argument could have been made in both broader and deeper ways, it is clear to me that Sandel has written an important book that tells the reader where it really hurts. The simple analysis that the populist backlash is the result of material circumstances has always been too simple, but seeing the case made so well, and so historically and philosophically informed, is particularly convincing. Indeed, one might very well say that the standard analysis of discontent – that the populist backlash has its roots mainly in material circumstances – suffers from the same limitation as the political programme that was its cause: Sandel very convincingly argues that viewing everything through the prism of value-neutral, material circumstances is precisely the problem. Rather, we need to relearn how to talk and behave in terms of morality, dignity, and the common good.

Maarten Wensink
Center for Advanced Studies
at EURAC, Bolzano
maartenwensink@hotmail.com

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In a World Governed by Merit, All the Poor Are Undeserving

The 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Brexit, and the rising support for authoritarian figures elsewhere have left politicians and commentators scrambling to understand where politics has gone wrong. These events have been widely interpreted as populist backlashes against rising inequalities, globalisation, immigration, and the elites. But there may be a deeper story that most commentators have missed. Michael J. Sandel argues that at the heart of this widespread popular discontent lie the social attitudes generated by the meritocratic discourse that politicians of all stripes have been pushing for the past four decades. Written in the gripping and accessible style that has become Sandel's calling card, this book mounts a powerful case that Western democracies have gone wrong by putting merit at the centre of politics.

In a meritocratic society, individuals achieve political and economic success based on their abilities and their merits, as opposed to their socioeconomic class. This ideal tells us that, provided we enjoy equal opportunities, any of us can study, gain the skills we need, and rise to the top if we work hard enough. This is, after all, the long-cherished American Dream. The problem with this ideal, Sandel points out, is that it fosters attitudes that are 'corrosive to the common good'. The 'winners' of this competition, often having strived to reach the top, tend to be convinced of their deservingness and superior qualities. Meanwhile, the 'losers' must contend not only with their lack of economic and political standing, but also with whatever purported intellectual and moral failings prevented them from reaching the top. The arrogance of the winners and the humiliation of the losers eventually erode the bonds of equality and of solidarity between citizens. Sandel's ultimate diagnosis, which he de-

livers in the very first chapter and continues to unpick throughout the book, is that this 'meritocratic way of defining winners and losers' has combined with our mistaking market efficiency for the common good to lead to the populist backlash we are witnessing today (p. 19).

The book paints an overall convincing – as well as chilling – picture of the moral and political pitfalls that our societies have fallen into in their pursuit of merit. Politicians of the left and of the right seem to have assumed that the answer to all inequalities and popular discontent is simply to expand equality of opportunity (pp. 85–89). The thought seems to be that if we can ensure that everyone can rise 'as far as their talents and ambition can take them' (p. 87) by expanding opportunities for education, we have done our job. Amongst the many resulting problems that Sandel canvasses is that we have now reached a point where the primary, or sometimes only, path to making a decent living and to earning the respect of the community is to pursue higher education. This ignores the fact that the overwhelming majority of people do not have nor want a college degree, and yet without one they face not only grim economic prospects but also a lack of social esteem (pp. 95–96, 198–199). The narrow focus on improving equality of opportunity has also led to a failure to engage in important public debates about our other needs, values, and goals as a political community – in short, about the common good. Perhaps most perniciously, we have encouraged people to believe in the false promise of social mobility. Politicians pushing the narrative that anyone can make it if they try, including prominent figures like Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Theresa May, have allowed the educated rich and successful to believe that they have earned their privileges, and have left the poor to shoulder the blame for their position, despite overwhelming evidence that social mobility is largely just a myth (pp. 75–76).

The book certainly mounts a convincing indictment of current politics and of the role that the merit narrative has played in leading us to where we are: a place of deep cultural division, resentment, and entrenched inequalities. But it is less successful in rejecting the very ideal of merit altogether. For Sandel claims not only that we have failed to implement a true meritocracy anywhere, which is true enough, but also that it would not be desirable to do so. His critique of the very *ideal* of merit boils down to two arguments. First, rewarding merit is inherently unfair because whatever we achieve is due in part to factors that we cannot claim credit for. Second, rewarding merit inevitably gives rise to attitudes that are inimical to equality of esteem and to the common good, namely hubris among the better-off and humiliation among the worse-off. Let us look at each in turn.

Sandel's fairness objection to rewarding merit is that our talents and abilities are to a large extent themselves undeserved. Whether we are born with certain talents, and whether our particular talents are valued in our economy, are a matter of pure luck and therefore just as unearned as being born an aristocrat in a class-based system. And while effort and hard work may make us more deserving, Sandel points out how difficult it is to disentangle effort from natural abilities and other bits of luck.

This is a powerful objection that goes back to John Rawls, who famously argued that a fair distribution of advantages should not reflect the morally arbitrary distribution of natural talents [Rawls 1999]. Rawls's rejection of luck was so influential that it sparked the development of a whole family of prominent theories of justice, namely luck egalitarian theories, whose key tenet is that a just society should eliminate all inequalities that are traceable to pure luck. Since Rawls, however, many have doubted whether rejecting luck should necessarily mean we must reject all

claims of merit. Some have argued that we need not deserve the very *foundations* of what enables us to come to deserve something. In Robert Nozick's formulation, we need not be deserving 'all the way down' for (some) merit claims to be plausible [Nozick 2006; also Zaitchik 1977 and Schmidtz 2002]. Others have said that someone may deserve a reward if their choice to use their talents in one way rather than another made all the difference to what they ended up achieving [Hurka 2003].

The debate over whether merit has any legitimate role to play in a just society, then, is much more complex than the book suggests. Yet instead of engaging in any sort of principled conversation that would help us make progress on the matter, Sandel slides back into a criticism of our societies' *actual* practices. He points out that, even assuming that effort makes people more deserving, we tend to mistakenly overinflate the significance of effort over talent in order to save the idea that some people are more deserving than others. He cites Olympics commentators who focus on stories about athletes overcoming hardships while downplaying their natural gifts. He also points to polls which show that, despite evidence to the contrary, a majority of Americans believe that most people can succeed if they work hard (p. 125).

While it may be true that, as a matter of fact, we tend to overemphasise the importance of effort for our achievements, this does not seem to be an intrinsic feature of an ideal merit-sensitive principle of justice. In this case, and at other points throughout the book, Sandel muddies the waters in terms of what the target of his criticism actually is: an ideal meritocratic arrangement, or our current, non-ideal practices around merit. This weakens, in particular, his claim that merit has no place in an ideally just society.

The second argument Sandel offers in his offensive against the very ideal of merit is that rewarding merit unavoidably leads to harmful attitudes about success and failure, attitudes that are corrosive to the common good. Those who land on top must have been *better* in some key respects than those who land on the bottom. This would be so particularly in a perfect meritocracy, in which true equality of opportunity prevailed. In a truly fair competition where everyone had an equal chance to succeed, those who failed must have failed at least partly because they were not talented enough, ambitious enough, or hardworking enough. As Sandel convincingly shows, this is worrisome because it is ultimately a *political* problem. For this undermines the relationship of equality and of solidarity between people. If each person's lot in life is their own doing, we are less inclined to see each other as equals who share in each other's fate. In a move that would take the Victorian 'Poor Law' ethic even further, a true meritocracy seems to make the *entire* working class 'undeserving' of their more fortunate neighbours' aid and esteem.

Here we have an objection that strikes at the very ideal of merit indeed. Whenever we claim that someone deserves a certain reward, the implication is that someone else, who is not equally rewarded, is less deserving. To say that a lawyer deserves to earn more money than a lorry driver automatically implies that the lorry driver is less deserving. In the last chapter of the book Sandel gestures towards an alternative political philosophy that would combat this rhetoric of merit. Instead of awarding income, wealth, and recognition based on what individuals have allegedly earned in a fair competition, we should reward people based on their contribution to the common good. This would involve, first, democratically reflecting together on what makes for a good life and on the goals we deem worth pursuing as a political community. Such deliberations would likely result in the recognition of a wide range of productive activities as valuable

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

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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-