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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 intergenerational 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,

Sandel argues, it is to be expected that the successful will think that their success is to a large part their own doing, regardless of whether this is true. This creates a certain sense of desert in the winners, and subsequently of hubris. The losers, on the other hand, are told that their failure is their own doing and that they have no right to complain.

Sandel sees the beginning of this trend at the start of the 1980s and assigns a large part of the responsibility for it to the Democratic Party and to centre-left parties in general. Instead of opposing the neoliberal advance brought on by their right-wing or conservative counterparts, these parties fully embraced the overall idea of a society of equal opportunity and increasingly began to make use of the 'rhetoric of rising' (p. 59). This narrative paints a picture of a society in which there are equal opportunities, education is a vehicle of social mobility, and rewards are based on merit. It both promises to free society from its stratified past and makes people believe that this society has already arrived. Using political discourse analysis, Sandel shows that this language of rising was increasingly used by Democratic presidents. This period since 1980, however, has also been a time of bad governance, globalisation, and starkly rising inequality. Compensation for the losers in globalisation remains a failed project and, according to Sandel, might not have been enough. So while presidents and prime ministers were arguing that everyone deserved an equal opportunity and that people should be rewarded based on their merit, socioeconomic conditions got worse for many, among them the white working class, and with this came a loss of social esteem. According to Sandel, this loss of social esteem led to a deep resentment against the liberal elites and was fertile ground for the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and for the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum earlier that same year.

To address this, Sandel argues, we need to look beyond distributive justice and include concerns of contributive justice. This means that while redistributive policies remain important, we need to consider the way individuals contribute to society, and what this means to them. According to Sandel, helping others and contributing is a central human need and is key to human flourishing. A society that disregards the contributions of many hinders the fulfilment of this need and consequently impedes human flourishing. Sandel acknowledges that this might require bigger changes, but he suggests some initial reforms to improve on the current situation. First, he proposes reducing the element of competition for the most sought-after universities by imposing some form of lottery system that randomly assigns those who are competent to different universities. Second, he argues that we need to shift the focus of the tax system. In line with his approach to contributive justice, this means shifting the tax burden from things that contribute something worthwhile to society to things that do not. Sandel's approximation of this is to shift taxes from labour to financial transactions and capital income. On a larger scale, he points out that this requires restoring the dignity of work even beyond taxes. How this can be achieved, Sandel argues, must be decided through deliberation among citizens.

This book presents a convincing account of the politics of esteem, issues of distributive versus contributive justice, and the dangers of meritocracy. The strengths of the book lie in Sandel's insightful analysis of political and societal discourse, the wide range of practical and theoretical issues included, its approachable tone, and the strong case he builds against meritocracy. The book also disappoints in certain regards. Sandel repeats his core argument numerous times across the book, without adding much theoretical nuance, and this takes up space that should have been used

for a more thorough discussion of the theoretical arguments he only briefly touches upon. Sandel remains unclear through large parts of the book about why he is talking mainly about the white working classes. On the other hand, the book clearly points at the portions of the population that voted for Trump or Brexit. Considering the heterogeneity of those groups, the issue of identity remains unclear. The question, however, of why this problem of resentment should be particularly present among the white working class is not addressed in great detail. The reader has to wait until the seventh chapter to find more in-depth theoretical arguments as to why this should be a problem specific to one ethnic and socio-economic group. One of the key arguments presented in this section is the following. In the first decades after the Second World War, the white working classes, while disadvantaged compared to the white middle and upper classes, were able to partake in most functions of social and political life. This was not true for most of the non-white population. Moving to a society of greater equality of opportunity would rob the white working class of the comfort of not being at the bottom of the hierarchy, instead giving them the impression that other people had jumped in line. While this could invite a discussion of the Marxist arguments of class co-optation, Sandel does not delve deeper into the theoretical argument. Rather, he points out that it would be wrong to simply accuse the white working class of racism because of the way they react to this development. Given that the issues of class and ethnicity are so tightly intertwined in this, and in the light of developments in both civil rights and racial justice on the one hand and socio-economic conditions on the other, a more intersectional and encompassing take on this issue is surely warranted. To put it differently, it would be interesting to see how the rhetoric of rising and the promise of meritocracy affect the parts of the population that during the golden age of capitalism were still mostly excluded from its spoils.

Another point worthy of being highlighted is the alternative that Sandel hints at. His proposals, however, are wanting in both clarity and scope. His argument that our contribution to society should matter and be valued appropriately would surely sound attractive to many people. The same might hold true for his proposal to reform the tax system by lowering taxes on labour income and increasing them on financial transactions. How exactly these ideas would affect the social esteem attached to different occupations is not clear. How do we decide which occupations contribute to the common good? Maybe more importantly, how do we decide what constitutes this common good? Sandel's answer to this is safe, unimaginative, and a little disappointing. He points out that the right way to decide these questions would be through citizen deliberation. This surely is a very safe answer in that it remains in the democratic tradition. Sandel does not want to prescribe what precisely we should aim for and which jobs are better than others, but he does not shy away from hinting at his preferences. Sandel's comparison of how the market rewards doctors compared to casino moguls and janitors compared to doctors might tell us something about his personal take on the issue. What we decide on as a society, he argues, should be exactly that, the product of our joint decisions.

Sandel presents two proposals on how the dignity of work might be restored. Both proposals, unfortunately, do not dare to step outside the realm of economic policies and consist mostly of policies that would affect the distribution of income. This, however, might not be enough to address the larger problem of the lack of social esteem that is inherent in US society, especially in relation to work and occupations. The advance of the post-industrial economy makes it harder for people to find jobs in which they can make a tangible contri-

bution to society. Restoring the dignity of work might, therefore, require not only that we treat everyone's contribution with the respect it is due, but also that we change the kinds of occupations that exist in our economies and the tasks that are required in most jobs, both private and public. The first step in answering these questions might be to determine what we define as the common good after all.

Here Sandel's answer is somewhat disappointing. Telling those who are suffering under the current system and are looking for change that we need to find a common solution to change our narrative will not bring them much solace. Considering Sandel's description of the United States as a deeply divided society that is morally unprepared to handle big challenges, the task of redefining its common good looms very large and potentially unattainable. Sandel does not offer specific ways of bridging that gap, and most of the policies that are proposed in the book already seem too controversial to be successfully and sustainably implemented in the current political climate of the United States. However, to those in politics who claim to be interested in fighting for the common good, alleviating social exclusion, and overcoming the divide, this book can act as an important wake-up call. Stop preaching a meritocratic society that might be neither attainable nor desirable.

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REGULAR REVIEWS

Krisztina Arató, Boglarka Koller and Anita Pelle (eds): *The Political Economy of the Eurozone in Central and Eastern Europe: Why In, Why Out?*
New York 2021: Routledge, 308 pp.

In a Europeanisation process that has generally unfolded as an 'ambivalent force for change' [Delteil and Kirov 2020], monetary integration has without a doubt been the thorniest challenge. The post-2008 Eurozone crisis has even revealed, above and beyond an East-West difference, that opinions can diverge quite sharply even within the respective clusters of member states. Arato, Koller, and Pelle zoom in on the political and economic factors that have shaped CEE states' options for joining, attempting to join, or expressly rejecting membership in the Eurozone (p. 2). Across 12 dense chapters, this co-edited volume argues specifically that CEE views on the Eurozone cannot be understood from a purely economic point of view, as they are warped in numerous ways by 'political gains and losses, the identity of the citizens, the status of democracy and the attitudes of other stakeholders' (p. 2). To begin with, the editors highlight that diverging CEE attitudes can in no small part be explained by changes in the nature of the Eurozone itself (p. 4). For instance, if the acceptance of Greece as a Eurozone member in 2001 signalled a 'soft and open' approach, later changes in crite-