

include a universal basic income and providing benefits to the middle class.

The security solutions are both more controversial (improving monitoring with speed cameras and data science algorithms as in China's social credit scheme) and less controversial (body cameras for police). At the international level, Ansell's proposals include democracy promotion and collective security arrangements like NATO, and even lethal autonomous weapons systems. Finally, escaping the prosperity trap could be mitigated through the coordinated market economy, the entrepreneurial state (for example, innovation agencies and sovereign wealth funds), higher taxes, bank regulation and carbon taxes. This is not to say that Ansell endorses any of these solutions uncritically; even here he is alert to tradeoffs.

Ultimately, Ansell makes an argument for the inevitability and even centrality of politics. Trying to take conflict and self-interest out of politics (through techno-libertarianism or populism) will lead it to emerge elsewhere. Again, this might be the one simple idea of political science. He suggests that an appreciation of this idea could lead to better politics, though it is hard to see how self-interested actors will come to such an understanding. But if you had to choose one book to recommend to friends to give them an appreciation of politics and political science, *Why Politics Fails* may be the best choice.

Andrew Lawrence Roberts
Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University

Michael J. Sandel:

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

New York, NY: Farrar, Straus
and Giroux. 2020, 288 pages.

DOI: 10.5817/PC2023-3-227
CC BY 4.0 (<https://www.creativecommons.cz/licence-cc/>)

Michael J. Sandel is a distinguished political philosopher and one of the world's most prominent public intellectuals. In his career, he has proven himself capable of writing dense and precise philosophical texts that resonate strongly with the leading figures in the field. However, he has been writing for a broader general audience for some time now. His books have a tremendous appeal primarily because they deal with critical philosophical issues and arguments in accessible language while at the same time not devaluing their substance, a true rarity among (contemporary) intellectuals. Thus, every time he publishes a new text, it resonates.

Sandel offers a timely intervention into contemporary debates on meritocracy in his latest book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* The work is a critique of the modern trend of credentialism and the societal pursuit of individual success, which, he argues, has come at the cost of the collective good.

The author strongly opposes the established dogmas of meritocracy. He believes that our societal reverence for individual achievement – epitomised by the adoration of elite educational qualifications – has fostered a toxic culture. In his view, this creates two interconnected problems:

- 1) Those who succeed (often) succumb to pride, believing that they have earned their status solely through their own efforts; he calls this *meritocratic hubris*.
- 2) Those who do not share in this success are left behind and feel humiliated and unvalued.

Sandel claims that Western societies no longer have a value system that emphasises the dignity of work and the importance of roles in a community. He says they have shifted from this and nowadays prioritise individual success, measured monetarily or by educational credentials. He also argues that the 'winners' in this system (often) forget the roles of luck and collective effort in their success, which leads to a lack of societal empathy and a fracture between the elite and the working class.

Sandel also deals with the way meritocracy has permeated the political landscape. He observes – in what I consider the book's central point – that politicians have become increasingly technocratic and rely heavily on the credentials and expertise of elites. While this may seem a recipe for informed decisions, it also sidelines a significant part of the population and alienates them from the political process. This, he argues, has contributed to a rise of populism and anti-establishment sentiment.

Economically, Sandel draws attention to the widening gap between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' because a system that rewards certain skill sets, which are very frequently tied to advanced educational degrees, results in an inherent inequality that grows over time. In fact, children from wealthy families are significantly more likely to be admitted to elite American universities, largely due to their ability to afford expensive preparatory courses.

'More than 70 percent of those who attend the hundred or so most competitive colleges in the United States come from the top quarter of the income scale; only 3 percent come from the

bottom quarter. [...] If you come from a rich family (top 1 percent), your chances of attending an Ivy League school are 77 times greater than if you come from a poor family (bottom 20 percent).'' (pp. 156–157)

Therefore, Sandel is, in essence, saying that a system that was supposed to be based on meritocratic principles has degenerated, leading to the above-mentioned meritocratic hubris, individualism and a situation in which elites no longer feel the need to give back to society. In this context, it is important to stress that selective colleges often favour children of alumni (Harvard admits one out of three 'legacy applicants', compared to one in twenty from the general pool), reinforcing the assessment of college admissions set out above. Prioritising the children of graduates looks even worse from my perspective in the context of the recent overturning of affirmative action in universities by the US Supreme Court.

Beyond the economic and political, Sandel touches on the moral implications of such a system. By placing individual merit above all else, society often disregards virtues like humility, empathy and collective responsibility. And the narrative that success is purely the result of hard work overlooks the role of luck in one's life trajectory. It can be argued that a system that honours 'the best geniuses' tends to denigrate others as 'trash', which is directly connected to the rise of the populist backlash described above.

Sandel does not merely critique but also offers possible paths forward through reinvigorating the dignity of work, by recognising roles, in other words, that might not require elite educational credentials but are essential for the functioning of society, which is in line

* Sandel evidences this with quotes, including Hillary Clinton's statement from 2016 that Donald Trump's supporters are 'a basket of deplorables'.

with his communitarian philosophy. In this context, it is important to recall the unvalued professions that proved to be so important for society as a whole during the coronavirus pandemic crisis. He also stresses the need for civic education that emphasises collective responsibilities and shared destinies rather than individual triumphs.

Sandel offers only one specific suggestion. He proposes that admissions to prestigious universities should be managed in such a way that a third or half of the worst applicants (based on test results) are eliminated, and the accepted applicants are chosen by lot from the rest. I do not consider this to be a very reasonable proposal. I see the solution in broader social acceptance of the above-mentioned value of the dignity of work and awareness of the mutual interdependence of citizens in the contemporary world, which necessarily leads to a reduction of individualism and a greater sense of humility, which is something of great importance in current times when we are seeing a backlash of people feeling left behind.

A shortcoming of Sandel's work is the almost exclusive focus of the text on the United States, which is common among American authors. There is nothing wrong with this in

itself. However, if the author presents facts to support his arguments almost entirely from the US, he cannot generalise the phenomenon under analysis to the whole of Western civilisation, which is what Sandel does (as do many other American authors). To generalise his thesis, it would be necessary to bolster the argument presented in his book with more empirical evidence from a non-American Western environment.

Nevertheless, in general, *The Tyranny of Merit* is another of Sandel's brilliant, insightful, and widely accessible works on the central societal challenges of our time, which, along with his previous writings (*What Money Can't Buy* and *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*) – as well as dealing with his main topic – non-explicitly presents and develops his communitarian philosophy. Thus, the book is essential reading for not just social science scholars but every thoughtful person who is concerned by the discontent or even frustration of many that is politically manifested by the rise of populism and radicalism, not only in the United States.

Václav Šmatera
Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University