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What's wrong with meritocracy?

Review article for *Political Quarterly*

Michael Sandel (2020*) The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Allen Lane.

Peter Mandler (2020) *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Education Since the Second World War.* Oxford University Press.

Jo Littler

When I was writing a book about meritocracy a few years ago I was struck by the regularity with which men would tell me I should read a book by Michael Young (ie, his classic satire *The Rise of the Meritocracy).* This happened many times, online and offline. No one woman *ever* asked me if I'd read Michael Young. This wasn't because they hadn't heard of him -- many of them mentioned him during the conversation. They just assumed that *of course* I'd read it, given that I was writing a book on the subject.

I remembered this fact when I was reading the two books for this review, both of which tackle the issue of meritocracy – the idea that you can make it if you try - from different theoretical, disciplinary and methodological standpoints. I remembered this fact when I picked up the copy of Sandel's book and saw that the seven endorsements on the back cover were all from white men. I remembered it again when I saw that inside the book there were so few references to the work of the many women who have written on meritocracy – such as Lani Guinier, Michèle Lamont, Angela McRobbie or Natasha Warikoo (none of whom are mentioned) -- and that gender plays next to no role in this analysis. Sandel's is a wonderful and beautifully written book which makes a hugely significant contribution to challenging the inequalities which the idea of meritocracy is used to generate. Like Mandler's book, it is part of a wider conversation on meritocracy, a conversation rapidly expanding at present as its costs and pitfalls become painfully apparent. But as these absences indicate, the inequalities of meritocracy are themselves multiple and they are also intersectional. Some groups of people are positioned further down the social ladder than others, and the reasons why need to be understood and addressed in both practice and theory.

As *The Tyranny of Merit* shows, the lineages of meritocracy are long and complex. Sandler is a political philosopher and finds the beginnings of 'the notion that our fate reflects our merit' in Biblical theology, which has a moral universe aligning 'prosperity with merit and suffering with wrongdoing' (p35). This belief system is traced through the Protestant Work Ethic, with its doctrine of salvation achieved through self-help, and all the way to the contemporary manifestations of the prosperity gospel. Today, televangelists in American megachurches preach that God rewards striving for faith with health and wealth. 'He' creates 'winners'.

As Sandel points out, such an exalted conception of individual responsibility is gratifying and exhilarating when things go well but demoralising, shameful and punitive when they go badly. The smug satisfaction of 'the winners', Sandel writes, can be called 'meritocratic hubris'. Such a state entails the tendency of the winners to 'inhale too deeply of their success': to believe they deserve their fate, and to fail to recognise the luck, fortune and

contingency of their lot. Merit thus becomes tyrannical and unjust. It inflicts humiliation on 'the losers'.

Sandel's argument is couched in moral terms and read in relation to moral philosophy. Meritocracy, he writes, 'is above all a moral claim about human agency and freedom'. Morality has featured prominently in Sandel's previous books, including *Public Philosophy: Essays on Morality in Politics* (2005) and *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* (2012) as well as *Justice: What's the Right Thing To Do* (2010). His work lies at the intersection between philosophy, law and government. This enables him to question the moral basis of meritocracy and to relate it to changing forms of politics and governance. The meritocratic hubris of a technocratic elite has come into being at the same time as the welfare state has been made smaller. Sandel is eloquently excoriating of the 'technocratic liberalism' of Obama, Blair and both Clintons, showing how they increased meritocratic self-responsibility at the expense of social solidarity and the civic good. There are also wider examples beyond politics. One interesting passage notes how the ubiquity of the word 'smart' – from smart phone to smart choices – has been pitted against any sense of collective advancement.

Meritocracy for Sandel, then, as for many contemporary critics of meritocracy, is a form of self-interest which works against the common good. The idea of getting ahead as personal responsibility in an epoch of increasingly inequality has been used to humiliate 'the losers', who have wreaked their revenge in the form of right-wing populism and support for Donald Trump. Alongside the moral reading of meritocracy, and the book's engaging, emotional appeal and readability, this analysis of right-wing populism is one of the key contributions of the book. Its solutions lie in greater collectivism: it appeals to solidarity, to the common good; it argues that the rich need to be taxed, it supports a financial transactions tax. It praises for civic education, Bernie Sanders and union reading rooms.

Whilst it could be argued that *The Tyranny of Merit* does not confront the problem of the power of capital enough, its sensibilities are firmly left wing and its analysis persuasive. It uses the phrase 'market-friendly globalisation' more than 'neoliberal capitalism', in line with its remit to appeal to a mass market audience. As a text it will be far-reaching in influence: Sandel has a high profile as an academic celebrity his course *Justice* was televised and made freely available online by Harvard. The realm of education is not neglected in *The Tyranny of Merit*, but rather seized upon as a core example of a democratic failure. Higher education is presented to the public as the 'engine' of social mobility, but kids of the poor are as unlikely to enter Harvard, Yale or Princeton as in 1954. Entry is largely predicated by wealth. 10% of Harvard students are admitted because of donor connections. Universities, Sandel shows, have little impact on social mobility: they reflect existing economic inequalities.

Like Daniel Markowitz in *The Meritocracy Trap* (2019), Sandel argues for a significant portion of lottery-based admission to university of qualified candidates. Importantly he challenges the premise of social mobility itself, arguing (like many others, including Geoff Payne and myself) that it promotes an impoverished social imaginary that works against the common good. Sandel is good at tracing the broader lineaments of recent 'meritocratic' education policies: their destructive emphasis on competition at all costs, their reduction of deep learning and joy, their erosion of collective learning and common advancement. He notes that 'to parent' became a verb in the 1970s, the time parents were encouraged to prepare children for an increasingly competitive market in education. He also notes the depressing increase in childrens' poor mental health, burnout and suicide rates across classes;

and a three-fold increase in 'deaths of despair' in the early 2000s from those without a college degree, who are now at the greater mercy of the market. There are very few winners from this individualistic system of market-based meritocracy.

By contrast Peter Mandler's book largely stays on the sunny side of the street, telling an overwhelmingly optimistic story about the democratisation of modern education. Meritocracy is nevertheless still for this book primarily a 'social bad'. *The Crisis of the Meritocracy* tracks the transition to mass education in Britain since the second world war. It pits this transition as a battle between education practices in which the few are selected to succeed (meritocracy) and those offering opportunity along the life course for the many (democracy). This transition has taken place on a breathtaking scale: before the second world war, around 20% of the population went to secondary school and a mere 2% to university; today, everyone goes to secondary school and half the population to university. Mandler presents this 'drive to more and more education' as a success story which needs to be understood in the historical context of an expansion of democracy in the form of the post-war welfare state.

Mandler is a historian, and thus the book is plentiful in detail and archival research from the different eras it moves through. It takes pains to delineate the original disciplinary contribution of its approach: arguing that historians have been too beholden to the behaviour of party politicians; educational historians too blindsided by moral ideals; economists to the demands of employers for more education; and sociologists to systems of distinction and advantage. By contrast, Mandler aims to shift the attention to parents and students: to include more of the 'demand side' alongside the 'supply-side', as he puts it. Emphasis is placed on two factors in this regard. The first is the 'escalator effect': educated parents have tended to demand more education for their children. The second is the argument that widespread upward mobility during the mid-century welfare state widened peoples' horizons, making them 'less burdened by inherited expectations than previous generations'. These social trends are understood as primary drivers of the democratic expansion of education.

This substantial book moves between a consideration of shifting demographics, parental attitudes, political policy and the behaviour of local authorities in order to map the different stages of the transition to mass education. On the way it supplies a great many usefully nuanced portraits of pivotal moments. These include an account of how the Conservative party, 'realising that meritocracy and inherited privilege were no longer at odds', brought in the 1944 Education Act ('The Butler Act') and the 11+ exam. It paints a similarly vivid picture of the widespread approval of the advent of a comprehensive school system in the 1980s, which 'had brought to an end to the clearly undemocratic ordeal of a public examination at 11+ which then allocated children to 'better' or 'worse' schools, largely in line with their social background' (p70). The sheer scale of the resistance towards the 11+ , the pivotal role of LEAs of all political persuasions in promoting comprehensives and the widespread popularity of the slogan 'grammar schools for all' is striking. The granular nature of the account also provides a mass of interesting local detail of wider significance, such as how exactly the Chicago School's corporate narrative of 'human capital' became attractive to politicians and was mobilised by conservative politicians in the 1950s.

Whilst it aims to focus on the 'demand-side' of mass education, this is definitely not history from below (indeed, Michael Sandel would most likely term the position it puts forward as 'liberal technocratic'). Mandler is critical or dismissive of many of the radical or working-class sociology of education texts he mentions, particularly Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*, whose critique of the experience of working-class boys is viewed as both hedonistically

nihilist and as delegitimating comprehensive education. There is a sharp critique near the beginning of the book of historians of education being ‘trapped’ in declinist narratives and in ‘the morality play of party politics’. By contrast, Mandler is at pains to praise both left and right politicians and pledges to provide more expansive detail and social context.

The book undoubtably offers this. Mandler’s book also has a section on women in education – far more attention is paid by him to gender than by Sandel. Yet the social context on offer is also somewhat politically delimited. There is strikingly little on racialisation of education, which is quite an oversight given the wealth of recent scholarship on this subject. The excesses of inequality post-2008 financial crash are discussed in the final chapter of the book, a chapter that also registers the uncertainty of the present. But there is little serious concern with the forms of privatisation and marketisation which have restructured comprehensive education through academisation -- notably, the spate of recent campaigns on this subject do not figure -- or the extremity of the pressures generated by neoliberal restructuring in universities. The book concludes with a 1963 *Private Eye* parody about comprehensive universities, which is used as a way of discussing the role of parental ambition. Yet the very phrase ‘comprehensive universities’ will for some gesture to how there is a serious point to be made about how plans for a comprehensive university system have never been taken seriously in the UK; about how its staggeringly unequal university landscape has more extremes of wealth and poverty than secondary education; and about how its former polytechnics are today in crisis and being run into the ground.

The Crisis of the Meritocracy is rich in detail and provides a good sense of the mix of mid-century welfarism and consumer capitalism, discussing the changing postwar norms and expectations ‘which caused people to see education as not only an investment good but also a consumption good, ‘one of the decencies of life’, and, even more, a right of citizenship’ (p207). There is less of a sense of how the individualistic, consumer-oriented component of this equation has won decisive victories over solidarity, over civic-mindedness, over collectivity. To Sandel this balance is far more clearly off kilter: ‘welfare state liberalism fails to provide a sense of community adequate to the solidarity it requires’ (p131).

In both books, then, meritocracy is understood as a *problem*. It is a social system built around individualist competition for the few and is opposed to democracy. It is truly gratifying to see this conception of meritocracy being both advanced and roundly critiqued, after several decades of neoliberalism in which ‘meritocracy’ was rehabilitated and re-energised as a favourable term against the grain of its original usage. Both books have much to offer both on their own terms and in terms of contributing to further analysis. And if such critical gazes can look outwards, more openly, beyond the scholarship produced by other white men at elite institutions, then they will find many other conversations and forms of activism happening which are working to strengthen these democratic endeavours as well. The fight against inequality, in other words, continually needs to ensure it doesn’t inadvertently work to shore up other inequalities along the way.

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