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Meritocracy, education, and the civic project: A reply to commentaries on *The Tyranny of Merit*

Theory and Research in Education
2022, Vol. 20(2) 193–199

DOI: 10.1177/14778785221113622
journals.sagepub.com/home/tre
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Abstract

Michael Sandel replies to commentaries on his book *The Tyranny of Merit*, focusing on meritocracy and education, the role of merit and grace in economic discourse, and the resentment that fueled the populist backlash against elites.

Keywords

Meritocracy, credentialism, resentment, elites, *The Tyranny of Merit*

I am grateful to the participants in this symposium for their searching engagement with my book *The Tyranny of Merit*. I would like also to thank Mitja Sardoč for conceiving and convening this special issue. His introduction to the special issue offers a generous overview of my book, highlighting 'the collateral damage arising out of governing by merit' (Sardoč, 2022: 139), including 'the weaponization of college credentials', populist discontent, helicopter parenting, and meritocratic hubris of the successful. He rightly observes that the standard defense of meritocracy arises from 'a disfigured understanding of the idea of "careers open to talent"' (Sardoč, 2022: 140). It is one thing to insist that everyone has an opportunity to develop their talents and pursue careers of their choice. It is quite another to assert that, if chances are equal, the winners deserve the rewards the market bestows on them. This second claim, about deservingness, is at the heart of the meritocratic principle. By attributing moral desert to the winners of meritocratic competition, it leads the successful to believe that their success is their own doing, and that those who struggle must deserve their fate as well.

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Reclaiming the public vocation of higher education

Harry Brighouse, a political philosopher who has thought deeply about questions of justice, education, and the family, offers a generous and sympathetic account of my critique of meritocracy and my suggestion that we reorient our public life to focus less on arming people for meritocratic competition and more on renewing the dignity of work. Anticipating objections to my proposals, he rightly observes that the book is not a manifesto; it offers 'a moral framework, not a policy platform' (Brighouse, 2022: 147).

Although Brighouse does not defend meritocracy, he speculates that a fully realized meritocratic society would be attractive for reasons unrelated to meritocracy. A society in which everyone had a truly equal chance to develop and exercise their talents would be a society with few inequalities of income and wealth. Such a society would be desirable in itself, as a matter of justice, Brighouse argues, not because it would give the winners the rewards they deserve. Indeed, the distinction between 'winners' and 'losers' would fade in significance. This intriguing observation highlights the moral distinction between seeking a more genuine equality of opportunity (which can be defended on non-meritocratic grounds) and attributing moral desert to those who succeed in competitive meritocratic societies.

Brighouse devotes some extended reflections to the role of higher education in promoting the common good. He agrees with my claim that higher education has become a 'sorting machine' for a market-driven, meritocratic society, and that this role is corrosive of the public good that universities should serve. He also agrees with the need to reverse the retreat from public higher education. But he offers a fuller, more detailed analysis than I do of how government funding of higher education has changed. He shows that an increasing share of funding takes the form of tuition subsidies to students and their families, rather than direct institutional support. This encourages the tendency to view higher education as a private good – a means to the end of a more lucrative career – rather than a public good. This tendency reinforces the role of universities as credential-conferring institutions and ignores the way they carry out their educational mission. Direct grants to public colleges and universities could be targeted, Brighouse suggests, to educational programs that equip students to contribute to the common good, not only to seek remunerative careers in finance, consulting, and the like. Brighouse's proposal is a valuable and important elaboration of my general worry that converting universities into meritocratic sorting machines corrupts their educational mission and leads to an impoverished, privatized conception of what higher education is for.

An economy of grace

The term 'meritocracy' is relatively recent; it was brought to prominence by Michael Young (1958), a British sociologist, in a short, dystopian book titled *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. But the notion that the winners have earned, and therefore deserve, their winnings has a longer history. It goes back to the Biblical idea that those who flourish must have earned God's favor and that suffering is a sign of having sinned. Christian theologians debated whether salvation was a matter of merit, something the elect earn

through faith and good works, or an unearned gift of God's grace. In *The Tyranny of Merit*, I show that these competing claims about merit and grace reappear in today's seemingly secular debates about who deserves what: Is material success due mainly to the superior effort and hard work of the successful or due to factors for which we can claim no credit, such as growing up in a supportive family and being blessed with talents our society happens to prize? In an illuminating commentary, Victor Tan Chen and Timothy Bland explore the tension between merit and grace and show how these competing moral perspectives carry important civic implications.

To acknowledge grace is not to imply fatalism, they observe, or to deny human agency. Grace can be a source of humility, 'one captured earlier in notions of God's blessings even to the undeserving, and today in more secular terms as a humble sense of connection to a vast and never fully knowable universe' (Chen and Beryl Bland, 2022: 166). In perhaps the most eloquent speech of his presidency, his 2015 'Amazing Grace' eulogy in Charleston, South Carolina, Barack Obama expressed the generous public sentiments that can flow from the recognition that we are recipients of undeserved gifts. This powerful evocation of grace came, as Chen and Bland point out, from 'a president who embodied' the American faith in meritocracy and upward mobility through higher education.

Drawing upon Chen's (2015) book *Cut Loose*, they suggest a number of ways in which a perspective of grace 'can have a deeper influence on how we organize the economy'. They cite the Biblical example of the jubilee year, in which debts were forgiven and slaves freed. In our time, this Biblical tradition of magnanimity 'helped inspire the Jubilee movement to forgive the debt of poor countries at the turn of the last millennium' (Chen and Beryl Bland, 2022: 168). Building on European Union regulations that require Internet search companies to honor a 'right to be forgotten', Chen and Bland would extend this concept to employment and credit records, periodically expunging credit ratings and criminal records so that more people could 'start anew with a clean moral and financial slate'.

What they aptly call 'an economy of grace' might also point to a more generous social safety net, whether in the form of a universal basic income or a 'participation income' for all who contribute to the common good – through paid work, training, caregiving, or volunteering. A government job guarantee is another possibility. What these measures have in common, Chen and Bland point out, is a renunciation of market-defined merit in favor of a willingness 'to distribute a good portion of the nation's wealth to all, without thought to deservingness' (Chen and Beryl Bland, 2022: 169). Their notion of an economy of grace offers an appealing and suggestive alternative to the harsh ethic of success I criticize in *The Tyranny of Merit*.

Meritocracy and resentment

Jonathan J. B. Mijs agrees with my critique of meritocracy but does not think it is implicated in the populist backlash against elites. Meritocracy, he writes, 'is a roadmap to inequality' (Mijs, 2022: 173), a way to 'legitimate disparities as the deserved outcome of a fair process'. But he questions my claim that resentment against meritocratic elites played a part in the election of Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit vote in the

United Kingdom, and the rise of nationalistic populists in other countries. He offers survey data showing that, in recent decades, the belief that hard work determines who gets ahead in society has increased, not decreased, among the working-class respondents in the United States and Britain. He concludes from this that resentment against meritocracy cannot explain populist anger. Instead, Mijs attributes the resentment to a generalized 'broken promise of equality' that is a persistent feature of liberal democracy.

Mijs' findings about public attitudes toward hard work and success are interesting and important, but they are not inconsistent with the interpretation I advance in *The Tyranny of Merit*. In fact, they support it.

Consider, first, the seeming paradox of these attitudes: At a time of wage stagnation, stalled mobility, and rising inequality, working people in the United States and Britain increasingly embrace the meritocratic faith that hard work is the key to success. How can this be? Mijs suggests that growing class segregation makes working people increasingly unaware of inequality. They do not see how the privileged, professional class lives.

It is certainly true that widening inequalities of recent decades have led to social separation. As the affluent buy their way out of public institutions and services, we have fewer class-mixing institutions and occasions, fewer public places and common spaces that bring people together from different walks of life. People from different social backgrounds rarely encounter one another in the course of the day. Social media and the targeted advertising on which they depend reinforce this enclosure. This is perhaps the most damaging consequence of economic inequality on civic life, one of the greatest obstacles to a politics of the common good (Sandel, 2019: 224–227, 2012: 203).

But class segregation is an unlikely explanation for the rising meritocratic faith that Mijs finds among working people. First, has upward mobility been increasing *within* working-class communities since the 1980s? If not, then the growing belief that hard work determines who gets ahead most reflects something other than the lived or observed experience of the respondents. Second, Mijs contends that the working-class resentment that fuels populist backlash is not resentment against meritocratic elites but a more generalized anger about the 'broken promise of equality' (Mijs, 2022: 175). But the class segregation hypothesis also undermines this more generalized account of working-class resentment. If class segregation 'makes it harder for people to recognize meritocracy's broken promises' (Mijs, 2022: 177), wouldn't it also make it harder for people to recognize 'the broken promise of equality'?

What then might explain the rising meritocratic faith among working people at a time of growing inequality, and how is it consistent with resentment against meritocracy? As Mijs acknowledges, meritocracy is an ideology that seeks to legitimate unequal economic outcomes. It is therefore not surprising that belief in the possibility of rising would become stronger as inequalities widened. Legitimating ideologies sometimes exert a greater appeal when social circumstances put their realization in doubt.

This can be seen, for example, in the growing prominence of the 'rhetoric of rising' in public discourse (Sandel, 2019: 22–24, 59–80). Even as neoliberal globalization brought inequality, job losses, and stagnant wages, its proponents offered workers some bracing advice: 'If you want to compete and win in the global economy, go to college'. 'What you earn will depend on what you learn'. 'You can make it if you try' (Sandel, 2019: 23, 86–87)

This rhetoric of rising flattered the winners, telling them that their success was their own doing, and that they therefore deserved the rewards the market bestowed upon them. For most working people, however, the meritocratic mantra was a double-edged sword, consoling in one way but insulting in another. The consolation was the promise of upward mobility through effort and hard work. The insult was the implication that those who fail to rise are responsible for their condition: If you did not get a college degree, and if you are struggling in the new economy, your failure must be your fault.

The consoling aspect of meritocratic ideology can explain what otherwise seems paradoxical – that belief in the possibility of rising increases rather than wanes at a time of growing inequality, stagnant wages, and stalled mobility. The insulting aspect suggests how the politics of humiliation compounds the resentment that fuels backlash against elites. The meritocratic mantra 'you can make it if you try' invites those who struggle in the new economy to blame themselves rather than the system. For those who can't find work or make ends meet, it is hard to escape the demoralizing thought that their failure is their own doing, that they simply lack the talent and drive to succeed.[1]

The politics of humiliation differs in this respect from the politics of injustice. Protest against injustice looks outward; it complains that the system is rigged, that the winners have cheated or manipulated their way to the top. Protest against humiliation is psychologically more freighted. It combines resentment of the winners with nagging self-doubt. This volatile brew of humiliation and resentment was a potent source of Donald Trump's politics of grievance.

The darkest expression of this demoralization is the increase, during these same decades, of what economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton have called 'deaths of despair', the growing incidence of death by drug overdose, alcohol abuse, and suicide. In a finding that uncannily tracks the growing belief in meritocracy among working-class Americans, Case and Deaton (2020) discovered that this rising tide of despair is an affliction distinctive to those without a college degree.

In short, the growing belief among working-class Americans that hard work is the key to success is not inconsistent with my claim that meritocratic ideology feeds the anger and resentment that politicians like Trump are able to exploit.

Mijs also takes issue with what he takes to be my response to the divide between winners and losers. I argue that we should focus less on arming people for meritocratic competition and focus more on renewing the dignity of work. Rather than accept the market's verdict on what counts as a valuable contribution to the economy, we should deliberate as democratic citizens about whose contributions matter most and how they should be rewarded. (For example, do we really believe, as the labor market's verdict implies, that a hedge fund manager's contribution to the common good is 800 or 1000 times more valuable than that of a nurse or a schoolteacher?)

I argue that a market-driven, technocratic conception of the public good wrongly neglects these moral and civic questions. Mijs thinks I want to change the terms of public discourse instead of redistributing income and wealth. But this is a misreading. Any attempt to deal with inequalities of income and wealth requires redistribution. My argument is simply that distributive justice is not a sufficient response to the systemic inequalities of income, wealth, power, and social esteem that neoliberal globalization, backed by meritocratic conceptions of success, has produced. In addition to distributive

justice, we need contributive justice – giving everyone, whatever their meritocratic credentials, an opportunity to contribute to the common good and to win social recognition and esteem for doing so (Sandel, 2019: 208–222).

Education beyond credentialism

Veronika Tasner and Slavko Gaber, sociologists of education at the University of Ljubljana, offer a wide-ranging series of reflections on meritocracy in education. Although my book draws mainly on the role of meritocracy in the United States and the United Kingdom, they observe that the logic of meritocracy, for good and ill, has 'reached more or less every corner of the world' (Tašner and Gaber, 2022: 182–183) and describe it as 'the dominant ideology of the 20th and 21st century education system' (Tašner and Gaber, 2022: 185). They agree with me, and with the other contributors to this symposium, that meritocracy serves to justify and legitimate the inequalities that arise in neoliberal societies. Although it reinforces inequality, Tasner and Gaber point out, meritocracy does enable some to rise. 'For many people, it represents the only hope and, through education, the only chance for social mobility' (Tašner and Gaber, 2022: 186). It is therefore doubtful, they suggest, that meritocracy will be renounced anytime soon.

This leads them to consider how meritocracy might be detached from its association with neoliberal, market rationality and enlisted in support of education as an intrinsic good. The market-driven meritocracy prevalent today converts higher education into a sorting machine and treats education as a purely instrumental good, a way of preparing people to compete in the labor market. (Chen and Bland also make this point.) Tasner and Gaber argue that focusing 'on wage labor as the *raison d'etre* of education' devalues the value and meaning of education. As technology reduces the need for wage labor, they speculate, education may be liberated from its instrumental role and seen increasingly as 'preparation for other spheres of human activity' (Tašner and Gaber, 2022: 187–188). Instead of privileging a unitary conception of merit, it may be possible to recognize and appreciate a broader range of merits, corresponding to the multiply spheres of life and layers of our identities.

This is a humane and hopeful vision. It holds out the possibility that the competitive, market-driven society that relegates education to a credential-conferring practice might give way to a more cooperative, deliberative mode of life. This would reduce the pressures that divert education from cultivating the love of learning for its own sake. It would also point us beyond the tyranny of merit to a more generous public life.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. In this and the following paragraph, I draw on Sandel (2019: 26), *The Tyranny of Merit*.

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