

The Limits of Meritocracy

a conversation with
MICHAEL J. SANDEL



MICHAEL J. SANDEL, of Harvard University, is one of America's foremost political and moral philosophers. His 2020 book *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* powerfully makes the case against the moral foundations, as well as the economic and political effects, of our contemporary meritocracy. Today's meritocracy, he writes, "moralizes failure" in ways that profoundly damage our democracy, not only by diminishing those the meritocracy leaves behind, but also by puffing up those it raises high. "A lively sense of the contingency of our lot," he writes, "can inspire a certain humility."

Sandel spoke with SAPIR editor-in-chief Bret Stephens in early June. What follows is an edited and condensed version of their conversation.



Bret Stephens: I enjoyed your book and look forward to discussing the notion of a meritocracy—used as a term not of praise but of opprobrium. Why don't we first take a step back and start with a bit of family biography, including your Jewish background?

Michael J. Sandel: I grew up in the Midwest in a family that belonged to a Conservative congregation. From age eight to 13, I attended a Hebrew school five days a week, after my public-school classes concluded. Attending Hebrew school and growing up in the Midwest were formative experiences. They inculcated a strong civic spirit, a belief that public life and public service could make a difference for the good. My grandparents on both sides of my family migrated here when they were quite young, and both of my parents are college-educated. My father worked in business, as a distributor of phonograph records to department stores, and my mother taught languages and was a homemaker.

Stephens: So it's a classic Jewish story, in which merit and effort led to greater success with every passing generation. Is that fair to say?

Sandel: Yes, although it's not clear what portion is due to effort and what portion is due to favorable cultural circumstances. But the broad pattern is as you've described it.

Stephens: There used to be in the United States, at least in the story we often tell ourselves, romanticizing a bit, a functioning meritocracy. A correspondence existed between effort and achievement, and there was a ladder of social mobility. And then something happened in the last 40 or 50 years, when that dynamic changed. Was the idea of meritocracy faulty from the beginning, or are we just living in a world where a commitment

to meritocracy no longer meets the needs of a growing number of citizens?

Sandel: Both. The ideal is flawed, and we fail to live up to it. As you suggest, there were elements of the meritocracy that seemed to work in the '50s and '60s, though in retrospect we may have overestimated the link between individual effort and success. Beyond effort, the ability to rise depended on conditions that we took for granted, such as access (for some) to excellent public schools. As inequality has deepened, things have changed. The mid-century American belief that effort and hard work would be rewarded with upward mobility is no longer true, if it ever was. Mainstream politicians don't get this. They continue to assume that the solution to inequality and wage stagnation is individual upward mobility through higher education. But this is a mistake. It is a mistake that the mainstream political parties, Democrats and Republicans alike, have made over the last four decades.

Stephens: I am curious to hear more about education, especially elite education. One of the points that you make eloquently in your book is that access to elite institutions is increasingly driven not so much by one's own talents but rather by the socio-economic position that one is born into.

Sandel: At the 140 most selective colleges and universities in the United States, the percentage of students from well-off families (top 25 percent of the income scale) is 70 percent. The entire population at the bottom half of the income scale constitutes only 10 percent of the students in these places. There's another figure, in some ways even more striking, Bret, that measures the extent to which colleges and universities actually function as engines of upward mobility. A team of economists led by Raj Chetty recently studied 1,800 colleges and universities in the United States—selective and nonselective, public and private. The team asked what

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proportion of the students in American colleges and universities arrives from low-income families (bottom fifth of the income scale) and rises as adults to the top fifth. The percentage is only 2 percent.

Stephens: Those numbers raise questions about how universities need to recast their admissions priorities, as well as their pedagogical priorities once students are admitted. The Supreme Court is now considering the case of *Students for Fair Admission, Inc. v. Harvard*, an anti-affirmative action suit that was brought on behalf of Asian-American students who feel unfairly discriminated against in the University's admissions process. Do you take a view of what a ruling against Harvard might mean for upward mobility or how it would affect the picture that you are describing?

Sandel: Since relatively few students at American colleges and universities come from low-income backgrounds in the first place, the mobility effect is surprisingly modest. Higher education is like an elevator in a building that most people enter on the top floor. Those of us who spend our days in the company of the credentialed can easily forget the simple fact that most people do not have a four-year college degree; nearly two-thirds of Americans do not. So it's folly to create an economy that sets as a necessary condition of dignified work and a decent life a college degree that most people don't have.

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On the issue of affirmative action that the Court is considering: Affirmative action has been an effective tool for broadening the racial, ethnic, and geographic diversity of higher education. This is an important achievement, and it enriches the classroom experience. But affirmative action has not functioned as an effective tool of upward mobility with regard to class. It would be unfortunate, in my view, if the Supreme Court struck down the use of affirmative action in admissions. But such a ruling would probably not have a substantial impact on upward mobility in terms of class.

Stephens: Would a policy of affirmative action that has a much greater stress on class rather than race resolve some of the problems of this kind of meritocracy that is hardening into a permanent aristocracy?

Sandel: I favor affirmative action that takes account of both race and class. But it is a mistake to think that any college admissions policy can be the primary way of dealing with the inequalities of income, wealth, and social esteem that have deepened over

the last four decades. To deal with these inequalities, we have to reconfigure the structure of the economy, reconstruct civil society, and reframe the terms of public discourse. We should focus less on arming people for meritocratic competition and focus more on making life better for everyone who contributes to the common good, whatever their academic credentials.

Stephens: There's also a matter of social esteem, the so-called prestige economy. There aren't many institutions in the United States today, in the way that there are in Germany, where one can acquire social esteem without the benefit of elite higher education. So what, educationally, are some of the systems we might be able to expand or develop that would advance the possibility of gaining social prestige without participating in the meritocracy as we've now devised it?

Sandel: The fundamental challenge is to question and reconfigure the prestige economy, as you've called it. Education is one part but not the only part of that problem. An economist at Brookings, Isabel Sawhill, calculated U.S. federal support for helping students attend higher education. Several years ago, it was \$164 billion a year, while the amount the federal government spent on vocational and technical training institutions was \$1.1 billion. This reflects the fact that we woefully underinvest in those forms of learning on which the majority of our fellow citizens depend to prepare themselves for the world of work and, for that matter, citizenship. In addition, the credentialing function of higher education has begun to crowd out the intrinsic mission of higher education, which is to cultivate the love of learning, to develop critical thinking, and to enable students to explore fundamental questions about what's worth caring about and why.

Stephens: Let's look at the specifically Jewish angle. Meritocracy was one of the great blessings for the American Jewish community.

Not everyone, but a striking percentage of Jewish parents were able to send their children to elite universities. This ability gave them entry into areas of public and private life that had previously been closed to them. The ideal of intellectual merit as the premier criterion for success and advancement created an elite in society that by many measures was disproportionately Jewish. In a system where status and intellectual merit are less tightly linked, what does that mean, if anything, for Jewish life in the United States?

Sandel: I don't think this would alter the character of Jewish life. But it's important to understand the meaning of the term "merit."

When we speak of merit as a value, we're making a strong claim; we're saying that insofar as chances are equal, the winners deserve their winnings. This is the assumption we need to reconsider. The principle of equality of opportunity is important; no one should be held back by poverty or prejudice. I think this is the principle, Bret, that you rightly care about. But it is important to recognize that equality of opportunity is a remedial ideal. It is not a sufficient condition for a just society. Meritocracy, understood as a principle of deservingness, has a dark side. It corrodes the common good. It teaches those who land on top that their success is their own doing and the measure of their merit. And, by implication, that those who struggle must deserve their fate, too. This feature of meritocracy—the attitude toward success that it cultivates—leads to hubris among the winners and to humiliation and resentment among those left behind. And this is precisely the condition that has led to the polarization we see today. One of the most potent sources of the populist backlash against elites is the sense, among many working people without a college education, that elites look down on them.

Stephens: There are various ways in which the prestige economy can be challenged. One of them you seem to be suggesting is

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that elites need to recapture the concept of noblesse oblige. Which is the moral education of elites that inarguably has been missing for the past several decades.

Sandel: We need to educate the successful to notice the luck and good fortune that helped them on their way, and to appreciate their indebtedness. This recognition can prompt a certain humility, the ability to look at those who struggle and say, "There, but for the grace of God or the accident of fate, go I. That could be me." So this is to agree with your point about the moral education of elites.

Stephens: On your point about the insufficiency of equality of opportunity, is the answer what now goes by the name of equity?

Sandel: I would put it this way: Beyond equality of opportunity, we need a broad democratic equality of condition. Democracy and a healthy civic life do not require perfect equality. But they do require public places and common spaces that gather people together in the course of our everyday lives, so that we

encounter one another across differences of class, race, ethnicity, religion, and political conviction. It's this equality of condition that has been deeply undermined by the inequalities of income and wealth that have unfolded over the past four decades. A broad democratic equality of condition would seek to rebuild the civic infrastructure of a shared common life. This is why equality of opportunity, understood as a fair race to the top, is not enough.

Stephens: Ron Daniels, the president of Johns Hopkins, wrote a book on what universities owe democracy. One of the cases he makes powerfully is the case against legacy admissions. What else can an institution like yours do to advance the aim attempted by ending legacy-based admissions?

Sandel: I favor the abolition of legacy admissions. But we also need to reorient the curriculum of higher education away from technocratic, supposedly “value neutral” social sciences and toward a broader ethical and civic education. I think it's important that all students be exposed to great works of philosophy and literature. But I also think it's important that they be challenged to relate the conceptions of justice, civic virtue, and the common good debated and articulated by philosophers in the past to contemporary issues that raise philosophical questions.

Stephens: What do you think that Jewish education has to offer to this conversation?

Sandel: Jewish education at its best can prompt a spirit of critical inquiry, interpretive debate, and humility. It can cultivate an appreciation of the possibility that we are not self-made and self-sufficient, despite what a market-driven meritocratic culture teaches us. So much of our public culture, especially among the privileged ranks of our society, teaches us that we are self-made

and self-sufficient, that everything we achieve is our own doing. Engaging with Jewish texts, Talmudic debates, and biblical stories can induce a certain humility. It can recall a covenantal idea of community, belonging, and obligation—an idea that exceeds our will, our doing, our mastery, and our dominion over the world and our fate.

Stephens: That's a beautiful place to conclude the conversation. *