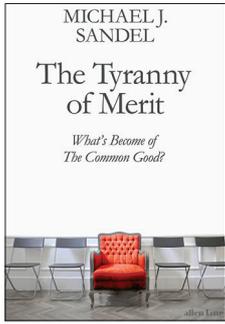




Book

Healthy because you deserve it, unhealthy because you don't?



The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?
 Michael J Sandel
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"Men at some time are masters of their fates;/ The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/But in ourselves, that we are underlings." We have only ourselves to blame for being "petty men", explains Cassius to Brutus in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. By contrast, Julius Caesar has someone remind him that he is mortal. His hubris comes at the expense of others' humiliation.

Hubris of the successful and humiliation of those less so are partly self-judgments; but they are also reinforced by societal attitudes, such as the language of the undeserving poor that is used by some politicians. During the decade from 2010 in the UK, government ministers characterised the poor as feckless, lazy, and deserving of their lot, in contrast to so-called hard-working families—a Manichean divide between "shirkers" and "strivers". This divide characterised the views of some politicians on health inequalities: the poor had only themselves to blame for their poor diets, smoking, and sloth. Dismissing poverty as an explanation for the unhealthy behaviours of the poor, a procession of privileged commentators explained that they could cook perfectly well on such restricted budgets. It is only ignorance and lack of responsibility that lead the poor to dish up bad food for their families. They have no one to blame but themselves. It didn't need spelling out that the rich deserved their good health; they were responsible. This attitude is revealing; so, too, are the data. The Food Foundation's figures, which we quote in *The Marmot Review 10 Years On*, show that households in England in the bottom 10% of household income would have to spend 74% of their household income to follow healthy eating advice. It is poverty

that is to blame for their ill health, not the poor themselves.

This demonisation of the poor, not unique to the UK, has much to do with meritocracy. Karl Marx wrote that history appears twice: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. In the case of meritocracy, it began as farce and returned as tragedy.

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Michael Young's 1958 book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* was a satire, critical of meritocracy. In the UK, meritocracy returned as government policy with New Labour; Prime Minister Tony Blair built on the meritocratic values that Margaret Thatcher had embodied.

This insight is part of a compelling critique of meritocracy in Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel's book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* Sandel's flowing prose shows why he is feted for the accessibility and popularity both of his books and lectures. On its surface meritocracy is attractive, if rewarding merit replaces hereditary privilege as the basis of social stratification. Certainly, according to Sandel, there is a case to be made that meritocracy contributes to social justice for two reasons. First, meritocracy expresses a certain idea of freedom; our opportunities should not be fixed by the circumstances of our birth. Second, "it gestures to the hope that what we achieve reflects what we deserve".

There is, however, a downside. "If you were born into the upper reaches of an aristocracy, you would be aware that your privilege was your good fortune, not your own doing... Whereas if you ascended, through effort and talent, to the apex of a

meritocracy, you could take pride in the fact that your success was earned", writes Sandel. "For similar reasons being poor in a meritocracy is demoralizing...If you found yourself on the bottom rung of a meritocratic society, it would be difficult to resist the thought that your disadvantage was at least partly your own doing, a reflection of your failure...A society that enables people to rise, and that celebrates rising, pronounces a harsh verdict on those who fail to do so." Thus, as Sandel highlights, meritocracy brings with it the twin evils of hubris and humiliation.

In my book, *The Health Gap*, I argued that agency—enabling people to have control over their lives—is good for health. In the WHO Commission on Social Determinants of Health, we put empowerment at the centre. That approach seems to be thrown into question by the view that the other side of agency is self-blame. Reading Sandel, it is not agency that is at fault, it is the rhetoric of meritocracy. The problem is giving people the impression that they have agency when the social conditions to which they are subjected means that they do not. The politics of humiliation are different from the politics of injustice. The former invites those less successful in society to look inwards and blame themselves. The politics of injustice recognise the conditions that make the perception of agency an illusion—you should not blame yourself if you cannot afford to eat healthily.

For Sandel, the hubris of those who succeeded, and the humiliation of those who didn't explain much about politics, particularly the resonance of the attack on elites. Humiliation of those left behind by a neoliberal globalisation may have much to do with voting for Donald Trump in the USA and Brexit in the UK.

Fundamental to the ideology of meritocracy is equality of opportunity. Equality of opportunity implies a belief in social mobility, a rhetoric of rising: get a good education and work hard, and you too, can rise to the top. Building on Sandel, there are at least three basic problems with the meritocratic argument.

First, equality of opportunity is a mirage. In the USA, for much of the 20th century, it was usual for people to earn more than their parents. Harvard economist Raj Chetty showed that for the birth cohort born in 1940, more than 90% of children earned more than their parents. This percentage steadily declined with successive birth cohorts; only half of people born in 1984 earned more than their parents. Because of the growth of the meritocracy, and the increasing rewards that go with success, parents exert all kinds of pressure to get their offspring into elite universities. Ivy League universities do now select more on merit than on aristocratic privilege, but, in practice, they overwhelmingly accept children of the rich. With outstanding exceptions, these institutions are not engines of social mobility. The perpetuation of class may now be less based on aristocratic privilege and more on success of the previous generation.

The rhetoric of rising exhorts people to get an education and better themselves. People without further education are then viewed negatively. But the value of education should not be seen merely as a route to earning merit. The evidence is strong that education is good for health, partly because it makes it more likely that people can lead a life of dignity and meaning for themselves.

Second, even if there were genuine equality of opportunity, the very concept of the meritocracy is flawed. In what sense do the successful “merit” their rewards? The privileged elite justify their high incomes and, if they can get away with it, their low

taxes, as reward for their ability and hard work. But ability and capacity for hard work come from a combination of genes and environment; and the environment and society provide the conditions in which talents can flourish. Individual merit doesn’t come into it. Economic fortunes during the COVID-19 pandemic are a stark illustration. Two organisations, Americans for Tax Fairness and the Institute for Policy Studies, reported in December, 2020, that the wealth of America’s 651 billionaires had increased by more than US\$1 trillion since the start of the pandemic. It means that these billionaires could write a cheque for \$3000 for each of the 330 million Americans and have the same wealth as they had at the beginning of the pandemic. The appropriate response should be outrage rather than viewing this wealth as somehow the due of the billionaires.

Third, meritocracy depends for its fairness on social mobility but does nothing about inequality. It says who is up and who is down but nothing about the adverse social conditions associated with being down. Actually, it’s worse than that. Meritocracy could increase inequality. Income inequality in the USA, the UK, and many other high-income countries has risen dramatically from the 1980s onwards. It is part of a general societal change, writes Sandel. “The loss of jobs to technology and outsourcing has coincided with a sense that society accords less respect to the kind of work the working class does. As economic activity has shifted from making things to managing money, as society has lavished outside rewards on hedge fund managers, Wall St bankers and the professional classes, the esteem accorded work in the traditional sense has become fragile and uncertain.” This erosion of the dignity of work, and of working-class life, has had much to do with the rise of “deaths of despair”, the title

of Anne Case and Angus Deaton’s book explaining the rise in mortality from poisoning, suicide, and alcohol in white men and women in the USA without a 4-year college degree.

The critique of meritocracy is not a criticism of skills or accomplishments. As a society we want surgeons to have knowledge, skills, and training. We respect them and most of us, not only the surgeons, think it reasonable that surgeons be paid well. But that is no justification for treating workers in adult social care so appallingly. These care workers may require less formal training than surgeons, perhaps no university degree, but it is indefensible that politicians and employers do not extend respect to care workers for the valuable work they do—half of adult social care workers in the UK earn less than the living wage and many are part of the gig economy.

The pandemic should have taught us these lessons. COVID-19 has shown us the debt society owes not only to front-line health professionals, but also to care workers, transport workers, food workers, refuse collectors, and so many others. Yet if society apparently places so little value on the contributions of such workers, it is unsurprising that it should lead to feelings of humiliation or resentment. Sandel is right to ask what has become of the common good. Doing things differently would entail creating the conditions for all, not just meritorious elites, to lead lives of dignity. A better society would be one that valued the contributions of all these people who keep society going. That is why at the UCL Institute of Health Equity we gave our December, 2020, report the title, *Build Back Fairer*. Hubris and humiliation had fatal consequences both for Julius Caesar and those who rose up against him.

Michael Marmot
m.marmot@ucl.ac.uk

Further reading

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