Is it time for a new meritocracy?

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Abstract
Meritocracy is a rationality that has significantly shaped the lives of people in modern societies, and today we all more or less believe that those who are smart, capable and hardworking will succeed in life. This seems to be a rule that applies in more or less all areas of public life. In the Western world, evaluating and judging ourselves and others based on meritocracy has become an imperative that we rarely question and despite the problems associated with meritocracy, politicians, parents and teachers continue to promote it. In The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?, Prof. Sandel lays out the genealogy of the aforementioned prevailing rationality and, in particular, highlights the limits and problems of meritocracy that are often overlooked. However, he does not leave it at a mere critique, but also offers a reflection on ways out of the problems of meritocracy. We continue along the path taken by the professor. The first part of our article highlights the critique as reconsiderations of the concept, then continues with reflections on the future of education, merit and wage labour, and concludes with thoughts on the possibility of creating a new meritocracy.

Keywords
Common good, education, equity, M. Sandel, merit, meritocracy, new meritocracy

Introduction
With his latest work, The Tyranny of Merit, Professor Sandel has once again produced an artfully written book that puts meritocracy and, in particular, its functioning in the times of neoliberal capitalism at the centre of consideration. The book provides insight into the genealogy of meritocracy and also into the inherent limitations of meritocracy that became visible in the times of neoliberal ‘personalised capitalism’. Although the book is primarily aimed at the Anglo-Saxon world – the United States and the United Kingdom – the logic of meritocracy does not stop at the borders of one part of the world. Today, it is evident that its main ideas – productive and oppressive – have reached more or less

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every corner of our world. The same should go for possible shifts in its reconceptualization. Our contribution to this special issue addresses the critique of meritocracy as reconsiderations of the concept, it continues with reflections on the future of education and wage labour, and concludes with thoughts on the possibility of creating a new meritocracy.

**Critique of the concept as reconsideration**

Despite the successful entrenchment of meritocracy in the field of education through promotion of the idea of equal education opportunities for all, it was precisely in this academic field that problematisations of the concept first emerged. The concept’s collision with its own limitations has been evident early in the data that presented persistent inequality in educational trajectories. Data as early as the 1960s demonstrated that markedly more children from socially privileged strata attained higher and most prestigious educational degrees; this shed critical light on equal educational opportunities. In France, studies (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1964/2004; Peyre, 1959) demonstrated limited progress in the area of social equality; in the United States, Coleman’s (1966) study proved that ethnic minorities did not have the same opportunities to achieve as high educational standards as the White majority; The Plowden Report (1967) in the United Kingdom also exposed the problems of social inequality. Criticism of the meritocratic logic continued for decades. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) continued their criticism of meritocracy, describing it as a typical example of the creation of an illusion behind which social reproduction continues (p. 84). Goldthorpe (2003) notes that it is almost impossible to obtain a reliable indicator of IMS-increased merit selection (IMS, that is, an increase in decisions based on merit) and comes to a conclusion similar to Hayek’s: ‘Meritocracy must be regarded as an “inevitable myth”’ (p. 676). Littler (2018), a member of a new generation critics of meritocracy, believes that meritocracy today is ‘characterised by the sheer extent of its attempts to atomise people as individuals who must compete with each other to succeed, by extending entrepreneurial behaviour into the nooks and crannies of everyday life’ (p. 3). Sandel’s latest book is in line with present critical questioning of meritocracy.

Today it seems a common-sense idea that modern societies are supposed to be organised as entities in which individuals can climb the social ladder based on their efforts and intellect. Despite the fact that those from the non-English-speaking world generally have difficulties defining the concept of meritocracy, many people believe that those who are smart and hardworking will and should eventually succeed in life. The above-mentioned motto is supposed to apply to the positioning of individuals in more or less all spheres of public life. As such, the idea of meritocracy functions as an imperative for the evaluation and judgement of oneself and others in a world prevailingly governed by a ‘western world’ rationality. Other forms of social promotion, nepotism and clientelism, even if they do still find space for existence, are not as numerous and acceptable as the ones based on the meritocratic principle. Meritocracy seems to be a logical consequence of the great enlightenment tradition in the Western world. Meritocracy stands for two key principles of the enlightenment. First, the positioning of individual on the basis of his or her birth should be minimised as much as possible, and second, in democratic societies, there
should be mass rather than elite participation. As such it stands as one of the fundamentals of liberalism and individualism too.

However, as Sandel’s book makes clear, the narrative according to which we can all reach for the sky if we are talented enough and we try hard enough, not only has its limits, but it can easily also become counterproductive and even repressive for the majority of individuals.

In his historical review of the emergence and the rise of meritocracy, Sandel directs our attention to the work of Michael Young (1958), the author of the formula summarising the idea of meritocracy as ‘IQ + effort = merit’. Young voiced his scepticism concerning the possible domination of a ‘merited class’ while advocating for democracy as the method of government in modern societies. As such, he was also one of the first critics of the concept, pointing to the fact that this idea is in no way a guarantee of a more just society. It is fair to add that the word meritocracy had been used before Young – by Alan Fox. Fox (1956) used the term (and, to a degree, also the concept) in the journal Socialist Commentary of May 1956, also warning against the persistent inequalities and the social stratification that

will remain as long as we assume it to be a law of nature that those of higher occupational status must not only enjoy markedly superior education as well but also, by right and necessity, have a higher income in the bargain. (p. 13)

According to Fox, as long as that assumption remains, our society will be divisible into the blessed and the unblessed – those who get the best of everything, and those who get the poorest and the least. In this way, in his eyes,

‘meritocracy’ reproduces an unequal society in which the gifted, the smart, the energetic, the ambitious and the ruthless are carefully sifted out and helped towards their destined positions of dominance, where they proceed not only to enjoy the fulfilment of exercising their natural endowment but also to receive a fat bonus thrown in for good measure. (Fox, 1956: 13; italics by authors)

Young feared and warned against the hegemony of the most talented and the most willing to invest effort in their education. Today it seems that his fear did not realise despite the fact that better educated members prevail in parliaments in the Western world (see Sandel, 2020: 94–95).

However, another danger, not discussed by Fox and Young, related to a broader but less often acknowledged feature of meritocracy, particularly in the neoliberal era of market economy: the idea that we as individuals have to take responsibility for our life trajectories, regardless of the social conditions we come from and live in. Against this background, Sandel (2020) points out that the logic of

relentless meritocratic competition (…) exerts its tyranny in two directions at once. Among those who land on top, it induces anxiety, a debilitating perfectionism, and a meritocratic hubris that struggles to conceal a fragile self-esteem. Among those it leaves behind, it imposes a demoralising, even humiliating sense of failure. (pp. 172–173)
The problem is that meritocracy, conceptualised in neoliberal fashion, leaves little room for solidarity and the common good. Thus, we can talk about a widely spread tyranny of meritocracy, which has received additional impulse through the exaggerated celebration of individualism within the realm of neoliberal rationality and with the rise of neoliberal meritocracy. Warnings related to the fact that a person’s socioeconomic status is substantially related to his or her opportunities to realise his or her potential and even to develop his or her dispositions in relation to learning and education, in general, were brushed aside. They were replaced by the notions of competitiveness, creativity and excellence as the new discursive practices signalling and enforcing the individual’s responsibility for educational attainment, labelled as human capital, and its use during a person’s life trajectory. In its new role, meritocracy, intertwined with the idea of a person as an entrepreneur of himself, became a mechanism of exclusion and oppression (see Dardot and Laval, 2013, 2019).

Like Sandel, we believe that meritocracy is critically linked to education and that is how and why some characterise it as the dominant ideology of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century education system (compare Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2010). Meritocracy organises cognitive schemes as common sense and imposes definitions of social reality as self-evident. In essence, it is a performative discourse that contributes to the logic of proclaiming and ascribing to everyone their place in society. It invites and guides the ways people think and act. In doing so, meritocracy justifies the operational forms of society and its institutions as legitimate. In this way, it also justifies and legitimises the resulting inequalities. It is with the help of this ideology that democratic societies can justify social inequalities since the belief in merit and equality of opportunity makes it possible to accept ‘losers’ on one hand and ‘winners’, who have a right to their victory, on the other. We follow Weber’s (1978) assumption that material schemes alone are not sufficient for domination, as well as Bourdieu’s assumption that meritocracy is concept with the help of which social inequalities are more or less smoothly reproduced. The school plays one of the most important roles in the reproduction of social inequalities with the help of the symbolic violence present in every pedagogical act, particularly when it functions as the legitimate agent of society (for more, see Bourdieu, 2012, 2016; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The enforcement of educational standards as legitimate processes of selection and differentiation between successful and unsuccessful individuals established education not only as a value but also as a norm. Education has become a selection mechanism for entry into different occupations and socio-political positions of power. It was not always like that. The first wave of education was marked by the mass schooling at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The school of that period was seen as a device to shape manners, promote religion and ensure discipline. The second wave of education in the twentieth century began with a shift from school ideology founded on the conviction that positions of individuals are defined by birth to a new aspiration based upon one’s age, aptitude and ability. A new criterion came into being – merit linking individuals’ predispositions, effort and achievements.

In rapidly changing societies, the criteria for fulfilling public duties and positions in society are more connected to the education system than ever before. Institutional as well as collective concepts of merit have gained importance with the importance of education
Gradually, the educational value of the individual was perceived as a complete meritometer. To reinforce the importance of effort and ability, it was enough to establish a privileged instrument of certificates and diplomas, since these — institutionalised cultural capital — is claimed to properly summarise talent and effort and communicate which individual is merited to occupy prestigious positions in public and/or private sphere.

In the process of individualization and democratisation, educational institutions thus become a place at which individuals should prove/demonstrate knowledge, skills and abilities in order to obtain diplomas, certificates and so on and, through this process, obtain entrance into the circles of privileged. In this way, exams and tests become perceived as the mechanisms by which merit is most objectively measured. Given their importance, it is not surprising that there is pressure towards standardised examinations. Only against such a background can diplomas and certificates be accepted as evidence of a person’s merit. It is assumed that the results measured by objective mechanisms actually reflect the individual’s achievements.

It seems productive to consider meritocracy, following Weber’s and Foucault’s concept of rationality, as a ‘truth regime’ (Foucault, 1980). Indeed, the aforementioned line of conceptualisations allows us to understand meritocracy as a socially and historically constructed phenomenon. Thus, we can appreciate meritocracy as a phenomenon structured by different discourses and other practices and enforced in various schemes of thought that have led to a particular regime of truth. Through the concepts and criteria of social mobility, the concept of meritocracy, despite its limitations, managed to promote a new concept of socialisation and social order that served as a mechanism of liberation in modern societies over a long period of time. As such, it is far from being just a part of the control mechanisms or ideology that the elites or the ruling class impose on the masses.

We clearly agree that it is not the task of science to celebrate the illusion that meritocracy brings. It is necessary to single out the limitations and weaknesses of meritocracy. Nonetheless, in parallel to all the necessary criticism, we should also not forget that meritocracy has had and still exerts a powerful force of interpellation and even exhibits potential for promoting justice and fairness in our societies. For many, it represents the only hope and, through education, the only chance for better life and social mobility. That is why we doubt that in the present and in the future, they will and should be willing to renounce it easily. Against this backdrop, it might be worth considering whether there is room for the conceptualisation and practice of a new meritocracy in the wake of the economic and social changes already taking place in certain sectors and subsectors, such as education. Ideas of the commons, community and collaboration (MacBeath et al., 2007; PISA 2015; UNESCO, 2021; Zeichner, 2018) and re-evaluation of the ways in which our contributions to the common good are judged and rewarded (Sandel, 2020), as well as ideas related to hybrid economies, evoke a possible and, to some extent, a necessary upgrading of the meritocratic rationality which will reach both beyond the neoliberal meritocracy as well as beyond the pre-neoliberal one. In the process of change with which we are confronted, we, it seems first of all, face the challenge of reconsidering our regimes of truth. Professor Sandel (2020) is right to remind us that there is a need to ‘ask whether the solution to our fractious politics is to live more faithfully by the principle of
merit or to seek a common good beyond the sorting and the striving’ (p. 20). This question evokes the idea of the need for shifting, upgrading or even putting aside old ideas.

In Bourdieu’s (1989) words, ‘To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced’ (p. 23). And we see the book to which this issue is dedicated as an attempt to do just that.

That is why it is necessary to rethink how we want to live, what kind of society we want to live in, what we will reward and encourage as a society, and so on. Therefore, in addition to the alternatives presented in the book – rethinking the role of universities, a new respect and status for the non-credentialed, humility as a civic virtue – to name some, we would like to add the reflections on the importance and role of education and the position of work in the future.

The role of education, work and merit in the future

The concept of merit and the related logic of instrumentality (doing something to serve something), especially in the context of the concept of wage labour, still constitutes an ideological axis in modern societies and functions as the basis of reflections on education, its goals and values. They are reflected in the national development strategies and in the strategies of the European Union, which aim to make Europe ‘the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy’ (cf. European Commission, 2020; Lisbon Strategy, 2000). Such an approach limits reflections on the present and future of education to an otherwise important but insufficient part of \textit{vita activa} – thinking not only beyond \textit{vita contemplativa} but also beyond instrumental and for profit only logic (Arendt 1958 [1919]). At the same time, it confronts educational institutions with an insurmountable task: to provide young people and adults with the pleasure of learning limited only to the benefits. Thus, it not only loses the cognitive, non-instrumentally oriented part of education: paradoxically, with the same reduction, it also loses the realm of narrowly working (instrumentally) conceived efficiency. To try to implement the concept of a market-oriented, competitive school in Europe without proper distance is to forget that, while this is a significant part, it is nevertheless only a part of our existence and an even smaller part of the meaning of our existence. In the light of the above mentioned, we believe that we should be aware of the fact at which Rifkin (1995) and some others have pointed: paid work is losing its centrality. More and more empirical analyses show that in the future, it will not be possible to create additional space for well-paid jobs at the top of developed economies, which should enable the employment of highly educated individuals (Souto-Otero, 2010).

In line with this warning, education – with its immanent logic of meritocracy and work at the centre of its system of ideas – must go beyond preparing exclusively or prevalently for wage labour. Continuing to focus on wage labour as the \textit{raison d’être} of education further exacerbates frustrations, disappointmentments and doubts concerning the latter’s value and meaning. As the limits of meritocratic logic become more apparent and the legitimacy of the system comes under increasing pressure, the time has come, we believe, for the schools to reclaim, in parallel to their preparation for the instrumental part of \textit{vita activa}, also the preparation for other spheres of human
activity. Education will continue to be important. We will continue to raise children in a world where there is a tension between instrumentality and non-instrumentality. Employment (occupation) will remain one of the most important goals of education and our lives, but not the only one, and still less the more and more important one. We should also prepare young people to be aware that most of their lives should not and will not be directed towards employment and the field of wage labour. In this respect, a promising sign of the ‘new vision of the world and practical operations’ is what we can read in recently published UNESCO Report considering the future of education until 2050.

We would like to point only to two points in the report that shift our attention to a wider role of education.

1. Education is the foundation for the renewal and transformation of our societies. It mobilises knowledge to help us navigate a transforming and uncertain world. The power of education lies in its capacities to connect us with the world and others, to move us beyond the spaces we already inhabit, and to expose us to new possibilities. It helps to unite us around collective endeavours; it provides the science, knowledge and innovation we need to address common challenges. ‘Education nurtures understandings and builds capabilities that can help to ensure that our futures are more socially inclusive, economically just, and environmentally sustainable’ (UNESCO, 2021: 10) and one more explicitly addresses the need to reach beyond formation for wage labour only:

2. A singular focus on education for jobs or education to develop entrepreneurial skills is misplaced. Education should be geared to enable people to create long-term social and economic well-being for themselves, their families and their communities (UNESCO, 2021: 43).

Against this background, we think that merit will remain bound to our ability to perform work in the field of competitiveness of modern market relations. However, it will also adopt the many faces of various possible efforts to care for ourselves as human beings, for the people around us, and for the good of the community and society. This is supposed to significantly change the meaning of the term ‘competition’ – ‘cooperation’ and ‘reciprocity’ will give a hand to ‘competition’. In this society, life will also be perfectly normal without any particular emphasis on merit since each of the merits will be only a part of the layers of our identities – including the identities of education and school.

Even though in our present time, the school primarily has a political and economic function, we must additionally pay attention to the social and cognitive function of the school. This would allow the school to expand the spaces beyond ‘useful knowledge’, that is, to expand the spaces of education in the realm of pleasure in the search for truths, knowledge and understanding.

Since education in Western societies still matters, the solution is not ‘not to go to school’, but to fight for greater equality and justice, which can be achieved through a variety of educational opportunities, but for which certain conditions must be met:
search for a new paradigm of production and way of life;
reflection on the role and importance of schools beyond the prevailing professional educational goals;
additional concern for the quality of the education system, creating mechanisms that ensure greater equity and produce space and capacity for the care for the common good, including the care for the planet.

To illustrate our point, if we assume that there will indeed be a reduction in wage labour and the social changes associated with it, this will lead to a considerable increase in the time available to individuals for other activities that do not belong to the spheres of wage labour and market economy. Even today, people already position and express themselves through a variety of social roles and practices, not just the work they do for money, and this will increase in the modern, fluid world.

Change will put pressure on lifestyles, and with it, as Durkheim (1956 [1922]) has put it, education will have to change and will change. By reducing the amount of time spent at work, parents will have more time to educate their children. The school sector could thus become a space for additional collaboration with parents. Especially in the area of increased support for children who would not be sufficiently supported at home, parents with more social and cultural capital, alongside the involvement of kindergarten and school, could help reduce the deficit. In this context, teachers and educators should also be given additional attention and training to work with the aforementioned group of children, once again, in cooperation with parents.

In conclusion, we would like to point to the ideas presented by Professor Sandel that, in our eyes, present considerations of possible ways ahead.

First, that our societies will have to address the question ‘what kinds of work are worthy of recognition and esteem’.

Second, and in relation to the plea for collaborative commons in which we should reconsider ‘what we owe one another as citizens’ (Sandel, 2020: 207) or even only as human beings.

Third, there is no doubt that in searching for a new meritocracy, we will not be able to determine what counts as a contribution worth affirming without reasoning together about the purposes and ends of the common life we share. And we cannot deliberate about common purposes and ends without a sense of belonging, without seeing ourselves as members of a community to which we are indebted. (Sandel, 2020: 207)

To contribute to further discussion concerning the problematizations (Bachelard, 1966; Foucault, 1984, 2014) of the ‘valued’ and the ‘merited’ in our societies, we would like to emphasise that we are convinced that the future holds a place for activities that require specific skills needed to perform a particular job or profession. Certain narrow specialisations will require longer education and training. Even today, however, some activities require only limited training and are educationally less demanding because of technology that supports or replaces human work (Frey and Osborne 2013). As far as acquiring skills and abilities to perform the above and similar jobs are concerned, it is
already acknowledged that basic mental flexibility, basic knowledge and the essential ability to accept the rules of the game of the jobs are sufficient to perform these jobs and that long-term training is not required. A bigger problem will be preparing for the less prestigious tasks that remain to be done. When we realise that these will represent only a limited part of the activities in which we will engage in our lifetime and that they will not take up a too large and an overly important part of our lives, we may also find it a little easier to accept them as a part and part of ‘the necessary’, as part of our civic duties, without which we will not be able to function as a society.

In this respect, some additional possibilities for reflection are offered by the concepts of the coexistence of different spheres (Walzer, 1983) and the intertwining of different forms of exchange, which is the subject of Rifkin’s (2000, 2014) work. In them and with them, new merits will also be able to assert themselves. The importance of education as cultural capital for the acquisition of labour will lose its dominance; its exchange value will decrease; and other exchange values of cultural capital, no doubt also social and symbolic capital, will probably increase. This, in turn, will allow for the establishment of new fields and kinds of merit and thus for the space for a new meritocracy.

While The Tyranny of Merit has stimulated the authors of this text to rethink the idea of meritocracy, we sincerely hope that this vital work reaches as many readers as possible and thus encourages reconsiderations of possible scenarios for the future of collaborative vita activa.

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