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Conversation

هائیکو سینگل

THE TYRANNY OF MERIT: WHAT'S BECOME OF THE COMMON GOOD

Michael Sandel

A CONVERSATION WITH

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The tyranny of merit is a paradox because usually, we think of merit as a good thing, something to aspire to, something to honour. Suppose the alternative to merit is cronyism, corruption, nepotism or hereditary privilege. In that case, the principle of merit is a good thing and a liberating one so much so that we come to think of merit as the principle of distribution as defining the meaning of justice. It is true that if I need surgery for a well-qualified surgeon to perform it then it's merit, the one who is well-qualified for a role. If I am flying, I want a well-qualified pilot at the controls. So, how come merit becomes a tyranny? This takes us to the ideal of meritocracy. Now meritocracy is a term that only came into familiar use in the late 1950s. The term was coined by British sociologist Michael Young who was affiliated with the Labor Party. He was writing at a time when the class system was finally beginning to break down, when people from the working classes were finally having an opportunity to get a good education and to compete for jobs with those who came from wealthy families, and who had gone to privileged schools. And this was a good thing that Michael Young saw that there was a dark side to the principle of meritocracy and in his short book he imagined how it would play out. He imagined a future in which all there is to achievement would be removed and that would be a good thing, but it would lead towards an attitude towards success that would be damaging to the common good. If we are to imagine a perfect meritocracy with perfectly fair equality of opportunity, that would be good. That would be an improvement under the current situation. But there

would be a likelihood of risk, he thought, that the winners those who landed on top believe that their success was their own doing, after all, they have earned it in fair competition and by application those who fell short, those who struggled they must deserve their fate as well. These attitudes towards success, the hubris that meritocracy breeds among winners, the demoralization that produces among those left behind- these attitudes towards success are the dark sides of meritocracy.

What we have seen is inequality globally. Meritocratic attitudes towards success have intensified this inequality. Those who have landed on top have come to believe that their success is their own doing, the measure of their merit. And they therefore deserve the full measure of the bounty that markets bestow upon them. And they come to believe by implication that those who struggle in the global economy have no one to blame but themselves. This is the dark side of meritocracy. I call it, the meritocratic hubris among winners; the tendency of the successful to inhale too deeply of their success, to forget luck and good fortune that helped them on their way, to forget their indebtedness to those who made their achievements possible. These harsh attitudes towards success which are connected to the meritocratic ideal, I think, have contributed to the loss of social cohesion and the difficulty of summoning solidarity in societies that increasingly are ridden by inequality. The problem is not inequality alone. The problem is injustice which is compounded by the insult to those who struggle.

The insult that your failure is your fault. You deserve where you have landed because insofar as society is a fair competition you have run the race last or perhaps you haven't learnt to run the race at all. I think this hardening of meritocratic attitudes towards success has coincided with growing inequalities in many of our societies certainly in my own in the 4 decades of globalization when the greatest rewards have gone to those on the top and when the bottom half of our population have enjoyed almost none of the economic growth that globalization has produced. As a result, of the harsh attitudes towards success because of the hubris among the winners and humiliation among those left behind, the resulting people are becoming more resentful of the elites. And we see this playing out politically. We have seen it played out in the UK and Brexit in 2016, when overwhelmingly those with advanced degrees were voted to remain in the European Union and those without a college education were voted to leave. Then few months later we saw it in the United States with the election of Donald Trump who overwhelmingly won the vote; a man without a university degree.

In Western democracies, in the United States, in Britain, in France, in Germany, several left parties in particular have suffered from the populist backlash because one of the deepest divides in politics has become the divide between those with wealth and those without university degrees. It used to be that parties of the left drew upon constituencies of the working people. And they defended working people against the powerful and the privileged. But by the 1990s and 2000s, these parties became increasingly identified with the well-educated professional classes and less and less oriented to the values, interests and outlook of the working-class voters who once constituted their base. I think it has to do with the educational divide, the diploma divide, this has to do with the intensified emphasis on meritocracy. So, we have a difficult project. On one hand, we encourage people to work hard, but we don't want to create a public culture in an economy that teaches people that they are self-made and self-sufficient, that teaches the successful that success is their own doing because if I believe that my success is my own doing it becomes



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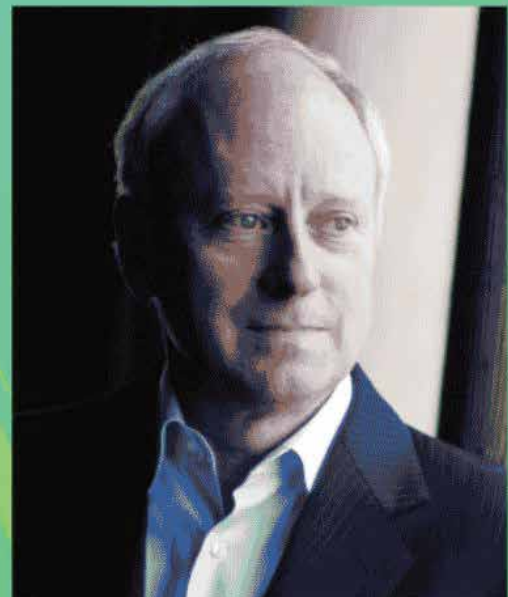
The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?

Monday, Jan 17, 2022
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difficult to identify with those less fortunate than myself. Being aware of the role of luck and contingency in life, and reminding myself of my indebtedness can prompt a certain humility. This attitude of humility is a civic virtue in short supply these days. But it is this civic virtue that I think we need. It could sense the recognize the role of luck in good fortune among the successful. It could prompt humility which could in turn open us to a greater sense of responsibility, of mutual responsibility for everyone in our society. It could open us to a greater appreciation of the dignity of work performed by many whom we rely on who don't have advantages degrees and prestigious credentials.

The pandemic in a way brought us that lesson more vividly than before. The pandemic revealed inequalities in our societies. They existed before the pandemic. But it made those more vivid. One of the most obvious ways it did this was during the lockdowns those of us who could work from home and hold webinars and meetings on Zoom but many of our fellow citizens didn't have that luxury, have either lost their jobs or performed to secure their jobs had to take risks on behalf of the rest of us. I am thinking not only of those in hospitals but also of delivery workers, warehouse workers, grocery store clerks, childcare workers, and truck drivers, these are not the most highly paid or the most honoured members of our society. During the pandemic, we began to refer to them as essential workers, as key workers, so this could be a moment for a broader public debate on how to bring their pay and recognition into better alignment with the importance of the work they do.

We often assume that the money people make is a major part of their contribution, is the common good. The pandemic I think has led us to question that assumption. Nobody I know was calling bank managers essential workers in the pandemic. The nurse workers, the warehouse workers and the delivery workers were the essential workers. So, I think what we need to do is to shift our focus in public discourse away from earning people for meritocratic competition to a great emphasis on the dignity of work, cultivating respect and honour, and recognition for those who make invaluable contributions to the common good, even though the market is not the full measure of the merit of their contribution. So, these are the reflections which ultimately connect to the question of justice, to the question of who deserves what and why, the questions we need to ask again, especially in the light of the pandemic because I think it's the only way to lead us beyond the harsh ethic of success that drives us apart. Perhaps asking these questions and debating them publicly can lead us to a less divisive and more generous public life.

Michael Sandel was talking with Nadeem ul Haque in a PIDE webinar.