



Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics

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



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When a company advertises job vacancies for specific positions and if it recruits people based on merit, the meritocracy of the organization will be appreciated by everybody. As a result, most people favour meritocracy over cronyism, corruption, nepotism, and inherited privileges across the world. Merit is a positive and empowering approach. It is a principle of distribution and the meaning of justice. If someone needs surgery, for example, he or she wants a well-qualified doctor who was appointed on merit to perform the treatment effectively. So how can **Prof. Michael Sandel** claim that merit has become a kind of tyranny?

Professor Michael J. Sandel is an American political philosopher who teaches government theory at Harvard University Law School. The Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) invited him to a webinar hosted by PIDE **Vice-Chancellor Dr. Nadeem-ul-haq** to present his magnum opus, 'The Tyranny of Merit: What's become of the Common Good?'

Key Points:

- Meritocracy is a term coined in the late 1950s by a British Sociologist named 'Michael Young'. Michael Young was a member of the labour party, and he wrote about meritocracy when the class system was broken, and working-class people had the opportunity to get a good education and compete with the wealthy group.
- However, Professor Sandel saw that the meritocracy principle had a dark side that would damage the common good. Because the winner who took the lead and compete with others would think their achievement was due to their efforts. They had all earned it in a fair competition, whereas those who came up short (loser) had to deserve it. The meritocracy breeds the 'hubris' among the winner and demoralizes those left behind (losers). This “meritocratic hubris” among the winners is the dark side of the meritocracy.
- According to his view, those who are more successful feel that their success is due to their competence and hard work, but this does not indicate that they deserve these rewards. This is not just because bad luck may interfere to deprive people of the benefits that their talent and work would have won, or because the good chance may provide awards to those who have expended less ability or effort. It is because the very notion that superior ability or harder work deserves greater recompense is mistaken.
- The hardening of meritocratic attitude toward success has coincided with the growing inequalities in the modern world. During the last four decades, when the greatest rewards have flowed to those at the top and half of the population has enjoyed none of the economic growth. As a result, because of the harsh attitude among the winners made those left behind (losers) resentful of elites, and all this played out politically.
- The Pandemic (covid 19) reveals inequality that already existed before. But it made them more vivid. During lockdowns, this was one of the most obvious ways it did this. Some of us can work from home and do webinars and Zoom sessions. However, many of our colleagues did not have that luxury. Who, like delivery boys, grocery workers, and others, either lost their employment or had to put themselves in danger on behalf of the rest of us.
- Brexit and Donald Trump's victory in 2020 was the results of a populist backlash among the losers of globalization. While deploring the nativism, misogyny, and racism that often accompany populism, Sandel contends that populist resentment is rooted in and justified by the failure of democratic elites. In particular, he blames those elites for promoting an ethos that leads the successful to believe that they deserve their success.
- Sandel suggests that this exalting of merit is a relatively new phenomenon—a product of the last four decades, initiated by the free-market policies of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. But it is not only conservatives whom he blames for this trend. He harshly criticizes Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Barack Obama for their emphasis on equal opportunity and for their reliance on the “rhetoric of rising” to promise their citizens success if they “work hard and play by the rules”.

Q/A Session:

As you mentioned that meritocracy begin in the 20th century, but even in the catholic days, Augustine also has the view that god's grace was bestowed on those who had merit. And Islam also has something similar God will forgive us if we have goodness in us. So, how would you differ from the fact?

In the Biblical story of “Job”, Job was a good and a virtuous man and he was suffering unspeakably, and he could not understand why. Because he assumed that goodness leads god to reward you and evil doing leads god to punish you. So, the idea that god matches rewards and punishment to goodness and evil, that runs deeply in our religious traditions. Because it suggests that if I act righteously or am a good person then I will be rewarded. But in Job's case, he is suffering while he is a good man. He loses his family, and he was in mourning. His friends came and told him, what did you do wrong this upon you instead of consoling him. Finally, god appears from the whirlwind and Job says to god: what have I done wrong to deserve this? And god replied to Job,” **Everything bad happens is not a punishment and everything good happens is not a reward**”. God reminds Job, that it rains over the oceans, where no crops are growing, and rain is not a reward to the virtuous farmer. But there is a mystery to creation.

Hubris is partly earned by our effort, so we must distinguish it in two or three ways. For instance, in talent, Djokovic has an extreme talent for playing tennis. So, does Djokovic deserve the money he gets? Should he have the hubris of the 21st-century grand slam champion? Or Should I Feel Jealous? Or should I feel lessened by him?

Djokovic makes a lot of money playing tennis and winning tournaments and partly due to his effort and training, which is very intense and disciplined. The efforts and striving lead us to assume that our success is the result of our effort. But then effort combines with talent in order to produce a great tennis player like Djokovic. And the great talent is not doing of the Djokovic but it's his gift, luck, or fortune. He developed it and he must be admired for that. We do admire the talent independent of the effort that he expanded in a way. We admire it as an achievement, as an expression of human possibilities.

The American dream is not as real as might seem and other writers wrote that luck is an important factor in success and show it through data and statistics. While the developing countries are trying to imitate the American institutions but you mentioned that the American dream is not intact as it was.

The United States has long lived with greater inequality than many European countries. But the US did not worry about inequality as many European countries did. Because the US has mobility and that's the American dream. No one is consigned to the fate of his/her birth. It's always possible to raise one generation to the next. So, Pakistan should not learn from the United States. That's a mistake that the United States made over the past four decades. The version of financial globalization has rewarded the top 10 or 20 percent of the income scale but left the bottom 50 or 60 percent with stagnant wages. It has led to division, resentment, loss of solidarity, and loss of social cohesion.

How do we order the society, especially in this era, where the rise of all sorts of fundamentalism, like in Europe, the US, Muslim countries, etc. On the other side, the rise of technology marginalizes us, and we are a labor-abundant economy. We send people like caregivers and workers to US and Europe to be able to do the menial job. But technology may take them away. In that milieu how would you propose a solution both for the west and east?

Martin Luther King Jr, before he was assassinated, traveled to Memphis Tennessee, and gave a talk to a group of sanitation workers (garbage collectors) . He told them a person who collects garbage is as significant as a physician. Because if a garbage collector does not do his job, the disease will be rampant. So, we have to cultivate in the public culture but also the system of economic reward with an appreciation of the dignity of work. We have to reverse the steep hierarchy of the prestige between jobs that do and don't require advanced professional degrees and that means honoring not only paid labor but also caregiving and garbage collection. As for technology, 'what you earn will depend on what you learn'. If new technology replaces low and middle-skilled work and increases the value of high-skilled work, then this is assumed that technology is an autonomous force beyond human and political control. It assumes that the direction of technology is like a force of nature. But it's a mistake that technology need not replace low and middle-skilled workers.

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