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Book Notes:
Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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'What's Become of the Common Good?'

Sandel, Michael J. **The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

In last week's *Book Notes*, we discussed W.B. Yeats' *"The Second Coming"* and its incantatory phrase, "the center cannot hold." Attempting to explain how the center's hold became so precarious is the focus of Michael Sandel's most recent book, ***The Tyranny of Merit***.

Sandel, Bass Professor of Government Theory at Harvard University, seeks to understand why so many people are so angry. Although Sandel does not refer to it, anger management suggests that anger is only a symptom of something else. In almost all cases, that something else is frustration.

What has *so* frustrated *so* many people to make them *so* angry?

There has been a cottage industry of books attempting to understand that frustration and the subsequent shift of middle-middle class, lower-middle class, and working-class Americans away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. Books as divergent as J.D. Vance's ***Hillbilly Elegy,*** Tara Westover's ***Educated***, Nancy Eisenberg's ***White Trash***, Barbara Ehrenreich's ***Nickel and Dimed***, Arlie Russell Hochschild's ***Strangers In Their Own Land,*** and Charles Murray's ***Coming Apart*** either directly or indirectly shed light on the issue.

But none of them really answers the question, "how did America become so polarized?" Eisenberg's ***White Trash*** and Ehrenreich's ***Nickel and Dimed*** come close, but ultimately miss the mark for they focus on the wrong question. They implicitly ask, "why are all these people voting against their own best interest?" Which interest, they assume, is all about economics.

Hochschild's ***Strangers in Their Own Land*** comes closest, because she understands that it is not about economics at all. Or, maybe more accurately, it is not only about economics.

As unrepentant southern curmudgeon Sam Francis said more than 25 years ago, people vote for either their economic or cultural interest. Ideally, they seek a candidate who speaks to both. If they cannot find one, then, a second "if" follows. If they trust a candidate to look out for their economic interest, they will vote for that candidate, which triggers a third "if." If they do not trust that candidate to protect their economic interests, they will vote for the candidate they believe will protect their cultural interests. [1]

This explains why in 2016 some of the same people who voted for Bernie Sanders in the primary voted for Donald Trump in the general election and voted for him again in 2020.

They trusted Trump to protect their cultural interests; economic benefits, except for the tax-obsessed wealthy, were secondary.

Why?

As Sandel points out, it is about respect, or, again maybe more accurately, about a perceived lack of respect, if not flat out disrespect.

No one likes to be "dissed." And for the last 40 or 50 years, America has been on an escalating ladder of disrespect aimed primarily at the undereducated and uncredentialed.

In 2016, that escalation hit a wall as the undereducated and uncredentialed gave the smug, educated elite *"the finger."*

How did that happen? Not *a crude gesture,* but the escalating ladder of disrespect aimed primarily at the undereducated and uncredentialed.

That is the story Sandel tells and he tells it very well, indeed. It is the story of the rise of the meritocracy and its withering impact upon American culture.

While doing it with a light touch, Sandel examines a complex and dense topic. In this ***Book Notes***, I briefly review four of Sandel's key ideas. In a future ***Book Notes,*** I will look more closely at one of his ideas, the impact of the meritocracy on higher education and the unintended, indeed, ironic, debasement of its

purpose.

In this ***Book Notes,*** however, here is an overview of Sandel's major points. They include a short history of the notion of meritocracy and its American roots in the Protestant Ethic and an egalitarian culture's paradoxical quest for success; that quest's attendant *rhetoric of rising* and its deleterious impact on those who fail to rise; the impact upon higher education resulting from its transformation into both the gatekeeper for and pathway to meritocratic success; and, lastly, as an antidote to meritocracy's socially destructive impact a turn away from a consumer culture's focus on *distributive justice* to a renewed focus on *contributive justice* and the dignity of all work.

What is a meritocracy? It is an old idea. In ***The Republic***, Plato advocates rule by the Guardians who are also known as philosopher-kings.

But who gets to be a *Guardian*?

Plato aside, in the messy reality of the non-ideal "real" world, it was those who were born to it. In short, in aristocratic societies people are sorted at birth into, in John Adams' memorable phrase, "the one, the few, and the many," Which, regarding "respect," had this advantage. The peasant did not think himself existentially unworthy because he had failed some test of "merit" nor, however faint, did the *aristoi* escape some gnawing sense of having won a lottery. It simply was the way it was. Now for most of history it was messier and meaner than that benign-sounding phrase, but, in the end, it just was the way it was.

This changed with the birth of the modern. In particular, this changed in the West with the Protestant Reformation and the birth of classical liberalism. In his chapter, *"A Brief Moral History of Merit,"*Sandel does an excellent job explicating a complicated topic. The crux of the issue is divine salvation. How is one *saved*? Is it simply by the grace of God freely disposed or can one earn salvation through one's works, i.e. how one lives one's life? Is it a question of *faith* or of *works*?

If, as Luther argued, it is by faith alone regardless of the moral quality of one's life, how can one identify the saved (*the elect*) from the damned? If there is no teleological benefit to virtue, why be virtuous?

Well, for one thing, there is peer pressure.

It is in your interest and the group's interest that you obey the group's rules (say the Ten Commandments). From the group's vantage point, rules are needed so that society operates in a more or less orderly fashion. It is in your benefit to obey the rules at some baseline level to avoid chastisement and, more generally, to be seen as a responsible group member.

But, even among the responsible group members, how can we determine who is among *the elect* and who is not? Enter John Calvin. Borrowing heavily from R.H. Tawney's ***Religion and the Rise of Capitalism***, Sandel traces how Calvin's solution to that riddle gave rise to the Protestant Ethic, the modern economic order, Joel Osteen and the Prosperity Gospel, and post-modern notions of secular meritocracy.

In short and admittedly grotesquely oversimplified (by me, not Sandel), one's material well-being is the outward sign of one's inner grace. One is not saved because they are prosperous; they are prosperous because they

are saved. And the damned are *not* saved because they are *not* prosperous; they are *not* prosperous because they are *not* saved. As Sandel says, “the notion that our fate reflects our merit runs deep in the moral intuitions of Western culture. … It reflects the belief that the moral universe is arranged in a way that aligns prosperity with merit and suffering with wrongdoing.” [2]

From there it is only a short hop, skip, and a jump to Ronald Reagan’s Welfare Queen. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Telescoping a convoluted history into a short narrative line, the combination of Calvinism with Adam Smith’s notion of a market economy, John Locke’s theory of government as a social contract between consenting parties obsoleting monarchies, a largely but not completely empty continent at its disposal and –hey, presto – one arrives at the post-World War II United States of America in the mid-20th century having replaced a hierarchy of birth with a hierarchy of wealth that was beginning to ossify into a new hierarchy of birth.

What to do?

Answering that question requires disentangling three or four intertwining storylines that emerged in the United States between the end of World War II and today. They are the triumph of a secular meritocracy and its attendant *rhetoric of rising,* globalization, and education as the path – the only path? – to a secure future, the impact of all three on higher education and, lastly, distributive justice pushing aside contributive justice as society’s primary measure of worth.

What is a meritocracy?

While an old concept, it has had a renaissance in late 20th century America and western Europe. According to Google’s N-gram, use of the word increased by a factor of more than 500 since 1950. [3]

Its modern definition says it is “a system, organization, or society in which people are chosen and moved into positions of success, power, and influence on the basis of their demonstrated abilities and merit.” [4]

What could be wrong with that? In theory, not much; in practice, quite a bit. For beginners, in an allegedly egalitarian society, how are “demonstrated abilities and merit” determined? To avoid that re-ossification of society into a hierarchy of birth, how are opportunities to demonstrate one’s “ability and merit” to be equalized? Can they be equalized?

What about outcomes? No one argues for an equality of outcomes, but if society is to be transmogrified into an ongoing contest of merit, what happens to those deemed to be of less merit or even of no merit? What protects them from humiliation? What protects the winners in the merit contest from suffering from an excess of hubris endangering both themselves and, one can imagine a latter day Guardian saying, “all those others?”

How did we get here?

During the 1940s, James Bryant Conant, President of Harvard University, conceived the notion that the post-war world would be one of intense competition requiring a nation to marshal its best talent. Coupled with his dismay at the *boola-boola* mediocrity of his prep school children-of-privilege student body, Conant decided that America’s elite colleges should become meritocratic

institutions that would “upend the hereditary elite and replace it with a meritocratic elite.” [5]

As Sandel explains, Conant’s plan to transform Harvard was part of a larger plan to transform American education in general. Conant wanted to strengthen public education so it could become a talent pipeline. Public education should not only to educate for citizenship in a political democracy, it should also serve a sorting function by identifying and preparing talented students to take their place on the meritocratic escalator. [6]

How was that talent to be identified? By taking a test – the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). Conant thought it would be an objective measure enabling students of talent regardless of their origin to access elite education to their and to society’s benefit. It only kind of worked out that way, for the SAT is susceptible to two non-egalitarian flaws: 1) it can be gamed and 2) SAT scores are directly correlated to household income and parents’ level of education.

While it did increase access to elite institutions for some students who would have never attended, it essentially replaced a hereditary elite with an elite of educational privilege. And regarding hereditary elite, the egalitarian nature of America’s “elite” institutions is questionable, since 70 percent of their students come from the top quarter of the income scale and only 3 percent from the bottom quarter. [7]

But it did accomplish two things. First, it created test culture and, two, it created the notion that the only path to meaningful success in life was through academic education, in particular a college education. The corrosive effects of test culture have been detailed elsewhere, but their most pernicious effects may be the transformation of K-12 into a giant *Jeopardy!* game at the expense of learning how to read in depth, of learning how to think inferentially, and learning the civic requisites necessary in a functioning democracy. All of this led to the notion that only the college educated can contribute meaningfully to society’s well-being.

As the above demographic data on enrollment at “elite” institutions suggest, Conant’s notion of replacing an elite of birth with an elite of merit has had mixed results. It has created a class of overachievers who ascribe their success to their own hard work while ignoring the family and economic advantages that gave them a head start in the meritocratic scramble. Thinking their achievements are the product of their own effort, they succumb to a hubristic self-assessment of their personal worth. They are the *winners* in a competitive society’s game of life. They look down upon – with condescension if not with contempt -- those who *failed* the meritocratic test. Hilary Clinton’s oft quoted remark characterizing some of those who supported then-presidential candidate Donald Trump as “deplorables” is a prime example of this mindset.

If this were only a question of graduates of “elite” colleges and universities, it would still be a vexatious problem but not an existential threat to the commonweal. But the meritocratic scramble does threaten society’s cohesiveness and general well-being.

Why? How?

America has always characterized itself as the land of opportunity – as the land of the “American Dream.” That dream told generations of Americans that here neither place of origin nor circumstance of birth limits one’s prospects. One

could rise by dint of one's own efforts. Hard work, diligence, not the grace of birth, determine one's lot in life.

Sandel calls it the *rhetoric of rising*, the belief in the American *"Yes I Can"* culture that, by accepting personal responsibility for one's own welfare, one can become anything one aspires to be. Like the old Army ad, "Be All You Can Be." In short, rebuking Luther, Americans believe it is not by some divine dispensation of grace that they are saved, but by dint of their own talent, effort, and sense of personal responsibility. Their material success is the outward sign of their inner grace.

Whereas the old aristocracy of birth had a sense of *noblesse oblige*, a sense that from those to whom much is given, much is expected, the new aristocracy of merit believes that if I am only responsible for myself, then, by definition, I am not responsible for anyone else.

That is the crux of the divide between the conservative and the liberal understanding of how society functions. In the conservative view, individual success is due to personal merit; by definition, individual failure is due to lack of merit. The liberal view is that personal merit is not definitive, but how society is organized affects personal success. Failure, in other words, is not personal but the result of some flaw in society. To correct individual shortcomings, we must correct, tweak, society's flaws. The conservative view says just work harder.

This became glaringly obvious in the late 20th century when under the pressure of globalization many of the old avenues to success in American culture began to shrivel and disappear. Old manufacturing jobs vanished, welfare rolls began to explode, and deaths of despair in the white working class grew as the promise of the American Dream, of the "Yes I Can" culture, withered.

What was society's response? Was it to tweak social organization to come to the aid of the dispossessed? No, it was a bipartisan doubling down on the *rhetoric of rising*. From Ronald Reagan to George H.W. Bush to Bill Clinton to George W. Bush to Barack Obama, the message was still *"you can be all you can be"* if you accept personal responsibility for your fate, if you work hard, and go to college. In short, it was to encourage, if not demand, that all Americans enter the meritocratic scramble.

College would save them all.

Did it?

No.

The impact was three-fold: 1) it debased college by transforming it from an experience of learning and personal growth into a mad scramble for a credential; 2) in a sort of Gresham's Law, the proliferation of college degrees devalued all college degrees but, more insidiously, it made a high school education inferior; and, 3) it created a great cultural divide between those with a "higher education" and those without one fanning flames of resentment and threatening the republic's survival.

In short, Conant's grand experiment backfired.

Why?

Because amidst all of this, concern for the common good was lost. If society is

simply a meritocratic competition of “all against all,” then what happens to the public interest, to the common ground of mutual interests? They are shredded, for, by definition, there are no mutual interests.

If society is simply a competition between winners and losers, what becomes of the losers? Well, since there was/is no equality of opportunity, the illusion of a fair competition is just that – an illusion. More to the point, people do not like to think of themselves as losers. The game must have somehow been rigged – place of origin and circumstance of birth still count; or, the game doesn’t value what I am good at – I like to work with my hands.

That mindset breeds resentment. People resent being excluded; people resent being devalued; people resent being condescended to; people resent the overt sense of superiority of a credentialed elite who they believe to be winners in a “rigged” game.

People resent “the tyranny of merit.”

So, we end where we began this ***Book Notes***. What explains the populist revolt? It is a revolt against “the tyranny of merit.” If there is one authentic thing about Donald Trump, it is his genuine resentment at the disdain and rejection the poor little rich boy from Queens experienced from the social elite of Manhattan’s Upper East Side. With his radar tuned to a fine precision by that rejection, he intuitively sensed the resentment and anger emanating from the victims of the last acceptable prejudice – the disdain of the educated for the non-educated.

What is the solution? First, the highly educated need to get over themselves. Then they need to understand that merit and virtue are not measured by what you have (distributive justice) but by what you contribute to society’s overall well-being (contributive justice). If all you are is a consumer, then you are a “user.” What do you do to enhance the common good? If nothing else, you can begin to enhance the common good by recognizing the worth of all of society’s members.

How can that be done, if it is to be something more than an empty platitude? Well, in a time of pandemic, America can support front-line personnel who keep society functioning while the rest of society shelters in place. All the letters after one’s name are worthless if the utilities stop functioning and the food stops arriving at the local store.

Sandel’s ideas deserve additional consideration. His argument is rich and deep. The rhetoric of rising, the impact of meritocracy on education at all levels, and the triumph of distributive justice over contributive justice merit (pun intended) further analysis in a future ***Book Notes***.

For now, if you want to understand why people vote against their own economic interest, read Sandel. It’s all about respect and how its absence breeds frustration, then resentment, then anger and then reaction.

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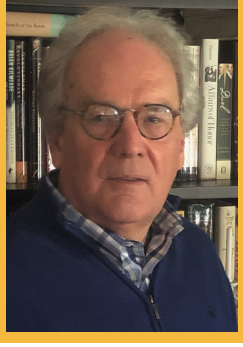

End Notes

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2. Sandel, Michael. **The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?** (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), p. 35.
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5. Sandel, p. 157.
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