



LIVING GOOD LIVES WITHIN MARKET ECONOMIES

A DISCUSSION OF
MICHAEL SANDEL'S
WHAT MONEY CAN'T BUY
& THE TYRANNY OF MERIT

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Abstract

Almost everything is up for sale these days. The belief that markets are an invaluable instrument to direct our common economic efforts is deeply embedded in Western societies. But what role should markets play in a state of sustainable prosperity? This paper provides a review of Michael Sandel's *What Money Can't Buy* and *The Tyranny of Merit*. Following an introduction into Sandel's conceptions of the moral limits of markets, this essay is attending to the contested notion of individual responsibility in today's discourses around sustainability, examining fundamental institutions, and pinpointing valuable political and social questions that need to be addressed first if sustainable prosperity is to be achieved in practice. In particular, this paper is looking closely at Sandel's proposal to engage people in public deliberation processes to help (re)negotiating the role of markets in our lives, and thereby enriching what he sees as a nowadays morally and spiritually empty political sphere. This paper is arguing that placing such high expectations upon public deliberation may turn out to be overly optimistic. However, despite all objections, it concludes that it is time indeed to reflect collectively on the purpose of our common efforts, time to transform fundamental institutions that govern our lives such that they contribute to our, yet to be defined, shared goal.

Introduction

Environmental goals are difficult to achieve in growing economies, and some economists have begun to question the growth paradigm.¹ Moving beyond GDP growth requires finding alternative, more sustainable ways to make humans thrive.² However, it is debatable what 'sustainable prosperity' could possibly mean within a world of environmental, social, and economic limits. Conducting interdisciplinary research on this question is the constitutive goal of the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity (CUSP). CUSP's research theme on the 'Meanings and Moral Framings of the Good Life' provides a basis for seeking to understand and rethink the moral foundations upon which our societies rest at present. One of its core aims is to identify institutions and political questions that are pivotal for making the transition to a state of sustainable prosperity.³

¹ See for example Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth* (London: Earthscan, 2009); Tim Jackson, *Post Growth: Life After Capitalism* (Polity, 2021)

² Ibid.

³ Meanings and Moral Framings of the Good Life, Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, accessed March 16, 2021, <https://www.cusp.ac.uk/themes/m>.

This essay contributes to that goal by reviewing two of the latest books by the US American political philosopher Michael Sandel. In *What Money Can't Buy* and *The Tyranny of Merit*, the influential Harvard professor examines one of the most fundamental institutions that governs our lives today: markets. His investigation of dominating structures of our societies point to a number of valuable political and social questions that need to be answered if sustainable prosperity is to be achieved in practice.

The two books investigated here engage with the various ways in which markets persist in our society and impact upon our lives. Following an initial review of *What Money Can't Buy* in which Sandel reflects on the expanded scope that markets have acquired in our societies and why their reach should be limited in some cases, I turn to the social and political consequences that accompany the wide-spread adoption of market values as Sandel identifies them in *The Tyranny of Merit*. He claims that one of the central notions associated with market thinking has been particularly disruptive for people's sense of belonging and their feeling of solidarity: the much-stressed notion of individual responsibility for one's own success. As a remedy, Sandel suggests challenging the way we conceive of success. I come to that in section three of this essay. In the final section, I will bring together arguments from both books that establish the need to deliberate on the nature of the good life.

Thinking through the moral limits of markets

Almost everything is up for sale today.⁴ The belief that markets are an invaluable instrument to direct our common economic efforts is deeply embedded in western societies.⁵ Most economists are convinced that floating market prices constitute powerful signals which help organising the production of the goods we value. Yet, despite the prevailing trust in markets, citizens are prohibited from selling certain things. It is forbidden, for instance, to sell one's right to vote. Why is that? Why shouldn't we allow people to trade their right to vote in exchange for something they value even more? Or putting it more generally: for what reason should some things not be for sale?

What Money Can't Buy examines this question from a moral perspective. In principle, Sandel agrees with the proposition that "no other mechanism for organizing the production and distribution of goods had proved as successful [as markets] at generating affluence and prosperity".⁶ Nevertheless, he argues, we need to bear in mind the moral, political, and

⁴ Michael Joseph Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

⁶ *Ibid.*

philosophical implications of allowing large domains of our lives being governed by market mechanisms. In some cases, doing so has unintended and rather unfavourable consequences. That's why we should rethink the role markets play in our lives, he argues. Each chapter of the book offers an impressive series of examples to convincingly underpin this thesis.⁷

One of the (many) shocking cases he presents is the trading of procreational rights.⁸ A US-based charity called Project Prevention⁹ pays \$300 cash to drug-addicted women if they agree to undergo sterilization or long-term birth control in exchange.¹⁰ In essence, these women sell their right to procreate, often with the motivation to finance further drug consumption. One promotional flyer even induces them to do so with the slogan 'Don't Let a Pregnancy Ruin Your Drug Habit'.¹¹

Another example is the practice of 'jumping the queue'.¹² Some firms such as LineStanding.com offer to place someone in a queue on behalf of a paying person.¹³ If you ever find yourself waiting to attend congressional committee hearings on proposed legislation in the US, you might witness this practice. Sandel interprets the high demand for this service as follows: "Corporate lobbyist are keen to attend these hearings, in order to chat up lawmakers during breaks and keep track of legislation affecting their industries". And instead of waiting their turn in the cold on their own, some prefer to pay somebody to swap places with them as soon as they are next in line.¹⁴

Consider also markets in life and death.¹⁵ During the 1980s, insurance companies managed to effect a relaxation of insurance laws, permitting firms to buy life insurance on the lives of all of their employees, "from the CEO to the mailroom clerk".¹⁶ They created a multibillion-dollar death futures industry. Often, workers were not even aware of the fact that their employers would profit from their deaths.¹⁷

7 Those looking for fascinating, well-written, and easily digestible literature on political philosophy will enjoy reading *What Money Can't Buy*. The sheer endlessness of examples presented corroborate Sandel's point: markets have overtaken control in areas of our lives where they cause substantial damage to norms and attitudes we value. Yet, the book's virtue is at the same time its most notable vice. Including that many illustrative examples comes at the cost of a lack of density. A more theoretically inclined, more profound analysis of the very same topic can be found in Debra Satz' *Why Some Things Should Not Be For Sale*. To my surprise, Sandel did not refer to her work which appeared two years before his publication.

8 Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 43 - 47.

9 According to <http://www.projectprevention.org/statistics/>, as of February 2021, Project Prevention paid 7,641 addicts or alcoholics for undergoing sterilization or long-term contraception.

10 William Lee Adams, *Why Drug Addicts Are Getting Sterilized for Cash*, *Time*, April 17, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1981916,00.html>.

11 Jeff Stryker, *Cracking down*, *Salon*, June 30, 1998, https://www.salon.com/1998/06/30/feature_369/.

12 Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 17 - 41.

13 See <http://linestanding.com/>, accessed March 03, 2021.

14 Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 22.

15 *Ibid.*, 131 - 162.

16 *Ibid.*, 132.

17 *Ibid.*, 133.

But what, if anything, is wrong with these phenomena? From a standpoint of market reasoning, everything seems fine. In the cases presented above, two private parties engage in an entirely voluntary exchange. Take the example of paid sterilization: The charity's donors are willing to give \$300 in return for the assurance that a drug-addicted woman does not give birth to a child. And all those potential mothers who accept the deal seemingly prefer buying a bundle of goods worth \$300 to preserving their ability to procreate. Both actors seemingly benefit from the exchange. The market is seen to be efficient because it places the good—in this case control over the addict's reproductive capacity—into the hands of those who are willing to pay the most for it “and who [are] therefore presumed to value it most highly”.¹⁸

According to this train of thought, trading procreational rights via markets increases social utility.¹⁹ So, why should we prohibit, economically speaking, mutually beneficial exchanges between individuals? Sandel argues, that we have to include moral considerations in our evaluation.²⁰ Not everything that money *can* buy *should* also be for sale.²¹

Two moral objections recur repeatedly throughout the book. The *corruption objection* raises the concern that some attitudes and norms may be damaged or dissolved when particular goods are traded via markets. The *fairness objection* points to inequalities that market choices may reflect.²² I will examine each of them in turn.

Consider markets for kidneys. One may object “that such markets promote a degrading, objectifying view of the human person, as a collection of spare parts” (the corruption objection). Further, selling his or her kidney may not always be a truly voluntary decision for the poor (the fairness objection).²³ Or consider blood donations.²⁴ As the British social researcher Richard Titmuss established in his 1970 book *The Gift Relationship*, the British blood collection system worked better than the US-American one. In the United Kingdom, blood donors receive no payment in return. They give their blood voluntarily. The health system in the US on the other hand works with commercial blood banks who pay people for their blood.²⁵ This commodification of blood coincided with “chronic shortages, wasted blood, higher costs, and a greater risk of contaminated blood”.²⁶ Titmuss concludes

¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 45.

²¹ Ibid., 96.

²² Ibid., 110.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 122 - 127.

²⁵ Richard Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship. From Human Blood to Social Policy*, (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 231-32.

²⁶ Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 125.

that markets for blood undermine the norms and attitudes that govern blood donations in the UK. In his view, a blood marketisation diminishes altruistic behaviour, erodes peoples' sense of obligation to donate blood, and corrupts its meaning as a socially bonding gift (the corruption objection). In addition, markets in blood drain the poor by exploiting their disadvantageous position (the fairness objection).²⁷ Titmuss observed in 1970 that much of the privately obtained blood was "supplied by the poor, the unskilled, the unemployed, [black people] and other low income groups",²⁸ demonstrating that the redistribution of blood "from the poor to the rich [is] one of the dominant effects of the American blood systems".²⁹

It is worth examining the two recurring moral objections—of corruption and fairness—more closely. Sandel suggests that the corruption objection applies under conditions of equality and inequality alike. A corruptive transaction undermines relevant norms or attitudes independently of the distribution of wealth or income within the society at hand. The fairness objection, however, relies on these discrepancies and only applies to unequal trades.³⁰

Transactions are fundamentally unfair when they involve a person who sells (or buys) a particular good because she has no other viable option in her economic circumstances. In other words, the unfairness arises from poverty and inequality. One of the examples that Sandel puts forward to support this view is the practice of prostitution. Some argue that prostitution is never truly voluntary. Proponents of that view argue that it is solely poverty, drug addiction, or the threat of violence, that drive people into prostitution—as a direct consequence of the dire circumstances they find themselves trapped in. Others argue that even in a world of perfect equality, in absence of coercive conditions, selling sexual intercourse for money still remains immoral—on grounds of corruption: "a form of corruption that demeans women and promotes bad attitudes toward sex".³¹

As mentioned, two different moral ideals are at play here. The corruption objection on the one hand appeals to the moral importance of the goods, norms, and attitudes at stake—of the ones allegedly degraded by market exchange and valuation. It follows, that in order to determine whether a particular good should or should not be up for sale, we need to ask which norms are (or should be) governing the context and whether trading the good would corrupt these norms. Sandel argues that before, say,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship. From Human Blood to Social Policy*, Either 134 or 277; The citation in Sandel's *What Money Can't Buy* from which the quote is taken is imprecise with regard to the pages the two quotes (7,8) are taken from.

²⁹ Ibid.; Either 134 or 277.

³⁰ Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 111.

³¹ Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 111 - 112.

establishing a market for tradable pollution permits, we must first consider what kind of attitude we want to promote—towards the environment in our case. Interestingly, he notes, rather than imposing *fin*es on excessive pollution, environmentally damaging activities are traded with *fe*es. The problem with that, he argues, is a lacking stigma that would be attached to a fine. The same holds for carbon offsets: “The risk is that carbon offsets will become, at least for some, a painless mechanism to buy our way out of the more fundamental changes in habits, attitudes, and ways of life that may be required to address the climate problem.”^{32,33}

The fairness objection on the other hand draws on the ideal of consent being carried out under fair background conditions. One argument often made to promote the use of markets to allocate goods is related to the expectation of a shared freedom of choice. Markets are places where people exchange goods on a voluntary basis. Yet, the fairness argument’s objection is that some of these choices are not made entirely voluntary. For our investigation it follows that when debating whether a good is suitable for being distributed through a market mechanism, we need to ask whether the inequalities in our societies may impair meaningful *consent*.³⁴

Unfortunately, Sandel’s descriptions of the fairness objection are not entirely consistent with one another, as his various elaborations draw on different moral ideals. Consider the case of tradable procreation permits. In 2006, two Belgian economists revived Kenneth Boulding’s idea of introducing a system of procreation licenses to limit overpopulation. Each woman would then receive one or two allowances, each giving her the right to give birth to a child—which she can sell at the ongoing freely floating price.³⁵ Commodifying the right of having a child would be unfair though, in Sandel’s view, because “[if] having children is a central aspect to human flourishing, then it is unfair to condition access to this good on the ability to pay”.³⁶ Yet, the concept of *human flourishing* rests on Aristotelean thoughts and thus not (primarily) on the conviction that free consent is a necessary part of a fair transaction between equal trading partners he used elsewhere.³⁷ Sandel uses a third moral principle in his fairness objection to the practice of paid line standing when he utters that “it’s unfair that wealthy lobbyists can corner the market on congressional hearings,

³² Ibid., 76 - 78.

³³ Sandel further elaborated this criticism to emission trading systems in an article that appeared in The New York Times: Michael Joseph Sandel, “It’s Immoral to Buy the Right to Pollute,” New York Times, December 15, 1997.

³⁴ Sandel, What Money Can’t Buy, 111 - 112.

³⁵ Ibid., 70-72

³⁶ Sandel, What Money Can’t Buy, 71.

³⁷ For an explanation of the conceptual origin of ‘human flourishing’ see for example Douglas B. Rasmussen, “Perfectionism,” in Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics Second Edition, ed. Ruth Chadwick (London, Waltham, San Diego: Academic Press, 2012), 395f.

depriving ordinary citizens of the opportunity to attend”.³⁸ Appealing to a lack of *equal opportunities* as the source of unfairness is quite different to drawing on the condition of individual *consent*. Therefore, Sandel’s use of different moral principles to justify his fairness objection runs the danger of disguising the moral foundation of his argument. The corruption objection on the other hand is less ambiguous.

Despite these two moral objections, at least in the US, almost everything is on offer. This makes the life of those with modest means, of course, much harder. How did it come to this? Where does the reign of markets originate? Who decided that market values should govern large domains of our lives? As mundane as it may sound, according to Sandel, “[w]e did not arrive at this condition through any deliberate choice. It is almost as if it came upon us”.³⁹ Still, he says, the market faith was not self-diffusing—it had powerful supporters all over the globe. The era of market triumphalism began in the early 1980s, with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher proclaiming the credo that markets, not governments, were key to prosperity and freedom. With the end of the cold war, markets and market thinking became to prevail within, and far beyond the boundaries of the economics profession. From there on, market values increasingly entered social life: “Economics was becoming an imperial domain”.⁴⁰ In the 1990s, Reagan’s and Thatcher’s liberal successors US-Democrat Bill Clinton and the former leader of the British Labour Party Tony Blair moderated but further consolidated the confidence in markets in the English-speaking world. All came to a hold when the financial crisis hit in 2007/2008—the belief that ‘free markets’ should be left unregulated was shattered. It became obvious to the wide public that markets had become completely detached from morals.⁴¹ And in Sandel’s view it’s because the market triumphalism and its reliance on technical expertise created morally and spiritually empty public discourse—market actors had almost free reign.⁴² For Sandel, reviving a public debate involving people from all walks of life is the way forward: “Our only hope of keeping markets in their place is to deliberate openly and publicly about the meaning of the goods and social practices we prize”.⁴³ It is time to ask whether we should try to keep our market *economy* at bay, or whether we want to be consumed by it, turning into a market *society*.⁴⁴

Sandel’s call for reevaluating the role that markets should play urges us to initiate a new kind of political debate about which goods should be allowed

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² A recurring theme in Sandel’s two books. I further elaborate this point on page 10.

⁴³ Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy*, 202.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

to be distributed via markets and which not. And that, he says, involves asking a set of broader questions.⁴⁵

Thinking through the moral limits of markets brings us—almost inevitably—to the very nature of the *good life*. Disagreement about whether markets should be allowed to crowd out particular values arises from the fact that people don't always agree about which values are worth caring about, and why. Setting the scope of markets through deliberation ultimately touches on visions of the *good society*. In Sandel's view, the arena of public argument should be the very place where passionate argumentation, informed by competing notions of what makes people thrive, is carried out.^{46,47} This faith in the power and success of democratic argument is characteristic for Sandel's work.

With *What Money Can't Buy* he contributes a guide to reconsidering which values should govern the various domains of our lives. He proposes a powerful antidote to the moral emptiness of public debates. And he importantly makes the case that we shouldn't shy away from deliberations for fear of disagreements: "For fear of disagreement, we hesitate to bring our moral and spiritual convictions into the public square. But shrinking from these questions does not leave them undecided. It simply means that markets will decide them for us".⁴⁸

What Money Can't Buy is an illuminating and accessible book whose clarity and simplicity is intriguing. However, it lacks at some points the depth Sandel realises in his later book *The Tyranny of Merit* to which I turn next.

Why meritocratic thinking fuels populist rising

In 2016, a majority of the UK electorate voted to leave the European Union.⁴⁹ Five years later, the United Kingdom effectively left the EU.⁵⁰ Seemingly, people had had enough of Brussels telling them what to do in their country. They thrust aside the forecasts of their own experts that predicted drastic economic consequences in case of the Brexit. The words of those who are considered to be leaders of their respective professions had lost their political weight. Michael Gove's comment on his fellow countrymen still

⁴⁵ Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy*, 202.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Initiating such a public dialogue between people from all kinds of different backgrounds is the purpose of the CUSP's 'Nature of Prosperity' dialogue series: <https://cusp.ac.uk/nature-of-prosperity/>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁴⁹ "EU Referendum Results," BBC News, accessed March 16, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/politics/eu_referendum/results.

⁵⁰ "Brexit: An agreement has been reached on the future relationship between the EU and the UK. What does the successful conclusion of the negotiations mean?," German Federal Foreign Office, January 01, 2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europa/brexit-where-are-we-now-what-next/2204138>.

reverberate throughout western societies: “people in this country have enough of experts”.⁵¹ Reading *The Tyranny of Merit* provokes the thought that the invoked distrust in authorities is only the tip of the iceberg though: It is just one of the most visible consequences of wide-spread meritocratic thinking which, as Sandel argues, fuelled the populist rise of Donald Trump—regarded by many as a major disruption for US democracy.

Before turning to Sandel’s political analysis, it is worth spending a moment longer with the reflection on the ideal of meritocracy. A perfect meritocracy distributes the relevant goods (income, wealth, social esteem among others) according to individual merit. In such a world, everybody deserves his or her place on the societal ladder. It’s considered to be just because an individual’s status is taken to be independent of prejudices based on ethnicity, social class, sexuality, religion, age, political orientation et cetera. The promise is that if you work hard, then you can fulfil your dreams.⁵² Such a meritocracy seems especially attractive compared to past aristocracies in which income and wealth were determined by the accident of birth and passed down from one generation to the next. Back then, an individual’s future prospects were more dependent on the family they were born into than today.⁵³ It is important to note, though, that a meritocracy does not necessarily abate inequality—it rather aligns economic rewards with ability.⁵⁴

Having a firm understanding of the underlying meritocratic convictions may be helpful for understanding what follows. For that purpose, I suggest three premises that, once fulfilled, constitute the meritocratic ideal:

Premise 1: Our success depends entirely on our own doing.

Premise 2: If our success depends entirely on our own doing, then everybody gets what they deserve.

Premise 3: If everybody gets what they deserve, then we live in a just society.

At first glance, the meritocratic ideal seems to be an aim worth pursuing. And if it were, are we there yet? We are according to Barack Obama. In speeches and public statements, he repeatedly emphasised that in the US, “[y]ou can make it if you try”.⁵⁵ But there is reason to doubt that the ‘American Dream’ has become reality. A rhetoric of rising up is rather empty

⁵¹ Henry Mance, Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove, Financial Times, June 3, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>.

⁵² Michael Joseph Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020), 34.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113 - 115.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

when upwards mobility only exists to very small degrees. Studies have shown what is intuitively true to most of us, that today, those US-Americans who are born to poor parents tend to remain poor as adults themselves. Many other countries around the globe are more successful in providing equal opportunities.⁵⁶

That means that the practice falls short of the ideal. Nonetheless, many people, implicitly or explicitly, *believe* that they are fully responsible for their own fate. Check for yourself if you adhere to the statements above by considering this slightly adapted version of them:

P1: My success depends entirely on my own doing.

P2: If my success depends entirely on my own doing, then I deserve what I get.

C: I deserve what I get.

Sandel notes that, for a society, this body of thought has substantial political and social consequences.⁵⁷ Consider each in turn. Politically, meritocratic thinking plays a key role in explaining the populist backlash that occurred in the US and the UK. Thus far, mainstream parties and governing elites interpreted the populist resentment mainly as a reaction to growing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity. More broadly, the populist ascendancy is conceived of in this sphere as a political response to “the rapid pace of change in an age of globalization and technology”.⁵⁸ Sandel acknowledges the legitimacy of these two diagnoses. But he argues that it is a mistake to point only to alleged bigotry in populist protest, or the involved economic complaint: “Construing populist protest as either malevolent or misdirected absolves governing elites of responsibility of creating the conditions that eroded the dignity of work and left many feeling disrespected and disempowered”.⁵⁹

This sense of responsibility that governing elites do carry for societal rifts is central to how the different chapters of Sandel’s book interact with one another. There are four major components. Each of them is linked, directly or indirectly, to meritocratic convictions.

I will first consider why Sandel holds governing elites responsible for the uprising of these feelings. Then, I summarize his examination of the two sources of discontent (feelings of disrespect and disempowerment). The

⁵⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁷ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 25.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

fourth element is the erosion of the dignity of work, which I put aside for now. I will come back to it later when describing the political agenda which Sandel recommends in order to challenge meritocratic convictions.

Sandel holds governing elites to account for having brought about conditions that have adverse consequences for most people. In essence, he criticises the mainstream parties' promotion of a highly market-friendly version of globalization, and their relentless use of meritocratic slogans. The past few decades have brought about alarming inequalities in the US. Led by the unquestioned belief in upwards mobility, mainstream parties and politicians responded to inequality by "retraining workers whose jobs have disappeared due to globalization and technology; improving access to higher education; and removing barriers of race, ethnicity, and gender".⁶⁰ In short, they attempted to improve and equalise economic *opportunities*. But, as just mentioned, the rhetoric of upward mobility in the US is a rather empty promise. Yet, politicians of both major US-American parties are using meritocratic slogans extensively.⁶¹ And for that they can be held accountable, according to Sandel: they have manifested meritocratic beliefs among US-citizens without delivering the actual structures necessary to take up these introduced opportunities. Sandel argues that widespread adoption of these convictions was one central condition for the emerging feeling of being disrespected and disempowered that led to the rise of populists in the country.⁶²

The sense of being disrespected is according to Sandel's analysis a direct consequence of meritocratic thinking. The latter "encourages winners to consider their success their own doing, a measure of virtue—and to look down upon those less fortunate than themselves".⁶³ Now, if you're losing without having had an actual winning chance to begin with, the elite's hubris comes into focus, generating growing resentment amongst those who lost out. However, sometimes it's not just the 'winners' that degrade the social esteem of the 'losers'. If the 'losers' themselves embrace meritocratic thinking, they come to hold the "demoralizing thought that their failure [might be] their own doing, that they simply lack the talent and drive to succeed".⁶⁴

As mentioned above, today's technocratic approach to politics and governance then gives rise to the feeling of being disempowered. It places public questions in the hands of technical experts and crowds out ordinary, less credentialed citizens of political discussion. Insisting on political

⁶⁰ Ibid., 19 - 23.

⁶¹ Ibid., 23.

⁶² Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 25 - 29.

⁶³ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 26.

problems to be handled only by highly educated experts is excluding ordinary citizens from discourse and thereby disempowering them.

At first, there seems to be no connection between meritocratic thinking and this technocratic development. But Sandel argues that the former is the moral companion of the latter. The idea that the meritorious should govern, legitimises the ruling of a small elite. Over time, many societies organized themselves that way. But “traditional versions of political meritocracy—from the Confucian to the Platonic to the republican—share the notion that the merits relevant to governing included moral and civic virtue”.⁶⁵ Today, being able to form solid moral judgments is no requirement for government anymore. Most governments still consider the common good to be (at least approximately) equivalent to the gross domestic product (henceforth GDP). For them, the common goal is to maximise the aggregate value of goods and services they produce annually. Such a state rather needs mathematically trained technocrats than moral leaders.⁶⁶

“Today, the common good is [...] less about cultivating solidarity or deepening bonds of citizenship than about satisfying consumer preferences as measured by the gross domestic product. [...] Citizens across the political spectrum find this empty public discourse frustrating and disempowering. [...] Such vacuums of public meaning are invariably filled by harsh, authoritarian forms of identity and belonging—whether in the form of religious fundamentalism or strident nationalism”.⁶⁷

Meritocratic thinking then, according to Sandel, is not only politically, but also socially precarious. Be it the hubris felt by the ‘winners’ of globalization, the humiliation spreading among those who do not flourish within today’s economies, their sentiment of being looked down upon with disdain, or the erupting resentment against elites; unbound meritocratic thinking is corrosive of the social bonds that constitute our common life.⁶⁸ The more we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility. And without these sentiments, it is hard to care for the common good.⁶⁹

In summary, sticking to meritocratic convictions has wide-ranging harmful consequences and relies on the mistaken supposition that our success is based entirely on our own actions.

And yet, most people who complain about meritocracy rail not at the ideal but at our failure to live up to it.⁷⁰ Sandel is not only making the point that

⁶⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 29, 31.

⁶⁸ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 30 - 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 119.

conditions of equal opportunities are difficult to establish, he offers a more profound challenge: our success, he says, also relies on our talents. And in his view, talents are not *deserved* for two reasons. First, our having (or lacking) of certain talents is a matter of luck. Secondly, it is equally arbitrary that we live in a society that values (or disvalues) some of our talents.⁷¹ Take for example LeBron James. He would not have made tens of millions of dollars if he lived in “Renaissance Florence, when fresco painters, not basketball players, were in high demands”.⁷² Hence, our success is arbitrary from a moral point of view. And so are the benefits that flow from them. In response, some argue in defence of the meritocratic ideal, our individual efforts matter after all to cultivate our talents—even the most gifted musician must spend countless hours to become a virtuoso. But this is to inflate the moral significance of effort, Sandel says. “[S]uccess rarely comes from hard work alone”.⁷³

If the meritocratic emphasis on personal responsibility and desert is flawed, leading to societal divisions that are difficult to overcome, it is badly suited to ground our understanding of what it means to live well together in a society.

Sandel considers two alternatives to a meritocratic society: *free-market liberalism* and *welfare state liberalism*.⁷⁴ In practice, both societal ideals generate attitudes toward success that are very similar to those stemming from the meritocratic one. “Neither offers an account of the common good sufficiently robust to counter the hubris and humiliation to which meritocracies are prone. [...] [T]hese public philosophies offer no antidote to the tyranny of merit”.⁷⁵ Given that these two ideals have been foundational for the route many western societies have taken, it is worth spending a few more words on them.

Free-market liberalism received its theoretical foundation primarily from the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek. Hayek argued against large-scale government interventions to economic inequality, opposed progressive taxation, and attacked attempts to stretch the welfare state’s security nets. He viewed the equality of all citizens before the law as the only equality compatible with with freedom. Interestingly, Hayek’s free-market liberalism explicitly rejects the notion of merit as its moral foundation. Quite surprisingly, given Hayek’s opposition to the need for redistribution, Hayek’s ideology, *denies* that individual desert determines how much money we receive for the goods and/or services we produce. According to him, our earnings rather reflect what consumers are willing to pay for the fruits of our

71 Ibid., 122 - 123.

72 Ibid., 123.

73 Ibid., 124.

74 Ibid., 125 - 146.

75 Ibid., 125 f.

work. Its value is determined by contingencies of supply and demand. On this basis, Hayek formulates a response to calls for redistribution. Those who believe that bankers do not deserve to earn more than teachers are simply mistaken, Hayek argues, in assuming that economic rewards track individual desert.⁷⁶

Welfare state liberalism draws on the work of the US-American political philosopher John Rawls. In *A Theory of Justice*, he argued that even a system of fair equality of opportunity does not guarantee the establishment of a just society. The winners of ‘fair’ competition would be those endowed with the greatest talents, which is, in turn, morally arbitrary.⁷⁷ Some are afraid that the only remaining option is an equality of outcome, a state in which everybody has the same while the gifted are prevented from gaining a competitive edge. It is Rawls’ contention that this fear is unjustified, as he presents a way to deal with unequal talents. Put simply, he argues for letting the gifted run at full speed, telling them in advance that they have to share parts of the rewards with their community⁷⁸: “The difference principle represents an agreement to regard the distribution of natural talents as a common asset and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever it turns out to be. Those who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune only on terms that improve the situation of those who have lost out”.⁷⁹

Despite their differences, especially with regard to their understanding of freedom, both Hayek and Rawls reject the idea that economic rewards should reflect what people *deserve*.⁸⁰

Despite their rejection of the notion of merit as foundational for a just society, to come back to Sandel’s observations, these public philosophies give rise to attitudes that are characteristic for meritocratic societies, nonetheless.⁸¹ Consider Hayek’s distinction between value and merit.⁸² He argued that the economic rewards we receive are based not on individual excellence but on the contingencies of supply and demand. In that logic, inequalities are less morally reprehensible than commonly assumed. But then, if economic reward is based on consumer valuation, those who receive relatively meagre economic rewards are—just as in the dysfunctional meritocracy—invited to think that they have little to offer to others. The story the disadvantaged tell themselves is in effect very similar to the meritocratic one.⁸³ Sandel writes that: “[m]orally and psychologically, the

⁷⁶ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 126-128.

⁷⁷ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

⁷⁸ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 129.

⁷⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 73-74.

⁸⁰ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 132.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 134-135.

distinction between merit and value becomes vanishingly thin. This is especially true in market societies, where money is the measure of most things. In such societies, reminding the wealthy that their wealth reflects (only) the superior value of their contributions to society is an unlikely antidote to hubris and self-congratulation. And reminding the poor that their poverty reflects (only) the inferior value of their contributions is hardly a bracing tonic to their self-esteem”.⁸⁴

Note, that this argumentation relies on the controversial premise that economic benefits equate with social contribution. I will come back to it later when discussing the notion of contributive justice Sandel proposes to drive out meritocratic beliefs.

But first, consider why Rawls’ vision of a just society feeds these resentments as well. Rawls argues that those endowed with talent are *entitled* to the fruits of their labour as long as they split the gains with their communities. The expectation of receiving large parts of these gains as rewards is considered to be legitimate because they were acquired within a system of rules that is supposedly fair to everyone. In Sandel’s view it is this notion of entitlement, promoting hubristic attitudes towards success, that is fueling the populist backlash against elites.⁸⁵ “Social esteem flows, almost ineluctably, to those who enjoy economic and educational advantages, especially if they earn those advantages under fair terms of social cooperation”.⁸⁶ In effect, “[e]ntitlements to legitimate expectations may be as potent a source of meritocratic hubris and working-class resentment as claims based on merit, virtue, or desert”.⁸⁷

Thus, both Hayek’s and Rawls’s visions of prosperous societies give rise to attitudes that are characteristic of meritocracies, despite their explicit rejection of desert as the underlying moral foundation.

So, if these two alternatives to a meritocratic society fail to deliver a satisfying solution, what options remain then? Should we start hiring people solely based on their gender, sex, ethnicity and so on; i.e. independently of how good they are at doing their job? Probably not. Merit should play a role in assessing individual qualities, as Sandel admits, so it should play a part in the allocation of jobs and social roles.⁸⁸ And yet, he says, we need to challenge and rethink the way we conceive of *success*. We need to overcome the idea that those on top have made it on their own.⁸⁹ How do we achieve that goal?

⁸⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 141-145.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 145.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 144.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 155.

Redistributing Social Esteem

The last two chapters of *The Tyranny of Merit* are devoted to investigating exactly that question. One focuses on education, the other on work. Sandel views these two domains as most central to overcoming the meritocratic conception of success.⁹⁰ In essence, he believes that we need to change the way we allocate *social esteem*.⁹¹

According to Sandel's analysis, social esteem in the US aligns with educational achievement. Many believe that those who land at the top deserve their place through the effort they made. They won in a hyper-competitive sorting contest, so they must have superior qualities worthy of esteem, or so the thinking goes.⁹² But admission to higher education in the US is far from being based on individual merit, and it does not hold its promise of providing social mobility, enabling everyone to rise independently of their background. In other words, it is not open to everyone. Rather, it favours the already wealthy and thus exacerbates inequalities.⁹³ One way to fix the system could be making it fairer in the meritocratic sense. End all kinds of admission schemes that track wealth instead of talent and effort. Stop favouring the offspring of former students. Equip everyone with the advantages that professional classes offer to their children. This is, on its face, a reasonable position.⁹⁴ Sandel argues that it begs the question though whether colleges and universities *should* sort people based on talent and whether they *should* take the role of determining who gets ahead in life. He has two objections. One concerns democracy. The other education itself.⁹⁵

The educational system's promotion of meritocratic thinking is problematic for democratic functioning: Those who gain prestigious credentials are invited to think of their success as self-made and may look down on others, disregarding their embeddedness in society. Also, since meritocratic success is not actually guaranteed, and can require exhausting continuous striving, young learners often suffer from severe emotional and psychological distress. And the effects are even worse for those who do not pass the test. They are prone to feel a demoralizing, even humiliating sense of failure.⁹⁶ "Ungenerous to the losers and oppressive to the winners, merit becomes a tyrant".⁹⁷ These attitudes are, again, corruptive to a shared sense of solidarity and mutual obligation that is essential for a well-functioning

⁹⁰ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 155.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 172 - 177.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 164 - 169.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170 - 172.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

democracy.⁹⁸ Not to mention that today's educational system is badly preparing people for democratic engagement to begin with, which leads us to how meritocratic sorting is unhealthy for education itself.⁹⁹

Sandel observes a broad shift in the role of colleges and universities from pursuing their educational function to being a basic training camp for competitive meritocracy. The credentialing function looms so large that it disturbs teaching and learning of those contents not being straightforwardly valuable for one's later job.¹⁰⁰ In effect, these institutions "place relatively little curricular emphasis on moral and on civic education, or on the kind of historical studies that prepare students to exercise informed practical judgement about public affairs".¹⁰¹ Networking, by contrast, becomes increasingly important. Thus, focussing on the sorting function impoverishes the educational system further by driving out a central part of its educational function.¹⁰²

A better educational system requires two major changes, Sandel writes. The first line of reforms must challenge the dominating meritocratic conception of success. The second focus should lie on rethinking the purpose of the apparatus by altering its educational goal.

First, we need to "figure out how to make success in life less dependent on having a four-year college degree".¹⁰³ Honouring work begins with taking seriously the different forms of training that people undertake in preparation. Giving more honour and better recognition to other post-secondary educational settings than just universities would be key. It also involves increasing monetary means assigned to alternative educational programs such as technical and vocational trainings.¹⁰⁴

To soften meritocratic convictions among students, one could include what Sandel calls a 'lottery of the qualified' in college admission. It would choose randomly among applicants that passed previous meritocratic tests such as the SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) in the US. Note that his proposal does not ignore merit altogether, it rather treats it as a threshold qualification. Such an admission system shows quite plainly that not only individual effort but also chance plays a role for our achievements.¹⁰⁵ That, however, immediately faces a fairness problem in my view: the morally controversial task of setting a threshold that determines the pool of applicants among whom this lottery chooses. Estimating the respective proportions that talent

98 Ibid., 183 f.

99 Ibid., 191 - 192.

100 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 182.

101 Ibid., 192.

102 Ibid., 183.

103 Ibid., 188.

104 Ibid., 188 - 193.

105 Ibid., 184 - 188.

and effort carry in our fate seems like an impossible endeavour. It remains unclear how to base such a lottery on a stable moral foundation.

Sandel acknowledges that the aforementioned measures alone will not heal the wounds that the sorting machine has inflicted. We are also asked to rethink the function of the educational system itself in order to value all different kinds of work. One way to do so is by diminishing the prestige attributed to students enrolled in colleges and universities. According to Sandel, these institutions derive much of their prestige from their higher purpose: “not only to equip students for the world of work but also to prepare them to be morally reflective human beings and effective democratic citizens, capable of deliberating about the common good”.¹⁰⁶ To put an end to the monopoly position that colleges and universities have on cultivating civic and moral virtues, Sandel lobbies for creating public spaces that fulfil that function.¹⁰⁷ “Civic education can flourish in community colleges, job training sites, and union halls as well as on [...] campuses”.¹⁰⁸

Which leads us to the last chapter of this inspiring and dense book in which Sandel showcases how the meritocratic age has undermined the dignity of work of many diligent people.¹⁰⁹ He reasons as follows. While the age of globalization benefited mostly the well-credentialed, “it did nothing for most ordinary workers”.¹¹⁰ Many of those without meritocratic credentials receive relatively meagre pay. This fact invites them to interpret their work as a meagre contribution to the common good, less worthy of social recognition and esteem. The conviction that the money we make reflects the value of our individual social contribution lies at the heart of this problem. The meritocratic belief that everybody gets what they deserve has helped entrenching this idea. So did meritocratic sorting and “the neoliberal, or market-oriented, version of globalization embraced by mainstream parties of the centre-right and centre-left since the 1980s”.¹¹¹

As discussed earlier, these assumptions rest on morally shaky ground. That doesn't change the fact though that many no longer perceive of their work as being a source of social esteem.¹¹² Sandel takes both what has become

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 191.

¹⁰⁷ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 192.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 193.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 197 - 222.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 197.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 198.

¹¹² Ibid., 199.

known as ‘deaths of despair’¹¹³ and the rise of the populist tide in the United States as symptomatic for this development.¹¹⁴

Now, mere increases of social benefits are, in Sandel’s eyes, insufficient to prevent further resentment. Rather, he emphasises that any serious attempt to temper working-class resentment must put the dignity of work at its centre, and it “must combat the elite condescension and credentialist prejudice that have become rife in the public culture”.¹¹⁵ Renewing the dignity of work requires giving people the opportunity to *contribute* to the common good.¹¹⁶ Sandel suggests that currently, market economies put their focus on the GDP and distributive justice and thus on consumption rather than production. But “it is in our role as producers, not consumers, that we contribute to the common good and win recognition for doing so”.¹¹⁷ Sandel’s notion of *contributive justice* accounts for that very thought. It breaks with the supposedly value-free consumerist notion of economic growth that evades debating morally controversial questions:

“Contributive justice, by contrast, is not neutral about human flourishing or the best way to live. From Aristotle to the American republican tradition, from Hegel to Catholic social teaching, theories of contributive justice teach us that we are most fully human when we contribute to the common good and earn the esteem of our fellow citizens for the contributions we make. According to this tradition, the fundamental human need is to be needed by those with whom we share a common life. The dignity of work consists in exercising our abilities to answer such needs. If this is what it means to live a good life, then it is a mistake to conceive consumption as “the sole end and object of economic activity”.¹¹⁸

But what shall we contribute to then? What will be the goal of our common effort? That is, Sandel notes diplomatically, up for debate.¹¹⁹

By engaging in public dialogue, we can collectively determine our common goal. The author admits that such a debate wouldn’t necessarily lead to an agreement. But it would revive the practice of publicly discussing moral questions, putting an end to decades of impoverished political discourse,

113 According to the study of Anne Case and Angus Deaton, nearly twenty percent of white working-class men in the US were unemployed in the last forty years, and were not looking for work. Most had simply given up. Case and Deaton introduced the notion of ‘deaths of despair’ after they stumbled across data that indicated a decline in life expectancy in the US from 2014 to 2017. This was not because medical scientists stopped improving treatments but mainly due to the number of deaths caused by suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholic liver disease. Surprisingly, educational background tracks well the dramatic increase in deaths of despair. See Anne Case and Angus Deaton, *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

114 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 199 - 207.

115 *Ibid.*, 205.

116 *Ibid.*, 206.

117 *Ibid.*, 208.

118 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 212.

119 *Ibid.*, 214.

drained of substance by market faith and meritocratic hubris.¹²⁰ Sandel suggests that doing so would also help to debunk associated beliefs that distance us from ourselves as noxious and misleading as they are¹²¹, for example the belief that money we make would equate with the value of our contribution to the common good.¹²²

One condition for such successful democratic wrangling about the common good is, according to Sandel, a sense of belonging. For only if we conceive of ourselves as part of a community to which we are indebted, can we recognise our mutual dependence, and thus our sharing in a common project. Appreciating other's contribution to our well-being requires a sense of humility that is in seemingly short supply nowadays. This source of solidarity has been weakened substantially during the past decades of market-driven globalization and meritocratic emphasis on individual responsibility for our success.¹²³ So, "[t]o renew the dignity of work, we must repair the social bonds the age of merit has undone".¹²⁴

On the last few pages, Sandel's political and philosophical work culminates in a shimmering image of a just society. He calls for moving beyond *equality of opportunity*, which he sees as "a morally necessary corrective to injustice".¹²⁵ In his eyes, our goal should be rather to establish a broad *equality of condition*, where everyone would be enabled to live lives of decency and dignity—independently of their income, wealth, and position. That means having the opportunity to develop and exercise one's abilities in work that wins social esteem. It means having access to a widely diffused culture of learning. And it means engaging with fellow citizens in deliberation about public affairs.¹²⁶

This raises the question whether redistributing social esteem, without redistributing income and wealth, will be sufficient to challenge the meritocratic notion of success. As discussed earlier, people are widely convinced that the money they earn for their work reflects what they deserve. So, even if that idea is undermined, income remains an expression of the value of one's contribution. Sandel remains oddly quiet on this topic—somewhat understandable in light of his focus on disentangling money from

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid., 227.

122 Sandel identifies the financialization of the economy to be especially corrosive of the dignity of work because it delivers some of the clearest examples for the gap between the value of one's contribution to the common good and the received monetary return. He therefore recommends using the tax system to discourage speculation and honour productive labour in return. Instead of putting a tax burden on work, he argues for placing it on consumption and speculation. Apart from raising revenue and incentivising different behaviours throughout the economy, it would express society's judgment about what is considered to be a valuable contribution to the common good.

123 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 222 - 223.

124 Ibid., 222.

125 Ibid., 224.

126 Ibid.

social esteem. Nevertheless, material redistribution could be a powerful way to reintroduce some balance and to better honour those who are left behind.

Deliberating on the Nature of the Good Life

Throughout both the books I discussed resonates the idea that it is time to deliberately discuss how we want to live together. In particular *The Tyranny of Merit* advocates for public deliberations, for example to help renewing the dignity of work.¹²⁷ Living a life of decency and dignity is to contribute to the common good in a meaningful way. Giving people the opportunity to do so requires, according to Sandel, a joint exploration of our understanding of such an aspirational goal. Mapping out a shared vision of a prosperous society can help us challenging the meritocratic notion of success, by revealing it to everybody that the money we make is not reflecting what we *deserve*. Engaging in vivid dialogue around the purpose of production might weaken the reigns of consumerism, and can help enrich the ‘morally and spiritually empty political sphere’. Open discourse can facilitate establishing the sense of belonging and solidarity we crave by realising mutual dependence and a sharing in common projects—fundamental for well-functioning democracies in Sandel’s view.¹²⁸

A similar case for political debate is made in *What Money Can’t Buy*, and it resonates with the call for reevaluating the role of markets in our societies. Sandel is convinced that thinking through the moral limits of markets involves questioning whether or not markets should crowd out particular values. This hinges in turn on what we deem worth caring about. People disagree on these issues, partly because they hold different conceptions of the good life. Therefore, exploring the scope of markets will also require discussing and compromising on different visions of the good life, and how these might be articulated and combined in practice.¹²⁹

There are good reasons to doubt the effectiveness of public deliberations on the good life. First, it is somewhat naïve to hope that, in a pluralist society, we can easily come to an agreement on the meaning of human flourishing. Second, adopting a normatively loaded notion of the common good may be in tension with the freedom of some citizens. Doing so anyway requires working out a solid philosophical foundation on the basis of which restricting people’s liberty is warranted. Third, people are not always the best judges of what is best for their own well-being.¹³⁰ More direct forms of

127 Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 214.

128 *Ibid.* 211 - 214.

129 Sandel, *What Money Can’t Buy*, 202 - 203.

130 Theo Schiller, *Issues and controversies*, Britannica.com, accessed February 03, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/direct-democracy/Issues-and-controversies>.

democracies do not automatically guarantee better decision making.¹³¹ Fourth, any attempt to (re)define the goal of our efforts could well become a threat to political stability and the environment since social collective action often has unintended consequences.¹³² In addition, Sandel himself believes that today's democratic systems are not up for the task at hand.¹³³ For one thing, he argues, market thinking still enjoys prestige, and its power is persisting.¹³⁴ Apart from that, our politics are, in his eyes, empty of moral and spiritual content.¹³⁵ These two reasons are not entirely unrelated. According to Sandel, the attempt to push arguments about the good life out of public debates prepared the way for supposedly value-neutral market reasoning.¹³⁶ Once established, market reasoning further amplifies this trend.¹³⁷ “[M]arkets [...] do not pass judgement on the preferences they satisfy. [...] “If someone is willing to pay for sex or a kidney, and a consenting adult is willing to sell, the only question the economist asks is, ‘How much?’”¹³⁸

Despite these obstacles to rethinking foundational values in public deliberation, I believe that optimism is justified. Many citizens' assemblies have successfully discussed very complicated issues like climate change in the past.¹³⁹ In 2021 for example, over the course of two months, the so-called Bürgerrat Klima, constituted of one hundred sixty randomly chosen German citizens, developed concrete recommendations for future German climate policy—touching on multiple ethical questions like intergenerational and global justice in the process.¹⁴⁰ Admittedly, the topics discussed in this, and other citizens' assemblies were not as contested as the nature of the good life itself. But maybe this big question must be split in smaller parts to become negotiable.

But is it the right moment for publicly discussing our societies' fundamental values? Can we really afford philosophising on foundational values while our environment collapses? Is it not about time to put democracy on hold altogether to be able to take more effective action? CUSP researcher Marit Hammond and Graham Smith counter calls for eco-authoritarianism both by showing why such regimes are doomed to miss the goals they set

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Robert King Merton, The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposeful Social Action, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Dec., 1936), 894-904.

¹³³ Sandel, What Money Can't Buy, 11.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ In 2019 alone, ten citizens' assemblies mostly on environmental topics have taken place in the UK. A list can be found here: <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/blog/news/keeping-citizens-assemblies>.

¹⁴⁰ Bürgerrat Klima, Citizens' Climate Report, Recommendations for German climate policy, accessed February 03, 2022, https://buergerrat-klima.de/content/pdfs/BK_211213_Gutachten_Digital_English.pdf.

themselves and by arguing that participatory and deliberative democratic practices are necessary for transitioning to sustainable prosperity.¹⁴¹ Their argument grounds on the idea that sustainability is not a specific outcome that needs to be enforced, say by an authoritarian regime, but a cultural process of continuous reflection on our values and visions of a more prosperous future.¹⁴² As Hammond describes in her 2020 blog post on “The link between democracy and shared prosperity”, the ‘glass ceiling of transformation’ that prevents us from taking effective measures to make the transition to sustainable prosperity has a cultural dimension.¹⁴³ In her view, the liberal ‘political grammar’ of discourses limits our imagination and thus prevents us from developing “new normative meanings in the sense of visions of sustainability that are meaningful to people, as opposed to forced onto them from the top down”.¹⁴⁴

Following this train of thought, it is high time to engage in deeper forms of democracy. If that is true, then it remains to ask whether citizens can shoulder the responsibility and effort constant deliberation demands from them. Under current conditions, I believe, people hardly have the time, capacity, and devotion to engage in public deliberation on a regular basis. How should, say, a single parent with three children and a nine-to-five job cope with all her daily (care) work *and* prepare for intensive discussions on the foundations of our society? One way to ease this stress and create space for everyone to engage in this meaningful endeavour is reducing overall work time—as many post-growth authors have called for.¹⁴⁵ Realising this proposal is difficult, however, under the current growth paradigm.

The arguments Sandel presents for reconsidering the values that govern our lives in *What Money Can't Buy* may prove helpful in rebutting GDP growth as the primary signpost towards human thriving—which makes him a powerful ally for those devoted to promoting the socio-ecological transition within democracies. His call in *The Tyranny of Merit* for exploring a shared aspirational goal besides consumerist notions of progress further supports the conclusion that we should look out for other metrics.

Beyond that, what can we learn from Sandel’s two books for realising a state of sustainable prosperity? First and foremost, the reach of markets must be carefully evaluated. Markets are powerful institutions that manage

141 See Marit Hammond and Graham Smith, *Sustainable Prosperity and Democracy: A Research Agenda*, 2017.

142 Hammond and Smith, *Sustainable Prosperity and Democracy: A Research Agenda*, 8.

143 Marit Hammond, *Facing the discursive power game: The link between democracy and shared prosperity*, 2020, <https://cusp.ac.uk/themes/p/blog-mh-deliberative-democracy/>.

144 *Ibid.*

145 Petschow et al., *Social Social Well-Being Within Planetary Boundaries: the Precautionary PostGrowth Approach*, 2020.

https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/sites/default/files/medien/1410/publikationen/uba_texte_89_2018_p_recautionary_post-growth_approach_executive_summary.pdf

production and allocation processes. Allocating goods via the market mechanism, however, can negatively affect both the character of the traded goods as well as the way individuals treat one another in their everyday life (corruption objection). Also, we run the danger of creating conditions in which the vulnerable are exploited via unrestricted market mechanisms (fairness objection). Assessing market boundaries is thus not only an economic question, but a philosophical and a social one. Considerations of justice and the good life play a key role in deciding which areas of our lives should be submitted to the logic of the market. Relying solely on ‘experts’ views to deal with these questions may induce ordinary people to feel disempowered and disrespected. Flourishing democracies should clearly offer public spaces to enable their citizens to discuss these matters.

The second lesson concerns the notion of merit. The belief that ‘everyone gets what they deserve’ undermines the very social bonds we need during the socio-ecological transition ahead of us. When people believe that they master their own success, when they ignore the role talent and luck play in their lives, they summon enormous psychological stress upon themselves. Such thinking invites people to envy one another for their achievements. This corrosive individual burden combined with the feeling of being disrespected by ruling elites may threaten political stability. Thus, meritocratic thinking counteracts both individual flourishing and the resilience that societies require for the challenges of the 21st century.

From these thoughts arises an array of political questions. Some relate to the public deliberation on socially relevant issues such as:

1. Is public and regular deliberation on the foundational values of our societies practically feasible? And if yes, how could we best equip citizens with the necessary means to engage in respectful dialogue?
2. Do existing institutional barriers further or hinder the integration of public deliberation in political decision making?
3. What role should experts play in political decision making?

Within the context of such open, public discourse, we may then ask ourselves:

4. What exactly means ‘living together in sustainable prosperity’ for us?
Can we agree on a shared vision of the good life?
5. Which domains of our lives should be governed by markets?
6. By which means can social bonds be strengthened for the challenges ahead of us?
7. How can we reward individuals for their work in a way that strengthens healthy notions of individual desert?

Sandel’s two books do not deliver a concrete recipe for building our sustainable future. They are rather an inspiration for asking questions that

will be relevant along the way. His approach to reflecting on the role that markets and merit should play can be used as a guide to alter other influential institutions. In my view, Sandel has shown that reflecting on the good life is a crucial step in the right direction. And even if our visions may not be fully realised, we should still engage in public deliberation to create a shared image of a better future that helps knotting the social bonds we need for the challenges we face today.

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