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***The Tyranny of Merit: What's become of the common good?* By Michael J. Sandel 272 pp. (pbk.) London: Allen Lane (2020). ISBN 978-0-241-40760-8.**

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Link to review

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There are books that are comforting in that they confirm your thinking, and there are books that make you question your old assumptions. For me, this one is the latter. I've spent most of my adult life loving and arguing for higher education: it is university education that contributes to the public good; of course, society is improved by graduates. Michael Sandel is an American academic who teaches philosophy at Harvard; so he's no angry Trumpite, but he does make a serious case about the way higher education in the last 40 years has damaged the cohesion of western societies. And while writing from the US, he does have a lot to say about British politics and universities.

You might remember from your old education studies booklist *The Rise of the Meritocracy* by the British sociologist, Michael Young, in 1958. Young pointed to the growth of a society in which 'merit', in the form of 'ability plus effort', is rewarded with high-status employment and income. It has formed the backbone of western politics: work hard at school, get a university degree and you will rise up the social mobility ladder. In the 1990s Tony Blair's three priorities 'education, education and education' was typical of the narrative. Michael Sandel shows that this is what has happened, but to a 'tyrannical' and damaging extent. Obviously, an aristocracy in which wealth and privilege are inherited through birth is unjust, and a meritocracy of ability and effort is an improvement. However, Sandel argues that the social trajectory of the years since the 1980s, with the neoliberal politics begun by Thatcher and Reagan, has led to a sharply divided society of material inequality, giving us the populist backlash of Trump and Brexit. And university degrees are instrumental in it.

He begins with the story of 'getting in' to the American ivy-league universities. Rather like our Oxbridge, graduation from universities such as Harvard and Yale guarantees a well-financed career and life. In March 2019 federal prosecutors announced that they were charging a number of wealthy parents with fraud in the credentials they had submitted in their sons' and daughters' university applications. It was revealed that one William Singer had been running a business in the provision of fake SATs results and examination certificates for which ambitious parents had paid tens of thousands of dollars. Of course, this was illegal and justly punished. However, says Sandel, this was only one of the ways in which wealthy parents might enhance their children's opportunities: paying for expensive schools, individual tutoring, books and resources, all of which help give them the desired access. And this is what Sandel calls 'credentialism': having the right awards takes you to the top.

The meritocracy, with the American dream of 'rising', is unjust in that opportunities are unequal and affected by parental income and status. But worse than this, the UK and the US both have vast inequalities of wealth, and those who find themselves at the top of the meritocracy believe that their position is due simply to their ability and effort, and that those 'below them' are there because of their lack of the required skills and energies. Indeed, Michael Young in his 1958 book did voice concern about the social rift a meritocracy might bring; and now we have it. The hubristic sense of self-worth held by the elite and successful is matched by a sense of humiliation among those at the bottom. If success is based on ability and effort, and you're at the bottom, then you must be lacking. But Sandel points out that it is neoliberal economics that determines whether your work is rewarded, not whether your work contributes to the common good. Compare the incomes of those working in the finance industries with those nursing in hospitals: the differentials are multiples of thousands. In his final chapter Sandel demonstrates that the finance industry contributes little to the economy, and certainly little to the common good, but anyone would surely agree that nurses contribute daily to the common good. The fact that the skills you have are rewarded highly can be just a matter of luck, as Sandel says, 'finding ourselves in a society that prizes our talents is our good fortune, not our due'.

This vortex of hubris and humiliation is what has created the crisis in politics in the two nations. The solution lies in recognising what Sandel calls 'the dignity of work'. We must abandon the elitism of the university degree. While the credentialism of graduate

employment exists, there is still a majority of the population without the qualification. We should recognise that those who provide essential services for the common good and for low incomes are respected and feel respected. Clapping on Thursdays doesn't do it, though. Sandel suggests that low incomes for such roles should be topped up by government grants to ensure that all have a decent living income with which they can participate in a community. He concludes, 'Such humility is the beginning of the way back from the harsh ethic of success that drives us apart. It points beyond the tyranny of merit towards a less rancorous, more generous life' (p.227).

Of course, higher education is a good thing, even 'a common good'. But the university should return to its role of defining and creating knowledge, not credits. While this book is about more than education, it reflects the politics and wider social vision that is important to education studies students and is highly recommended.

Reference

Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. London: Thames and Hudson.