

Sandel Meritocracy_mixdown

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SPEAKERS

Tricia Johnson, Prudential, Elliot Gerson, Michael Sandel

- P** Prudential 00:00

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- T** Tricia Johnson 00:43

This is Aspen Ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson 2020 has brought dire financial problems disappearing jobs and an uncertain future for millions of people. The American Dream says anyone can achieve success if they get a good education and work hard enough no matter where they start in life. That Harvard University political philosophy professor Michael Sandel says there's a dark side to this idea
- M** Michael Sandel 01:06

Implicit in that message is an insult in the insult is that if you don't go to college and if you struggle economically, your failure is your fault.

T

Tricia Johnson 01:17

Aspen Ideas to go brings you compelling conversations from the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is from the McCloskey speaker series. Sandell says America's wealthy class believes they deserve what they have and their position is based on merit. At the same time, inequities in opportunity are feeding resentment among working people toward so called elites that's led to a growing and bitter political divide and widespread support of authoritarian populace. It's also fueled racism and xenophobia, Sandell his latest book is the tyranny of merit what's become of the common good, he spoke with the Aspen Institute's Elliot Gerson in August, here's Carson,

E

Elliot Gerson 02:01

you essentially describe how over the past roughly four decades that the social bonds and respect for one another in America have become badly unraveled. And how meritocracy, a word that originally had some pejorative connotations, and has come usually to be seen as almost entirely virtuous, has been a major cause of those problems. And also, I think worthy of note for its distinctiveness, you speak in this book with considerable sympathy to voters in this and many other countries, whose deep resentment of elites lead them to support authoritarian populists, despite the fact that the actual policies those populace might be advocating, might not actually benefit them. So in any event, there's a lot to cover here. So let's just jump in. You begin this book with a prologue that obviously you wrote after the book. And so you must have thought that the circumstances justified as this as a leader, and that's really about the pandemic. And where you say that America, the wealthiest country in the world has not just been politically and logistically unprepared, but morally unprepared as well. Could you explain to us what you mean by that, and how it relates to this concept of meritocracy.

M

Michael Sandel 03:30

There's a slogan we hear a lot these days since the pandemic struck. We are all in this together, we hear this from politicians, from advertisers from celebrities. And it's a warming affirming thought. But it's hard to hear it without thinking Would that it were true. This pandemic came along at a time of intense polarization, partisan rancor. And so in a way it hit us when we were morally unprepared, unprepared to mount the response to the pandemic that would reflect the solidarity that a real response would have required. And so my question in opening the book is why? Why were we so morally unprepared? Why the depth of the polarization and rancor that afflicts our politics, and the book is an attempt to explain how this happened. What went wrong, not only with the pandemic, but with our civic life.



Elliot Gerson 04:51

In the book you describe what I might describe as a toxic mix of hubris and resentment. And maybe you can tell us what that mix is. And then we'll jump into the rest of the book.



Michael Sandel 05:08

What I think lies behind the partisan rancor, the polarization, the deep resentments. That royal our politics, and that have us coming unraveled, really, socially and in civic terms are two features of our public life as its unfolded over the last four decades, really. Part of it is the deepening inequality. We're by now familiar with the growing gap, the deepening inequality of income and wealth. But it's not only that, it also has to do with the attitudes towards success, toward winning and losing, that have accompanied the deepening inequality. And what connects these attitudes to success, to the resentment we see that has upended our public life is that over the last four decades, those who landed on top came to believe that their success was their own doing, and that they therefore deserved. The benefits that the market heaps upon those who succeed and by implication that those left behind must deserve their fate as well. This connects to the to the hubris, it's really it's a hubris, meritocratic hubris, I call it among the winners. And it goes along with a kind of humiliation for those left behind the inequality by itself would not be enough to generate these deep resentments. But when you combine it with the tendency of the successful to inhale too deeply of their success, and to look down on those, let's work it out. I'm sorry,



Elliot Gerson 07:22

sometimes with distain, you said yes, yes.



Michael Sandel 07:25

And that is built that sense of hubris among the successful and disdain for those who haven't risen. This is built in or so I tried to argue, it's built in to what seemed on the face of it to be an attractive moral and civic ideal, the ideal of meritocracy that people should rise based on their talents and their own efforts,



Elliot Gerson 07:53

perhaps with a little humility, rather than hubris. So let's let's dig into the book formally, the next remarkable thing in the book for a serious book of moral philosophy, but one that I have to say is, I think accessible to almost everyone is that you begin the book with a description of last year's college admissions crisis, the scandals involving rich parents and

celebrities. So tell us why you chose to begin this very serious, important book with a description of those scandals.

M

Michael Sandel 08:33

Well, I suspect pretty much everybody remembers that scandal. When turned out there were a bunch of parents, just as you say, Elliott, who were basically scamming the college admissions process, hiring some guy a bogus college consultant to fabricate the applications of their, of their kids. And this generated universal outrage across the political spectrum. At a time when we can agree on a little else, everyone agreed that this was this was a horrendous scandal. But what's interesting are two further questions that could be asked about this scandal. Of course, everyone agrees it's wrong for rich parents and celebrities to cheat to get their kids in. But there are two further questions first, what about other ways, legal ways that affluent parents pass their advantages on to their kids. Those SAP prep courses, those sometimes expensive extracurricular activities, trips, internships, music lessons, ballet lessons, soccer Tucker had lessons and all the rest. Hiring paid college consultants to burnish the CV, and even nowadays to burnish the lives of the kids, so that the CV will be impressive to admissions. Officers. What about legacy admissions? What about colleges that given edge to children of wealthy donors? These are legal ways. Are they morally like the outright scandal? Or do they stand somehow on a different moral plane? That's one question. And the other question, in a way is subtler but more far reaching? Why the desperate desire of well off parents to bend heaven and earth to get their kids in to these selective colleges and universities, colleges and universities? Why has this become so fevered ambition in our society,

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Elliot Gerson 11:08

when they could have given them trust funds?

M

Michael Sandel 11:12

Right, if they just wanted them to live an absolute life, they could have given them trust funds, but something else was at stake. What they wanted to buy really was not just prosperity for their kids. They wanted to buy the luster of merit, the esteem in a meritocratic society that is attached to going through this sorting machine that higher education has become having the brand name college degree, everything that that signifies, which is not only now a passport to material success, but also to social esteem and honor in recognition. And this brings out and it leads in the book to a discussion of the dark side, the harsh side of meritocracy, an otherwise seemingly attractive ideal.

E

Elliot Gerson 12:13

Well, perhaps we'll have a chance later in our conversation to return to that particular challenge of college admissions, because you'll have some very provocative proposal in the book about what to do about that particular problem. But as I already alluded, Michael, many books have diagnosed, this global rise of populist anti elite movements usually grounding them in attitudes toward race, or immigration or NGO ization. And while you don't dismiss those things entirely, you suggest that these books and arguments are really missing a fundamental point, which is a hidden grievance against how elites have governed over the last few years. And I must say, you point out center right, elites and center left elites alike. Could you just explain that some?

M

Michael Sandel 13:10

Sure. It's certainly true, that many voters are attracted to authoritarian populist figures. Do so out of xenophobia, racism, anti immigrant sentiment, that's undeniable. Just listen to the rhetoric of Trump and, and marine lepen in France and others. But there's more to it than that. And I think the governing elites let themselves off the hook too easily. If they say that's all it's about. And the reason I say this, is that part of what animates the anger and resentment of working people against elites and against established politicians is they've it's a these elites have actually foisted upon working people, the governing project, over the past four decades, a kind of market driven, or neoliberal version of globalization. That has heaped enormous rewards on those on top but has left the average worker behind with stagnant wages for over 40 years. This is bad enough. But when you add to that, the self satisfied attitudes that they leads and this goes to the meritocratic hubris we were talking about a moment ago Eliot and the tendency to look down on those who haven't gone to college You get a kind of toxic brew of anger and resentment that leads a great many working people to lash out against the elite. And that is what we've seen. And so I think it lets a leech off the hook, simply to point to the undeniable xenophobia and racism and anti immigrant sentiment and to neglect, essentially, the failure of elites to govern in a way that looks after the needs and also the self respect of most of the society.

E

Elliot Gerson 15:46

So your book title, he used the word tyranny? Yeah, very strong word. It, you know, it means sort of unjust rule. Yeah. When people think of the word meritocratic, one of the things we often think about is the best and the brightest. And are you saying that sort of from Reagan and through Obama, we've been the, you know, the governed, governed by the best and the brightest somehow has been tyrannical?

M

Michael Sandel 16:15

Well, to begin with, not all of them were the best and the brightest. And even those who were, were the best and the brightest in a relatively narrow, technocratic sense on the face of it. We might say, well, don't we want the best educated people to dominate in government, in Congress in Parliament's in the executive in the courts? Don't we want to be governed by people who are well educated? Who went to the best schools to prestigious universities? To which I think the answer is? Well, it depends. It depends on what they've learned there. It depends on the governing philosophies, that issue from that educational formation. And it seems to me that mainly what issues from that edge educational formation is not sound historical and practical political judgment, not sympathy for ordinary working people, not a keen appreciation of the moral and civic principles that can inform public discourse in a way that that leads enables people to deliberate about big questions. We've had very little of that in recent decades, we've had essentially a whole public discourse. And the reason for this is I think that what the so called best and brightest are learning and bringing to bear in their governing is a kind of technocratic notion of the common good, that is informed by economic ideas of the common good efficiency considerations, views about how to maximize GDP, but has very little to do with sound, practical judgment, and little to do with moral deliberation about the common good. If you look at the track record of these governing elites over the last four decades, it actually isn't very impressive. We've they gave us they gave us a financial crisis. They gave us a bailout that did very little to rein in the conditions that had led to the crisis in the first place. They brought us the Iraq war. They brought us at 1718 years of an inconclusive afghanistan war. They brought us the crumbling infrastructure. They brought up that a gerrymandered gerrymandered system of representation that makes incumbents almost impossible to defeat they brought us money dominating politics

E

Elliot Gerson 19:26

and and they have brought us as you say, a situation where the top 10% have received almost all the economic gains and the bottom 50% have have gained hardly anything at all, which which leads into something else that you spent a great deal of time in the book talking about and you've already talked about the importance of discourse or hollow discourse. You call it the rhetoric of rising or it might be called the rhetoric about the American dream and write very personally Certainly not just morally but factually, that, and tragically, that this, this dream has become hollow it for many. And you know, and the facts are that upward mobility is now greater in Canada, most of Europe and as you point out even in China than in the United States, where where this myth is fundamental to our very ethnos. How did that happen?

M

Michael Sandel 20:27

Right? Well, you you've, you put your finger on it, Elliot, one of the deepest failures of governing elites of the center, right and center left, over these 40 years of market driven globalization is that inequalities have deepened almost all of the income growth for 40 years has gone to those at the top, not to the median worker. And just as you say, not only is the inequality deeper, but the opportunity to rise, mobility, upward mobility is stalled. Those who were born in the bottom 20%, very few actually rise to affluence. In fact, most don't even make it to the middle class. If you compare upward mobility rates, one generation to the next, parents to children, the ability to rise is greater in many European countries, and in Canada, and now even in China than it is in the United States. Denmark actually has the highest rate of upward mobility, the American Dream is alive and well and living in in Copenhagen. Now, this is perhaps the deepest failure of the governing elites of the last four decades, and that includes Democratic and Republican administrations alike. And what intrigues me and what is a central theme of the book, is that the governing philosophy, the public philosophy, the reigning ideology, of center, left and center, right politicians during this period has been in the face of this inequality, not to address the inequality, the gap between rich and poor, but instead to say, to those who lost out, well, you too, can rise. You can rise. If you go to college, what you earn depends on what you learn, you can make it if you try now, this seems that racing, inspiring advice and slogan, you should be able to rise as far as your efforts, effort and talents will take you who could be against that. But this slogan, this reigning philosophy, now rings hollow, it lost its capacity to inspire. And in 2016, we saw that people were not moved by it anymore, not in the United States and increasingly not.

E

Elliot Gerson 23:15

And it can even humiliate. And and the, you know, what? Are you saying? What, what, when you talk about marriage? I mean, you're not saying are you that marriage doesn't matter? I mean, that we shouldn't choose the most skilled and knowledgeable dentist or plumber or surgeon, or even professor,

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Michael Sandel 23:43

right? No, no, I'm not saying that. But I am saying that we make a mistake to identify merit with how much money you make. We make a mistake to suggest that the way to deal with inequality is to tell people, well, you too, can rise it from the you go to college. The problem with this, of course, it's a good thing. But

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Elliot Gerson 24:12

we're out of three American adults, I think goes to college. So what is the message to the two thirds of the adults who do not?

M

Michael Sandel 24:21

That's just it implicit in the bracing advice, you too can rise if you get a four year college degree, especially at a brand name place. implicit in that message is an insult. And the insult is that if you don't go to college, and if you struggle economically, in this economy, in the new economy, you are a failure is your fault. Your failure is your fault. That's the implicit message. The Dark Side that the the meritocratic politicians who who intoned this mantra, you too can rise up on the you get a college degree miss those of us. For those of us who spend our days in the company of the credential, it's easy to forget the simple fact that most people don't have a four year college degree, nearly two thirds of Americans don't. And this figures are similar in most Western European countries, so it's a mistake to create an economy premised on the idea that you can get, make a decent living. And you can win dignity in the work you do if you go to college, but not otherwise, we've slipped into that. And so we've brought out we've enacted the insulting side, the dark side of the meritocratic promise, the promise of rising that we proclaim,

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Elliot Gerson 26:03

and you talk a lot about not only talk about but fascinatingly describe, and actually measure how this rhetoric has been used by successive presidents. And if I recall, which to me was actually shocking to learn. john kennedy never used language like this, it actually I think, they began with Reagan, it accelerate Clinton, and no one used it more than Obama.

M

Michael Sandel 26:29

Yes, yeah. It's fascinating. If you look back, and now you can do searches of phrases and expressions of the presidents, you can do this with online searchable archives. And I went back and I look, there's this familiar phrase we hear in politics all the time, which is, if you work hard, and play by the rules, you too, should be able to rise. As far as your effort and talents will take you. Sometimes it's as far as your God given talents will take you. Now, who could disagree with the idea that we should remove obstacles to advancement? Of course, that's we should do that nobody should be held back by prejudice or by a poor upbringing. Of course not. But to make that mantra that promise, the central response to inequality distract us from the inequality itself, here's a way of thinking about it. What this slogan, as a political project essentially says is, we will help you to clamor up the ladder of

success, compete to win in the global economy. But this is without noticing, or attending to the fact that the rungs on the ladder had been growing farther and farther apart. So simply to say, we're offering you a political program that will help at least the industrious among you to to compete more effectively, to scramble up the ladder. But we're not going to do anything about the fact that the rungs are getting further and further apart and that this is poisoning, our commonality, the social bonds that hold us together that that has a big that's a politics with a blind spot.



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Elliot Gerson 29:03

We ask a slightly different question about you have any concern that your arguments could be misconstrued by people as an exploited by those who are already stuffy will fanning and celebrating anti intellectual ism, anti science attitudes. Anti fact attitudes is see any risk bear that your compelling moral arguments about meritocracy could be sort of flipped to actually exacerbate some of these trends that I think objectively you would agree are not in our interests.



Michael Sandel 29:43

I think there is a risk. And so I need to be as clear as I possibly can. That facts and science and expertise matter in governing. There's no question about that. How could There be now that we're in the midst of a pandemic, with the disastrous handling of the pandemic that we've seen by this administration. So that's not in doubt. But what I think is equally important to emphasize is that the reason there's an audience, a constituency for these outrageous statements that fly in the face of facts and science and good sense in dealing with a pandemic, why is there even a strong audience for that? It's because a elites, an expertise had been discredited by the elites and the experts themselves discredited politically, their moral authority has been eroded. Because that authority has been put in the service of a version of globalization that basically left behind most people. Not the top 10 or 20%. But pretty much everyone from the middle on down. And



31:18

that,



Michael Sandel 31:20

that that inequality came along with the meritocratic hubris we were discussing before. So this explains why there is an audience for these, this blatant rejection of science and common sense in dealing with a pandemic. And whether it's from you know, about chloroquine, or about injecting bleach or believing what Trump tells us about the pandemic. The question we need to ask is, what creates a constituency that some mistrusts the seemingly responsible center left and center right political parties and politicians. The people went for this. So the way to shore up the moral authority of experts, and science and facts, is to recognize how a certain idea of technocratic expertise detached from moral deliberation and good civic judgment led us to this predicament. And that means that the responsible parties have to rethink the way they've been governing and rethink the way they frame the political agenda. And rely less on note that kind of technocratic, meritocratic hubris. And more on listening more on engaging with our fellow citizens across classes across educational status, and reason together about big questions that matter, including questions about the common good.



Elliot Gerson 33:02

You'll also seem to suggest that this notion that that's fundamental equality of opportunity, that the the American dream has also been, has become toxic for some people, in part, because it seems that the rewards for those who have succeeded have become frankly, obscenely great on any relative sense. You know, you talk about, for example, how CEO compensation and 40 years has gone from 30 times to 300 times the average worker, and you also decry something you call the financial ization of the economy, right? I mean, what what what you mean by that?



Michael Sandel 33:44

Well, the financialization of the economy is the transformation really, of the economy that's occurred over the last 40 years where a greater and greater proportion of GDP and of corporate profits are accounted for, by finance financial activity, rather than by producing goods and services in the real economy. Now, every healthy economy needs finance. But due to the way the regulations have been written, over the last four decades, including the deregulation of finance in the 90s. And since the end, given the way the tax code has privileged interest over equity has privileged finance that finance has loomed

larger and larger in the economy. Now, on an purely economic grounds, many who have studied this many economists and regulators who've studied this pointed out that beyond a certain degree of financial deepening or development More finance, hurts rather than helps GDP. That's in purely economic terms. But, and I think that's pretty important, especially when more and more finance has to do with basically casino like bets that are untethered from actual investment in productive capacity of the economy. That's one problem. I'm sorry, go ahead.

E

Elliot Gerson 35:28

No, I'm saying you mentioned casino. And which brings to mind something you mentioned a few times in your book about the presumed moral worth of people and you decry, for example, what, you know, why is it that a casino magnate earns an absurd multiple, over, say, a high school teacher or a head fight over a pediatrician? And what does that say morally and economically?

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Michael Sandel 35:57

Well, that goes to really the second, the second challenge to moral and civic life in a sense of Justice Society, that we need to worry about with excessive financialization of the economy. And that's the tendency of the rewards to become pretty Poorly aligned with the actual social value of the contributions that people make. And so what we need, I think, right at the center of our public debate, is a question about the social value of the contributions people in various roles, make it seem this now

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Elliot Gerson 36:43

dramatically in the dignity of work, and what we're seeing now with essential workers?

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Michael Sandel 36:48

Yes, yes, because one of the corrosive moral tolls, that excessive rewards to CEOs and to finance have brought is they've that this skewing of rewards, has undermined the dignity of work. It's almost as if it marks the hard work and the important contributions made by people who do not reap these rewards. And in fact, who haven't gained much of anything from the economic growth of the past 40 years. And so the, in coming to the pandemic, the people we now rely on the workers we now rely on? Well, well, some of us that can work from home, and have meetings done, zoom, and carry on our work, more or less unperturbed by what's going on outside? That all depends, and we see that it depends on the work of people, delivery workers, warehouse workers, grocery store clerks, shop, clerks,

nurse assistants, home health care workers, childcare workers, we call them now essential workers, we put out signs saying thank you essential workers. But in the economy, writ large, these are not the best paid workers certainly, nor are they the most honored and respected workers that the work they do doesn't really enjoy the social, the kind of social esteem that gives people a sense of dignity in their work. So what I'm hoping is that this will be a moment this pandemic will be a moment of reflection, and of reckoning on whether we can bring into closer alignment, the material rewards but also the social esteem with the importance of the work that a great many of these workers are performing the people we now call essential workers. And the problem is in the name of merit, in the name of meritocracy, which is so bound up with getting high high credentials, brand name degrees. The effect the cumulative effect has been to depreciate the contribution, the enormously important contributions of people who lack these lossless meritocratic credentials.

E

Elliot Gerson 39:42

We've been talking a lot about the descriptive and then I want to talk to some prescriptive points. Yeah, one one quote that I just want to read. It's such a strong quote, you say the wealthy and powerful have read the system to perpetuate their privilege. And the professional classes have figured out how to pass their advantage to their children, converting the meritocracy into the hereditary aristocracy. And you, you, you perform a thought experiment, which I thought was absolutely fascinating, comparing meritocratic meritocracy to aristocracy, leading leading people to maybe think that Oh, my goodness, aristocracy may in some respects be better than the meritocracy because an aristocracy is the understand the argument. The people at the top, don't necessarily, you know, they accept they're there because their father was there, their grandfather was there, they don't think they earned it or deserved it. They accept it. And the people at the bottom don't think it's because of their own failure. markable notion,

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Michael Sandel 40:50

right, I certainly don't. I'm certainly no defender of aristocracy, but it, but it is. And this goes back to a British sociologist named Michael Young, who actually coined the term meritocracy in the late 1950s. And his point was, that at least in an aristocratic society, the people who landed on top had no basis for believing they were there thanks to their own doing. They had to know they were there because they were lucky to be born into an aristocratic family into wealth or to hereditary advantage. Whereas in a meritocracy, Michael Young said, there is a tendency of those who work their way up who get the degrees who achieve success, to say, I did it on my own, I deserve where I've landed. That's the meritocratic hubris I write about. He was onto this back in the late 1950s. And when he

coined the term meritocracy, Elliot, he didn't coin it, as an ideal we should aim that he side is a dangerous tendency of our societies. In fact, he predicted that left unchecked by the year 2034. It hits was a kind of satirical, historical account, a dystopian account of the meritocratic side by 2034. He said, there will be a populist revolt against meritocratic elites, and their smugness and their complacency and their self satisfaction by those who are left behind and looked down upon. Well, he was pretty clairvoyant, except that the revolt came 18 years ahead of schedule, but he was on to this point. And so part of what I'm trying to do in the book is to show how this dark side of meritocracy that humoristic attitudes that generates in those of us land on top, actually has quite fateful political consequences. that take us right to the heart of the anger, the resentment, the polarization, and the rancor that afflicts our politics today.

E

Elliot Gerson 43:17

Let me come back to something we began with, and then I'm going to turn it back to crystal and and people are going to have to buy the book defined some more of your thoughts about, you know, how we can build, as you put it, a less rancorous, more generous public life with obligations to our shared democratic project. What we talked about the book began after the after the prologue with the college admissions scandal. You later in the book, you actually make some suggestions about college admissions that I think will strike some people, as remarkable far fetched. And tell us about that. I mean, you actually project you're actually suggesting that where you teach at Harvard, that perhaps the entire admissions process should be changed, and that most people admitted to Harvard should be admitted by lottery.

M

Michael Sandel 44:10

Right now, let me come to the lottery in a second Elliot. But first of effect at Ivy League, colleges and universities. There are today despite generous financial aid policies and scholarships, and attempt to recruit students from diverse backgrounds. Despite all of that there are more students on our campuses, these elite campuses from the top 1% than there are from the entire bottom half of the country put together

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Elliot Gerson 44:46

and you say that they're no more from the poor at Harvard, Yale and Princeton today than there were in the 50s. And you also say it's not just Harvard, Yale and Princeton. It's also Charlottesville and an arbor

M

Michael Sandel 45:00

Right, even the the kind of main branches of many of the leading public universities have the same kind of class skewed demographic as the Ivy League colleges and universities. Now coming to the provocative proposal, this is a problem of access, and of justice and of fairness, what we've been describing the distribution, the demographic distribution that class is. But there's another problem to the tyrant, another side to the tyranny of merit. And that's the tyranny that this system exerts on the winners on the students in my class, who I noticed, and this is impressionistic, but I've been now at this for 40 years, Eliot, and it strikes me. Well, two things, students increasingly believe they got in thanks to their own strenuous effort in high school and the effort is indeed strenuous to get admitted to these places. But the day emerged, the winners emerge wounded from running this meritocratic gauntlet throughout their adolescence, and sometimes even before with the intense hyper parenting that goes with it, with the intense pressure, for grades for burnishing their CV for adding innumerable activities. And so by the time they arrive, they are so accustomed to hoop jumping. And they are they are injured by the the high pressure, high anxiety upbringing that they've had to endure, that they have less and less space, or ability to step back and explore and think and reflect and figure out what they believe, and why the habit of hoop jumping, it becomes so ingrained that it narrows and constrains them to say nothing of the mental health effect some 30% of students at Harvard and Ivy League colleges, report struggles with depression and with anxiety. And it's no wonder why and these rates have increased. So here's my provocative proposal. Places like Harvard and Stanford, yet, get something like 40,000 plus applicants, for the first year class, there are about 2000 places. What I suggest is a lottery of the qualified window out those who are not qualified to do the work and do it well, and to help educate their fellow classmates, by their presence in the classroom and in the campus. So you winnow out, I don't know, from 40,000 to 30,000, or 25,000, whatever the number is, people who are qualified, fully qualified for these places, then do a lottery of the qualified, I have a hunch that the quality of discussion in my classes would not be noticeably different. Maybe it would be better. But it would be one small step toward driving home the message to the students to their parents into all of us about the role of luck in life, including the role of luck in qualifying for admission to these, these namebrand colleges and universities and beyond. I think in general, and this is stepping back from colleges and universities. What we need is to rein in meritocratic hubris, we need a greater sense of humility, the kind of humility that comes from an appreciation of the contingency of life, from the luck and good fortune that helped us on our way. It's the kind of humility that enables us to look at someone less fortunate and say, there, but for the luck of the draw, or the grace of God, or the accident of fortune, go I that sentiment is essential to a politics of the common good. And that sentiment is crowded out, made very difficult and inaccessible, by a society driven by the meritocratic pressures that drive our society and that drive the students who arrive in my classroom.



Elliot Gerson 49:49

On that profoundly important point, I'm going to turn things back to Crystal in the time we have remaining for audience questions.



49:57

Our first question is this professor Stein Dell, thank you for this conversation. To me. This is a classic example of America's strength overplayed Individual Achievement above all else and abandoning of the community meritocracy, how can we create a critical mass of insiders meaning those of us who are in the top 1%, who can intentionally pick apart this narrow notion of success?



Michael Sandel 50:27

Well, thank you for the question. It's in exactly the spirit of the book, I think we need to do this in three ways. First, though, it might seem to cut against our own interest in our own experience and our own advantages. We need to rethink the role of colleges and universities as the arbiters of opportunity. And we need to focus more on making life better and more dignified. For the two thirds of Americans who don't have a four year college diploma, we should shift that emphasis. And there ways we could discuss it trying to do that. Second, and it's related. We should put the dignity of work at the center of politics, and ask what does it mean to bring about a society and an economy that accords dignity to everyone who makes an important contribution to the common good, not only to those who reap huge windfalls at the top. And finally, and maybe this matters most of all, for, for this audience, for us, we need to rethink the attitudes towards success that we have fallen into, we need to and this involves a kind of moral and civic and maybe even a spiritual turning to remind ourselves and our children of the role of luck in life in our own lives. So that the we inhale a little bit less deeply of our own success, and recognize



52:08

how



Michael Sandel 52:10

if things had been otherwise, we could be in the position of some of those less fortunate than ourselves who had been neglected by the politics of the last 40 years. So those are three ways I think, we can begin to shift the momentum of the tendencies Elliot and I have been discussing.



52:31

Great, thank you. Our next question is the Brookings Institute recently noted that the first time in history 50% of the world's population could be classified as middle class with some disposable income. If that is true, hasn't globalization had an important and favorable impact on distributive justice, and the common good when viewed from the perspective of the whole of mankind?



Michael Sandel 53:01

Well, this is an argument, the idea that if you look globally, especially at China, incomes have risen in China. That's true. And bringing, bringing hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in China is a good thing. The question is, whether the policies of outsourcing jobs from the US to low wage countries, China and others with low labor standards and environmental standards, devastating jobs for middle skilled and less skilled workers in the US, hollowing out communities in the United States, but also in many other countries, creating resentments that have fed support for authoritarian, hyper nationalistic



54:15

populists,



Michael Sandel 54:16

Paul of this too, has to be weighed in evaluating the way we carried out the market driven, outsourced version of globalization that we did over the last four decades that we have to consider whether we're, we're happy on the whole with that picture, with the result.



54:45

How do we fill the American dream again, with more opportunities for average, earning families who seek to rise in social and economic status? What steps can the US government and our community take as well? Whole to move towards reestablishing true meritocracy in society.



Michael Sandel 55:06

Number of things, first of all, investing a lot more than we do in the forms of education that equip most Americans, the two thirds who don't get a four year college degree to

contribute to the economy to their communities, and to society. We we invest woefully little in labor market policies in vocational and technical training. By comparison to the amount we invest in higher education, which of course, I'm very much in favor of, but not to the exclusion of the investments we need in labor market policies to help those who don't get a college degree. And so that's one thing. Another thing is we need to have a public debate at least, about the values embedded in a tax system that for example, tax labor, the work most people do at a higher rate than for example, capital gains, and whether we should shift and this is one proposal I make in the book whether we should discuss shifting a taxation from the payroll tax, which is a tax on work, tax on the worker and tax on the employer hiring the worker toward other forms of taxation, such as financial transaction tax, a carbon tax, not only as a way of not only for reasons of distributive justice, the ability to pay in all of that. It is a way of signifying concretely support for the dignity of work, the work that most people actually do, and reining in, for example, high frequency trading, which actually contributes relatively little to the health of the economy, and for that matter to the common good. So I think we need a broader debate about the values related to work and contribution that are embedded in the way we remunerate work, and also organize our tax system.

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Tricia Johnson 57:40

Michael Sandel is professor of political philosophy at Harvard University and author of the tyranny of merit what's become of the common good. The book looks at how we define success and how meritocracy has affected our society and politics. He spoke with Elliot Gerson, Executive Vice President at the Aspen Institute. Their conversation was held in August as part of the McCloskey speaker series. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to go wherever you listen to podcasts. Follow us on social media at Aspen Ideas and listen on our website [Aspen Ideas. org](https://www.aspenideas.org) Shawna Lewis produced today's show and it was programmed by Aspen community programs. Our music is by wonderly I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for listening.

P

Prudential 58:27

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