

Modern Political Theory and the Tyranny of Merit

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INTRODUCTION

For most of human history, economic and political power was, for the most part, arbitrarily distributed. Some rulers justified their wealth and power by appealing to family lineage, military power, or other morally arbitrary characteristics, while other rulers appealed to religion, divine favor, or superior virtues. One of the most significant issues in the age of modern philosophy has been to justify property rights and the distribution of wealth and power, to rid man of the arbitrary powers of the Dark Ages.

Meritocracy is a very prevalent view in contemporary political discourse. People believe they possess “rights” to their property, and by extension, wealth, so long as they work hard for it. Proponents of meritocracy believe that if everyone has equal opportunity and competes honestly in a fair and open economic system, then those who end up on top “deserve” the rewards of their labor. However, as political philosopher Michael Sandel argues in *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?* (2020) claims of “merit” are often used to excuse inequality, create a sense of shame for the working class, and instill hubris among elites. It is not greed that drives inequality, but rather the idea that everyone deserves their success (and failures) that amplifies it (Sandel 2020). But meritocratic thinking is not confined to one side of the political aisle, with both parties in America claiming to support meritocracy as the ideal, and disagreeing only about how much the government should do to “even the playing field.”

This paper will illustrate how many liberal and modern philosophers have attempted to explain under what conditions property and wealth are acquired legitimately and, in doing so, actually justify inequality. First, it will show how classical liberal thinkers sought to conceive of a more just means of acquiring property, leading people to believe that they are inherently deserving of what they have. Second, it will demonstrate how liberal thinkers have used the “rhetoric of rising” in their arguments for liberty and how this rhetoric contributes to problems with meritocracy. And finally, it will conclude with remarks on moving society away from meritocratic ideas.

SECTION I

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, John Locke provides an account of how people come to acquire property. According to Locke, property is a fundamental right that exists in the state of nature. But how does property that was common and ownerless come into one’s hands? In response to this question, Locke writes that “[t]he labour that was mine, removing it out of the common state they are in, hath fixed my property in them” (Locke 1689, chap. 5). Similarly, “His labour hath taken it out of the hands of nature... and hath thereby appropriated it to himself” (Locke 1689, chap. 5). Meaning, that if someone combines their labor with unowned land or resources, they receive the right to it as their property.

Locke likely was not giving a historical account of how people acquired property. He was certainly aware of property acquired through taxation, crime, or conquest. Writing after the Glorious Revolution,

he was attempting to rationalize the status quo and present a prescriptive account of how people acquire property justly from the common domain.

For Locke, the value of property rights is so vital that he grounds human dignity in terms of property rights. In discussing natural law, Locke writes that “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions” (Locke 1689, chap. 2). He is arguing that we ought to respect other people because we are God’s property, but this only works if property is something that someone has a right not to have violated. Thus, property rights become logically prior to human rights.

Although Locke acknowledges that one must leave “enough, and as good” for others (Locke 1689, chap. 5), it still follows that those who acquired property by these means are morally deserving of it. In Locke’s political philosophy, property is one of the most important things for the government to protect, alongside life and liberty.

However, this becomes problematic when all property is taken and distributed. Wealthy landowners and industrialists can claim their right to such property if acquired according to Locke’s criteria. Any objection to wealth distribution—such as an imbalance of negotiating power or circumstance—can be dismissed on the grounds that property was initially acquired properly. Locke’s account replaces arbitrary control over resources with other arbitrary factors: those who happened to win the race to mix labor with nature now “deserve” the property they own. Furthermore, the skills necessary to acquire property are themselves shaped by genetics, family, class, and geography, meaning that once property is inherited, it becomes dependent on

birth rather than work. Locke introduced the precedent of post hoc justification for property distribution, which today manifests in meritocratic thinking.

Locke’s ideas support Sandel’s thesis that meritocracy divides citizens into “winners and losers” (Sandel 2020), where those at the top attribute success to education, hard work, and talent. Like Locke’s labor theory, these factors rationalize acquisition after the fact, placing shame on those who do not succeed. Yet, as Sandel notes, the talents that generate wealth depend on market demand and contingency (Sandel 2020). For example, a nurse may contribute more socially than a casino owner, yet the latter may generate more wealth due to market demand.

SECTION II

Sandel also criticizes the “rhetoric of rising,” in which politicians and elites emphasize upward mobility as a justification for the inequality that comes as a result of Meritocracy (Sandel 2020). This paradigm creates hubris among the successful and shame among those who do not “rise,” and it also reflects a judgment about which forms of work deserve honor. The idea that social mobility justifies people’s place in society is implicit in the thought of nineteenth-century liberal thinkers such as Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès and John Stuart Mill.

In “What Is the Third Estate?,” Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès criticizes the French system that confined power to the first two estates. He argues that the Third Estate—those who produce in the economy and have no political power—should be granted political representation. He writes, “Nevertheless, the privileged have dared to preclude

the Third Estate... Honors are not for the likes of you” (Sieyès 1789). While it may appear that Sieyès is advocating for a more equal society, Sieyès does not eliminate hierarchy in his political proposal. Rather, he seeks to shift the elite from aristocrats to one based on merit and productivity. Political representation ensures that honors become “the natural prize and reward of recognized ability and service” (Sieyès 1789).

This is precisely meritocratic logic that Sandel criticizes in *The Tyranny of Merit*. It allows the elites to say they are the most talented or industrious, not just those who inherit their position, and therefore deserve their place in the socioeconomic hierarchy. In such a society, it leaves those at the bottom feeling that they deserve where they are and allows the elite class to hold a hubris above the lower classes. Although it is not worse than an oligarchy, it is more dangerous, as it allows those who came to power to morally justify their success and disregard the value of the working class. It gives the appearance of fairness, but bases its fairness on morally arbitrary qualities like the talents the market happens to demand. Sieyès believed the French Revolution would produce a meritocracy that would result in a more equitable society; however, he was merely changing the criteria for entry into the elite. Although it may be argued that these criteria are superior to those of the feudal era, they do not morally justify inequality.

SECTION III

John Stuart Mill further influenced meritocratic thinking. Mill is best known for his arguments in favor of maximising liberty. He was, however, a utilitarian. Freedom was not a good in itself, but rather the best means for advancing total happiness.

In *On Liberty*, Mill argues that liberty enables individuals of superior talent to innovate for society’s benefit. Mill writes, “The general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind” (Mill 1859). Regular people are mediocre and contribute less than those with superior talents. “Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow.” Meaning that freedom allows “experiments in living,” so that persons of superior ability will rise up.

Evident from this passage, those who are successful in this system are meant to be admired, while the ordinary person is deemed mediocre. While Mill advocates some redistribution for those left behind, there remains a condescending attitude toward the ordinary worker. In the state of freedom that Mill advocates for, those who have become successful look down on everyone else as lacking ability and creativity. Many today justify inequality under the guise of freedom. They argue that freedom allows us to work hard and go as far as our talents take us. However, this philosophy disregards those who do not make it to the top as mediocre and not deserving of the admiration that the “men of genius” receive.

CONCLUSION

Meritocracy is appealing because it provides moral satisfaction to those who are successful. People do not just desire wealth; they also want to feel that their hard work has paid off and that they deserve it. However, Meritocracy is inherently flawed. It posits that, as long as the game is fair, society should reward the winners and leave the losers behind. It gives the elite a sense of hubris and the poor a sense of shame

and resentment. The rhetoric of rising is used to justify this system, claiming that the “best” will rise to the top. What is meant by “best” is not a function of creativity, talent, or even hard work, but rather what the specific talents market demands, which in the end is based on luck and is morally arbitrary. Meritocracy does not honor the social contributions the working class makes to society and to the creation of wealth.

So what is the solution? What should determine merit in society? Communist and populist revolutions have only resulted in authoritarian leaders claiming they deserve unlimited power because they represent the working class. Revolutions that claim to empower the working class often justify new forms of domination or authoritarianism. Instead, there ought to be no ultimate moral justification for wealth and status. This does not mean that no one can become affluent.

Rather, the successful must recognize that their success arises from circumstances beyond oneself—family, community, providence, contingency. Even talent and hard work lead to success only because our circumstances cultivate them. A society oriented toward the common good must give dignity to all forms of socially valuable work and reward contribution rather than mere market success.

References

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