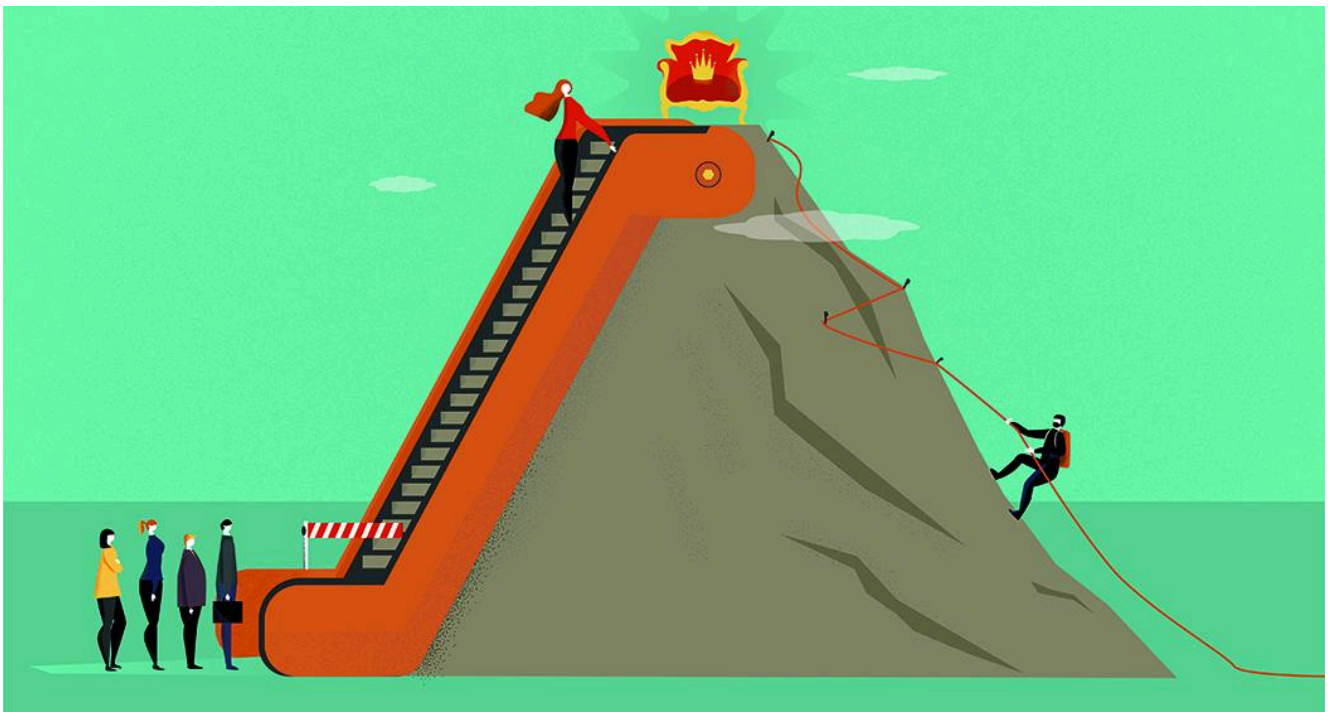
In search of the common good: politicians must address worker anger to repair the broken social contract

In a polarized world with rising inequality, it’s time to rethink what it means to be a productive citizen and bring dignity back to work.



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By Michael J. Sandel

Having taught political philosophy at Harvard since 1980, I am sometimes asked how student opinions have changed over the years. I generally find this question difficult to answer. In classroom debates about the subjects I teach (justice, markets and morals, the ethics of new

technologies), students have always voiced a wide range of moral and political views. I have not noticed any decisive trend, with one exception: Beginning in the 1990s and continuing to the present, more and more of my students seem drawn to the conviction that their success is their own doing, a product of their effort, something they have earned. Among the students I teach, this meritocratic faith has intensified.

WATCH: On Nov. 15, 2024, Michael Sandel went on Amanpour & Company to discuss the discontent and polarization that fueled Trump's 2024 campaign and ultimate victory, drawing upon ideas the author laid out in this Insight article related to Trump's win in 2016.

It is not hard to understand the growing meritocratic sentiment among students in selective universities and colleges. Over the past half century, admission to elite colleges in the United States has become increasingly daunting. As recently as the mid-1970s, Stanford accepted nearly a third of those who applied. In the early 1980s, Harvard and Stanford admitted about 1 applicant in 5; in 2019, they accepted fewer than 1 in 20.

As competition for admission has intensified, the adolescent years of children who aspire to top colleges (or whose parents aspire for them) have become a battleground of fevered striving — a highly scheduled, pressure-packed, stress-inducing regime of advanced courses, private counselors, exam tutors, athletic and other extracurricular activities, internships and good deeds in distant lands designed to impress college admissions committees, all supervised by anxious hyper-parents seeking the best for their kids.

It is difficult to emerge from this gauntlet of stress and striving without believing that you have earned, through effort and hard work, whatever success may come your way.

This does not make students selfish or ungenerous. Many devote copious amounts of time to public service and other good works. But the experience does make them staunch meritocrats; they believe they deserve the success their hard work has won.

This principle of merit can take a tyrannical turn. I argue that a cluster of attitudes and circumstances present today have made meritocracy toxic.

First, under conditions of rampant inequality and stalled mobility in the United States, reiterating the message that we are responsible for our fate and deserve what we get erodes solidarity and demoralizes those left behind by globalization.

Second, insisting that a college degree is the primary route to a respectable job and a decent life creates a credentialist prejudice that undermines the dignity of work and demeans those who have not been to college.

Third, insisting that social and political problems are best solved by highly educated, value-neutral experts is a technocratic conceit that corrupts democracy and disempowers ordinary citizens.

These ideas are unpacked and explored, one by one, in my latest book, *The Tyranny of Merit*. For the purposes of this article, I'll highlight just a few ideas that I would urge leaders to reflect on deeply.

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