

The Tyranny of Merit: Can we Find the Common Good?

Professor Michael Sandel

Introduction to the 2022 Opening Lecture

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Dear Professor Sandel, dear students, dear colleagues, dear friends, Mesdames et Messieurs, it is my pleasure to welcome you tonight for the opening keynote lecture of the academic year.

Differentiation and integration are two defining dynamics of human life. The balance though between those two dynamics has varied significantly across time and space. On the one hand, we find in humanity the need to affirm a singularity, a difference – and differentiation implies the affirmation of the individual. On the other hand, humans need to belong, to connect and to conform, to share in a community, in the group.

Social scientists and in particular sociologists have long explored the dynamics that have led to a re-balancing over the last 200 years or so... from community to society, in the words of Ferdinand Tönnies, from organic to mechanical solidarity to cite Emile Durkheim, or the great transformation as Karl Polanyi called this movement. One of the marks of modernity, or even of “modernities” if we want to be less euro-centric, is the more or less rapid progress of differentiation and individualism in a given society with in parallel the more or less significant weakening of integration and community belonging.

The progress of the division of labor (including in its international dimension) and of the marketization and contractualization of (nearly) everything – of which Professor Sandel so aptly talked in his 2012 book *What Money Can't buy: The Moral Limits of Markets* – have been major carriers of this significant societal transformation – towards ever increasing differentiation and individualism.

The balancing act is delicate. And many social scientists, including the father of modern economics, Adam Smith, have warned us of the dangers. We need to read Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a book he wrote well before his famous opus the *Wealth of Nations*. Only then do we understand that while self-love is indeed for Adam Smith an important motor of market dynamics, self-love should be framed and tamed through another defining principle of our human nature – fellow-feeling. And the balance between both should be moderated by what he calls the impartial spectator – a kind of hybrid in this 1759 book between the fear of God, peer pressure and the legal system. If that moderation is not sufficient, Adam Smith tells us, then society – and markets – will crush and crumble with a host of disastrous consequences.

For Emile Durkheim, the extreme development of differentiation and individualism in any society, without in parallel the stabilization of new forms of solidarity, will inexorably lead to what he calls anomie. Anomie can be defined as the breakdown of our collective glue, of the community and social bonds that hold us together. One of the many direct and measurable consequences of the progress of anomie, as Durkheim scientifically showed and convincingly argued, is a significant increase in rates of suicide.

Another consequence of anomie which is being currently underscored by many scientific studies is the progress of structural forms of loneliness – with associated ills emerging from this for individuals but also for societies and countries. Loneliness has been shown to increase psychological and physical health problems, to reduce the capacity to find a job and hence to ensure economic and social integration... in her 1951 book, the origins of totalitarianism, the philosopher Hannah Arendt went even further – affirming that loneliness could be at the roots of our fall into totalitarianism. Let me read here what is a stunningly modern text:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age has become an everyday experience.... The preparation has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as with the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought.

Structural loneliness, hence Hannah Arendt tells us, makes us ideal subjects of totalitarian rule.

Some of you may be wondering at this stage what all this has to do with the keynote lecture we are about to listen to. So let me now make the connection.

We have the great chance today to welcome Professor Michael Sandel. Professor in the government department at Harvard, Michael Sandel is one of the world's most distinguished political philosophers. Madame Beth Krasna, President of the Foundation Board of the Geneva Graduate Institute will be presenting him more fully in a minute. Today, Professor Sandel will talk from his latest book – *The Tyranny of Merit*. But the title of his talk for today makes an interesting connection between merit on the one hand and the common good on the other – *The Tyranny of Merit: Can we Find the Common Good?*

Merit is an important structuring feature of our societies. In light of my rapid introduction, we can also identify merit as an important mechanism of the trend towards differentiation and therefore individualism in our modern societies. When does too much “merit” then become detrimental to the type of balancing act I have been talking about? At what point do we need to bring back a focus on integration and therefore on the common good? And how can we, how will we be able to do this today?

Andrew Carnegie, one of the infamous 19th century American Robber Barons, wrote in 1889 a short text titled “wealth” and renamed a bit later “the gospel of wealth”. This text soon became the roadbook of 20th century American philanthropy – and is still highly influential in that community today. In this text, Andrew Carnegie identified the potentially highly disruptive consequences of a logic of merit – in the form of extreme structural inequalities. And here is how he proposed to reconcile merit and its risks with the need for integration and common good:

There remains, then, only one mode of using great fortunes; but in this we have the true antidote for the temporary unequal distribution of wealth, the reconciliation of the rich and the poor – a reign of harmony – another ideal, differing, indeed from that of the communist in requiring only the further evolution of existing conditions, not the total overthrow of our civilization. It is founded upon the present most intense individualism... under its sway, we shall have an ideal state, in which the surplus wealth of the few will become, in the best sense, the property of the many, because administered for the common good... even the poorest can be made to agree that great sums gathered by some of their fellow citizens and spent for public purposes are more valuable to them than if scattered among them through the course of many years in trifling amounts.

I am convinced, naturally, that Professor Sandel’s proposal for rebalancing will be very different from Carnegie’s! And just like you probably, I am waiting with great expectation for the answer to the question he gave himself: can we find the common good?

Through the years, Professor Sandel’s many books and contributions have been lifting our veil of ignorance on some of the structuring pillars of our contemporary society – freedom, markets, justice and most recently merit. His exploration of these foundational institutional pillars is at the same time a powerful commentary on our contemporary society and its ills. He has built through the years a powerful toolbox for the critical assessment of our current life and institutional choices. And in the process, he has made it possible to envision and explore alternatives and to enter the path of realist utopia that the urgency of contemporary challenges is clearly calling for. It is a great chance for our community to start the academic year with such a broad and systemic commentary on the world as it is and as it could be. The kind of political philosophy that is deployed by Professor Sandel is profoundly aligned with our own intellectual identity at the institute – critical thinking, integrated transdisciplinarity and a constructive projection towards common good challenges and a better world.

Before leaving the floor to Professor Sandel, however, I would like to call to the stage Madame Beth Krasna, President of the Foundation Board of the Institute.

