



A Case for Communitarian Meritocracy: A Critical Engagement with Michael Sandel

Andrew Tsz Wan Hung¹

Received: 14 March 2023 / Accepted: 25 May 2023
© Fudan University 2023

Abstract

In this paper, I examine Sandel's recent criticism of meritocracy. I argue that even though Sandel appeals to the rhetoric of luck in his criticism, unlike Rawls, his fundamental political aspiration is a kind of communitarian republicanism rather than liberal egalitarianism. However, Sandel's suggestion of lottery elements in college admission does not help much in reducing inequality and political polarization. After comparing Mulligan's meritocratic thesis, I argue that the problems of inequality and polarization in the U.S. are not caused by meritocracy; rather it is due to a lack of substantive equal opportunity. And I would argue that as long as substantive equal educational opportunities are guaranteed, there is no reason to reject meritocracy. And by taking reference from the experience of Hong Kong's educational reform, I further argue that one important way to achieve equal educational opportunities is through leveling-up educational policies, such as providing competitive publicly-funded education, which not only provides equal opportunity to everyone to develop their capabilities regardless of their different family backgrounds, but also establishes citizens' participatory readiness, so that they can effectively participate in creating and sustaining communitarian meritocracy.

Keywords Michael Sandel · John Rawls · Meritocracy · Communitarianism · Equal opportunity

1 Introduction

While it is generally agreed that the recent rebirth of normative political philosophy, as well as the recent debates about global justice, began with the publication of John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* in 1971a (Gu 2019; Ma et al. 2019, 2022), Michael

✉ Andrew Tsz Wan Hung
andrew.hung@cpce-polyu.edu.hk; andrewhung911@gmail.com

¹ Division of Social Sciences, Humanities and Design, College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, 8 Hung Lok Road, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Sandel, a communitarian, is well-known for his criticism of Rawls' liberal egalitarianism in his *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1998; hereafter *LLJ*). Nevertheless, while Sandel seems to support Aristotle's meritocracy and reject Rawls' egalitarianism in his earlier writings, his recent criticism of meritocracy in *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (2021; hereafter *TM*) and his call for elites' acknowledgment of luck in their success seem to follow Rawls' rationality in his *A Theory of Justice*. Has Sandel changed his position and endorsed Rawls' egalitarianism? Indeed, it is really surprising and also confusing to see Sandel's recent harsh criticism of meritocracy when we compare it to his earlier criticism of Rawls' theory and his argument of meritocracy. It is important to delineate the development of his thought and to examine whether he has changed his position or involved any contradictions in his philosophy. This also helps us to assess and reflect on the current meritocratic system and see how we can overcome the shortcomings caused by meritocracy.

In this article, I will show that Sandel's criticism of American meritocracy is driven by his political aspiration of communitarian republicanism rather than Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism. And I will argue for a kind of communitarian meritocracy by pursuing a substantive equal educational opportunity that can respond to Sandel's criticism of meritocracy and his communitarian aspiration. In the following, I will first review Sandel's early criticism of Rawls' philosophy and his own view of justice in his earlier writings. I will then examine his argument in *TM*, and compare it with Littler's and Mulligan's view on meritocracy. I will show that in contrast to Littler, Sandel's criticism of meritocracy is driven by his communitarian republican concern. After examining Mulligan's argument for egalitarian meritocracy, it shows that the social problems which Sandel raises are not due to meritocracy; rather the case is that because society is not meritocratic enough, it has not adequately guaranteed equal opportunities for all. And I will examine Sandel's solution to inequality and argue that while I agree with his argument of the equality of conditions, his appeal to the element of luck in elites' achievements and the incorporation of a lottery element into school admission cannot really tackle the problem. Rather I argue for a kind of communitarian meritocracy, which is consistent with Sandel's aspiration, by pursuing a substantive equal educational opportunity for students, so that everyone, regardless of their family background, has an approximately equal playing field to compete and mitigate intergenerational inequality. While equal educational opportunity must be sustained by civic republicanism, education is also important in cultivating human potential to establish readiness for civic participation. Equal educational opportunity is thus constitutive to republican politics, which is fundamental to dealing with the problem of economic inequality and political polarization.¹

¹ Social fragmentation and political polarization used to be one of the main concerns of communitarianism. I am not claiming that economic distribution and equal opportunities are the only factors that cause social fragmentation and political polarization. In other articles, I argue that the current social-political fragmentations in the West are caused by atomism, moral pluralistic culture, and the disintegration of the family (Hung 2022a: 609; Hung 2022b: 263). According to Xi Lin (2020: 37–42), social fragmentations also happen in China; they were caused by rapid urbanization and social transformation after China's Reform and Opening Up in 1978. And Lin argues that we have to establish an organic solidarity based on the idea of *civitas homini* (a humane community) which connects individuals through voluntary associa-

2 Sandel's Criticism of Rawls

One of the most controversial aspects of Rawls' (1999: 266) philosophy in his *A Theory of Justice* is its difference principle, which states that social and economic inequalities can be considered to be just only if they are arranged to ensure the greatest benefit to the least advantaged. He opposes a libertarian market economy, because the market will exacerbate the gap between the rich and the poor, and the distribution is largely affected by the social background of individual families. Rawls (1999: 64–5) also opposes meritocracy, because one's income is determined by family background or natural talent which is just a kind of natural lottery; it is a matter of luck. One does not deserve or merit the outcome of these.

Michael Sandel, in his *LLJ*, offered harsh criticisms of Rawls' theory of justice. He criticizes Rawls' concept of the original position, the primacy of justice, and the priority of the self over its ends for being based on a voluntaristic individualistic assumption in which subjects are mutually disinterested. Sandel calls Rawls' assumed concept of the self a kind of antecedently individuated subject (1998: 55) or an unencumbered self (1984: 92) as if whatever moral value one has chosen has no effect on the self.

Regarding the issue of merit, Sandel (1998: 78) refers to the writing of Robert Nozick (1974: 228) and criticizes Rawls for treating individual natural talents as a common asset that serves society. This violates Kant's principle of respect for persons, treating individuals only as tools, not as ends. For Nozick (1974: 225; Sandel 1998: 83–100), even though natural talent is out of luck, it does not mean that one is not entitled to the outcome of these talents. Even if individuals do not deserve their assets, it does not mean that society as a whole deserves them. Whatever the person has legally obtained, he still is entitled to those assets. In fact, Sandel (1998: 99) pointed out that although Nozick rejects the concept of merit or desert, in Nozick's usage, "the concept of entitlement does the same work as desert, but without its pre-institutional credentials ever being established". Nozick just never explains why people are entitled to their assets to support his argument. Sandel (1998: 100) argues that Nozick's entitlement theory "requires a theory of the person on which I possess some things, at least, as constituents and not merely as attributes of the self". Similarly, for Rawls to claim that "the community as a whole to deserve the natural assets in its province and the benefits that flow from them, it is necessary to assume that society has some pre-institutional status that individuals lack, for only in this way could the community be said to possess its assets in the strong, constitutive sense of possession necessary to a desert base" (1998: 101). However, such a view would run counter to Rawls' individualistic assumptions of an unencumbered self. This analysis seems to show that Sandel supports the idea of desert or merit in economic distribution.

Footnote 1 (continued)

tions based on multiple cohesive factors, such as culture, family, and skills. However, we cannot go into details here.

Furthermore, in his latter book, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, Sandel (2009) criticizes different theories of justice, such as utilitarianism, laissez-faire, Kant's, and Rawls'. In the last three chapters, he discusses Aristotle's meritocracy and the idea of the common good, and defends Aristotle's teleology. Sandel's writing in the past gives us the impression that his philosophy is a kind of communitarian meritocracy, that is, through public negotiation, citizens can define merit and the common good and consolidate communities. However, his recent book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, has made harsh criticisms of American meritocracy. Furthermore, in his criticism of the meritocratic hubris of the elites, he has repeatedly appealed to the rhetoric of luck. This raises the question: has Sandel changed his position and endorsed Rawls' egalitarianism or some kind of luck egalitarianism?

3 Sandel's Criticism of American Meritocracy

Sandel in his *TM* points out that the rise of populism in the United States and Western Europe in recent years is partly due to people's resentment of the hubris of the political elites in these meritocratic systems. Brexit and the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States reflect the verdict of angry people and the failure of technocratic governance.

The emergence of populist nationalism is generally believed to be politically motivated by anti-immigrant and anti-multicultural racism and xenophobia, and white androcentrism. Some believe that it is the result of new economic technology and the globalization of trade, and many jobs have been eliminated, outsourced to other lower-wage countries, or replaced by machinery, leading to a wave of protests sparked by job losses. These are problems, but Sandel (2021: 17–19) argues that it is mainly due to the fault of past rulers who pushed the courses of free-market globalization and financialization of the economy which led to job losses, and fostered hostile social conditions and public grievances.

In the past, it was said that the United States is full of opportunities. The rhetoric of meritocracy, elaborated during 1980, the era of market triumphalism, states that a market economy will reward people with what they deserve as long as everyone has an equal opportunity to compete. However, Sandel (2021: 22–24) finds that in the last few decades, people under globalization have been unevenly rewarded. Although globalization has benefited the upper classes, most people who grew up in poor families are still poor, and only a few can really move upward. This has made ordinary citizens feel that they have been abandoned economically and culturally; they even feel that the winners do not respect them as persons. This causes hostility, and reduces people's identity and allegiance to the state.

Meritocracy also creates a "credentialist prejudice," whereby a college degree is used to judge personal merit, which undermines the dignity of work and degrades those who have not gone to college (Sandel 2021: 73, 85). Higher education in the United States has become a winner-take-all selection mechanism that reinforces inequality and hereditary advantage (Sandel 2021: 11, 165–7). This screening mechanism also implies that lower-class workers are less valuable in the market than the jobs of the high-paying professional class; those workers contribute less to the

common good, and are therefore less worthy of social recognition and undermine laborer's dignity of work (Sandel 2021: 197–9). With the fear of downward mobility, choosing a prestigious college has become the best guarantee against downward mobility (Sandel 2021: 12). Helicopter parents even donate huge sums of money to colleges, hire admissions consultants or bribe teachers in order for their children to enter prestigious colleges (Sandel 2021: 12–13).

Sandel (2021: 113–118) argues that meritocracy has a dark side. In the past, people, who grew up in a traditional aristocracy, knew in their hearts that they were at the top because of their parents' wealth and power, not because of their ability or merits. But meritocracy creates a false sense of pride for those who thrive under meritocracy. Those who succeed will feel that they deserve to be admitted into prestigious colleges, or to acquire high financial rewards because of their hard work and ability. Sandel (2021: 12–13, 24–5) argues that such hubris of those who benefit from meritocracy is often unjustified, and they often overlook that their success is largely due to their family backgrounds. Despite their hard work, it is their good fortune that allows them to receive a quality and expensive upbringing, extra tutoring, and many additional activities through money, as well as the advantages that the network of friendships among the elite still confers in the United States and elsewhere.

The winners become arrogant and conceited; their pride scorns or belittles the losers (Sandel 2021: 89–96, 226). This feeling of disrespect and even humiliation not only makes losers feel inferior, but also tends to inflame political sentiment and is an important factor in supporting populism (Sandel 2021: 26). Furthermore, Sandel argues that the problem of unemployment is not just a lack of income, but that losing a job deprives a person of the opportunity to contribute to the common good of society. Sandel thinks that this income inequality is also why so many blue-collar workers voted for Trump. Liberals only know how to keep providing workers and the middle class with more distributive justice and comprehensive economic growth, but Sandel believes that what these voters want is more contributive justice, that is, providing what others value in order to win opportunities for social recognition and dignity (Sandel 2021: 206).

Sandel (2021: 73) observed that under the influence of meritocracy, governments often insist that social and political problems are best solved by highly educated, value-neutral experts, gradually forming what he calls “the tyranny of merit,” which is a kind of technocratic conceit that corrupts democracy and disenfranchises ordinary citizens. However, these elites usually smack of a certain arrogance and inhumanity; they are out of touch with the ordinary lives of most Americans, and ended up making bad decisions in the face of the 2008 financial crisis, choosing to print money instead of holding the banks accountable. The poor who lost their homes did not get help and then fueled outrage in Occupy Wall Street (Sandel 2021: 19–22, 90). Sandel (2021: 90) argues that practical wisdom is said to be related to civic virtue, but history tells us that higher education has little to do with practical wisdom, nor is it related to an intuition of discerning the common good.

Sandel (2021: 227) concludes that the key to the problem is whether we can realize that despite our hard work, we cannot succeed without a comparable social environment. We are lucky, not deserving, to be in a society that values our talents. This sense of the contingency of our lot, knowing that what we

receive comes from the grace of God or the accidental circumstances of birth, can humble one so that one can go beyond the tyranny of merit and point to a more tolerant and generous public life.

Sandel's criticism of American meritocracy involves controversies of ideas of meritocracy, family and equal opportunity, and republican democracy. In the following, we will discuss them in detail, respectively.

4 Controversies of Meritocracy

4.1 Littler's Against Meritocracy

In this section, I will compare Sandel's with Jo Littler's criticism of meritocracy. According to Littler (2018: 2), a cultural politics scholar, there exist five problems with contemporary meritocracy.

1. While it supports a competitive, hierarchical system, certain people, by definition, have to be left behind. There is no top without a bottom. Not everyone can "rise up." Thus, unrealized talent is both a necessary and structural condition for its existence. However, such rhetoric of upward mobility given by meritocracy is indeed promoting a kind of "socially corrosive ethic of competitive self-interest" that both legitimizes inequality and harms communities by requiring people to be in a perpetual state of competition (Littler 2018: 3).
2. Its logic often assumes that talent and intelligence are innate. However, Littler refers to the multi-authored book *Inequality by Design*, which examines the history of IQ tests and demonstrates that IQ scores are shaped by context (Littler 2018: 4).
3. It ignores the fact that upward mobility is much more difficult for some people than others. One's ability to rise really depends on one's social–historical context and the availability of material and psychological resources in a particular location (Littler 2018: 5).
4. It is uncritical toward specific forms of status in the ranking of professions and statuses that it recognizes. There is not enough discussion about why certain professions are positioned at the top and certain working-class cultures are considered abject.
5. And thus, Littler criticizes meritocracy as serving as "an ideological myth" that obscures the machinations of capitalism to create a class of super-rich who live off "unearned income," assets that generate rent, interest or capital gains (2018: 7, 117). It enables structural privileges to be passed off as talents or merit—which in turn enables the rich to "maintain and increase their power and wealth" (2018: 120). Thus, instead of meritocracy, we indeed have plutocracy, ruled by a wealthy elite characterized by a meritocratic fantasy.

4.2 Merit and Luck

Although there are many similarities (mainly [3] [4] and [5]) between Sandel and Littler in their criticism of meritocracy, Sandel's attitude toward merit is more ambiguous. As Robert L. Tsai (2021: 70) states, "it is coy about whether the idea is problematic in the abstract or in practice." Furthermore, while Littler's concern focuses on the problem of meritocracy which leads to inequality (particularly shown in [1]), Sandel's main concern seems to be the problem of the meritocratic hubris caused by inequality and different family backgrounds. Sandel is basically following Michael Young's (1958) warning, in his *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, that if society is perceived as meritocratic, then there will be no sympathy for the poor; they will be seen as being deserving of their fate, and that is what has happened. It seems to show that if those elites and winners can be humbler toward others, inequality is not a problem, for Sandel, to be concerned about. So Sandel's solution to elite arrogance is to let those winners know that their success is indebted to their families, community and genetic lottery or God; it is up to luck, not what they deserve.

In Sandel's book, words such as "dependency," "indebtedness," "mystery," "humility" and "luck" recur. On the surface, both Sandel and Rawls are similar in denying meritocracy, and both believe that individual achievements involve elements of luck. However, unlike Rawls, who attributes all personal achievements to luck, Sandel (2021: 26) seems to never completely deny that personal achievements involve elements of one's personal choices and actions, i.e., he admits one's success is partly due to one's hardworking; and he does not deny that part of the benefits and outcomes of one's actions are indeed personally deserved; only those outcomes that are based on luck are not deserved. To a certain extent, Sandel (2021: 33–35) admits that meritocracy is supposed to be "a good and sensible practice" because it is productive and has the virtue of fairness. Its emphasis on self-responsibility is also a good concept. However, it is one thing to be responsible for one's own actions and another to be responsible for one's own destiny, which does not come solely from one's own choices and actions, but partly from predestination, luck, or God's grace. Thus, it seems that Sandel should support luck egalitarianism, which holds that society should compensate only those who are unfortunate due to factors beyond one's choice and control (such as a natural disability or family background), so that luck can be excluded or reduced from resource distributional impact. According to Gu Su (2019: 269–70) such "luck/choice dichotomy" by luck egalitarianism "is used for explaining personal responsibility in social and economic differences." On the one hand, among equally deserving people, it is unfair for someone to be worse off than others through no fault or choice of their own. On the other hand, it is another kind of unfair for a society to over-compensate those who are worse off than others through their own choice, such as laziness, drug abuse or voluntary crime, etc. Such a welfare arrangement may have some undesirable consequences; in particular, it may hinder people's motivation to work and lead to lower social efficiency. Thus, Gu argues that we should never unconditionally compensate for the least advantaged without explaining the reasons for the disadvantage.

However, Sandel also rejects luck egalitarianism for three reasons: (1) its basis for helping is not based on compassion and solidarity, but on how that person's

misfortune is caused. (2) Luck egalitarianism is a harsh criticism of indiscretion, and even demeans those who do qualify for public assistance as helpless victims. All recipients of benefits are seen as victims of a lack of agency, who are unable to be responsible individuals and unable to contribute to society. Once denied the ability to make meaningful decisions and behave in a certain way, it is difficult to gain the respect of others, and, once the element of luck appears to be resolved, this reinforces the norm of meritocracy and merit. (3) Luck egalitarianism believes that those who choose to take risks must be willing to accept the loss if they fail. But Sandel believes that the line between choice and luck is blurred, and people sometimes choose to take chances, but whether this choice is entirely voluntary or influenced by environmental factors is controversial.

Sandel's criticism of luck egalitarianism seems to show that his underlying concern is a matter of human dignity, community and solidarity rather than of eliminating luck and achieving equality. Sandel's view on meritocracy will be clearer after comparing Thomas Mulligan's meritocracy thesis. Although Sandel has made very harsh criticisms of American meritocracy, Mulligan's analysis of meritocracy seems to show that Sandel's criticisms can only be applied to the economic distribution of certain situations, such as that of the U.S.; it is insufficient to refute meritocracy *per se*.

4.3 Mulligan on Meritocracy and Equal Opportunities

In the past, equality of opportunity has been one of the main concerns of Rawlsian liberal egalitarianism (Gu 2019: 266). Sandel's harsh criticisms of American meritocracy leave us with the impression that meritocracy perpetuates existing inequalities without concern for equal opportunity. However, Mulligan (2018: 4–6) argues that meritocracy also emphasizes equal opportunities, everyone should compete on an equal footing, and victory should be based on individual talents and virtues, not based on an individual's race, gender, or family background; therefore, equal opportunities can be said to be a necessary condition for meritocracy; and only with equal opportunity can each person truly receive what they deserve based on their individual merit. Thus, the aim of meritocratic justice is exactly to fight against nepotism and cronyism (which are perfectly legal in the US private sector), as well as discrimination based on race or gender. Justice should be intrinsically linked to people's individual characters, talents and merits. It is also in the interest of universities and businesses to admit and recruit on merit. Meritocracy thus “dispatches worries about crony capitalism which have plagued libertarian theory, and deals with subtler problems of injustice and inefficiency—such as the passage of corporate power and capital by nepotism”.

While Sandel attributes people's hostility to inequality and meritocratic hubris, Mulligan (2018: 20) argues that people's resentment is due to unfair competition. Fair competition is an important element of meritocratic justice. Failure in the competition will inevitably lead to sadness. But we can eliminate resentment “which is born out of unjust competition, is avoidable and pernicious”. Therefore, Mulligan (2018: 107–8, 111) believes that one of the important elements of meritocracy is

that society should make people feel that the distribution of work or resources is fair and that what everyone gets is what they deserve. Due to limited resources and differences in ability, some people will have more, some will have less, and people will envy those who have more, and pity those who have less, but there is no need to have resentment because of these differences. Resentment is moral anger. It is a response to unjust, intentional harm or insult. Thus, recruiting or rewarding on merit can minimize resentment. When we lose to another on meritocracy, we understand that we are competing for the position on an equal footing, and accept that the other party is more capable of the job than we are. Thus, meritocracy promotes social cohesion through a process of competition that does not generate resentment. Mulligan (2018: 110) questions how many Olympic silver medalists have a grudge against the winner? Conversely, profiting not based on merit destroys a person's ability to enjoy the benefits. One cannot be proud of one's "achievements" which are not well deserved and come at the expense of others.

However, Hayek (1976), a neoliberal, in his criticism of social justices, argues that to reward according to merits in a pluralistic open society is impossible and violates market economy. Without an agreed understanding of merits, the government would intervene in the market and command individuals on an ad hoc basis. Mulligan (2018: 131) defends that meritocracy and market economy are compatible. The ideal markets are supposed to be naturally just; in an ideal market, one's income is equal to one's marginal value product; thus, one is getting one's just deserts.² However, in reality, our economy is not ideal; it involves different kinds of rent-seeking. Mulligan (2018: 185–200) believes that economic rents and unequal opportunity can be reduced through taxing rents, externalities, and inheritance. As A.J. Tebble (2009: 593–4) argues, social justice "is not about centrally directing the economic activities of the whole of society toward a politically determined substantive end but rather about mitigating the more deleterious effects of the market process, usually through specific programmes funded through taxation." And for Sandel, he would argue for republican politics to deliberate about common goods.

Sandel complains that American meritocracy leads to inequality. Mulligan (2018: 6, 158) agrees that inequality is a problem, but it is only a symptom of injustice, not injustice itself. The problem is not with the theory of meritocracy; rather it is a reflection of the fact that meritocracy does not work well, and the link between remuneration and merit has been severed. Mulligan also points out that the high incomes of many Americans at the top do not really reflect their excellence, effort, or economic contribution. They are primarily derived from economic rent-seeking and are highly inefficient. When remuneration and merit/social contribution are separated in society, people tend to engage in activities in which it is easy to make money, but have little value to social production, such as consulting, finance, law, etc. There is a huge difference between remuneration and social added value in these industries, even though these jobs are also important to a well-functioning economy. The separation of remuneration and merit also discourages investing in and

² Mulligan (2018: 131–4) has offered a substantive defense to the idea of an ideal market and marginal value product suggested by John Bates Clark and N.G. Mawkin. I cannot go into details here.

improving one's human capital. Indeed, Mulligan (2018: 75) emphasizes that young people are more willing to invest in human capital when they feel that there is an equal opportunity and no formal barriers to future development in society.

Sandel criticizes meritocracy for demonizing low-skilled people, but Mulligan (2018: 69–71) emphasizes that meritocracy only values merit/virtue, not individuals. Indeed, hardworking, intelligent, agile, beautiful, etc. are only certain, but not all, factors that make up a person's identity. We cannot say that certain factors are not outstanding, and therefore the value of the whole person is insignificant. This is a fallacy of composition. Meritocracy does not believe that a society made up of highly skilled people is more valuable than a society made up of low-skilled people. What is valuable is the merit itself. The excellence of a person or a society lies not in the degree of merit, but in the degree to which people “develop, promote and apply merit” (Mulligan 2018: 70). That is, the fact that A is more meritorious than B does not mean that A should be more respected than B; on the contrary, if B pays more attention to developing and applying his merits than A, he will be more respected. Similarly, a poor society that improves its lot by cultivating the good qualities of its citizens is better than a rich society that has become content and decadent.

4.3.1 Family and Equal Opportunity

Sandel criticizes meritocracy as a highly polarized society dominated by an elite class. Differences in family background are often seen as barriers to equal opportunities. Socioeconomic status aside, there is a huge difference in how children grow and develop when being raised by loving parents versus being raised by bad parents. The family used to be seen as a non-political, private liberty that should not be subject to government interference. However, Mulligan (2018: 78–81) believes that in order to achieve equal opportunities, society should limit family autonomy. This requires substantial policy measures, such as the confiscation of nearly all wealth between generations. The only possible inequality of wealth is generated within a generation, and it does not allow for rent-seeking (Mulligan 2018: 138–9). Moreover, equal opportunity is in fact defined by the flattening of human capital; and the existence of income inequality is limited to (1) income-related genetic-determined characteristics, and (2) adults making different choices about work and human capital investments. This requires the restriction or regulation of homeschooling and children's religious education, the provision of universal healthcare and publicly-funded education up to secondary education, and a robustly implemented estate tax (Mulligan 2018: 75–89, 192–197).

In fact, research shows that much of the existing wealth gap in the US is caused by family than by individuals' natural traits, and thus inequality should be reduced in meritocracy. Mulligan (2018: 138–9) believes that a meritocratic society will be highly egalitarian. One survey shows that in Sweden (a society with more equal opportunities), the biggest factors of the income gap are hard work first, intelligence second, and family third (Björklund et al. 2012). Furthermore, as a meritocratic society is a more egalitarian and just society, Mulligan (2018: 141) argues that it would also be a more united society.

In view of Mulligan's theory, the problem of political polarization and meritocratic hubris in the US is not due to meritocracy, as argued by Sandel; on the contrary, the cause is that the economic distribution in the US is not meritocratic enough; it has neglected the significance of equal opportunity in a meritocracy. If equal opportunity is fully implemented, there is no point for Sandel to reject meritocracy.

Nevertheless, Sandel (2021: 224) considered equal opportunity to be only a remedy; it is "at best a partial ideal" (Coman 2020), and should not be the ultimate ideal of a good society. Sandel's (2021: 224) main concern is not simply to ensure equal opportunity for everyone, but to construct "a politics that makes mobility the answer to inequality." Thus, Sandel (2021: 224) is not advocating sterile, oppressive equal outcomes. He advocates going "beyond equal opportunity" and pursuing a broad, democratic "equality of conditions" as suggested by RH Tawney, a British Christian socialist, that "enables those who do not achieve great wealth or prestigious positions to live lives of decency and dignity—developing and exercising their abilities in work that wins social esteem, sharing in a widely diffused culture of learning, and deliberating with their fellow citizens about public affairs". And Sandel, in his interview, admits that his philosophy is "out of that tradition" (Coman 2020). However, Sandel offers not much elaboration on Tawney's theory and what equality of condition is. In order to better grasp Sandel's philosophy, we have to briefly explore Tawney's social philosophy.

4.4 Sandel and Tawney on Equality of Condition

In *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Tawney (1926, 68–73, 278, 319–21) laments the gradual historical loss of the more corporate and organic sense of a society in which the Christian Church had once offered authoritative teaching on social and economic issues, in particular on the doctrine of just price and the prohibition of usury which have been undermined after the Reformation and led to the rise of individualistic secularized capitalism, and systematic oppression of the poor. Tawney (1921: 3) insists that "social institutions are the visible expressions of the scale of moral values." However, contemporary society is dominated by the principles of laissez-faire and individual rights, and the moral dimension of social order is thus excluded. Tawney rather argues for a kind of "Functional Society" in which people are associated "in various degrees of competition and co-operation, to win their livelihood by providing the community with some service which it requires" (1921: 6, 29–32). In a functional society, both property and economic activity exist to further the common purposes of society. Tawney (1952: 37–41, 103–106) also argues for equality based on his view of human beings as children of God. Despite being profoundly different in character and ability, people are entitled as human beings to be respected and considered, and should equally be able to make the most of the power that they have. Such equality cannot be achieved by the purely formal sense of equal opportunities, such as the abolition of legal privileges or the absence of certain restraints, which just leaves the way open for social and economic inequalities

within a society of atomistic individualism and does not help guarantee equity or create a harmonious society.

According to Rogan (2017: 37–38), Tawney considers selfhood as social, and thus, liberal individualism is wrong in the atomization of the individual who believes that the individual enters the world with rights prior to and independent of any social obligations. Instead of pursuing equal opportunity, Tawney rather argues for equalizing the conditions for health and education in order to ensure equal opportunities for all individuals to cultivate those abilities that nature bestows upon them. Tawney (1922: 33, 141–5, 218; Baum 2012: 719–24) is in particular concerned about the equality of educational opportunities. He criticizes the vicious circle of systemic inequality in education and the wider class stratification which perpetuates class divisions, defeats social solidarity, and poses a threat to democracy. For Tawney (1964: 84), the purpose of education is not only to pursue knowledge and self-development, but also to strengthen the spirit of social solidarity and prepare people to better serve their fellows and to improve the general level of social well-being. Thus, he calls for redistribution and to provide equality of educational opportunities for all people. In short, Tawney's vision was a society that produces fraternity, mutual respect and mutual consideration. This is a society in which inequality requires moral and social justification; equality is not only a guarantor of fairness, but a necessary condition for participatory democracy. Thus, Tawney's political philosophy is generally considered a kind of democratic socialism.

In short, for Sandel and Tawney, equal opportunity measures are insufficient to deal with the problem of inequality and social disintegration. He rather argues for a kind of republican politics with equality of conditions so that people can be consolidated to tackle the problem together. We will further discuss Sandel's republican thesis below. However, in the following, I would first show that Sandel's and Tawney's equality of condition are actually similar to Mulligan's equal opportunity.

4.5 Equality of Opportunity Versus Equality of Condition

Basically, there are two kinds of equal opportunity: formal and substantive. While the formal equal opportunity aims to ensure open and fair competition for advantaged positions, substantive equal opportunity further demands that "all have a genuine opportunity to become qualified" (Arneson 2015). It seems that what Sandel and Tawney criticize is the formal concept of equal opportunity existing in the US; and the "equality of condition" they argue for, as well as Mulligan's equal opportunity, are indeed a substantive concept of equal opportunity, that is, making everyone compete on an equal footing without the influence of one's family background. In addition, apart from an equal footing for competition in economic distribution, Sandel and Tawney are also concerned about the equal conditions and citizens' democratic participation.

The above analysis seems to show that Mulligan's egalitarian meritocracy can avoid the problem of inequality and meritocratic hubris raised by Sandel. However, it is doubtful whether Mulligan's suggested solution can really achieve his intended egalitarian, consolidated meritocratic community. In particular, one of the major

obstacles raised by Sandel is the great disparity between family backgrounds which leads to unequal educational opportunities. In the following, I argue that both Sandel's and Mulligan's proposed solution is not sufficient to deal with the inequality caused by unequal family backgrounds. Rather, I would argue that equal educational opportunities are one of the important ways to achieve equality of conditions as suggested by Sandel. By taking warning from the experience of Hong Kong's educational reform, I would argue for achieving equal educational opportunities by leveling-up policy, that is, providing public-funded quality teaching that is competitive with private schools, so that everyone has an equal chance to receive a quality education regardless of their family background. Furthermore, I will also show that equal educational opportunities and republican democracy are mutually supported in order to achieve a kind of egalitarian meritocratic community.

5 Family and Equal Educational Opportunity

Generally, theorists of social justice care very much about education because it is an important causal factor that affects people's access to other goods, such as jobs and rewards. Both Sandel and Tawney are also concerned about achieving equal educational opportunity because it is an element of equality of conditions, and an important step toward social equality. However, according to Sandel, one of the major causes of disparity is the credentialism and unequal playing field created by the disparity in family backgrounds.

Sandel (2021: 218) argues for transferring the tax burden from labor to consumption and speculation. Sandel also (2021: 184) suggests reforming university admission by introducing a lottery system. However, Tsai (2021: 72) criticizes that it will have only a small impact on the meritocratic hubris and tangible inequality. What's worse is that allocation could create a backlash among communities who have already (over)invested in the means to compete for scarce seats in prestigious institutions. This finally undermines Sandel's goal of establishing solidarity.

Tsai is an egalitarian, and he rejects meritocracy. However, Tsai (2021: 76) acknowledges that for a populist meritocrat, the answer to the problem of social mobility is not to introduce luck into the admission, thereby undermining the drive to improve oneself, or to lower the standards of the system, thereby questioning its quality. People do not want to dethrone excellence; they just do not trust those elites and have a different understanding of what excellence means from those elites. Thus, the solution is to subsidize those who do not have as many advantages in the first place and increase investment in schools, which may give people better access to selective opportunities.

Furthermore, Sandel seems to overestimate the impact of acknowledging one's luck on one's moral attitude toward the poor. Sandel attempts to counter the meritocratic hubris by emphasizing the elements of luck involved in those elites' achievements by appealing to experience of traditional aristocracy. However, social experience tells us that even if those elites acknowledge that what they have is partly due to luck, this does not mean that they would become humble toward the poor. As Sophia Moreau (2021: 134–5) criticizes that Sandel's depiction of aristocracy, following

Michael Young, paints an overly idealized picture of them. Indeed, Moreau criticizes Young's picture of pre-war Britain's class-based societies for being naïve. Even if people really think that it is morally arbitrary and lucky for them to belong to a particular class, it does not follow that they are regarded as morally on a par. This is because the children brought up in noble families were taught, trained, and educated in certain ways that were hallmarks of superiority in their society. In short, they became what their society considers superior. Such class-based societies reinforce the belief that the privileged deserve the privilege no less than meritocratic societies. They just do it in a different way than meritocracy. Thus, instead of emphasizing elements of luck and introducing lottery elements into school admission, I argue for achieving equal educational opportunity by implementing a leveling-up education policy for children with different family backgrounds.

Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2014: 4, 28, 147) also admit that there is an eliminable tension between facilitating familial value and equal opportunity. While the heart of the conception of family values is the "familial relationship goods," pursuing equal opportunity requires reducing the differences in children's family backgrounds. Nevertheless, the children of wealthy parents will have myriad ways (accessing high-quality education, food, healthcare, housing, and holidays) to foster the development of their children that are not available to the children of poor families. Although Brighouse and Swift are sympathetic to the egalitarian aspiration, they found that even if reducing these inequalities through certain measures was feasible, they would not suffice to secure fair equality of opportunity. This is because the inequalities between children "stem from processes more central to—one might say constitutive of—family life than egalitarians might have hoped. It seems to be the informal interactions—the bedtime stories, the talk at the table, the family culture, the parenting styles, the inculcation of attitudes and values (some conscious, some unconscious)—that make the difference to children's prospects" (Brighouse and Swift 2014: 32–33). This seems to suggest that the only way to fully realize equality of opportunity would be to abolish the family. However, as "familial relationship goods" are so valuable, it would be a bad idea to abolish the family in order to pursue the full realization of equal opportunity. Thus, what Brighouse and Swift (2014: 44–45) argue for is the achievement of the right balance between family values and equality of opportunity with "all-things-considered judgment." Brighouse and Swift (2014: 124–9) claim that in order for familial relationships to flourish, some paradigm cases of familial activities, such as reading bedtime stories to children and having children accompany one to church, must be permitted. Nevertheless, Brighouse and Swift argue that parents have no right to confer competitive advantages that are not essential to familial relationships, such as sending them to elite private schools and bequeathing legacies to their children because it violates the ideal of equal opportunity and makes poor children worse off. In short, certain familial autonomy must be restricted to prevent the situation of intergenerational unequal opportunity.

While Mulligan (2018: 81) agrees to limit familial autonomy, he rejects abolishing elite private schools as a step toward establishing fair equal opportunity suggested by Brighouse and Swift. This is because elite institutions cannot really provide significantly better human capital development than public institutions. What

elite institutions provide is just “an interpersonal advantage in the form of pedigree and personal connections” so that “by attending elite schools, one can later extract rents from the economy.” The advantage that these elite schools can provide is very limited and thus there is no need to be leveling down in a meritocracy. Furthermore, Mulligan (2018: 205) considers college students to be full moral agents who can be self-responsible. College admission should not be part of the equal opportunity framework.

However, I would argue that Mulligan has underestimated the influence of admission to elite colleges on inequality. Both Sandel and Mulligan (2018: 77) admit that the reality in the US today is that elite jobs go to those with elite higher education while admissions to elite colleges are hyper-competitive and expensive. This is unfavorable and unfair to those who are brought up in poor families. Even if Mulligan is right that what elite institutions provide is just interpersonal connections that help them extract rent from the economy, Mulligan has not provided effective measures to eliminate such rent-seeking activities.³

As O’Sullivan and Tsang (2015: 465) argue, numerous studies, recent or past, have established that socioeconomic family background is the strongest and most consistent predictor of student achievement and a key factor in achieving inequality. And inequalities can be reduced by implementing equal distribution of quality teaching or restricting socioeconomic diversity by reducing inequalities in living conditions, as the examples of the Netherlands and Sweden show.

Nevertheless, I agree with Tsai and Mulligan that the lottery elements and leveling-down policy (restricting private schools) for education are not effective and not preferable. And thus, I would argue that a better way to achieve equal educational opportunities is to level up the poor family children and to distribute quality teaching equally. And quality public-funded education should include higher education if the inequality and meritocratic hubris are caused by unequal chances of receiving quality higher education as Sandel has shown.⁴ If the development of education is allowed to be dominated by the market alone, the inequality of educational opportunities is bound to widen. We may take warning from the experience of Hong Kong’s education marketization reform.

5.1 Education Reform in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, fee-free education was implemented by the government for aided primary schools in 1971 and secondary schools in 1978. Before 1990, most students studied in government-run and aided schools that were almost entirely financed and controlled by the government. Comparatively, expensive private schools (mainly

³ Mulligan (2018: 187–9) suggests prohibiting the ‘golden goodbyes’, increasing top marginal income tax rates, and setting a wage ceiling to tax economic rents. However, these measures are not directly related to higher education. And Mulligan also admits that the effectiveness of these measures is very weak and even merely symbolic.

⁴ In fact, I believe that there should also be quality public-funded vocational training for those unfit for higher education. However, I cannot go into details here.

international schools) played a less significant role at that time in Hong Kong's education (Tang & Bray 2000: 472; Woo 2017: 41). Although primary 6 students were divided into five different bands ranked (reduced to three bands after 2001) according to academic performance, they had approximately equal opportunity to study in privileged secondary schools regardless of their family background because these privileged schools (Band 1) were mostly government and aided schools. And the allocations of schools are often bounded by the school net and determined by the government. Furthermore, there is little diversity among these public government-supported schools because they are similar in terms of their curriculum, admission procedure, and teachers' hiring and firing practices regulated by the government.

However, in the 1990s, the Direct Subsidy Scheme (DSS) was introduced for market-oriented education reform in order to respond to globalization. Under this scheme, DSS schools operate according to market principles while they can still receive a certain amount of government funding. Thus, these DSS schools are just like semi-private schools, and more and more traditional privileged aided schools have joined DSS and charge high tuition fees. The DSS scheme was initially introduced to increase the choice for parents. Ironically, Jacqueline C.K. Woo (2017: 50) argues that as these privileged aided schools leave the public sector, join the DSS scheme and charge tuition fees, many poor families are deterred from applying to these DSS schools; they feel that their school choices have diminished. Beatrice Oi-yeung Lam et al. (2019: 1181) also find that DSS has led to the systematic division of students of different socioeconomic statuses into public-(semi-)private schools, thereby segregating their schooling experiences and widening the differences in academic achievement among schools. There are growing voices calling for reflection upon the social inequality that DSS has indirectly created and revision of the DSS policy.

In contrast, equal opportunity in Hong Kong's tertiary education seems to be better than the situation in secondary education. Basically, the best universities in Hong Kong are funded by the government according to the University Grants Committee's (UGC) advice. Most of these UGC-funded universities have high international rankings that other self-finance institutions cannot compete with. As these universities are publicly funded, Hong Kong students have approximately equal opportunities to access degree places in these privileged universities. I would argue that Hong Kong's tertiary education system can be a model of equal educational opportunity.

Numerous studies have shown strong ties between education, poverty and reducing inequality (Chaiya and Ahmad 2022: 136). For instance, Bloom et al. (2014) show that higher education increases the level of working skill and technological catch-up, which in turn helps to maximize Africa's potential for faster economic growth. It also accelerates technology diffusion, which in turn reduces knowledge gaps and helps reduce poverty in the region. Nevertheless, Ilie and Rose's studies (2016) show that while higher education help to enhance one's working skill and income, the levels of attendance of higher education in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa remain generally low. Thus, they argue that in order to provide equal access to affordable, quality education for all, society needs "to tackle inequalities in access within a system-wide approach, focusing on the level of education at which inequalities initially manifest, alongside higher education." The survey in the US

also illustrates that a low-income background makes someone less likely to apply for higher education or aid in the first place, which excludes them from financial aid. Thus, most reviews argue for multifaceted interventions in order to achieve equal educational opportunity (Herbaut and Geven 2019; Younger et al. 2019).

Experience in Hong Kong's education reform seems to show that marketization of education would likely increase the inequality in educational opportunities. Thus, in order to achieve equal educational opportunity without endorsing a leveling-down policy, I would argue for a leveling-up approach where public schools should be sufficiently funded so that their teaching quality is competitive or even better than other private schools. This can ensure that poor students have an approximately equal opportunity of admission to prestigious colleges without considering their family background. Without sufficient competitive public-funded schools, allowing market-oriented private schools will inevitably isolate students' learning experiences, amplifying the differences in their opportunities for future achievement. This would likely lead to the meritocratic hubris and weakening democracy that Sandel worries about. However, leveling-up educational opportunities for the poor also requires enormous resources that cannot be achieved without community support and solidarity. This is the reason why we should further pursue a kind of republican politics as suggested by Sandel.

6 Beyond Equal Opportunity: Republican Democracy

On the one hand, as mentioned above, implementing leveling-up educational opportunities requires enormous resources that demand the wholehearted support of the entire community. On the other hand, even if equal educational opportunity is fully implemented, it does not therefore solve the problem of political polarization that Sandel worries about. Thus, although Sandel is very much concerned about inequality, his political aspiration is not simply a kind of egalitarianism like Rawls, meritocracy like Mulligan, or compatibility between family values and equal opportunities like Brighouse and Swift; rather his concern for substantive equal opportunity is driven by his underlying aspiration of republican self-government. For Sandel (2021: 224), emphasizing rising alone does little to cultivate the social bonds and civic attachment that democracy requires. Even if there is a society that will allow people to be more rising than the United States is now, it still needs "to find ways to enable those who do not rise to flourish in place, and to see themselves as members of a common project."

As Littler (2018: 2) argues, contemporary meritocracy is characterized by attempting to atomize people into individuals who must compete with each other in order to succeed. Its attempts to assimilate the language of equality and identity politics into entrepreneurial self-shaping creates isolated forms of selective empowerment that are completely incapable of addressing the broader structural causes of inequality. In short, the fundamental problem of current liberalism and meritocracy is atomism, or what Sandel calls the idea of unencumbered self which fails to respect persons as members of particular communities to which they belong (1996: 89). Sandel's aspiration is a kind of communitarianism or civic republicanism that

“enables citizens of all walks of life to hold their heads up high and to consider themselves participants in a common venture” (Coman 2020). And this republican thesis runs through his thoughts since the *LLJ* and *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (1996) and onwards until *TM* and the recent new edition of *Democracy’s Discontent* (2022). In order to achieve republicanism, we have to review the ethical ethos of contemporary capitalism, to revive producer ethics and contributive justice.

6.1 Consumer and Producer Ethics, and Contributive Justice

Sandel pointed out that we are both consumers and producers in the market. Globalization leads to the concern of maximizing economic growth and the interests of consumers, that is, a collection of individual preferences and interests to pursue the maximization of overall interests. Consumer ethics seldom care about the impact of job outsourcing, immigration, and economic financialization on the well-being of producers. The elites who dominate globalization have not only failed to resolve the inequalities brought about by globalization, but also fail to see that globalization has violated the dignity of work (Sandel 2021: 206–7).

Nevertheless, producers want work that is satisfying and well-paid (Sandel 2021: 206–12). Producer ethics discusses the common good from the perspective of citizens. They critically reflect on their own preferences and think together with others about how to improve and achieve a just and good society. Apart from being producers, Sandel also reminds us that we are democratic citizens:

“As citizens we have a stake in creating an economy hospitable to the project of self-government. This means that economic power must be subject to democratic control. It also requires that everyone be able to earn a decent living under dignified conditions, have a voice in the workplace and in public affairs, and have access to a broadly diffused civic education that equips them to deliberate about the common good.” (Sandel 2022: 9)

Therefore, society requires a channel for public deliberation, which can cultivate citizens, and thus people can jointly explore the purpose and common goods of the political community from the perspective of citizens in which people’s contributions to society cannot be measured by salary, but by their civic moral judgment. Sandel (2022: 9) calls this civic tradition of economic argument “the political economy of citizenship.” Unfortunately, the reality is that such a civic tradition and producer ethics has gradually disappeared since the twentieth century, and has been replaced by a consumerist liberal view and an economic growth-oriented political and economic line because people like to consume and emphasize value neutrality in a consumption-led society.

Sandel acknowledged that the market itself does not provide labor skills and recognition, so Hegel proposed the creation of a kind of trade association or guild to ensure that the skills provided by workers would eventually make contributions worthy of public recognition. Sandel (2021: 210–1) quotes Axel Honneth briefly describing two conditions under which the working class can be properly

recognized: (1) there must be a minimum wage; (2) all work must be given a form that makes it clear that it contributes to the common good of society. Sandel cites Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s wording and expects that our society will one day honor the cleaners because, ultimately, the garbage collector is as important as the doctor for society to survive.

In an era of political polarization, Sandel (2021: 210–2) believes that contributing justice and work dignity should be the concern of the political discourse. Contribution justice is not neutral to self-fulfillment and how people live. From Aristotle and Hegel to the American Republican tradition and Catholic social teachings, these theories of contributive justice teach that we can win the respect of compatriots by contributing to the common good of society, and such life is the most fulfilled. According to this idea, the basic needs of people are to be recognized by those who live with them, and the dignity of work is to use one's ability to meet the needs of others.

Nevertheless, Sophia Moreau (2021: 135–7) criticizes Sandel's ideal of equality of conditions achieved partly through public deliberation about moral issues and a sense of solidarity with fellow citizens as unrealistic. More than half of the population is low educated and cannot analyze a news report critically. In addition, the problem of post-truth politics has made such political deliberation even more difficult. Siyang Liu (2022: 16–8) refers to David Miller's liberal nationalism and criticizes that political deliberation is insufficient to cultivate the sense of solidarity and motivate people to give in support of distributive justice, because it fails to explain why people are willing to engage in public deliberation without nationalist sentiments in the first place. While Baum (2012: 726) strongly supports Tawney's, as well as Sandel's, democratic equality, he also admits that such an account "has a somewhat utopian character, pointing beyond the horizon of what currently is 'realistic' politically... In our era of transnational corporate power and diverse noneconomic (or not strictly economic) sources of political struggle, economic democratization may be harder than ever to realize."

6.2 Sandel on Historical Republican Politics

Basically, I agree with Liu (2022: 215) that political participation without "a common national identity developed through the nation-building process" is insufficient to motivate people to support distributive justice and equality of conditions. However, political participation can also be part of the nation-building process to establish a common national identity. Basically, I would consider political participation and national identity to be mutually constitutive. And I would argue that the pursuit of leveling-up equal educational opportunities can respond to the problem of low-educated citizens raised by Moreau. Furthermore, historically speaking, although implementing such a republican thesis is difficult, it is not impossible. Sandel, in his *Democracy's Discontent*, has provided a historical retrieval by tracing the development of political economy and constitutional law in which there were dialectical struggles and debates between procedural liberalism and civic republicanism throughout American politics. Sandel (1996: 127, 2022: 22) reminds us that the American Revolution originally aspired to generate a new community of

common good, to realize republican ideals, and to “renew the moral spirit that suited Americans to republican government.” However, American political discourse, in the last few decades, has become dominated by procedural liberalism and has steadily crowded out the republican understanding of citizenship which is important for self-government. “Beginning in the late New Deal and culminating in the early 1960s, the political economy of growth and distributive justice replaced the political economy of citizens” (1996: 250; 2022: 171). The triumph of procedural liberalism could be due to waves of migration, the growing diversity of nations, and the rise of globalization. In particular, the culture of consumerism has offered an individualistic, privatized vision of freedom which has diminished the aspiration of republican freedom as self-government. All of these lead to the loss of community and shared public life necessary for self-government. Thus, Sandel (1996: 345; 2022: 275) calls for an American revival of the republican ideal. This requires nourishing civic life in particular communities, and at the same time, shaping citizenship across multiple sites of civic participation so that the regime can be integrated to rival global market forces.

Sandel’s historical retrieval shows that republican politics is to a certain extent possible, even though not perfectly implemented. Although we are still facing the challenge of globalization, the times seem to have started to change recently. Since President Donald Trump embraced an “America First” policy, the United States has shifted from trade liberalization to limited protectionism. The Sino-US trade war has shown a trend of “decoupling” between the world’s two largest economies and the weakening of globalization. Furthermore, Brexit and the rise of Covid-19 have further added impetus to the deglobalization trend (Irwin 2020), and it may be time to reconsider Sandel’s republican communitarian aspirations in a future world. Indeed, Sandel’s new edition of *Democracy’s Discontent* (2022) attempts to address these new developments and growing political divisions in the United States. Nevertheless, Win McCormack (2022: 65) criticizes that it is unclear what Sandel’s republicanism means in concrete terms, and how such a civic engagement could actually be conducted. In this regard, I would argue that the pursuit of equal educational opportunities, in particular humanistic education, is especially important to the revival of the republican ideal and the enhancement of civic participation.

6.3 Education, Equality and Democracy

As Danielle Allen (2016: 13–14) argues, in her *Education and Equality*, the justification of education is not simply utilitarian, as a means to other extrinsic ends, such as higher-paying jobs, but also eudaimonistic. The aim of education is to activate the latent positive capacities to achieve eudaimonistic human flourishing. Allen (2016: 14) calls this “the humanistic baseline for the concept of education” which considers all humans as possessing the potential for four basic needs: breadwinning work, civic and political engagement, creative self-expression, and rewarding intimate relationships. And Allen argues that we need to cultivate these potentials for four basic needs to establish “participatory readiness.” Participation in civic political life is important because it is central to mitigating the problem of political economic

inequality. Participatory readiness allows for the possibility of confronting “labor market rules that deliver insupportable forms of income inequality” (2016: 31). Apart from developing skills for the labor market, democratic society also needs to create the possibility of changing social norms that can lead to greater political and economic equality. And Allen further argues that humanities or liberal arts education is distinctive in supporting participatory readiness because it involves serious engagement with language and promotes verbal empowerment that is at the foundation of political empowerment (2016: 43–8). Education is thus not only instrumentally, but also intrinsically connected to equality because it facilitates the empowerment of people as republican agents. Allen’s vision is indeed coherent with Sandel’s republican aspiration. And I would argue that meritocracy with equal education opportunities and communitarian republicanism can really be a kind of egalitarian consolidated meritocracy that both Sandel and Mulligan aspire for.

7 Conclusion

Although Sandel’s recent criticism of American meritocracy and his rhetoric of luck seem to be contradicted by his earlier criticism of Rawls’ egalitarianism, I have shown that Sandel’s criticism can only be applied to certain economic situations, such as that of the U.S.; it cannot refute the theory of meritocracy per se. After comparing Mulligan’s egalitarian meritocratic thesis, I argue that as long as substantive equal opportunities or what Sandel calls “equality of conditions” are guaranteed, there is no reason to reject meritocracy. However, Sandel’s suggestion of lottery elements in college admission does not help much in achieving equality of conditions. Rather, I would argue that equality of conditions can be achieved through equal educational opportunity by leveling-up education policies, such as providing competitive publicly-funded education. Finally, I argue that equal educational opportunity and civic republicanism are mutually constitutive. While equal educational opportunity demands wholehearted support by the community through republican politics, it can provide equal opportunity to everyone to develop their talents regardless of their different family backgrounds, and establishes citizens’ participatory readiness to actively pursue the establishment of egalitarian communitarian meritocracy.

Funding My work on this article is partially supported by a grant [SSHD-2022-269(I)] from the College of Professional and Continuing Education, an affiliate of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Data availability Not applicable.

Code availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest There is no further conflict of interest to disclose.

Ethical statements I hereby declare that this manuscript is the result of my independent creation under the reviewers’ comments. Except for the quoted contents, this manuscript does not contain any research achievements that have been published or written by other individuals or groups. I am the only author of this manuscript. The legal responsibility of this statement shall be borne by me.

References

- Allen, Danielle. 2016. *Education and equality*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Arneson, Richard. 2015. Equality of opportunity. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/equality-of-opportunity/>. Accessed 31 December 2022.
- Baum, Bruce. 2012. Governing “democratic” equality: Mill, Tawney, and liberal democratic governmentality. *Political Research Quarterly* 65 (4): 714–731.
- Björklund, A., M. Jäntti, and J.E. Roemer. 2012. Equality of opportunity and the distribution of long-run income in Sweden. *Social Choice and Welfare* 39: 675–696.
- Bloom, D.E., D. Canning, K. Chan, and D.L. Luca. 2014. Higher education and economic growth in Africa. *International Journal of African Higher Education* 1 (1): 22–57. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ijahe.v1i1.5643>.
- Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. 2014. *Family values: The ethics of parent-child relationships*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Chaiya, Chitralada and Mokbul Ahmad. 2022. The student loan fund and the education for all in Thailand. In *Education as the Driving Force of Equity for the Marginalized*, ed. Jacquelynne Anne Boivin and Heather Pacheco-Guffrey, 135–157. Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference.
- Coman, Julian. 2020. Interview with Michael Sandel: “The Populist Backlash has been a Revolt Against the Tyranny of Merit”. *The Guardian*, 6 September. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/06/michael-sandel-the-populist-backlash-has-been-a-revolt-against-the-tyranny-of-merit>. Accessed 27 December 2022.
- Gu, Su. 2019. Nationalism, egalitarianism and global justice. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 12 (2): 263–273. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-019-00259-1>.
- Hayek, F.A. 1976. *The mirage of social justice*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Herbaut, E., and K. Geven. 2019. What works to reduce inequalities in higher education? A systematic review of the (quasi-)experimental literature on outreach and financial aid. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 65: 100442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2019.100442>.
- Hung, Tsz Wan Andrew. 2022a. Taylor and Rousseau on republican freedom and political fragmentation. *The European Legacy: Toward New Paradigms* 27 (6): 601–616. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2022.2066818>.
- Hung, Tsz Wan Andrew. 2022b. Atomism, communitarianism, and Confucian familism. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 15: 259–275. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-021-00340-8>.
- Irwin, Douglas. 2020. The pandemic adds momentum to the deglobalisation trend. *PIIE Realtime Economic Issues Watch*, 23 April. <https://www.piie.com/blogs/realtime-economics/pandemic-adds-momentum-deglobalizationtrend>. Accessed 7 June 2023.
- Ilie, S., and P. Rose. 2016. Is equal access to higher education in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa achievable by 2030? *Higher Education* 72: 435–455. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-016-0039-3>.
- Lam, Beatrice Oi-yeung, Soo-yong Byun, and Moosung Lee. 2019. Understanding educational inequality in Hong Kong: Secondary school segregation in changing institutional contexts. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 40 (8): 1170–1187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2019.1642736>.
- Lin, Xi. 2020. The China model of development as solidarity. *Chinese Political Science Review* 5 (1): 31–49.
- Littler, Jo. 2018. *Against meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. London: Routledge.
- Liu, Siyang. 2022. Global justice and the motivation to give. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 15 (2): 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-021-00338-2>.
- Ma, Baobin, Qingshan Tan, and Ping Du. 2022. Public opinion and social justice in China. *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 27 (4): 619–636.
- McCormack, Win. 2022. The failure of a public philosophy. *The New Republic* 253 (12): 62–65.
- Moreau, Sophia. 2021. What’s needed for equality of condition? Comment on M. Sandel’s *The Tyranny of Merit*. *American Journal of Law and Equality* 1: 132–138. https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle_a_00011.
- Mulligan, Thomas. 2018. *Justice and the meritocratic state*. New York: Routledge.
- Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, state and Utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- O’Sullivan, Michael, and Michael Yat-him Tsang. 2015. Educational inequalities in higher education in Hong Kong. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 16 (3): 454–469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2015.1069007>.
- Rawls, John. 1999. *A theory of justice*. Rev. MA: Harvard University Press.

- Rogan, Tim. 2017. *The moral economists: R. H. Tawney, Karl Polanyi, E. P. Thompson, and the critique of capitalism*. Princeton University Press.
- Sandel, Michael. 1984. The procedural republic and the unencumbered self. *Political Theory* 12: 81–96.
- Sandel, Michael. 1996. *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sandel, Michael. 1998. *Liberalism and the limits of justice*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sandel, Michael. 2009. *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sandel, Michael. 2021. *The tyranny of merit: What's become of the common good?* London: Penguin Books.
- Sandel, Michael. 2022. *Democracy's discontent: A new edition for our perilous times*. Harvard University Press.
- Tang, Kwok-Chun., and Mark Bray. 2000. Colonial models and the evolution of education systems: Centralization and decentralization in Hong Kong and Macau. *Journal of Educational Administration* 38 (5): 468–485.
- Tawney, Richard H. 1921. *The acquisitive society*. London: George Bell and Sons.
- Tawney, Richard H. 1922. *Secondary education for all: A policy for labour*. London: Hambleton.
- Tawney, Richard H. 1926. *Religion and the rise of capitalism: A historical study*. London: John Murray.
- Tawney, Richard H. 1952. *Equality*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Tawney, Richard H. 1964. *The radical tradition: Twelve essays on politics, education, and literature*, ed. Rita Hinden. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Tebble, Adam James. 2009. Hayek and social justice: A critique. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12 (4): 581–604.
- Tsai, Robert L. 2021. Can Sandel dethrone meritocracy? Comment on M. Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit*. *American Journal of Law and Equality* 1: 70–80. https://doi.org/10.1162/ajle_a_00001.
- Woo, Jacqueline Chak-Kei. 2017. Parental choice in the new education market: aided-turn-direct subsidy scheme schools in focus. In *Making Sense of education in post-handover Hong Kong*, ed. Thomas Kwan-choi Tse and H. Lee, 40–53. London: Routledge.
- Young, Michael. 1958. *The rise of the meritocracy*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Younger, K., L. Gascoine, V. Menzies, and C. Torgerson. 2019. A systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43 (6): 742–773. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1404558>.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.

Andrew Tsz Wan Hung is a lecturer in College of Professional and Continuing Education, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He teaches critical thinking, moral political philosophy and Chinese culture at the Division of Social Sciences, Humanities and Design. His research focuses on Charles Taylor, Christian ethics, Chinese Family and Culture, Western and Chinese philosophy. His recent publications include “Charles Taylor and Paul Tillich on Interreligious Dialogue”, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 2021; “Mencius and Isaiah Berlin on Freedom”, *Philosophy East and West* 2022; “Controversies on Cornell Realism” *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 2023.