

NOTE: An introductory information session for the seminar will take place on Tuesday, January 19, from 9:45-10:15am. All students interested in enrolling in the seminar are strongly encouraged to attend this session.

Join URL: <https://harvard.zoom.us/j/95219480112>

The deadline for entering the lottery for the seminar is January 19, at 6:00pm.

Gov. 94db: Meritocracy and Its Critics

Professor Michael J. Sandel

Spring Semester 2021

Mondays, 9:45-11:45am

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Course requirements

The seminar depends on the informed participation of all members in each week's discussion. Attendance at all class sessions is required. Students who enroll in the seminar should be prepared to keep up with each week's readings, to post short response memos on the course discussion board each week, and to participate in class discussions. Response memos, due on Sunday evening by 5:00pm, should address (in about 500 words) one of the assigned questions, with reference to key readings. A final paper of 10-12 pages is due on May 2. Sixty percent of the course grade will be based on attendance, preparation, timely posting of response memos, and participation in the seminar, and 40 percent will be based on the final paper.

Zoom policies: As the seminar discussions depend on the active engagement of all students, please have your video on throughout the seminar, and turn off all other electronic devices, including other apps, websites, email, and cell phones.

Book recommended for purchase

Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap* (paperback)

Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (Enrolled students will be provided a free copy.)

Seminar topics

Jan. 25 Who deserves what?

Feb. 1 College admissions I: The admissions scandal

Feb. 8 College admissions II: What is merit?

Feb. 15 [Presidents' Day]

Feb. 22 Mobility and the American dream

Mar. 1 [FAS Wellness Day]

Mar. 8 Meritocracy and equality

Mar. 15 Merit, luck, and moral desert

Mar. 22 Inequality and "patrimonial capitalism"

Mar. 29 Merit, work, and finance

Apr. 5 *The Meritocracy Trap*

Apr. 12 Meritocracy, justice, and the common good

Apr. 19 Winners and losers

Apr. 26 Conclusion, final paper topics

Introduction: Who Deserves What?

"People should get what they deserve. A person who contributes more to society deserves a higher income that reflects those greater contributions. Society permits him that higher income not just to incentivize him, as it does according to utilitarian theory, but because that income is rightfully his." (N. Gregory Mankiw, "Spreading the Wealth Around")

Do you agree or disagree? On what grounds?

N. Gregory Mankiw, ["Yes, the Wealthy Can Be Deserving,"](#) *New York Times*, Feb. 15, 2014

[N. Gregory Mankiw, "Spreading the Wealth Around: Reflections Inspired by Joe the Plumber,"](#) *Eastern Economic Journal*, 2010.

College admissions I: The admissions scandal

What was "scandalous" about the 2019 college admissions scandal? Is there a moral distinction between what the accused parents did to gain admission for their children and other ways that money plays a role in college admission?

[Jennifer Medina, Katie Benner and Kate Taylor, "Actresses, Business Leaders and Other Wealthy Parents Charged in U.S. College Entry Fraud,"](#) *New York Times*, March 12, 2019.

Anemona Hartocollis, ["College Admission: Vulnerable, Exploitable, and to Many Americans, Broken,"](#) *New York Times*, March 15, 2019.

Daniel Golden, ["How the Rich Really Play. Who Wants To Be An Ivy Leaguer?"](#) ProPublica, March 12, 2019.

Daniel Golden, ["Jared Kushner Isn't Alone: Universities Still Give Rich and Connected Applicants a Leg Up,"](#) ProPublica, Nov. 22, 2016.

Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, [Introduction \(pp. 7-15\)](#).

College admissions II: What is merit?

Should college admission be based solely on merit? If so, what counts as merit in the relevant sense? Is affirmative action consistent or inconsistent with admitting students based on merit?

Anemona Hartocollis, ["Harvard's Admissions Process, Once Secret, Is Unveiled in Affirmative Action Trial,"](#) *New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2018.

Daniel Golden, ["How the Fight Against Affirmative Action at Harvard Could Threaten Rich Whites,"](#) ProPublica, July 11, 2018.

Nicholas Lemann, ["Behind the SAT,"](#) *Newsweek*, Sept. 6, 1999 (Book excerpt from Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*)

Richard Kahlenberg, ["Affirmative Action Should be Based on Class not Race,"](#) *The Economist*, Sept. 4, 2018.

["Some Colleges Have More Students From the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60,"](#) *New York Times*, Jan. 18, 2017,

(drawing on data from Raj Chetty, <https://opportunityinsights.org/education/>)

Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*, [ch. 7 \(Arguing Affirmative Action\)](#)

Optional reading:

Paul Tough, ["The Impossible Math of College Admissions,"](#) *New York Times*, Sept. 15, 2019.

Mobility and the American Dream

Is the U.S. still the land of opportunity or is mobility a myth? Is it harder to rise in the U.S. than in other countries? If so, what are the implications for the American dream?

[Raj Chetty, et al., "The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940,"](#) *Executive Summary*, Dec. 2016. (Links to an external site.)

[David Leonhardt, "The American Dream, Quantified at Last," *N.Y. Times*, Dec. 11, 2016. \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Moving On Up," Nov. 2013.](#)

[The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Pursuing the American Dream: Economic Mobility Across Generations," 2012. See especially Figure 3, p. 6, and Figure 18, p. 28.](#)

[OECD, *Economic Policy Reforms: Going for Growth*, ch. 5 \("A Family Affair: Intergenerational Social Mobility across OECD Countries"\), pp. 181-185 \(see esp. Figure 5.1\).](#)

[Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Patrick Kline, Emmanuel Saez, "Where is the Land of Opportunity? Intergenerational Mobility in the U.S.," Feb. 4, 2014.](#)

[Stefanie Stantcheva, "Prisoners of the American Dream," *Project Syndicate*, Feb. 22, 2018.](#)

Meritocracy and equality

What is a meritocracy? What is the strongest argument in favor of meritocracy, and what is the strong argument against? Which is more persuasive?

Michael Young, *The Rise of Meritocracy* (1958), [chapter 5](#), [chapter 7](#).

Daniel Bell, ["On Meritocracy and Equality,"](#) *The Public Interest* (1972)

[Michael Young, "Down with Meritocracy," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2001.](#)

Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, ch. 2-3.

Optional:

[Jo Littler, "Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketing of "Equality"™ under Neoliberalism," *New Formations* \(2013\).](#)

Merit, luck, and moral desert

On what grounds do Hayek and Rawls reject the idea that income and wealth should be distributed according to merit or moral desert? In what sense, if any, is meritocracy consistent with inequality?

[Frederick A. Hayek, "Equality, Value, and Merit," ch. 6 in *The Constitution of Liberty* \(1960\).](#)

[John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, sections 11-12, 17, 48.](#)

Inequality and "patrimonial capitalism"

Why has inequality increased in recent decades? What is the relation between equality and mobility? What is "patrimonial capitalism"? In what sense, if any, do the richest members of society deserve their share of income and wealth?

[Facundo Alvaredo, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, Gabriel Zucman, \(Links to an external site.\)*World Inequality Report 2018*, Executive summary. \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[Timothy Noah, "The Dead are Wealthier than the Living," *psmag.com*, Mar. 20, 2014.](#)

Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Harvard University Press, 2014, [Introduction](#) and [ch. 11](#). [Available on reserve in Lamont Library]

Or: [Thomas Piketty and Gabriel Zucman, "Capital is Back: Wealth-Income Ratios in Rich Countries," 2013. \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[Miles Corak, "Income Inequality, Equality of Opportunity, and Intergenerational Mobility," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 27, Summer 2013.](#)

[Gregory Mankiw, "Defending the One Percent," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 27, Summer 2013.](#)

Optional reading

[Facundo Alvaredo, Anthony B. Atkinson, Thomas Piketty, and Emmanuel Saez, "The Top 1 Percent in](#)

[International and Historical Perspective,â€ Journal of Economic Perspectives, vol. 27, Summer 2013. \(Links to an external site.\)](#)[Links to an external site.](#)

Merit, work, and finance

What, according to Cass, is the problem with prevailing approaches to work, and what is the alternative he suggests? Do you agree or disagree? Does the growing role of finance in the economy, with its high pay, undermine the dignity of traditional work?

Oren Cass, [â€œThe Working Hypothesis,â€ The American Interest](#), Oct. 15, 2018.

Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, ch. 7.

Adair Turner, *Economics After the Crisis*, MIT Press (2012), [ch. 2](#).

[Rana Foroohar. â€œAmerican Capitalismâ€™s Great Crisis,â€ Time, May 12, 2016. \(Links to an external site.\)](#)

[Bruce Bartlett. â€œâ€™ Financializationâ€™ as a Cause of Economic Malaise,â€ N.Y. Times blog Economix, June 11, 2013.](#)

[Robin Greenwood and David Scharfstein. â€œThe Growth of Finance,â€ Journal of Economic Perspectives, vol. 127, Spring 2013.](#)

The Meritocracy Trap

Why, according to Markovits, is meritocracy harmful, and to whom? Do you agree?

How, according to Markovits, has meritocracy contributed to rising inequality? Does technology make inequality inevitable by increasing the value of skilled work? Or have highly educated elites influenced the direction of technology in their favor?

Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap*, ch. 5-8, conclusion.

Meritocracy, justice, and the common good

Would a perfect meritocracy, in which everyone had an equal opportunity to succeed, be a just society? Would it be a good society?

Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, ch. 5, conclusion.

Winners and losers

What, according to Sandel, is the "tyranny of merit" in politics and higher education? Do you agree or disagree with his analysis?

Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, ch. 1, 4, 6.

Concluding session

No new assigned readings. For the concluding session, please post a 500-word precis of your final paper, to be discussed in class.