Book Review[1]

The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy
Daniel A. Bell
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

By Amy Friel[2]

Much of the current discussion in political science contains implicit assumptions about the primacy of democracy. It is axiomatic that a liberal democratic system of government should be favoured by all. Discussion on the pitfalls of democratic systems is all too often shut down by political theorists echoing the famous assertion of Winston Churchill that "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all of the others that have been tried." But is the superiority of the democratic system so assured that it warrants no critical analysis or discussion?

In his book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* Daniel A. Bell attempts to challenge this widely-held assumption. Using the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a model, Bell endeavours to "desacralize" and critically assess democracy and to make a case for an alternative system of governance, which he terms *political meritocracy.* He presents the CCP as a working (albeit imperfect) model of political meritocracy, and argues that a series of reforms within their current system is preferable to the wholesale democratization of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Bell divides his discussion of democracy into two categories: *substantive* arguments, which assess the merits of democracy based upon the results of democratic governance, and *procedural* arguments, which assert the intrinsic value of voting to the individual, regardless of the outcome. While the former is crucial to his initial critique of electoral democracy, the latter informs much of his later discussion of legitimacy.

That Bell devotes an entire chapter of his book to assessing the weaknesses and shortcomings of democracy speaks to the near-unassailable status of democracy within current political discourse. Even the minority of voices who have argued for non-democratic systems of government at particular stages of a country's development (Samuel Huntington, for one) do not truly argue *against* democracy, but rather argue about the *timing* of democratization.

Bell frames his own critique on four key problems with electoral democracy: the tyranny of the majority, the tyranny of the minority, the tyranny of the voting community, and the tyranny of competitive individualists. Of these four, two are of particular importance in understanding why political meritocracy may represent a compelling alternative to liberal democracy.

The first, *tyranny of the majority*, describes the ways in which majorities may utilize their voting power to oppress minorities. On the face of it, this pitfall of democracy may appear to have a simple solution; most modern, developed democracies offer constitutional protection for minority groups. However, it remains problematic when one accounts for the often irrational biases held by the majority. The notion that individual biases within the electorate as a whole will overwhelmingly cancel one another out (with the public then favouring sensible policies as a result) is called into question. Bell draws upon the work of economist Bryan Caplan to demonstrate that, rather than balancing out the more extreme or irrational viewpoints among them, the voting

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public as a whole can be shown to be *systematically biased* in favour of policies which lead to demonstrably unfavourable results.

"Democracies frequently adopt and maintain policies harmful for most people," Caplan explains. "In theory, democracy is a bulwark against socially harmful policies, but in practice it gives them a safe harbour" (*The Myth of the Rational Voter*, 2007: 1). The irrational majority thus imposes their political preference onto the country as a whole, often with disastrous results. Though democratically elected leaders may be well informed on an issue or be advised by experts in a given field, they are nonetheless compelled to act in accordance with the wishes of their often irrational constituents. Contrast this to a political meritocracy, wherein leaders are empowered to select evidence-based policies regardless of popular demand.

Bell also explores the problem of *tyranny of the voting community*, whereby political leaders find themselves accountable only to the wishes of voters, while their policies have implications that reach far beyond that group. Even if one sets aside the lack of representation of noncitizens who may reside within the state, democracies also do considerable damage to children and future generations as a result of what Bell calls "consumer culture" politics. "Voters constantly demand instant gratification, and have no patience for long-term structural reform or for politicians who impose pain, with the result that entitlement spending and public debt explodes to unsustainable levels," he explains (2015: 49). This becomes especially problematic when it comes to environmental policy; an electorate unwilling to tolerate short-term discomfort in exchange for long-term solutions to a looming global crisis has little hope of selecting effective and rational policies. As evidence, Bell compares the meritocratic CCP's relatively progressive approach to climate change to the policies adopted by the democratic United States.

Bell concedes that democracy may well have appealed to Churchill as "the worst form of government, except for all the others" when contrasted with Nazism or Soviet-style communism, the two overwhelming alternatives of his day. But in its relatively short history (a little more than a century in most stable regimes), democracy has shown itself to be dangerously resistant to long-term, evidence-based economic or environmental policy. This has as much to do with the whims of an oft-irrational electorate as it does with the election of inexperienced and often dangerously under-qualified people to top political positions.

In a political meritocracy, potential leaders are drawn from a pool of academic high-achievers. These potential leaders are subsequently assigned to junior political positions, put through a battery of examinations at various levels, and continuously assessed on the success or failure of their work to determine their fitness for higher office. Their legitimacy is rooted in *substantive* arguments, and failure to produce positive results seriously undermines said legitimacy; a meritocratic regime that does not demonstrate merit has no moral right to its authority. By contrast, leaders in a democracy are not required to have prior education or political experience before taking office (though many of them do). Their legitimacy is rooted in *procedural* arguments; they have the moral right to their authority by virtue of their free and fair election, irrespective of the merits of their policies. "No corporation or university would pick a top leader without substantial leadership experience of some sort, preferably in the same field," he explains. "Yet political power is an exception: it's fine to pick a leader with no prior political experience, so long as he or she has been chosen on the basis of one person, one vote" (Bell, 2015: 16).

The absurdity inherent in this line of reasoning is not lost on Bell. Procedural arguments favour democracy based on the intrinsic value of voting, regardless of the outcome. But if the chief concern in selecting political leaders is simply that the process be fair, why not do away with elections altogether and replace popular opinion with a coin toss? "We care about the voting

process not just because it is a fair procedure (a coin toss is equally fair) but because we think it will lead to fair outcomes" (2015: 26). It is not enough that leaders be chosen by a fair process if the policies they adopt or maintain are harmful to those they govern. So what sort of process for the selection of leaders might be more likely to produce desirable policies?

Bell is chiefly concerned with China as a model for political meritocracy but draws additionally on Singapore to illustrate the process by which leaders may be trained and selected. Both countries select potential leaders from a pool of academically high-achieving students at top schools. The legitimacy of a meritocratic system is bolstered by China's long tradition of assigning civil service positions based on entrance examinations, a practice dating back thousands of years. Historically such examinations drew from various academic disciplines; however, their modern equivalents are closer in form to IQ tests, assessing the potential leader's analytical and problem-solving skills, with additional written components addressing questions of political policy. Successful applicants may be assigned to junior political positions, and are expected to work their way up slowly over the course of many years, demonstrating positive results at lower levels of government before advancing up the ladder. The enormous commitment of time and energy that this requires makes a single-party system all the more attractive, as potential leaders have increased assurances that their work will be rewarded, provided they continue to demonstrate skill and competence.

Bell is quick to note that China in its current form represents an imperfect model of political meritocracy, since factors such as family connections and party loyalty are also salient in determining who is promoted. However, simply because meritocracy in its present form is imperfect does not necessitate a complete abolition of the system in favour of liberal democracy; it is possible that a series of strategic reforms, rather than an entirely new democratic regime might, reshape Chinese meritocracy into a more effective form of government. Bell devotes the third chapter of his book to the potential pitfalls of political meritocracy, determining what form these specific reforms might take, and discussing whether a form of political meritocracy can be presented as a legitimate and defensible challenge to the primacy of liberal democracy.

Bell draws upon Michael Young's seminal critique of meritocracy to explore the three key problems of this political system (*The Rise of Meritocracy*, 1994). Young suggests that political rulers selected for their superior ability may be more likely to abuse their power. But as Bell explains, there appears to be little correlation between increased democracy and decreased corruption. The salient factor appears instead to be economic development, with less developed countries more likely to have higher levels of corruption in government. The real danger of corruption, Bell suggests, is that meritocratic leaders are legitimized in part by their supposed superior virtue (as opposed to democratic leaders who are legitimized by the process of election), and therefore, rampant corruption poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of government. Thus it becomes crucially important that corruption is addressed through the use of competitive salaries, improved moral education, and supervisory agencies to check the power of political leaders.

Young argues that meritocracy will impede social mobility and contribute to the ossification of political hierarchies. To remedy this, Bell suggests that governments make a concerted effort to include people from varied socioeconomic backgrounds (how this will be negotiated against the standards of merit remains unclear), and to open up conceptions of merit to make room for innovative leadership. Young's final critique of meritocracy that it is impossible to legitimize such a system to those outside the power structure - proves to be the most difficult for Bell to address. Legitimacy, he concludes, ultimately *does* require the assent of the people, and thereby necessitates a certain hybridization of democratic meritocracy.

Bell explores three approaches to the question of how to blend democracy with meritocracy. The first approach, which attempts to blend the systems at the voter level, owes much to the work of John Stuart Mill. In such a system, educated voters, those who had successfully passed certain state examinations, or those belonging to qualified professions, would be allotted additional votes. Bell dismisses this approach because its legitimacy is too easily undermined by the arbitrary process of assigning an allotment of votes to a given voter.

The second approach, which Bell terms the *horizontal model*, would require leaders elected by popular vote to pass a battery of examinations before taking office. This model too contains a built-in crisis of legitimacy; if a leader elected with 75% of the vote did not pass the examination, and was then replaced by a rival who garnered only 25% of the vote, it is unlikely that the electorate would view this process as legitimate. Even structured as a bicameral legislature (with one elected house of democrats and one appointed house of meritocrats), the elected house would inevitably challenge the appointed house for legitimacy.

Bell suggests instead that a hybrid system of democratic meritocracy ought to be structured on a *vertical model*, with meritocracy at the top, experimentation in the middle, and democracy at the bottom. Local governments, selected by popular election, can be expected to function reasonably well since issues are typically more straightforward at the local rather than national level. Mid-level governance is characterized by experimentation, with pilot projects to assess various economic, ecological, or social policy choices on a small scale before expansion to the country as a whole may be considered. At the national level, political meritocracy insulates the government against "beginner's mistakes" by employing experienced party members, and promotes rational, long-term policy choices that democratic governance would have made difficult to implement or sustain.

Following the results of the United Kingdom's "Brexit" referendum, as well as the 2016 United States presidential election, Bell's discussion of the inherent flaws of democratic systems takes on an increased urgency. Contextualized by the looming spectre of climate change, the systematic inability of democracies to sustain policies producing short-term discomfort but long-term results calls into question the central assumptions of theorists like Francis Fukuyama, who posited that democratization was the natural end-point of political evolution, as the legitimacy of one person, one vote would inevitably provoke "a crisis on the level of ideas" in authoritarian regimes (*The End of History and the Last Man*, 1992: 15).

The tendency of voters to systematically favour irrational but emotionally satisfying policies, explored at length by Caplan, has been demonstrated to an almost hyperbolic degree in recent years. In light of this, Bell is right to question the sacrosanct deference to democracy in political discourse; it is not sufficient that the process by which we choose our leaders is fair if the outcome of that process is demonstrably bad.

Bell positions his argument for meritocratic reform as an alternative to democratization in the People's Republic of China, and cautions against the model's applicability to other states whose particular culture or history might be at odds with the values of political meritocracy. But the cases he makes, both for meritocracy and against democracy, open the door to discussion about whether existing liberal democracies might benefit from a good deal more rationality at the expense of populism. After all, the purportedly benign track record of liberal democracy could just as easily be indicative of a short history (and by extension, a small "sample size" of political events) than it is of a superior system of governance. *The China Model* is a compelling contribution to the long-neglected critical discourse on democracy in political science but is equally relevant to the work of journalists and non-governmental organizations that, as Bell suggests, have been far

too quick to divide the political world into "good" democracies and "bad" authoritarian regimes. As Bell makes clear in the dispassionate language of political philosophy, the moral legitimacy of democracy is anything but self-evident.

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