



E-ISSN : 2621 - 8984 | P-ISSN : 2621 - 4792



JERA

**Indonesian Journal of Educational
Research and Review**

Vol. 7. No. 1. April 2024



Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha



www.undiksha.ac.id



<https://ejournal.undiksha.ac.id/>



Meritocracy, the Reproduction of Inequality, and the Academic Scandal in Indonesia: Philosophical Perspective of Michael Sandel

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Abstrak

Praktek kecurangan akademik merupakan salah satu skandal terbesar dalam proses pendidikan di berbagai perguruan tinggi di seluruh Indonesia. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menguraikan isu kritik filosofis Michael Sandel mengenai tirani meritokrasi dan reproduksi kesenjangan pendidikan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian literatur review yang dilakukan dengan cara mengidentifikasi, menganalisis, dan menafsirkan secara kritis karya-karya Sandel, khususnya bukunya *The Tyranny of Merit: What Menjadi Common Good?* Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kecurangan akademik di perguruan tinggi bukan hanya akibat dari ketidakmampuan akademik pribadi atau degradasi integritas moral pribadi, tetapi terutama akibat sistem dan paradigma pendidikan yang mengagungkan dan mengagungkan meritokrasi. Di bawah tirani meritokrasi, para akademisi berkonsentrasi pada mengejar gelar akademis dan kebanggaan individu daripada menjadi intelektual yang organik dan humanistik. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa di bawah meritokrasi, sistem pendidikan gagal menerapkan perannya yang humanis dan membebaskan, dan malah mereproduksi kesenjangan dan penindasan sosial yang baru. Penelitian ini berimplikasi pada revitalisasi peran pendidikan sebagai agen pembebasan, kesetaraan, dan keadilan di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: Meritocracy, Education, Academic Cheating, Inequality, Humanistic Intellectual

Abstract

The practice of academic cheating is one of the biggest scandals in the educational process at various universities throughout Indonesia. This study aims to elaborate on the issue from Michael Sandel's philosophical criticism of the tyranny of meritocracy and the reproduction of educational inequality. The research uses the literature review research method, which is carried out by identifying, analyzing, and interpreting Sandel's works critically, especially his book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What Becomes the Common Good?* The results of this study indicate that academic cheating in university is not only the result of personal academic incompetence or degradation of personal moral integrity but mainly the result of the educational system and paradigm that exalts and adores meritocracy. Under the tyranny of meritocracy, the academicians concentrate on pursuing academic titles and individual pride rather than being an organic and humanistic intellectual. It can be concluded that under meritocracy, the education system fails to implement its humanistic and liberating role and instead reproduces the new social inequality and oppression. This research has implications for the revitalization of education's role as an agent of liberation, equality, and justice in Indonesia.

Keywords: Meritocracy, Education, Academic Cheating, Inequality, Humanistic Intellectual

History:

Received : July 21, 2023

Accepted : December 06, 2023

Published : April 25, 2024

Publisher: Undiksha Press

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1. INTRODUCTION

Academic cheating is a global phenomenon in various universities worldwide, with unexpected impacts on students, lecturers, and the education system (Baran & Jonason, 2020; Heriyati & Ekasari, 2020). Previous reports that on an international scale, academic cheating, such as contract cheating, achieves an average of 3.52% and continues to increase (Newton, 2018). Other study note that among university students, since 2014, the practice of contract cheating has continued to increase to 15.7% (Awdry & Ives, 2022). The result of investigation is an iceberg phenomenon on the massive practice of contract cheating and various types of academic fraud among lecturers and students at various universities in Indonesia (Dewanti et al., 2020; Heriyati & Ekasari, 2020; Patak et al., 2021). The academic cheating undermines the moral status of academicians and destroys the public's "sacred trust"

for intellectuals or academicians. The sacred trust of the public demands the severe responsibility of every academician and university, but has decreased in recent decades (Niedlich et al., 2021; Patak et al., 2021).

There have been a number of studies to answer that question. According to previous study academic cheating is rooted in academic immorality, namely the elimination of moral and ethical principles such as honesty and truth to gain a prestigious title, academic position, and an abundance of incentives (Awaludin, 2023). Academic immorality undermines the purpose of education, namely cultivating good ethical values and high levels of personal integrity (Mushthofa et al., 2021; Mustapha et al., 2017). According to other study not only the moral crisis but also the low interest of the lecturers in research and their ability to design research is the root of contract cheating (Yustisia, 2023). Some studies in Indonesia have added other variables as the root of academic fraud. There is study identify two factors as the root of academic dishonesty in higher education, namely internal and external factors. Internal factors are related to personal attitudes, personality, and talents. External factors are related to environmental influences, institutions, or misuse of technology (Yindi Cardina et al., 2022). Based on the fraud diamond theory, other researchers have found some factors as the root of academic cheating, namely pressure, opportunity, rationalization, and capability (Fontanella et al., 2020; Fransiska & Utami, 2019). Previous study mentioned procrastination as a reason for academic fraud in college (Amiruddin et al., 2022). These variables emphasize the individual fragility in dealing with academic pressure, environmental influence, or lack of access to information.

Many studies in various countries and disciplines have found several variables associated with academic cheating such as, lack of time, pressure to get a higher position, lack of motivation, low levels of self-efficacy, university penalties, the inability of individuals to meet scientific publication requirements, low writing skills, declining of academic grades, dishonesty, the crisis of ethical attitude and ethical climate in campus (Awdry & Ives, 2022; Dougherty, 2022; Molnar, 2012). To conclude, the practice of contract cheating and other types of academic cheating are rooted both in a crisis of academic capability and the low moral integrity of academicians.

Nonetheless, these various explanations of academic cheating seem too over-emphasize the individual weaknesses of academicians, both intellectually and morally. What has escaped from their attention is the macro dimension as the root of the problem, namely the flawed educational system and ideology (Cheng et al., 2021; Roe, 2022). In other words, academic cheating is not just an individual problem that can be overcome by increasing personal moral character and individual capabilities. It is a complex issue that requires macro changes in the education system and ideology (vision and paradigm). The flawed system does not always appear directly on the surface. Marx once said that a structure is not a reality that can be directly observed. However it is hidden behind the actual relationship or acts as a logical system (ideology and paradigm) that underlies a visible reality order (Akanbi, 2018; Skobelev & Borovik, 2017). The flawed paradigm, logic, and education system are rarely seen as the root of academic cheating in higher education.

Therefore, this article intends to explore the main argument as the novelty of the research, namely that the academic cheating as an academic scandal in universities is the product and crystallization of an educational system and ideology that focuses too much on individual success, achievement, and pride. The main argument of academic cheating and scandal will be further explained based on the philosophical perspective of the American political philosopher, Michael Sandel, on the tyranny of meritocracy. The danger of the paradigm and education system that emphasizes individual success and victory in the global market competition is one of the main topics analyzed by Sandel in his book, *The Tyranny of Merit* (hereafter, *TM*).

Sandel used the term “tyranny of meritocracy” to describe a world that is shackled by the ideology of individual success, the glorification of college degrees, and the harassment of those without college degrees. The ideology of meritocracy is a double-edged sword: it inspires success on the one hand but is evil and destructive on the other. Meritocracy is the belief that individual achievement is everything, and this achievement can only be obtained if someone gets an academic degree from an elite university. In meritocracy, education is reduced to an instrument to make people excel individually so that education’s social and humanistic goals are increasingly lost (Madung, 2020; Sandel, 2020). As a result, over the last 60 years, education has produced academicians who focus on pursuing academic titles and degrees (even in cheating ways), even though these academic titles have made no real contribution to social change except for individualistic pride and luxury. Based on these facts, Sandel believes that under the tyranny of meritocracy, education not only fails to fight for equality ideals but also reproduces new types of inequality (Sandel, 2020; Tan, 2023).

Furthermore, the decline of solidarity in modern society as the result of the meritocratic paradigm, especially among those who call themselves educated people. The decline of solidarity has become the root of the democratic crisis and the trigger for the right-wing populist backlash in the US and other democratic countries in recent years (Hochschild, 2021; Madung, 2020; Sandel, 2020). Meritocracy tends to justify the hierarchy and discrimination as something fair due to the differences in individual talents and abilities. Based on this argument, previous study argues that education reproduces and expands social inequality instead of producing greater equality among people (Sandel, 2020).

This article aims to discuss the nature of meritocracy and analyze further how meritocracy reproduces social inequality and enslaves academicians under the shell of academic scandals from the perspective of Michael Sandel’s political philosophy. It is assumed that the studies is significant and have novelty because it broadens and sharpens our perspective on the roots of various academic scandals and why education failed to realize its humanistic vision of fighting against social inequality and being an agent of human liberation from the shackles of slavery, exploitation, and social injustice.

2. METHODS

The method used in this research is literature review research. Literature review research is a process of collecting data and information using various materials available in the library, such as reference books and journal articles that related to the problem being discussed and intended to be solved, similar research that has been carried out previously, and various journal articles that discuss the similar topic (Budiarto & Yusuf, 2023).

By using this method, there are three stages of collecting data and how to analyze the findings of this research. The first stage is collecting data by classifying the primary and secondary literature. Primary literature is the main literature that contains the main ideas and theories in field of science (Khusnun Nadhifah & Thamrin Hasan, 2022). In this research, the primary literature is the books and journal articles written by Michael Sandel, which contain his main thoughts on meritocracy, education, and social inequality. Sandel's books and journals in question are *The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good?*, *Liberalism and the Limit of Justice*, “*Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy*,” “*How to Save Democracy*,” and “*Right-Wing Populism is a Progressive Politics Fails*.” These primary literature are collected from Google Scholar and Research Gate databases. Meanwhile, the secondary literature is the articles and books that contain the previous researches and findings on the similar topic or issue, with certain keywords (Khusnun Nadhifah & Thamrin Hasan, 2022). In this research, the secondary literature is all literatures that contain previous researches and findings on Sandel’s thought, meritocracy, academic cheating, and social

inequality. The researchers use various indexed journal articles that relate to the object of the research as secondary literature. These journal articles were collected from multiple databases such as Google Scholar, Research Gate, SINTA, Scopus, and DOAJ.

The second stage is determining the eligibility criteria of references that will be referred by using the relevant keywords and in line with the research topic and objectives (Budiarto & Yusuf, 2023). In this research, the keywords used are Michael Sandel, meritocracy, education, academic cheating, and social inequality.

The third stage is selecting, downloading, and saving the found documents or references to the Mendeley application. The data from these references is then extracted and analyzed by comparing (similarities and differences) and complementarity, in relation to the research focus under the scientific principles (Budiarto & Yusuf, 2023). In this research, the researchers apply Sandel's perspective on meritocracy and social inequality, in comparison and connection with the data from secondary literature, to analyze the issue of academic scandals in Indonesia.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the literature review research method, there are three main points as the result of this study with regard to Sandel's philosophical thought on the tyranny of meritocracy, social inequality, and academic cheating: 1) Communitarianism as the starting point; 2) Meritocracy as an ideology; 3) The relationship between meritocracy, academic cheating, and the reproduction of social inequality. These three main points are outlined below.

Communitarianism of Michael Sandel

There is a close relationship between Sandel's critics of meritocracy and his critics of liberalism. As a response to the individualistic lifestyle and the expansion of neo-liberalism in American society that coincided with the rise of liberalism, a system of political philosophy emerged to re-anchor the individual to the community, solidarity, and social purpose. The philosophical system in question is communitarianism (Cowden & Singh, 2017; Hung, 2023). Since the 1980s, communitarianism has argued with liberalism on government policies, civil society lifestyles, and public controversies such as abortion, pornography, religious freedom, and educational issues. Regarding education, liberals consider that education is important because it prepares individuals to compete in a competitive global market and gain individual goals. Conversely, for communitarians, education is crucial because it guides individuals to be good citizens who contribute to the progress of the nation (Hall, 2003; Rosenbaum, 2018). Communitarians have criticized the liberal educational model that is oriented too much towards market interests rather than improving students' abilities to think about issues of citizenship, justice, public ethics, and fundamental moral and civic questions.

In the debate between liberalism and communitarianism, Sandel's philosophical position is often called communitarian, although he objects to this label (Osnos, 2018; Sandel, 1998). Communitarianism is a political philosophy system founded by a group of Anglosaxon philosophers. They criticize the social contract theory developed by John Rawls and liberalism in general. In *A Theory of Justice*, following Kant's thought, Rawls' main thesis is that the ethics of politics cannot be based on the concept of happiness or good life (Madung, 2020; Rawls, 2009). Politics is not a scheme to determine a model of happiness and the concept of a good life but rather a rule of the game that ensures that no one citizen whose freedom is harmed.

Communitarian philosophers oppose liberalism claims. Their critique is aimed at the individualistic tendencies in Rawls's thought and liberalism in general and reminds the liberals of the importance of ethical demands and the shared concept of life as the moral foundation of democracy (Moore, 2019; Yudianta, 2020). In other words, communitarian philosophers challenge right-based ethics with positive views on citizenship and community. Sandel also underlines the lack of Rawls's political philosophy. Democracy requires the revival of republican traditions, namely togetherness among citizens and positive freedom for social aims, to oppose the corrosive effects of contemporary liberalism and the tyranny of the global market (Jonsson & Beach, 2013; Sandel, 2018).

Sandel's critique is a response to two main issues at the heart of the American public's disappointment with democracy. First, there is the fear that, individually and collectively, citizens are losing the foundational moral values of democracy, such as the common good and collective solidarity, which have been pushed aside by liberal political domination and borderless market globalization. Second, as a result of the privatization of the concept of a good life translated into liberal policies, moral community or moral orders in the family, religion, education, and nation-state are decomposed and destroyed.

According to Sandel, the philosophical roots of the collective solidarity crisis and the strong hegemony of the market, which damages the social bonds of citizenship and democracy is the unencumbered-self anthropology of liberalism. Sandel uses the term "unencumbered-self" to describe individuals who have lost their moral attachment to the shared world. Unencumbered-self is a floating self in spaces of freedom, unencumbered from community values, social attributes, formative goals, and the calculus of social interests. The unencumbered-self is not a selfish and evil being but an alienated, isolated, and lonely individual who is cut off from the shared world and social obligations (Hamudy, 2020; Moreau, 2021). Conversely, for Sandel, subject is the encumbered-self because every individual is always situated and embedded in a certain community with certain values. In the liberal paradigm, individual rights are guaranteed by the state, where those rights are not subject to the calculus of social goals but instead serve as a trump card for the individual in pursuing his or her own goals.

The political implication of this liberalism anthropology is the loss of public philosophy, which formulates a morally strong public discourse. The concept of unencumbered-self destroys the moral foundations of democratic citizenship with the idea that what separates citizens as individuals is stronger than what unites them as citizens (Humaeroh & Dewi, 2021; Rosenbaum, 2018). As a result, social polarization increased in contemporary society, and democracy plunged into crisis. Under the pressure of liberal emancipation, citizens lose their respect for the shared values and moral commitment of the welfare state. The more a sense of autonomy is understood as self-sufficiency, the more the bonds that embrace the citizens in the warm citizenship also become more fragile. It is not an accident that coincides with the strengthening of liberal ideas, meritocratic beliefs have also become more hegemonic.

Meritocracy as an Ideology

Since the late 19th century, the term meritocracy has been used to describe a liberal society that holds the principle of fair equality of opportunity. Philosophically, this principle was echoed by Rawls in the 20th century. Under this principle, meritocracy does not assume who deserves a higher position in life but only ensures that everyone has the equal or fair opportunity to get the advantageous positions in society (Rhode, 2022; Sandel, 2020). In other work, Sandel notes that the principle of equal fairness of opportunity is rooted in the principle of neutrality as a primary concept of contemporary liberalism in America (Huang,

2018; Huiling, 2018). Americans have long lived with meritocracy as an idea of individual progress in life unimpeded by background or race.

The term meritocracy was coined by the British sociologist, Michael Young, in his masterpiece, *The Rise of Meritocracy 1870-2033*. According to Young, meritocracy is a belief in individual achievement as the key to democracy and social progress. However, Young indicates the irony of meritocracy (Madung, 2020; Nagarajan et al., 2005). On the one hand, meritocracy values individual achievement and simultaneously opposes hierarchy, feudalism, aristocracy, and nepotism. On the other hand, in modern society, meritocracy reproduces new inequality when social privileges and the power of economic capital determine everything in life.

Sandel also argues that democracy is paradoxical. However, different from Young, Sandel understands meritocracy as an ideology in the Marxian sense, namely false consciousness. For Sandel, the ideology of meritocracy deceives us to believe in the fiction that individual achievement is everything. Of course, Sandel is not saying that individual achievement is not important. What Sandel criticized is the belief that individual achievement determines everything including one's social dignity and self-esteem (Kooli & Abadli, 2021; Sandel, 2020).

It should be noted that Sandel distinguishes meritocracy from merit. For Sandel, merit is a good idea compared to feudalism, plutocracy, and nepotism. Someone's achievement and ability in work and social roles are good in a practical sense. Merit also refers to standards and principles that determine how the economy, politics and society are ideally organized (Mubin & Roziqin, 2018; Segoshi & Poon, 2016). In politics, merit refers to a society led by people who are chosen based on of achievements, services, and abilities (Bagus, 2002; Utama, 2016). Merit is an incentive system that rewards the actions valued by society.

What Sandel rejects is not merit but meritocracy. Meritocracy is a certain ethics and belief in individual achievement or success. This belief forms the system of rule which is based on individual success and achievement. The system of rule is a way of allocating income, wealth, power, honor, and prestige. Meritocratic ethics is summed up in the proposition, previous study state that if opportunities are shared equally and fairly to each individual, the winners deserve to breathe their success to their heart's content, and for the losers, there is no one to blame but themselves (Sandel, 2020). For Sandel, this is a moral claim that goes beyond the practical proposition that it is a good thing to work hard and professionally in our social roles. This moral claim is the dark side of meritocracy.

Meritocracy propagates the belief that everyone is responsible for their destiny. As well as liberalism values individual autonomy, meritocracy also greatly values to the concept of individual responsibility. Because of the idea that everyone is responsible for their destiny, liberal societies like American society believe that successful people deserve good luck and those who fail are failed by their own doing (Sandel, 2020; Tan, 2023). For Sandel, being responsible is evidence of the human capacity to think and act autonomously. However, being responsible is different from the ethical core of meritocracy that human beings are fully responsible for their destiny in life (Madeira et al., 2019; Sandel, 2020). This rhetoric of individual responsibility ignores the role of the community, society, or environment that help someone to be a successful person.

The Reproduction of Inequality and Academic Scandal

Based on these meritocracy claims, we can say that meritocracy does not reduce inequality but rather sharpens it. Meritocracy even propagates arrogant morals by flattering the winners and insulting the losers (Sandel, 2018, 2020). Sandel's argument shares Michael Young's thought that if society accepts the logic of meritocracy, then there will be no sympathy for the poor and the losers (Hung, 2023; Tsai, 2021).

Someone can counter Sandel's argument by arguing that however bad, meritocracy is still needed in democratic societies as a philosophical and moral weapon against unjust and repressive hierarchies. Meritocracy provides everyone with the opportunity to compete freely and fairly (Krisnawati, 2022; Mubin & Roziqin, 2018). Without ignoring this important note, Sandel's critique is not only truthful but also useful. If we explore his argument deeply, we can find that the main problem of meritocracy is its insistence on mobility rather than equality. Meritocracy persuades everyone that individual success is more important than social goals because individual success that is achieved fairly can promote social progress (Mubin & Roziqin, 2018; Nagarajan et al., 2005).

However, instead of social progress, meritocracy creates social polarization and the decline of democracy because its assumptions do not fight inequality but exacerbate it. The main problem of meritocracy lies not in the absence of a level playing field but in the standards of achievement and the sorting culture (Nagarajan et al., 2005; Plattner, 2021). Meritocracy, for example, does not concentrate on the problem of inequality between the rich and the poor, the educated and the less educated, or different starting points in the meritocratic competition. For meritocracy, the hierarchy between the rich and the poor or the educated and the less educated in society is fair because it is a fair consequence of differences between individual ability, talent, and hard work. The rich are rich because they work harder and are smarter than others. In the same way, the poor are poor because they are lazy and lack of knowledge. This meritocratic assumption is not different from the racial assumption of white supremacy that there is something in Caucasian blood or genes that makes white men naturally more intelligent, more moral, and more capable than black people (Hung, 2023; Sandel, 2020).

This analysis introduces Sandel's thought of why under the tyranny of the meritocratic paradigm, education not only fails to end the inequality between humans but also becomes the new agent of social inequality. The idea that university diplomas and high academic degrees are the sources of social dignity and decent life is what Sandel calls academic credentials. Credentialism demeans those without a college degree and academic titles. It also creates an insidious prejudice against those who have not been to college as responsible and blameworthy for their failure and poverty. Credentialism has become a kind of credibility rhetoric that is deployed in moral and political battles far beyond the campus gates. In college, credentialism shows how individual achievement and success can be the source of tyranny. This credentialism spreads humiliation and hatred among the majority of workers who do not have college degrees in the US (Johnson, 2015; Sandel, 2020). This ugly sentiment was used by Trump as a weapon for his victory in the presidential election in 2016.

As previous study stated, when the credentialism and academic title or the stamp of "having graduated from an elite university" is valued too high, the meritocratic competition to get a ticket into the top university becomes more brutal (Sandel, 2020). Sandel cited high-profile bribery cases in the US in 2019. One of the names that played the mastermind of the admissions scam was William Singer, the organizer of the admissions scheme to the top colleges in the US. Thirty-three parents acknowledged that they paid millions of dollars to Singer to get a ticket to the elite college for their children.

Much of the anger at this scandal has focused on the practice of cheating and its unfairness, which is surely against the meritocratic premise that every student should be admitted to a university based on their ability and talent, not on factors beyond their control. However, what is equally troubling is "attitudes that fueled the cheating". Laying in the background of the academic scandals was the meritocratic assumption that admission to an elite university and getting a prestigious academic degree is a highly sought prize, a source of all luxuries and social self-esteem. Instead of betraying meritocracy ethics, these academic scandals are the damaging effects of meritocracy that are rarely realized by many people. The

rich can buy tickets to an elite university easily. Those with insider access could enter through the back or side doors. It happens when the meritocratic stamp, "having graduated from an elite university" or academic degree, has been regarded as the source of social recognition and higher self-esteem, a symbol of success, luxury, and individual victory.

Discussion

The result of this study presents a new perspective on meritocracy that is different from the previous studies (Niedlich et al., 2021; Patak et al., 2021; Segoshi & Poon, 2016). It proposes a new understanding that meritocracy is a moral claim that justifies and exacerbates the social injustice in society. The result of this study also adds to previous debates on the meritocratic claim that educational credentials and degrees are considered as the key indicators of individual achievement to win the strategic social and economic position (Kuppens et al., 2018; Mijs, 2016).

The meaning of the result of this study indicates the critical perspective concerning the issue of academic cheating among lecturers and academicians in Indonesia. One can easily argue, as previous studies concluded, that the practice of academic cheating in Indonesia is rooted in the crisis of meritocracy in higher education (Dewanti et al., 2020; Heriyati & Ekasari, 2020; Mushthofa et al., 2021). The conclusion of those previous studies is true if we understand meritocracy as the idea of merit. However, based on the result of this study, the conclusion is fallible. According to the result of this study, those lecturers and academicians commit fraud because a professorial rank is valued too highly in the society and has become a symbol of individual luxury, majesty, and victory. The more education in Indonesia is led by a meritocratic paradigm, the more unscrupulous practices to get prestigious academic degrees increase.

In line with the result of this study, even if the professorial rank is achieved fairly, it shows meritocratic hubris when the professional class insults workers without a college degree as stupid or uneducated. Under this meritocratic hubris, liberal progressive politics and leftist parties in many countries, including Indonesia, address inequality not by questioning the unjust structures but by reinforcing the rhetoric of mobility through pursuing college degrees and other academic titles from elite universities. Then, society is divided into the smart group (those with academic titles) and the dumb group (those without academic titles). As Thomas Nagel said, when racial and sexual injustice was reduced, a new inequality emerged, namely the hierarchy between the smart and the dumb (Gessler et al., 2021). As well as the social inequality between the rich and the poor, meritocracy also considers the hierarchy between the smart and the dumb as fair. If racism and sexism are condemned as moral disabilities, insulting those without college degrees as dumb is a legitimate moral prejudice. This hubris claim erodes the workers' social self-esteem and triggers their resentment against the political elites. This is in line with the previous research findings that meritocracy can humiliate low-status groups (Madeira et al., 2019).

But the rhetoric of rising does not just belong to the political elites, as a previous study found (Huang, 2018). Based on the result of this research, the meritocratic belief also lies in the heart of many students in the world. They generally pursue the title "having graduated from an elite university" as social capital to fight in a hyper-competitive market society. The result is compatible with the previous finding that belief in meritocracy is also based on the individual's desire of students to gain social recognition and higher grades (Chiang et al., 2022).

The result of this study is compatible with some previous studies. In their study on meritocracy in Singapore, reframe the tyranny of meritocracy as "monocentric meritocracy" or top-down meritocracy, namely the political hegemony of those who are successful in education and economy (Cheang & Choy, 2023). Similar argument that the support for

meritocracy tends to legitimize inequality rather than fight it (Mijs, 2016). Other study indicate that university belief in meritocracy can create justification for social inequality and affect how the students think of social class and economic inequality (Batruch et al., 2023). The research of the SMERU Research Institute shows that the thesis of meritocracy is wrong in the Indonesian context. The research shows that children of the poor tend to stay poor as adults. The income gap for children born into poor families is 87% lower than those born into rich families (Diningrat, 2019).

This research is in line with the finding of SMERU research that it is challenging to escape from the poverty chain because the poverty of the family prevents the children of the poor family from getting various opportunities for improving their destiny (Diningrat, 2019). The result of this study is also compatible with the previous finding that the building of democracy is being collapsed by the fact that free movements of goods, capital, and labor do not produce a new equilibrium but a new social gap with the full support of the plutocrats (Sandel, 2020; Tan, 2023). When the social esteem of a person is judged by the amount of money and educational degree, the contempt for those who are poor and those without a college degree is unstoppable (Neroni et al., 2022; Stosich, 2016). This hubris of morality is rising along with the increasing social inequality in our society.

It indicates that the increasing of social inequality is closely related to the education system that guides students to the ideology of personal success and individual pride, as represented by college degrees (Johnson, 2015; Sandel, 2020). Most of the leading colleges or universities today are more focused on raising the skills and practical-pragmatic orientation for individual careers in a competitive global economy than developing students' ability to think about issues of justice, public good, or fundamental moral and civic questions. It aligns with previous study's findings that moral and civic education or historical studies in universities that prepare students to evaluate critically public issues are out of concern. Moreover, the social sciences have become so specialized and only leave a little space for the big questions of political and moral philosophy which are capable of inviting students to critical reflection on every moral and political belief in society (Kaul, 2018; Masfiah et al., 2021).

A similar issue has become a problem in the education system in Indonesia according to some previous studies. Many educational policies in Indonesia, such as the Freedom of Learning policy, focus on the idea of linking and matching with the market approach or industry needs as the core approach (Hadinata, 2021). The technocratic educational system has contributed to the failure of government elites over the last few generations to take seriously the crisis of democracy and citizenship. If developing noble characters as democratic and responsible citizens is one of the main goals of education (Amka, 2019; Dewi & Wiarta, 2021), then education system in Indonesia has failed.

Using Paulo Freire's term, under the tyranny of meritocracy, education loses its function as a "conscientization" medium, and the academicians fail to become intellectuals who are involved, liberated, humanist, and in solidarity with "colonized people" (Bourn, 2021; Mahur et al., 2019). Freire used the term "conscientization" to describe the process by which humans become critically aware of the oppression that oppresses them and their capacity to change reality (Gomes, 2022); (Firdaus & Mariyat, 2017). However, based on the result of this study, in a society that exalts meritocracy, the education of the oppressed has disappeared.

The result of this study underlines the meaning that the meritocratic project in higher education is the root of educational failure to produce organic intellectuals. According to Gramsci, the organic intellectual is the intellectual who leaves the ivory tower to fight for the oppressed and becomes the agent of social change. The word "intellectual" represents connective, participatory, and humanistic functions rather than the ability to understand

reality (Arribas Lozano, 2018; Gramsci, 2003). Organic intellectuals are those who cultivate critical thinking and create counter-hegemonic practices to fight against the structures of social inequality (Mijs, 2021; Sousa, 2022; Stewart & Lucio, 2017). However, beyond those studies, the result of this study adds that the crisis of organic intellectuals today comes from the tyranny of meritocracy in education. Without organic intellectuals, the tyranny of meritocracy grows and becomes stronger. The more meritocratic ideology dominates education, the more education undermines its humanistic goals and visions of social equality.

The implication of the result of this study is that first, it enriches and deepens the critical debate in the philosophy of education about the pragmatic and humanistic orientation of education. By sharing a critique of meritocracy, it can balance the pragmatic goals of education with critical discourse (Madeira et al., 2019; Sandel, 2020). The second implication of this study is that it provides a new debatable paradigm for the critical social and philosophical discourse on the issue of academic scandals in Indonesia. This study proposes the argument that the academic scandal is driven by the ideology of meritocracy that values individual success too highly (Kuppens et al., 2018). Finally, the implication of this study is to encourage a sharper philosophical analysis of the relationship between meritocracy, academic cheating, social inequality, and the decline of democracy. The result of this study restores the critical function of education in advocating the struggle against injustice and realizing massive equality, liberation, and social justice.

4. CONCLUSION

This research has found that from Sandel's perspective, the root of academic fraud is not merely individual intellectual and moral crisis but essentially the educational system, paradigm, and ideology under the tyranny of meritocratic logic and assumption. The research gives meaning to the idea that even though academic scandals reflect the disobedience of meritocratic principles, what is more accurate and essential is the attitudes that fueled it. The attitudes point to the ideology that an academic degree is a highly sought prize, the source of all luxuries in life, and the guarantee of self-esteem and social status in society. The research promotes the awareness that under the tyranny of meritocracy, education not only undermines its humanistic role but also becomes the new factory of social inequality. Therefore, the research has implications for revitalizing the Indonesian education system toward radical transformation at the paradigmatic level: system, ideology, and vision.

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