

Great Defense Testimonial

Dissertation: Peter Wedekind, “Justification and Limits of State Coercion in Liberal Democracies: Reconciling Binding Welfare State Policies and a Reformed Classical Liberalism,” Charles University, Prague, July 2022.

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This testimonial entails elements from the small defense testimonial and responses to edits Wedekind has completed since the small defense took place.

The state of meritocracy has preoccupied political theorists for ages, but perhaps no more intensely than in the last two decades. Peter Wedekind’s dissertation is a timely study that does an excellent job detailing the stakes in the debate over meritocracy. It provides a persuasive and nuanced defense of a classical liberal approach to how the advantages of meritocracy can be preserved while some of its pernicious consequences be avoided. Wedekind argues that the key to a sustainable and equitable meritocracy is support for public higher education. Modern society can never be perfect, Wedekind notes. It is about the balance that is struck among feasible alternatives. For all too long, he avers, the debate about meritocracy has been between some form of libertarian neoliberalism on the one side and some form of communitarian or social welfarist alternative on the other hand. These are stark alternatives that hide a middle ground, which is where Wedekind situates classical liberalism. From Wedekind’s perspective, the latter accepts the imperfections of the world in which we live and is adaptive in ways that provide for equality (of opportunity) and ultimately also equity in outcomes while preserving individual liberty.

Wedekind defends a classical liberal interpretation of meritocracy that stands in sharp contrast to neoliberal and libertarian perspectives on meritocracy, and that simultaneously distances itself from communitarian and social welfarist models. He uses support for public education as an example of how and why government programs are critical for achieving a just society and argues that such programs are compatible with classical liberalism. In recent years, communitarian theorists like Michael Sandel have rejected meritocratic models on the basis that they reinforce inequalities and fail to produce equality in outcome (equity). Meanwhile,

neoliberals and libertarians have been tone-deaf to the pernicious, and one may argue self-undermining aspects of the neoliberal variant of meritocracy that has failed to prevent massive inequality from undercutting its own legitimacy. Wedekind carefully carves out a middle space between the two sides and constructs a classical liberal defense for meritocracy that justifies limited state intervention in the provision of higher education. From Wedekind's perspective, publicly funded higher education is essential to a system of meritocracy and avoids flaws of the libertarian variety that shaped 20 years of marketization in higher education. The latter produced significantly higher levels of inequality and contributed to political polarization than is much greater than its proponents ever suggested could be the case. Aggressive populism is the legacy of this reality. Though for very different reasons, Wedekind suggest that social welfarist and communitarian perspectives could potentially also be self-undermining, especially with respect to protecting individual liberty. This is what leads him to argue in favor of a classical liberal alternative. He does it with great success.

I found myself enthralled by Wedekind's careful dissection of the authors he covers. The early analysis of Foucault is notably strong, as are those later on of the thought of Sandel, Wooldridge, Nozick, Dworkin, and Sterba. In later chapters, Wedekind expands to cover the thought of John Locke, David Miller, Friedrich Hayek, Adrian Wooldridge, and others.

Since the small defense, Wedekind has rounded out his analysis in several places, and I am fully content with revisions. I found the extended discussion of Adam Smith notably good and important. I also appreciated the additional attention that the concept of meritocracy has been given, the manner in which Wedekind has inserted strategically placed extensions and qualifications, and the more assertive conclusion.

I have no reservations with the current manuscript. Indeed, I find it extremely strong and learned a lot from the engaging, deep, and original analysis that Wedekind provides in his timely dissection of classical liberal in the context of contemporary developments in higher education.