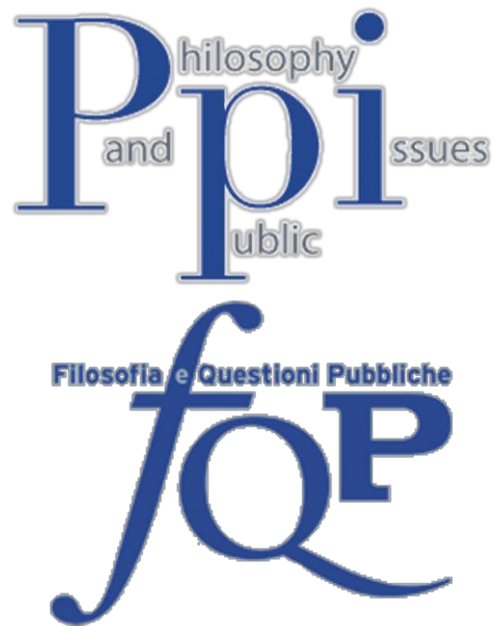


SYMPOSIUM  
THE CHINA MODEL



MORE THAN A CHINA MODEL  
BELL'S BOOK MIGHT BE EVEN MORE  
CONSEQUENTIAL THAN  
ITS AUTHOR THINKS

BY  
CRISTOPHER-TEODOR UGLEA

[THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK]

# More Than a China Model Bell's Book Might Be Even More Consequential Than Its Author Thinks

Cristopher-Teodor Uglea

**I**n his most controversial and misunderstood book so far, Daniel Bell<sup>1</sup> makes compelling arguments in favor of political meritocracy, which he aims to set as the new standard for assessing China's progress, rather than the (Western) standard of electoral democracy. Accused by his critics of being an apologist of China's communist regime and a denigrator of democracy,<sup>2</sup> professor Bell is actually neither. In essence, he simply points out that everyone prefers to be led by competent and virtuous politicians, and therefore the quality of a political system should be judged by how well it manages to promote such leaders with "superior ability", not by how many people are involved in the (s)election process.

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, "Embarrassed meritocrats, Westerners who laud a Chinese meritocracy continue to miss the point", *The Economist*, October 2012, <http://www.economist.com/news/china/21565228-westerners-who-laud-chinese-meritocracy-continue-miss-point-embarrassed-meritocrats/>, Andrew J. Nathan, "Beijing Bull: The Bogue China Model", *The National Interest*, October 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/beijing-bull-the-bogue-china-model-14107>, James Griffiths, "Democracy is not a perfect system, but the Chinese meritocracy is pure fantasy", *Shanghaiist*, November 2012, [http://shanghaiist.com/2012/11/26/democracy\\_might\\_not\\_be\\_a\\_miracle\\_cu.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2012/11/26/democracy_might_not_be_a_miracle_cu.php), accessed 02.12.2017.

Bell's boldest claim, however, is that China has developed such a system (if still imperfect) of "political meritocracy", that is, the selection of leaders based on merit. In the meanwhile, the Western electoral democracies have raised the flawed dogma of "one person, one vote" to "almost sacred status", as the sole acceptable mechanism for selecting leaders. These assertions could be disturbing for a Western reader, but going through the whole book, one discovers that the Canadian professor's views are actually more complex and carefully nuanced. For Daniel Bell, political meritocracy and electoral democracy are not mutually exclusive, and "the China model" is actually a combination of both. He terms this system a "vertical democratic meritocracy, meaning democracy at lower levels of government, with the political system becoming progressively more meritocratic at higher levels of government".<sup>3</sup>

Rather than discussing the idea that the CCP is consistently selecting China's cream of the crop while the West is busy counting heads instead of merits, the following article takes a different angle. My intervention will address Bell's reluctance to recognize that his theory is fully operational outside China. Bell insists that this "China model" is neither applicable nor replicable in its complete "vertical democratic meritocracy" form anywhere else in the world. This view coincides with the mainstream view in China, which is that Beijing is not seeking to export its political model abroad. Moreover, it is argued, China's system has a very particular series of "Chinese characteristics", rooted in its rich history and culture and impossible to find elsewhere. For Bell, this might also seem like a more solid academic argument, since he is not claiming the universality of his model, but merely that it works well for China.

<sup>3</sup> *The China Model*, p. xiii.

While China's civilization is indisputably unique and impossible to reproduce elsewhere, Bell's idea of a combination of democracy and meritocracy is not necessarily so. The main point of my intervention is to show that it might be counterproductive to firmly state that the model of "vertical democratic meritocracy" is something only China can access fully. Such an approach unnecessarily limits the reach of an extremely solid conceptual foundation – and make no mistake, Bell's book is one of great intellectual force. If political meritocracy in this form is indeed a model (as the title of the book states), and not an accident of history, the reader is entitled to ask what it has to say about other societies. Secondly, the almost exclusive focus on China puts the whole debate on the wrong track. Instead of engaging with Daniel Bell's argument more directly on a conceptual level, most critics have countered by bashing China and praising the West. Rather, a real intellectual debate on the topic should discuss the implications of a possible shift of paradigm in political science from electoral democracy to political meritocracy (with the hybrid version vertical democratic meritocracy somewhere in between).

To prove the relevance of Bell's conceptual framework outside China, I will briefly show that the standard of political meritocracy can be successfully applied to the European Union. Using Bell's model I have been able to shed light on an unknown aspect of the EU, and in the aftermath of my experiment, the claim that the vertical political meritocracy is "China only" might seem a bit unnatural.

## I

### **Daniel Bell's Ideas of Political Meritocracy and Their Self-Imposed Limitations**

Although a declared fan of political meritocracy, Bell admits that such a system is impractical in its pure form, because it has a huge problem of legitimacy. No system can simply exclude the vast majority of the people from governance, in favor of a cast of “meritocrats”, however selected. Consequently, Daniel Bell recognizes that the ideal model is a combination between democracy and meritocracy, one he calls “vertical democratic meritocracy”. Drawing on both Western and Chinese thinkers, Bell correctly argues that democracy seems to work better in small communities, at the local level, where “people have more knowledge of the [...] leaders they choose”, “issues are relatively straightforward and easy to understand”, and “mistakes are less costly”.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, at the top, issues are more difficult to understand by the general public. In addition, “meritocratically selected leaders can make long-term-oriented decisions that consider the interests of all relevant stakeholders, including future generations and people living outside the state”.<sup>5</sup> In practice, according to Bell, China’s actual system (“the China Model”) is not only meritocratic at the top and democratic at the bottom, but also presents a middle level with “room for experimentation”. In between the central government and the local authorities, regions or cities implement special economic zones or different political and social reforms, and the country leadership decides which pilot projects are working and will be implemented at a national level.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p.168.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p.172.

After introducing this strong conceptual framework of a system combining the best of democracy and meritocracy, Bell is surprisingly arguing that “the model—democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top—is unique to China” and that “the whole package [...] cannot be readily adopted by countries with a different history and culture”.<sup>6</sup> Stemming from its Confucian tradition, the Chinese society highly values leaders with superior ability, primarily for their capacity to maintain social harmony. This view, Bell argues, is different from the Western tradition of competitive individualism.

Further diving into Bell’s arguments about the limitations of this model, we find out that meritocracy is not possible outside a one-party system, (“the whole thing can be implemented only by a ruling organization similar to the CCP”)<sup>7</sup> and the electoral cycles in democracies would provide no incentive for experimentation, as pilot-projects would not bring votes immediately. More problematic even, the West can never implement meritocracy at the top. Once people are given the right to vote for top leaders, they will never give that right away, and in a clever twist of Fukuyama’s words, Bell states that “democracy in the form of one person, one vote really is the end of history, but in the bad sense that it cannot be improved”.<sup>8</sup> If it doesn’t have access to “the whole package” then, the West can only try to imitate some of China’s practices, like the voters starting to actually vote for people of superior ability (which probably Bell himself also thinks it’s unlikely).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 180, 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p.195.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p.166.

Finally, why is not China more attractive, if its system is so good? For now, “China is not good enough (in terms of governance), and the United States not bad enough, for China’s political meritocracy to exercise much soft power abroad. But things can change and China may pose more of a normative challenge to electoral democracies in the future”.<sup>9</sup>

Bell’s model, however, is stronger than the author might have thought while writing those lines. Bold when it came to conceptualizing his “China model” or showing the limitations of democracy, the Canadian professor became very prudent when speaking about its exportability. The only extended comparison in the book is that with the United States, but this is also misleading. The Chinese love to compare themselves with the Americans, and their strong belief, both for the Americans and the Chinese, in their exceptionalism, makes it easy to infer that there must be some fundamental factors (cultural or otherwise) determining that concepts that work in China must not be fully operational in the West.

This “model” that is valid just for China, it’s replicable only in bits and pieces, and only when the decline of democracy will become more visible, has, it seems to me, some self-imposed limitations. The great French historian Fernand Braudel once argued that models are like boats; you build them in your own waters, and then let them flow in unfamiliar seas, in order to discover their reach. At some point, closer or further away, the ship will sink, showing its limits. There is little value in maintaining from the start that the ship is only good in the “Chinese” waters it was build in, and only bits of it can be used to sail on other seas.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 36.



## II

### **What the Standard of Political Meritocracy Has to Say About the European Union**

Daniel Bell developed his model starting from the premise that democracy does not explain China's rise. The idea to try and evaluate the European Union by the standard of political meritocracy occurred to me when I started asking Daniel Bell's question in reverse. As European, I have lived to hear constant criticism that the EU is not sufficiently democratic. However, by studying its history I realized that there actually seems to be a negative correlation between the two: the more democratic the EU became, the less effective.<sup>10</sup> Is democracy EU's problem, then? The conclusion that the EU should be less democratic was obviously wrong, but it is clear that measuring the EU by the standard of democracy is misleading. Fortunately, Bell's strong conceptual framework provides a way out of this dilemma. What if we judge EU's progress by the standards of political meritocracy, instead of democracy? On this count, I will show that the Union has become less and less meritocratic and this partially accounts for its crisis.

To the extent that my experiment of applying Bell's conceptual framework to the European Union is successful, a new conceptual paradigm is born, one in which political meritocracy (with its version of "vertical democratic meritocracy") is an alternative standard to measure progress, in China and the world. In the next two sections I will judge the EU

<sup>10</sup> Thomas König, "Divergence or Convergence? From Ever-Growing to Ever-Slowing European Legislative Decision Making: Divergence or Convergence?," *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (2007): 417–44.

by both standards, democracy and meritocracy and point out what implications this endeavor has for Bell's theory.

### *The EU Judged by the Standard of Democracy*

Since there is no “European nation” and no actual precedent for the EU, the Union is defined by its institutions, and this is why they are disproportionately more important in this case.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it makes sense methodologically to focus on its institutions in order to assess the democracy and meritocracy at the EU level. One of the critiques that is often leveled against the EU is that it is undemocratic and disconnected from the realities of the citizens it should serve.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, an analysis of the EU institutions nowadays shows that, although the integration started with undemocratic institutions, this aspect has radically changed in time.

The institutional history of the European integration can be said to begin in 1951, with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The most important institution was then the “High Authority”, a supranational executive branch, led by the legendary Jean Monnet. The powers of the High Authority were huge, and its members were appointed, not elected. As a check on the High Authority's powers, there was also a Common Assembly, with (again) appointed members from national parliaments, but its attributions were very limited. A third institution was the Special Council formed of the ministers of the

<sup>11</sup> John Peterson and Michael Shackleton (ed.), *The Institutions of the European Union*, 3rd ed (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, “Why There Is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, no. 3 (2006): 533–62.

member countries.<sup>13</sup> The ECSC was, by Western standards, profoundly undemocratic, and the citizens had very little control on the decisions that were made. None of ECSC officials was directly elected by the people. The only type of democracy it could claim ran through the democratic processes in the member states.

The next more than 60 years have seen the gradual democratization of the European institutions;<sup>14</sup> the High Authority evolved into the European Commission, the Special Council into the Council of the European Union (also called the Council of Ministers) and the Common Assembly into the European Parliament. Additionally, a new institution was formed in 1974, the European Council, which reunites the heads of state or of government of all 28 (27!?) member countries. Nowadays democracy in the form of one person, one vote is present at virtually every level of EU institutions. Thus, the European Council consists of leaders that have been elected in their countries, while the Council of Ministers consists of national ministers (voted in national parliaments). The MEPs are directly elected by the European citizens, starting with 1979. Of the main institutions, the only body that can be said to be “less democratic”<sup>15</sup> would be the Commission.<sup>16</sup> However, its members and President are appointed by the member states (that is, by

<sup>13</sup> Also a Court of Justice, which is not directly the focus of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Lord and Erika Harris, *Democracy in the New Europe*, The New Europe Series (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Myrto Tsakatika, “Claims to Legitimacy: The European Commission between Continuity and Change,” *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005): 193–220.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart A Brown, *The European Commission and Europe’s Democratic Process: Why the EU’s Executive Faces an Uncertain Future*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

elected governments), and are confirmed by the directly-elected European Parliament.

Judged by the standard of democracy, the European Union should be thriving, and its legitimacy to EU citizens should be rock solid. Instead, the EU is in crisis at almost every level, and the voices that don't feel represented by Brussels are as loud as ever, if not louder. By the standard, of democracy, the EU should be the success story of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while China should be presented as a declining civilization. In fact, it is the other way around, and the model of political meritocracy might explain why.

### *The EU Judged by the Standard of Political Meritocracy*

As Bell shows, democracy and meritocracy can coexist, but not at the top. The real problem was that for the European Union, elective democracy came at the expense of meritocracy at the top. The High Authority (the precursor of the Commission) was initially created as a supranational meritocratic body to exercise the leadership of the European institutions. In time, however, although the body remained supranational and, generally speaking, meritocratic, its powers were greatly decreased, while the power of the democratic institutions increased at the top levels.

Jean Monnet was the first President of the High Authority, and he intended to build the institution as “the engine of Europe”.<sup>17</sup> He had in mind a supranational body to transcend national interest. The High Authority was supposed to be the

<sup>17</sup> John Peterson and Michael Shackleton (ed.), *The Institutions of the European Union*, 3rd ed (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

agenda setter for the European integration. Monnet wanted a leadership role for the High Authority (hence the name), whose members should have been appointed by the member states by merit (two for the larger states, one for the smaller ones, and one President agreed upon by all of them). As such, I think it is fair to assess that Monnet wanted a meritocratic body as the most important European institution. The body contained, however, the seeds of its decline in the selection process (and Daniel Bell spends a lot of time talking about the selection process in a meritocracy). Having the power to appoint the members of the High Authority, the resources and the political legitimacy, the states soon worked together to curtail its powers, fighting under the flag of “more elective democracy” at the European level. Thus, instead of a harmonious mixture, democracy came at the expense of meritocracy.

All this happened gradually. After the Treaty of Rome (1958), two other parallel institutions appeared: the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, whose executive bodies were called “Commission”, not “High Authority” – a name deemed too grandiose. In 1965, the two Commissions and the High Authority were merged into a “Commission of the European Communities”, which later on became the “European Commission”. Although the body maintained, in theory, its monopoly on legislative initiative, the other two bodies, the Common Assembly (later on the European Parliament) and the Special Council (later on the Council of Ministers) greatly increased their powers. The Assembly (changing its name to Parliament in 1962), has since received the power to confirm (or not) the Commissioners and the Commission President, its democratic legitimacy being greatly increased by direct election in every member countries for the MEPs. The Special Council that had very limited powers in the beginning evolved into the Council of the European Union, and

its powers greatly increased after the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, now acting as co-legislator with the EP. The European Council's role of "agenda-setter" has also limited, once more, the powers of the Commission to lead the EU.

The narrative above is a much simplified account of events that are very complex, but I think it is safe to conclude that the High Authority, initially conceived as a meritocratic body at the top of the European institutions, has since lost most of its powers. The EU was some sort of China in reverse, in terms of political meritocracy. If we were to take Bell's narrative at face value, China strengthened its process of meritocratic selection of leaders at the top, and its democratic processes at the bottom, while leaving room for experimentation in between. Meanwhile, the EU implemented elective democracy at the top, middle and bottom, with no discernible distinction and little room for experimentation.

### III

#### **What My Experiment Proves**

As announced above, my brief case-study confirms the explanatory value of Bell's theory outside China, with little reference to the distinct Chinese characteristics of the model. The Canadian political scientist is right to claim that the closer to the top, the less functional democracy becomes (now, Brussels is seen as a faraway place for most of the EU citizens, and its exact attributions are unclear for everyone save a handful of specialists). Bell is also right about the "slippery-slope" effect of the one person, one vote mechanism. Once the European Parliament started being directly elected, it used its legitimacy as a weapon to absorb more powers from the unelected Commission,

and the governments of the member states quite often rest on their support at home to criticize Brussels as illegitimate.

For a start, the standard of political meritocracy theorized by Bell might be able to explain, not only China's success, but also Europe's decline, and that in itself is impressive. Of course, the author will probably claim that this is exactly what he meant when he said that his "China model" is not applicable anywhere else in the world: the Western one person, one vote dogma would wreck the whole system from the top. In a sense, this is exactly what happened with the EU. But here's the catch, two of them.

1. In social sciences, a veritable model has an explanatory power going both ways: if it explains success, it should also explain why others failed, under similar circumstances. For Bell, there seems to be two separate worlds, China and the West. China's raise comes with the model of political meritocracy, the West's decline is due to the decline of democracy with its separate causes. What if both processes are more closely related than initially thought, and, what if, the decline of Western democracies is also partially explained by a decline in their meritocratic institutions or characteristics, under the assault of one person, one vote mechanisms? This hypothesis seems worthwhile to explore in future studies.

2. Nothing in EU's institutional decline was predetermined or unavoidable because of European peoples' incapacity to accept meritocracy. Rather, it was a series of historical factors (the speed and the particular circumstances of EU expansion in a post-Cold War context) and poor decisions of institutional reform which determined it. Recently, the EU Commission rekindled the debate around EU reform by publishing a *White Paper on the Future of Europe*, which offered five scenarios for EU reform. The third option, called "those who want more do more" opens the door for experimentation, where regional

groupings of countries implement measures which could potentially be applied at EU level (somewhat like Bell's middle level in the China model), while the fourth option, "doing less more efficiently" suggest a more clear division between the attributions of the European and national institutions (which could act similar to Bell's top and bottom). There is no fundamental obstacle in the way of the EU implementing a reform involving more meritocracy at the top, one person, one vote at the bottom and experimentation in the middle. There wasn't a clear obstacle to begin with, and the EU could have evolved towards something close to "the China model", were the initial plans for the Commission as the "engine of Europe" to be carried through. In reality Bell is probably exaggerating the "almost sacred" status of the one person, one vote mechanism for the top leaders. The practice of indirect elections, the sometimes massive absenteeism and widespread disappointment in democracies that one's individual vote doesn't really matter anyway, as well as the example of a supranational body such as the European Union, point out that there isn't really such a religious, set in stone, practice of direct elections for leaders. It is rather a perceived lack of viable options that got us here. Now, as in the past, a rational European citizen would probably end up accepting a Union led by meritocrats, as long as there is a trusted system of selecting them and solid democratic practices at a local and national level. Such an option was never explicitly presented, and this is why Bell's book should be read and outside China too.

In conclusion, the main purpose of my intervention was to argue that the "ship" of "vertical political meritocracy" can be let go and sail different seas than the ones in which it was built. I firmly believe that Daniel Bell's *The China Model* is a brilliant book, and there is scope for the model to be applied more



broadly. By claiming that China has discovered a better system to which others only have partial access, Bell has encouraged his critics to take aim at China and deny its political meritocracy, while praising the Western democracy. The conceptual debate needs to go beyond this, and the paradigm of political meritocracy and vertical democratic meritocracy needs to be tested in different waters. This ship is ready to set sail.

*Tsinghua University*