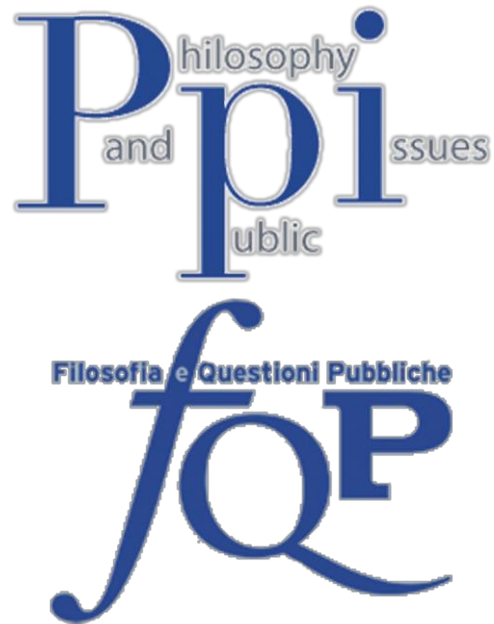# THE CHINA MODEL
POLITICAL MERITOCRACY AND THE
LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY

BY

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The China Model
Political Meritocracy and
the Limits of Democracy

Luigi Caranti

T he book by Daniel A. Bell is intended to be provocative and in large part succeeds.[1] The main thesis is that democracy, narrowly construed as a one person, one vote principle, is not only less perfect and beyond criticism as Western common sense assumes, but intrinsically flawed and comparatively worse than the alternative of political meritocracy. Bell lives in Beijing where he has been teaching for a decade after an academic experience in Singapore. The author thus has firsthand experience of the two political systems that best approximate the ideal of anti-democratic political meritocracy defended in the book. Moreover, he is—I hope he will agree with this characterization—a secular believer in Confucianism, which is not merely the dominant and most widespread moral/religious culture in China, recently rediscovered by the Communist party as a valid alternative to Marxist-Leninist ideology, but itself a system that supports merit as a criterion to select political leaders.

Bell's analysis is particularly welcome because it complements a now rising and perhaps too long awaited debate among Western normative theorists about the possibility that, after all, democracy may not be the "least bad" political system. Bell uses criticisms of

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[1] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015). Parenthetical references refer to this text.

democracy already present in political theory and originally reinterprets them. Democracy has a tendency to prioritize electors' short term interests at the expenses of future generations. It leans towards various forms of tyranny—of the majority famously, but also of the minority, either in the form of wealthy sectors exercising excessive political influence or of various small groups that have a *de facto* veto power. Democracy also seems to be intrinsically unfair to those who are not part of the political community and yet are influenced by the policies decided 'within'. Finally, it promotes a divisive and bellicose public spirit as a result of the competition among parties and individuals.

To counter the limits of democracy the author proposes to pay attention to the experience of political systems that are often more criticized than understood, in particular the form of government that is now in power in the People's Republic of China. Bell's general line of thought is to suggest that—normatively speaking—the best political system, where 'best' is intuitively understood as most efficient at promoting the community's well being, is a system in which democratic elements are combined with 'meritocratic' ones. In particular, we should abandon the one person, one vote principle to (s)elect the central level of government. Only leaders selected on the basis of their proven intellectual and moral abilities should be appointed.

Every standard political theorist of the West has much to learn from Bell's book, at least given his firsthand knowledge of a system we know at best from books and papers (if we do). My task here, however, is more that of highlighting problematic points in Bell's theory rather than praising its numerous virtues. I would like to raise a number of issues that seems to be either not sufficiently developed or clearly stated and yet still problematic. These points are strongly related with one another and what I say

about one will be further clarified and hopefully strengthened by what I say about the others.

To begin with, the comparative assessment of democracy and meritocracy is mainly run by taking the models of the USA and China. I fear that this choice make Bell's case not 'harder', as he says (p. 20), but too easy. On the one hand, of all anti-democratic countries China is certainly not the worst, and even the harshest critic of autocracy could not deny China's great economic success in the last decades, with the eradication of poverty for large sectors of its population. On the other hand, and this is the central point, it is very questionable that the USA is the best democracy one could find out there, especially if one focuses on democracy's shortcomings mentioned above.

Secondly, I would like to question Bell's basic notion of politics. The reader (I, at least) often has the impression that politics is considered all about finding efficient means for pre-established or at least agreed-upon goals. Given this assumption, it is then asked whether democracy or political meritocracy is better equipped to reached those goals. However, it is reasonable to assume that part of the political life is about deciding which goals we want to pursue collectively, not merely who has the best plan to reach unproblematic and largely shared ones. If this is true, then the case in favor of political meritocracy becomes immediately harder. Leaders non-democratically selected will have choose the ends of the political community, and even intuitively their higher intellectual and moral abilities will look too thin as a legitimizing basis to do that. Strictly related is the problem of deciding who is a *moral* leader. It is relatively easy to understand the areas of knowledge a good politician needs to master, but it is less clear what makes a leader ethically up to the task, unless one understands that in the narrow sense of uncorrupt. Who is a moral politician seems to depend on what

goals matter to us as a collective body, which takes us back to the previous point.

Thirdly, if everything Bell says about the flaws of democracy and the virtues of political meritocracy is correct, then one wonders why he still wants, as he does, democracy at the lower levels of government. It may be true, as he says (p.171), that the issues the central governments deals with are both more difficult and more impactful than the ones local leaders usually face. And yet most of the reasons Bell presents to show that political meritocrats would do better than elected leaders seem to be relevant also for the selection of local leaders. After all, it is debatable that the quality of our life does not depend considerably on the kind of leaders we are most in contact with.

Fourthly, I have serious reservations about the referendum against elected democracy Bell suggests to back up the legitimacy of CCP's rule in China. As far as I can see, but I may have missed something because the point is too trivial, the choice Chinese people would have is between leaving things as they are and having 'a more open form of political meritocracy, with more freedom of speech and more freedom to form social organizations, but without one person, one vote to chose top leaders' (p.176). If this is the option, a victory of the yes would count as a support for a non-democratic rule in the same way in which my preference for an ice-cream with some chocolate over one with none counts as my disliking chocolate.

The fifth point, and perhaps most important, is the following. Bell's proposal is similar to the praise of epistocracy (considered as a better alternative to democracy) Jason Brennan has recently put forward.[2] It is similar to the extent that they share both the

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[2] J. Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016).

conviction that the average voter is often uninformed or too partisan (Brennan's categories of 'hobbits' and 'hooligans') and a preference for a government by the most knowledgeable. Bell is therefore vulnerable to all powerful replies Brennan attracted, most importantly the ones by Christiano.[3] We will have to assess these criticisms while deciding whether the point of dissimilarity between Bell and Brennan—the fact that only Bell insists in a non-occasional manner on the necessity that leaders be selected according to moral, not only intellectual merit—is sufficient to render Bell's proposal immune from Christiano's attacks.

I
The Champion of Democracy
Making One's Case Hard or Easy?

Bell's book is a work in political theory with tentatively universal validity. What he says about democracy and meritocracy is meant to apply in general, not only to certain specific political and social contexts. However, the book is also intended a) as a comparative analysis between the political systems of the two most powerful economies currently competing for world leadership and b) as a normative guidance for political reform in China. How harmoniously these two dimensions sit together is in itself an interesting question which I won't be able to pursue here. What I want to ask is whether selecting the USA as the 'champion' of democracy and China as the best approximation to political meritocracy does not weaken the theory. Bell thinks (p. 20) that referring to the USA—the most ancient and solid

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[3] T. Christiano, Review of *Against Democracy*, by J. Brennan (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016), available at http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/against-democracy/.

democracy—makes his case against democracy harder. I doubt that.

Let us focus on the major shortcomings Bell sees in democracy. It will be recalled that, leaving aside for the moment the problems of voters ignorance and of incompetent leadership which we will deal with later, these are: a) a tendency to prioritize electors' short term interests, b) the tyranny of the majority, c) the tyranny of the minority (mainly understood as tyranny of the wealthiest), d) unfairness to outsiders and e) promotion of divisive and bellicose public spirit. My simple question here is the extent to which these 'structural' shortcomings apply to rather egalitarian and European-style democracies such as Sweden or Germany. The European welfare democracies (but something similar could be said for Canada) are significantly different than the USA and on all counts listed by Bell fare much better. Regarding the charge of tyranny of the ignorant, partisan, and/or irrational majority, with its more or less inevitable outcome of incompetent/unfair leadership, both Scandinavian governments and German leaders can hardly be charged with that. Citizens are hardly ignorant given the good functioning of public schools and universities, the free debates on public issues going on TV and largely read newspapers, the uncensored debate going on in social media and a general commitment to the value of pluralism in the source of information. Obviously this is not to say that all or most Germans or Swedes are experts in political matters or have a grip on the complexities of our world. But certainly, unlike most sectors of the American population, they have the means to become informed if they want and to listen to the 'whistle blowing' of experts against charlatans. Think of the way in which most European democracies remained faithful to their commitment to a common currency during the last economic crisis in spite of the many populist forces asking for a return to their national currency. Similarly, think of the way in which these

countries have rejected the rise of racism against immigrants despite the attempt of the extreme right to speculate on people's fears. And finally, think how likely would be for Germany or Sweden to elect someone like Donald Trump as head of the executive. Given the more egalitarian and welfare oriented nature of North-European democracies, it is also fair to say that they are relatively immune from the second of Bell's charges, the tyranny of a wealthy minority. I would add that given their rather well tested and by now old electoral systems, those democracies are also capable of making even difficult decisions (think of the sudden opening of the German borders in 2015 to receive immigrants) without being vetoed by minorities or interest groups. Thirdly, given German, Scandinavian and to a certain extent generally European commitment to issues such as climate change and migrants/refugees' rights, also what Bell calls the tyranny of the voting community does not seem to affect terribly those democracies. This is not to say that national interest at times stands in the way of policies that would favor a more balanced harmonization of interests of the voting community and, say, the human rights of migrants. Think of the belated endorsement by Germany of the principle that refugees arriving to the Greek or Italian shores cannot be a problem for Greece and Italy only. Also think of the questionable decision to outsource to Erdogan's Turkey the duty to evaluate the request for refugee status of migrants – most of whom moving from conflict-prone areas such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Still, one would have a hard case showing that these democracies are fully under the yoke of a short-sighted and egoistic community of voters. Sweden is after all the country that has the highest refugees/citizens ratio.

Lastly, regarding the tyranny of the competitive individuals and the promotion of a bellicose public spirit, much should be said about the dangers of aiming at a 'harmonious' public sphere.

Here, quite frankly, I simply think China has very little to teach given the systematic clampdown on free press and free flows of information the CCP implements. Incidentally, but not marginally, there is a concrete risk that even the best political meritocracy will have to keep on obstructing the admittedly often irrational orientations of the public opinion. What less violent ways would be in fact open to political meritocracy to silence a rising of a public discontent about the government policies, not to mention a possible discontent about the very meritocratic, anti-democratic nature of the system? But let's concede that the non-bellicose nature of political confrontation is a legitimate criterion for evaluating political systems. While US campaigns usually are rather poisonous and negative advertising against political opponents is heavily used, even a superficial look at the last campaigns in the other democracies we indicated do not seem to signal the degeneration of public spirit Bell alludes to.

If democracies perhaps less ancient and yet demonstrably more inclusive than the USA fare better on Bell's favorite four democratic shortcomings, then one wonders whether the meritocratic alternatives Bell proposes (e.g. the Singapore-style political meritocracy and China's exams system) are that attractive given the compression of individual freedom and civic/political rights they involve (and that Bell readily admits).

II

A Merely Technical Notion of Politics?

A more theoretical point concerns the notion of politics Bell operates with. The reader often gets the impression that for Bell politics is mainly about efficiently implementing pre-established goals. Different political systems are evaluated according to the efficiency in which non-controversial and universal goals such as

the economic development of the society, the eradication of poverty and the fight against unemployment are pursued. Politics is assumed to be about finding the best means for certain goals, not about setting those goals. If this captures the way in which Bell sees politics—more or less consciously—we need to ask how solid this conceptualization is. As political philosophers we know well that even apparent non-controversial political goals such as 'the well-being of the community' or 'the modernization of the society' are indeed ambiguous and controversial. Do we want to pursue the well being of the political community at the expense of the human rights of migrants or not? By 'well being of the political community' do we mean the maximization of societal happiness as measured by the sum of pleasures and displeasures of each member of the society? Many would disagree. These questions attract legitimate and reasonable disagreement which cannot be cured by a better knowledge, but ultimately by a *choice* made by the political community. Surely Bell could reply that not all choices of a political community are moral. Knowledge *and* moral political leaders would know better than a voting crowd how to disambiguate those apparently non-controversial goals. Perhaps not accidentally Bell defines legitimacy as government that is 'morally justified in the eyes of the people."

And yet things are not so simple. To begin with, most countries (and China is no exception) host a pluralism of moral orientations, at the individual and collective level. Hence the very idea of disambiguating in the 'moral' way sounds problematic. Democracies have a less than perfect yet straightforward way of solving the epistemic vagueness of those ecumenical goals. Within the limits set by constitutional guarantees, the majoritarian interpretation becomes the one assumed by political institutions. Political meritocracy, to the contrary, seems to be bound to select the disambiguation dictated by the moral orientation of the ruling class. In fact, this problem is nothing but a specific version of the

general problem, of which Bell is well aware, of whether political meritocracies make any room for moral pluralism. Secondly, there is a problem that is perhaps less serious politically and yet intellectually more intriguing. In the political life of a community, choices are not always between moral and immoral goals or between a moral or immoral disambiguation of 'big goals' such as economic growth or pursuit of national interest. If that were the case, a moral and enlightened elite could make the choice, leaving aside for a moment the problem of pluralism just mentioned. Sometimes the choice is between equally moral or morally indifferent goals (or interpretations thereof). Think of the classical contrast between freedom and security or other instances of conflict of goods *à la* Berlin. If we have the problem to decide how much of our privacy we want to sacrifice to prevent terrorism, neither is there a true or false answer, nor, more importantly, is there a moral or immoral answer. It is just a choice that in democracies we make by having the most popular option win. In a political meritocracy the choice will have to be an arbitrary imposition on the part of the elite.

III

Slippery Slopes: Why Democracy at the Bottom?

Bell's favorite version of political meritocracy is a vertical model that combines democracy at the lower levels with meritocracy at the top level of government. More precisely, the idea is that the system becomes more and more meritocratic as we move up in the hierarchy. My objection, or I should say, request for clarification here is simple. If everything Bell says against the one person, one vote elections is true, and if everything he says about the desirability of selecting leaders on a meritocratic basis is true, then why shouldn't we have meritocracy

also at lower levels? Bell explains the reasons in favor of democracy at the local levels through a reference to few classics in political theory. Aristotle, Montesquieu, Rousseau all famously made the argument that democracy works best in small communities. In addition, two features seem to make 'local democracy' desirable: a) people know pretty well virtues and vices of candidates at local elections, hence they can make responsible, informed choices; b) the issues at stake at local elections have a lesser impact than those for central government. A wrong decision on where to build a road is incommensurably less impactful than a decision to withdraw a major economic power from the Paris Agreement on climate change.[4]

What about these two features, especially if we read them against the backdrop of Bell's reasons in favor of political meritocracy? To begin with, common experience suggests that corruption, nepotism and phenomena of vote-buying are most frequent at the local level. It may be true that citizens know candidates better, but it is also true that what they look for may be something very different than political virtue. While at the level of elections for the central government issues get rarefied and they are usually influenced by ideological commitments, at the local level most of the time people vote for someone who promised a building permit or against someone who issued fines in the past term. So the idea that elections at local level select better is based at best on mixed evidence. Secondly, it may be

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[4] Bell (p. 168) also points out that there is widespread consensus on local democracy in China, both among citizens and in the central government. This is however an empirical claim which does not change much the normative picture. Whether local democracy is good or bad cannot be decided according Chinese preference any more than whether democracy at the top is good or bad cannot be decided by the general consensus in Western-style democracies for this form of government.

true that issues at local levels are less impactful *in absolute terms*, but it is questionable if they are so for the people who live under a specific local administration. My life can be rather miserable if I am under a local administration that does not organize well basic welfare services, schools, local police, not to mention if I am targeted as an enemy and therefore constantly fined, denied work permits, showed down in my economic enterprises, just to think of the most obvious examples. Moreover, and more importantly, the point is not whether local administrations are more or less impactful, but quite obviously whether they are better run by elected or selected (in virtue of merit) leaders. If there are reasons to think elected leaders do worse, than the fact that their policies are less impactful (in absolute terms) is quite irrelevant. Now, given that all the reasons Bell provides to convince us that a serious process of selection of leaders on the basis of examinations is better than elections seem to be of universal validity, it is hard not to extend to ban of democracy at the local level. Quite simply, it is better to have a moral person with a high IQ as your mayor (something the examination system should deliver) as opposed to running the risk of having a corrupt representative of a power group inside the local community elected for office—an outcome all but uncommon. This point seems to be further reinforced by the surveys Bell himself cites. At p.138 for example we learn that in 2009 95.9% of Chinese citizens were satisfied with the central government, but only 61.5% were so at the local level where, we learn again from Bell (p. 168-9), democratic elections were made mandatory since 1998. Isn't Bell suggesting to keep democracy at the levels where it already exists and yet enjoys a comparatively low consent?

IV

Legitimacy Through a Non-Grotesque Referendum

Bell is well aware that a system in which political leaders are not chosen by 'the people' but selected on the basis of intellectual and moral merit, no matter how objective this merit is, is under a constant deficit of legitimacy. Even if this is defined, as Bell does, as rule morally justified in the eyes of the people, which is of course different that rule shaped/determined by the people, it still seems that citizens, at one point in time at least, should be able to say whether they prefer a meritocratic process to select their top leaders over elections. Bell intersects here a problem similar to the one faced by the theory of human rights when it is asked whether democracy is a human rights. Even philosophers with a solid conviction on the superiority of democracy over other political forms tend to concede that democracy may not be a human right, but insist that there is a human right to self-determination that secures people (or *a* people) the opportunity to chose *in a fully democratic manner* a form of non-democratic rule: a sort of democratic referendum that would reject democracy.[5]

Bell seems to be suggesting something similar for China, but my concern lies with the formulation of the referendum. As noted above, Chinese people would be asked whether they endorse the system as it is with some more opening in favor of civic and political freedom. Hence, top leaders would still be chosen not by the people, local leaders would still be elected and some more civil and political rights, in particular more freedom of speech and a right to publicly dissent would be granted. As

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[5] T. Christiano, "Self-determination and the Human Right to Democracy," in R. Cruft, M. S. Liao and M. Renzo (eds.), *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), pp. 459–80.

already announced, this sounds to me like asking whether one wants some more democracy and, having received a distinct yes, interpret the result as a support for a non-democratic form of government. Obviously the referendum should be offering the alternative between democracy *at all lelvels of governement* and democratic meritocracy to have any political meaning. I realize that CCP would never allow this phrasing of the referendum (it is reasonable to think that it wouldn't even allow the rather biased formulation Bell suggests). And yet this seems to be the only formulation the referendum should have if CCP's legitimacy is to be strengthened in a non-grotesque way.

V
Democracy Vs Meritocracy
the (real) terrain of confrontation

The last point of concern I want to raise concerns Bell's point about the voters' ignorance. Much of the entire motivation behind the book rests on the conviction that ordinary citizens in democracies are not informed enough to make rational choices when they select their leaders. Not only are they ignorant, but also they are structurally undermotivated to obtain some knowledge: the influence each single vote has will never compensate the effort and investment it would take to move from a condition of ignorance to one of reasonable competence. As Bell rightly explains, the point is not so much that democratic citizens vote to pursue their personal interests ('they vote their pocketbooks,' as commonsense has it). Actually empirical evidence shows that people vote for the political options that they see as capable of advancing national interest, not directly their self-interest. The problem is rather people's ignorance which results in systematic risk of irrational and low quality decision making. Bell adds to this already quite depressing scenario the

element, borrowed from experimental psychology and sociology, that ordinary people would remain bad at making political decisions even if they were well informed about politics. There is for example the 'pervasive optimistic bias,' noted by the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, which leads people to believe themselves to be on average better than other people. But there are also biases that generally lead us to underestimate risk, ignore evidence that disprove our entrenched beliefs and so on. The emphasis on ordinary people's structural ignorance and the suggestion that only those who know better should rule (at least at the top level of government) makes Bell's proposal similar to Jason Brennan's recent book *Against Democracy*. Brennan defends epistocracy as a better alternative to democracy on the basis of roughly the same diagnosis. The average voter is either ignorant about basic political facts (as shown by empirical research, almost 2/3 of voters give incorrect answers to certain significant questions about politics) or partisan to the extent that emotions carry away any objectivity in judging. In sum most voters are, to use Brennan's vocabulary, either 'Hobbits' or 'Hooligans'. To assess the validity of what Bell and Brennan infer from these rather indisputable facts it may prove instructive to look at a recent reaction to Brennan's book by one acute supporter of democracy, Thomas Christiano. Christiano makes a number of interesting points against Brennan but two appear as particularly far-reaching.[6] To begin with, the fact that ordinary people give incorrect answers to basic facts about politics does not mean that they act on bad information. Rather, they might be relying on what Christiano calls 'cognitive shortcuts', that is, other citizens they trust: friends, opinion makers, experts and so on. Moreover, political parties play the role of being gigantic cognitive shortcuts

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[6] T. Christiano, Review of *Against Democracy*.

people use to make up their mind. After all, in democracies we do not vote on specific issues except on very limited cases (referenda). We usually either vote for parties or for people supported by them. Democracy in modern times is always representative democracy and parties have always played a crucial mediating role in the whole mechanism. Thus ordinary citizens may afford the luxury of being ill-informed because they legitimately vote following other people they trust. To be sure, trust cannot be blind, argues Christiano, and sometimes there is the need to appeal to independent experts that tell us the truth of some matters (if not unanimously, with a strong majoritarian voice). This is made possible by the availability in democracies of independent entities, such as universities, that at times enter public debate to blow the whistle on charlatans and demagogues. The huge investment democracies make on knowledge and on its diffusion provides a rather solid basis to believe that at the microlevel people make decisions in a way that is less unreliable and irrational than it might appear if one only looks at their specific competence.

Christiano also makes an additional, perhaps more fundamental point against Brennan, which applies to Bell as well. Reasonably high quality democracies (think again of Germany and Scandinavian countries) respond rather well to the interests of the lower strata of the population. It is hard to deny that this has nothing to do with the fact that in democracies all have *some* power—perhaps not the *same* power, if not on paper, but some— to influence political decisions. Taking from the poorest and most ignorant the power to vote for top leaders (what both Brennan and Bell want) appear as a way to make them even powerless than what they are. Autocracies have a rather poor record of poverty eradication. Hence comparatively they score worse than democracies on this crucial point. To be sure, Bell insists that China constitutes a huge counterexample, with

hundreds of million people being lifted out of poverty in the last decades and a better record on malnutrition than democratic India. Moreover, he takes as self-evident that part of the merit for this is to be attributed to the meritocracy that characterizes the selection of political leaders, as opposed, say, to the opening of a country with a critical mass of 1.2 billion people to market economy. As he puts it, on poverty eradication 'the success of meritocracy in China is obvious' (p. 173). At the same time, though, Bell admits (quite surprisingly) that 'corruption, the gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, abuses of power by political officials, harsh measures for dealing with political dissent, overly powerful state-run enterprises that distort the economic system, repression of religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang, discrimination against women […] *have become worse while the political system has become more meritocratic*.' (p. 171, my emphasis) Well, this is a rather impressive list which mainly speak to the point Christiano is making. Denying the right to vote to ordinary people and entrusting a self-proclaimed epistocracy risk making the weak even weaker than what they are. *If* that is the case, considering the rather exceptional record of high-quality democracies at ensuring a decent life for everybody, I am afraid China's poverty eradication won't suffice to make political meritocracy look better than democracy, even if one concedes to Bell (and it is a generous concession) that poverty eradication was in fact caused by the meritocratic nature of the Chinese political system.

VI

Conclusion

What remains of Bell's proposal if the above points (or at least some of them) are correct? A lot, to be sure. Much of what he

says to highlight the limits of democracy, including what he says about people's ignorance, remain rather convincing especially if we read it against the backdrop of rising populism and the election of Donald Trump as leader of the most powerful democracy in the world. Equally convincing is the general lesson about the importance of competence for politicians, no matter how they are selected, not to mention the opportunity to balance democratic will-formation with some institutional body capable of introducing professionalism and experience in the final outcome of the law making. Less convincing, perhaps, is the case in favor of a meritocratic system at the top completely severed from the popular control. But in the end, one should not be too exigent. In philosophy, like in life, the *pars construens* is often more difficult than the *pars destruens*. Moreover, it would be truly unfair to say that all we get from Bell's book is a rehearsal of well-known democratic shortcomings, now seen from an 'Asian' perspective, along with an in-depth view of a system we know only from remote. From a normative perspective, his case for *some kind of check* on the competence and morality of top leaders is hard to dismiss as the obsession of a professor's professional disease to evaluate others. His plea for *some kind of* merging between meritocracy and democracy is today more compelling than ever.

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