

JOSEPH F. KETT, *Merit: The History of a Founding Ideal from the American Revolution to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2013), 344 pp.

Analyzing notions like religious pluralism,<sup>1</sup> republican virtue,<sup>2</sup> or the pursuit of happiness,<sup>3</sup> historians of U.S. intellectual history have repeatedly engaged with complex notions associated with the founding of the nation. In doing so they not only deliver what has come to be called “conceptual histories”<sup>4</sup> but usually also aim to demonstrate how these histories relate to the current understanding and relevance of respective ideas. Joseph F. Kett adds merit to this ever-growing list. With that, he tackles a concept that, despite its prominence in public discourse, has never really been systematically researched. The author maintains that one explanation for this imbalance lies in the contentious debate about how merit can best be measured. Kett’s book, therefore, not only presents an intellectual history of merit itself but just as much, or even more so, a history of the various ways Americans have sought to establish and assess merit.

Without necessarily re-asserting American Exceptionalism, Kett points out that merit has long been considered particularly important in the United States. Due to the lack of a hereditary aristocracy, all stratification of society including politics, the military, and the professions, could only be acceptable on the basis of merit. Thomas Jefferson memorably coined the phrase “natural aristocracy” of the “talented, virtuous and wealthy” (47). John Adams, on the other hand, was skeptical: He worried about how, for example, it would be possible to distinguish between mere popularity and true merit (cf. 48). Adams was particularly concerned if it was left up to society—or worse, “the multitude”—to decide this question (261). Thus Adams’s criticism already hits on two key problems of dealing with the concept of merit: The difficulty of comprehensively defining it and subsequently identifying it correctly. Kett’s analysis reveals a close connection between these two challenges. What we recognize as merit, of course, heavily depends on what we value as worthy. While it might be possible to measure intelligence or a specific skill in marks and grades, how do we measure

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Hutchinson, *Religious Pluralism: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Gary Bryner and Richard Vetterli, *In Search of the Republic: Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); King, William Casey, *Ambition, A History: From Vice to Virtue* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Capel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> Melvin Richter, “Conceptual History (Begriffsgeschichte) and Political Theory,” *Political Theory* 14.4 (1996), 604-637.

the merit of character? While the former might, to a certain extent, be broken down into fields of knowledge or ability, it is a lot more difficult to establish what exactly is (a) good character.

The author approaches this tension both historically and sociologically. First, he explores how the emphasis has changed over time as merit was defined in various ways. During the Revolution and the Early Republic, the concept of merit was closely tied to the concept of character, a term of similar complexity.<sup>5</sup> Since the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, we can see a gradual transformation towards perceiving merit as a measurable unit along with the introduction of new ways of assessing it. Schools and colleges began to use grades and marks around the 1830s while report cards and written examinations did not take hold until the 1870s. (cf. 69; 106) Through innovations such as the IQ test in 1916 (cf. 129) or the Scholarly Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1926 (cf. 141) advances in psychology brought what was believed to be exact science to the process of merit determination. Kett only briefly acknowledges that some of the advocates of these supposedly objective methods had a racist agenda (cf. 131). Kett's general interest in these developments, which he has also demonstrated in various other publications, clearly shines through in these chapters, rich with examples and detailed accounts (cf. 68-191).

In addition to presenting a chronological argument, Kett differentiates between “essential merit” and “institutional merit” (2-6, 163-165). In this context it is interesting to consider that reading this book as a German native speaker, one discovers that the term merit itself defies direct translation, for depending on the context it can mean *Verdienst* or *Leistung*. Each of these terms refers to some kind of distinguishing act yet they can rarely be used interchangeably. The former, which, for example, might refer to a contribution to a cause or a military accomplishment, captures the older use of merit in America as part of the politics of character and comes closest to what Kett calls “essential merit”. The latter usually describes an achievement that has somehow been measured and may lead to advancement or reward. Thus, it is part of an institutionalized system, i.e. “institutional merit”. However, the dividing line between the two kinds of merit, Kett concedes, is at best fuzzy. Furthermore, the two definitions of merit have often been conflated. Early marking systems, for example, awarded grades not only for school subjects like Mathematics or English but also for “moral traits like

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<sup>5</sup> For a more elaborate analysis of the notion of character see: Andrew S. Trees, *The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004).

industry and promptness” (94). Today these very traits, described in somewhat more contemporary terms, might well be praised in a letter of recommendation. This overlap hints to the way we have almost come full circle since the seventeenth century, as character—today more commonly called personality—has re-entered the equation of assessing a person as a whole. Concepts like “human capital” and a new emphasis on potential have yet again changed the way merit is assessed (239). Hence, the development from the more vague definition of merit as character to a measurable institutional merit is by no means as linear as educational reformers of the late nineteenth century and psychologists of the early twentieth century had hoped. It still remains the case that merit is in the eye of the beholder and any test devised to measure it objectively roots in a socially constructed notion of merit, informed by the dominant values of a given society.

Aside from the problems of defining and identifying merit, Kett identifies a second problem for the role of merit in American history and culture. In the United States a strong case can be made for the view that any kind of social stratification—even one on the basis of merit—must be at odds with one of the most important of all founding ideals, namely equality. Kett discovers that this dilemma has featured prominently in the distribution of political offices and later in devising and reforming the civil service. Kett portrays, intriguingly, how the infamous spoils system originated during the Jacksonian Era as an egalitarian reflex against the merit-based hierarchies that drew their legitimacy from the Revolution (cf. 60). According to this new interpretation, anyone could earn merit through party loyalty, which, incidentally, was also a lot easier to define than merit in general. In a historical twist, half a century later, new advocates of equality strove for measurable merit to counter the political favoritism at the heart of the spoils system (211). This example illustrates how the tension between merit and equality has continuously shaped U.S. society.

Another related example Kett finds during the interwar period when public administration reform was on the agenda, but “[t]heir tradition of equal rights led most Americans [...] to gag at the thought of a British or French style higher civil service” (217). In this context the author finally considers questions of class in some detail, which seems to come surprisingly late in the book (cf. 234-239). Kett examines key publications of the 1950s and 1960s, for example, C. Wright Mills’ *The Power Elite*,<sup>6</sup> and *The Rise of the Meritocracy*

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford UP, 1956).

by Englishman Michael Young.<sup>7</sup> But for earlier periods, Kett takes little note of economic hierarchy as either an alternative or a backcloth to a merit based society, except for the concern of nineteenth-century educational reformers, who worried about wealth becoming the sole badge of distinction in American society (cf. 95).

In his final chapter Kett diagnoses a “Crisis of Merit” in the present (222-262)—not unlike that of the Jacksonian Era. Pointing among others to John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*<sup>8</sup> (cf. 250), Kett argues: “By 1975 merit had become the bogeyman of egalitarians” (249). As merit is always relative to opportunity and truly equal opportunities remain impossible to achieve for everyone, the focus of understanding merit has shifted. According to Kett, America is heading towards a system where merit is no longer the basis for decisions, be it in school or college admittance or in political promotion; rather, if anything, merit is the goal. The author is critical of this drive to enable everyone to achieve merit in order to reconcile the tension between merit and equality (cf. 222). From his historical perspective, Kett fears that the pendulum might swing in the other direction (cf. 251). By cancelling out merit as a basis of assessment, other, less controllable criteria like the political favoritism of the spoils system will emerge and harm equality even more in the long run. Kett concludes: “Critics of merit would do well to contemplate the alternatives” (262).

The merit of this book is threefold. It sheds light on the convoluted development of how Americans have defined, identified, and understood merit. At the same time, Kett’s analysis of the complex relation between equality and merit contains valuable insights into the U.S. understanding of democracy and social justice. And finally, Kett’s elaborate arguments about college and school systems, civil service reforms, and military promotion processes render his work interesting not only for intellectual historians but also for social historians and historians of education.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Dunlop Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971).