

BENEDETTA RINALDI FERRI*

TOOLS FOR EQUALITY**

If one is looking for an exhaustive, scholarly analysis of inequality today, this short volume, *Equality: What it Means and Why it Matters*¹, by Thomas Piketty and Michael J. Sandel, is probably not that book, nor what the authors have set out to provide. If, however, one wants to engage in an open-ended, politically grounded discussion of equality – what it means, why it matters and why it should concern us – the work offers a valuable starting point.

The volume originated as an in-person discussion, held at the Paris School of Economics on May 20, 2024. Given a relatively loose outline – a conversation about the meaning and relevance of equality – the exchange unfolds between two distinct intellectual perspectives.

Thomas Piketty is an economist at the Paris School of Economics – or, as he prefers to describe himself, a “social and economic historian” – who has devoted much of his career to the study of inequality. Michael J. Sandel teaches political philosophy at Harvard University, where he has offered widely acclaimed courses on justice, merit, and public virtue. This disciplinary and thematic distance, however, proves no obstacle to fruitful engagement. The book reads like a collaborative process of intellectual discovery: questions and conjectures are repeatedly taken up, reformulated, and mutually extended. The result is a 128-page dialogue spanning numerous arguments that, ultimately, converge on a shared concern.

The nine chapters of the book focus on different aspects of the unequal distribution of goods, merits and dignities in contemporary Western societies. Rather than merely listing these disparities, the authors recast each topic into a broader conceptual question. As Chapter 1, “Why worry about inequality?” makes clear, the

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** This review has been proofread by Damon Hager, whom I thank for his meticulous attention and advice. Any remaining errors are, of course, my own.

¹ I have consulted the EPUB version. See also the Italian translation: *Uguaglianza. Che cosa significa e perché è importante* (Feltrinelli 2025).

authors seek to interrogate what a lack of equality implies in contemporary times, before proceeding to discuss the possible remedies.

The chapters on money and markets – specifically, Chapter 2, *Should money matter less?* and Chapter 3, *“The moral limits of markets”* – are perhaps the most interesting for an extended academic audience. A case is made concerning the space societies are willing to grant market mechanisms in distributing goods and granting value. Building on Piketty’s proposals progressively to decommodify many areas of social life, Sandel extends the argument and radicalizes it. The central question becomes whether market institutions can adequately evaluate goods and social practices, or whether they corrupt the meaning of the things they price – such as health, education and culture. Thus, the speculation about the modes of valuing carries into a “how-to”, foundational one, that arguably exceeds economic scholarship (cf. also ch. 4, 5 and 7).

Economists – many mainstream economists – take for granted the de facto modes of valuation, the de facto preferences that consumers bring to economic life, and ask how to maximize their satisfaction subject to certain distributional considerations. But the corruption argument for decommodification, if we can call it that, would require that we debate the appropriate way of valuing health, education, cultural activities. And that would require us to put up for a political debate whether certain modes of valuation are higher, are worthier, than others. It would make economics and also public discourse more judgmental than many social democrats, and certainly libertarians, would be comfortable with.²

Meritocracy is arguably a significant test case for evaluating the relevance of an assessment model. Chapters 5, *“Meritocracy”* and 6, *“Lotteries: should they play a role in university admission and parliamentary selection?”* lead the reader through a perceptive critique of how society evaluates merits and distributes dignities. The discussion springs primarily from the case of education, university admissions, and the meritocratic mechanisms that often underpin them. Chapter 7, *“Taxation, solidarity and community”*, meanwhile, widens its scope. The way we reward merits and dignities is closely related to the way we reward labour, and the means by which we make sense of collective contributions.

Up to this point, Piketty and Sandel’s book provides progressive readers with substantial material for discussion. Chapter 4, *“Globalization and Populism”*, offers

² Ch 2.

pointed insights into the way left-wing elites have navigated the post-1980s neoliberal hegemony. Chapter 8, “Borders, Migration, and Climate Change”, considers how they may have to evolve in the emerging international order, particularly under the impetus of Donald Trump’s presidency. Finally, chapter 9, “The future of the left: economics and identity”, explores some possible strategies via which the left may prosper in the years ahead.

Nonetheless, this is also where one senses a certain lack of grounding. The analysis cannot be easily applied to more specific arenas without a careful discussion of its relevance. References to the intended beneficiaries of the left are very loose – e.g. “the middle class” or “the working people”. Readers who are not familiar with American progressive agendas³ may find it difficult to translate them into comparable terms and may perceive at times a slight tendency toward overextension. It is also pertinent to ask whether this analysis holds across more context-specific configurations of the private and public sectors. “The state in itself is not pro-inequality or pro-equality” (Piketty, ch. 2). As reservoirs of jobs, ranks, dignities and long-lasting status, states can be primary engines of social division.

This book is contemporary with many attempts across the Western world, scholarly and otherwise, to make sense of our communities. While preparing this review in Rome, I have encountered *TOOLS*, the site-specific work by Elisabetta Benassi: ten 14-meter silos now stand in Piazza Venezia, wrapped with the image of twelve workers’ hands raised against the sky, each gripping a different tool – a paint roller, a trowel, a jackhammer, a wrench, among others. These hands tower over the metro construction site in the city center. One can think of few more powerful ways to recalibrate our gaze towards the places where communities take shape and achieve self-recognition.

To an extent, this is also how *Equality* reads. As a work of intellectual discovery, this volume provides readers with a valuable toolbox to debate the ways societies construct inequality. It is less a conclusion than a point of departure that scholars and activists can productively build on.

³ *Bernie Sanders on Economic Inequality*, <<https://feelthebern.org/bernie-sanders-on-economic-inequality/>> (consulted on 4 February 2026). For a current archive of pertinent political news, see among many: <realclearpolitics.com/search/?q=inequality>.

Google Books Ngram Viewer

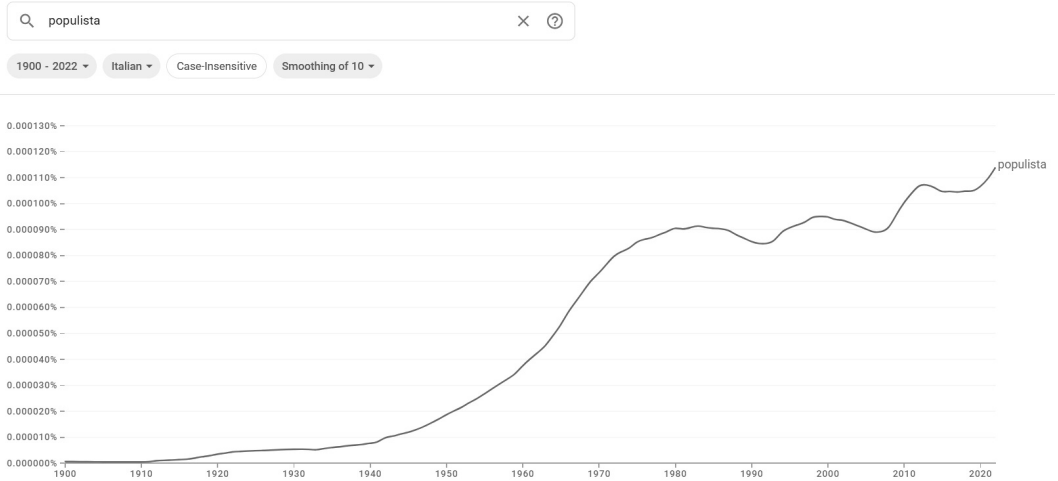


Fig. 1. Google Books Ngram Viewer (consulted on 4 February 2026).

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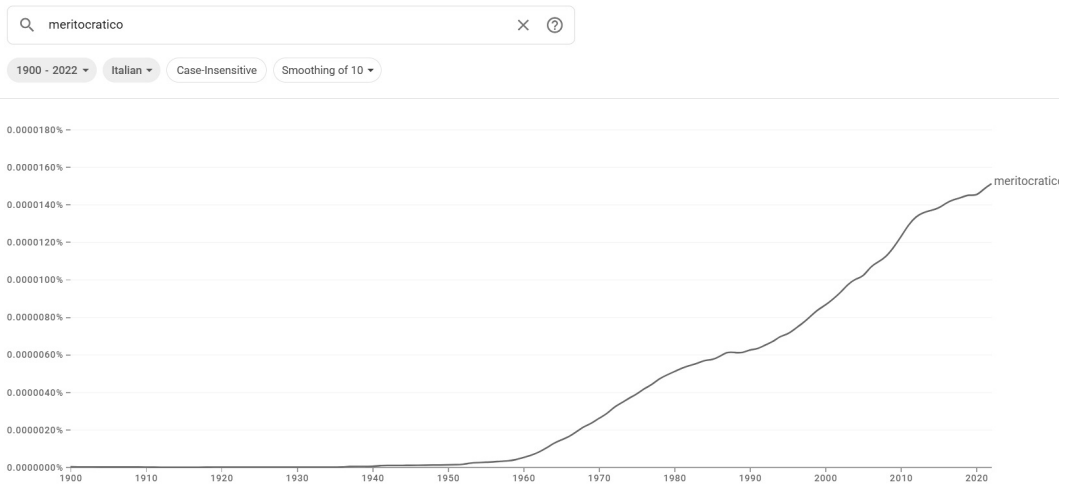


Fig. 2. Google Books Ngram Viewer (consulted on 4 February 2026).