THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC IDENTITY[1]

Michael J. Sandel

WHAT IS IT ABOUT DEMOCRATIC LIFE that scholars seem to think warrants diagnosis and treatment? I would suggest that the discontent that has afflicted American public life in recent decades is distinguished by two interrelated features. The first is that despite the success of American life over the past 25 years—including rising affluence, the end of the Cold War, and greater social justice for women and minorities—there is a widespread sense that Americans are less and less in control of the forces that govern their lives. There is a sense of disempowerment. The second feature of Americans' discontent is the fear that from the family, to the neighborhood, to the nation, the moral fabric of the community is unraveling. These two fears—about the loss of self-government and the erosion of community and moral authority—define the anxiety of the age. The problem with our politics is not so much that it hasn't solved these problems, but that it hasn't effectively addressed them. It hasn't provided us with an avenue for making sense of them, and responding to them, and debating them.

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Voluntarist vs. Republican Public Philosophy

The reason that our political discourse has been unable to address these two sources of frustration has something to do with the public philosophy by which we live. And what, specifically, is that public philosophy? Briefly stated, our public philosophy affirms what might be called a "voluntarist conception of freedom." According to this conception, we are free in so far as we are able to choose our own ends, unencumbered by claims or attachments or duties that we have not chosen. Given this emphasis on "choice of ends," this might also be called the "consumerist vision of freedom."

Now the view of public life and of the government that is connected to this voluntarist or consumerist vision of freedom is one that says that the government respects citizens, not by affirming any particular conception of virtue or the good life, but by providing a framework of rights that is neutral among ends and within which people can be free to choose their own ends. I call this public philosophy the liberalism of the procedural republic. It emphasizes rights, but does not affirm any substantive vision of the good. Ironically, the triumph of the voluntarist conception of freedom has coincided with Americans' growing sense of disempowerment. This sense of disempowerment, I believe, reflects the loss of agency that results when liberty is detached from self-government and located in the will of an independent self, unencumbered by moral or communal ties it has not chosen.

The liberalism of the procedural republic hasn't always predominated American life. For a long time it contended with a rival understanding of freedom and citizenship, what might be called a civic or republican view. The republican tradition argues that to be free isn't

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just to choose one's ends, but to share in self-rule; to be free is to participate in shaping the forces that govern the destiny of a political community.

Why, you might ask, is the republican tradition a rival to, or in tension with, the voluntarist conception of freedom? After all, liberal voluntarist selves might choose, if they wish, to participate in public life. The difference is this: In the republican view, to share in self-rule requires citizens who possess, or who have come to acquire, certain qualities of character, certain habits and dispositions, certain civic virtues. Among these habits—and the actual list has been a subject of intense debate throughout the American political experience—are, for example, an orientation toward the common good, a concern for the whole, the capacity to deliberate well about public things, and certain kinds of restraints that make these other qualities possible or even likely. In the republican conception of freedom, the government cannot be thought of as neutral or indifferent about moral character. Rather, politics is perceived as a formative project. Public life is the arena within which citizens form their moral or civic character. It is my argument that it is this formative project, this distinctive feature of the republican tradition, that has yielded to the voluntarist conception of freedom—a conception that conceives persons as free and independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties not personally chosen. It is this voluntarist public philosophy that has now taken hold of our public practices and institutions.

Both the republican and the voluntarist public philosophies have been present throughout the American political and constitutional experience, but in shifting measure and importance. Very roughly speaking, the republican self-understanding predominated earlier than the voluntarist, through much of the nineteenth century. The voluntarist/procedural public philosophy came to fuller expression later, especially after World War II, particularly into the 1970s and 1980s. The argument of my book, *Democracy's Discontent*, is that America has experienced a steady drift toward the procedural republic—and yet this procedural republic, and the set of self-under-

standings that inform it, can't sustain the liberty it promises. And the reason it can't is that it can't inspire the sense of community and civic engagement that self-government requires. That is, the liberal neutrality that is inherent to the procedural republic doesn't encourage, and may not even permit, the ambitious formative project that is a prerequisite, at least according to the republican tradition, of meaningful self-government—self-government that goes beyond voting every four years. Effective self-government is more demanding than that. Thus, the formative project, as it turns out, isn't dispensable to self-government after all.

In fact, it is my contention that the republican tradition, with its emphasis on community and self-government, may offer a corrective to our nation's impoverished civic life. If we recall the republican conception of freedom as "self-rule," we may be prompted to raise questions that we have long since forgotten to ask: What economic arrangements are hospitable to self-government? How might our political discourse engage rather than avoid the moral and religious convictions people bring to the public realm? And how might the public life of a pluralist society cultivate in citizens the expansive self-understandings that civic engagement requires? Since the public philosophy of our day leaves little room for civic considerations, it may help to recall how earlier generations of Americans debated such questions, before the procedural republic took hold.

The Political Economy of Citizenship

Democracy's Discontent tracks two expressions of the historical shift from the republican public philosophy to the voluntarist/procedural philosophy. One expression of this shift is found in the area of constitutional law and discourse. The second is in the area of political economy and national debate about economic questions. For the purposes of our discussion, I'd like to focus on the latter—how we think about and conduct economic arguments. In order to do this, I will first turn our attention toward Thomas Jefferson; for it was Jefferson who gave perhaps the most distinctive expression to

republicanism in the national debate about the economy. His question, and a pressing question of the late eighteenth century, was whether America should become a manufacturing nation. That was a question of economics. But it was also to Jefferson a broader question of political and moral economy. Jefferson worried very much about large-scale manufacturing because it might undermine the character of citizens and ill equip them to share in self-rule. Large-scale manufacturing had the potential to gather a property-less proletariat in big cities, something that was antithetical to civic virtue. "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government," he said, "as sores do to the strength of the human body."[2] So it wasn't for reasons of prosperity or affluence that Jefferson argued against America becoming a manufacturing nation. It was for moral and civic reasons, for the formative consequences of economic arrangements.

Jefferson, as we all know, lost that debate. America became a manufacturing nation, and had become so even in the day that Jefferson spoke those words. Nevertheless, the conception of politics and of citizenship and of freedom that animated his arguments persisted and informed American national political debate through much of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century.

Let's race ahead to the twentieth century, to the Progressive Era. During this period, the question "What economic arrangements are hospitable to the qualities of character that self-government requires?" informed the debate about national markets and industrial capitalism. Then, as now, the problem was that there was a gap between the scale of economic life and the terms within which people understood themselves. The economy had become national, but politics and political identities were local. Americans experienced this gap as disempowering and dislocating. How to deal with that disjunction between the scale of economic life and the terms of

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[2] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), *Writings / Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984) 290-291.

political community was the primary subject of political debate. This debate reflects the persisting influence of what might be called the political economy of citizenship. It focused attention on economic arrangements not only from the standpoint of prosperity and distribution, but also from the standpoint of character formation and self-government.

There were two main alternative responses to the gap that Americans confronted during the Progressive Era. One was represented by the reformer Louis D. Brandeis, before he was appointed to the Supreme Court, and also, to some extent, by Woodrow Wilson. These men argued for a decentralized economy that would be amenable to local democratic control. Brandeis opposed monopolies and trusts, not because their market power led to higher consumer prices, but because their political power undermined democratic government. In Brandeis' view, big business threatened self-government in two ways—directly, by overwhelming democratic institutions and defying their control, and indirectly, by eroding the moral and civic capacities that equip workers to think and act as citizens. In his wariness of concentrated power and in his appreciation of the formative consequences of industrial capitalism, Brandeis brought long-standing republican themes into twentieth-century economic debate. Like Jefferson, he viewed concentrated power, whether economic or political, as inimical to liberty. The solution to big business was not big government—that would only compound the "curse of bigness"—but to break up monopolies and restore competition, to protect independent businesses from the predatory practices of national chains. In addition, Brandeis retained the republican conviction that industrial capitalism would have adverse effects on the moral and civic behavior of workers. Labor, according to Brandeis, needed to cultivate the qualities of character essential to self-government. That is to say that Brandeis' primary concern was not distributive justice, but the formation of citizens capable of self-government and committed to democracy.

On the other side of the aisle, so to speak, were Theodore Roosevelt and Herbert Croly. They asserted that it was impossible that they

could ever decentralize the national economy, that a centralized economy was an inevitable feature of industrial capitalism. Instead, they argued that the only answer to big business was big government, and what Theodore Roosevelt called a "New Nationalism." "Big business has become nationalized," Roosevelt declared in 1910, "and the only effective way of controlling and directing it and preventing the abuses in connection with it is by having the people nationalize the governmental control in order to meet the nationalization of the big business itself."[3] Like Brandeis, Roosevelt feared the political consequences of concentrated economic power. Big business corrupted government for the sake of profit and threatened to overwhelm democratic institutions. "The supreme political task of our day," Roosevelt proclaimed, "is to drive the special interests out of our public life."[4] This task required that the citizens of the United States "control the mighty commercial forces which they have themselves called into being"[5] and reclaim self-government from the grip of corporate power. Where Roosevelt disagreed with the decentralizers was over how to restore democratic control. He considered big business an inevitable product of industrial development and saw little point in trying to recover the decentralized political economy of the nineteenth century. Instead, Roosevelt argued that corporations would need to be regulated in the interest of the public welfare. And only the Federal government was suited to the task. The power of national government had to grow to match the scale of corporate power.

As Roosevelt was the leading spokesman for the New Nationalism, Herbert Croly was its leading philosopher. In *The Promise of American Life* (1909), Croly laid out the political theory underlying the nationalist strand of Progressivism. Unlike Brandeis and the

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3 Theodore Roosevelt, "Speech at Denver," August 29, 1910, *The New Nationalism,* ed. William E. Leuchtenburg (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961) 53.

4 Roosevelt, "Speech at St. Paul," September 6, 1910, *The New Nationalism,* 85.

5 Roosevelt, "Speech at Osawatomie," August 31, 1910, *The New Nationalism,* 27.

decentralizers, Croly argued for accepting the scale of modern industrial organization and for enlarging the capacity of national democratic institutions to control it. The Jeffersonian tradition of dispersed power was now a hindrance, not a help, to democratic politics. Additionally, Croly believed that the success of democracy required more than the centralization of government; it also required the nationalization of politics. The primary form of political community had to be recast on a national scale. Americans would have to identify with the nation as a primary form of political community; otherwise they would not underwrite the authority of a powerful national government. That was the formative project of Croly and Roosevelt. It was to reshape the self-understandings and political identities of Americans so that the national community would take precedence in their loyalties and commitments. Although Croly renounced Jefferson's notion that democracy depends on dispersed power, he did share with Jefferson the conviction that economic and political arrangements should be judged by the qualities of character they promote. Repeatedly and explicitly, Croly wrote of the "formative purpose" of democratic life. More than a scheme for majority rule or individual liberty or equal rights, democracy had as its highest purpose the moral and civic improvement of the people. According to Croly, American democracy could advance only as the nation became more of a nation, which required in turn a civic education that inspired in Americans a deeper sense of national identity.[6]

The decentralizing and the nationalizing versions of progressive reform described above, found memorable expression in the 1912 presidential contest between Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. But despite all their differences, these contestants shared some significant assumptions, including the view that economic and political institutions should be assessed based on their tendency to promote or to erode the moral qualities self-government requires.

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6 Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (1909; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965) 286, 407.

Like Jefferson before them, they worried about the sort of citizens the economic arrangements of their day were likely to produce. They argued, in different ways, for a political economy of citizenship. The civic emphasis of their political economy sets it apart from the debates familiar in our day—debates that focus instead on economic growth and distributive justice.

The Consumerist Vision

During the Progressive Era, there was also a third, less celebrated but more fateful response to the gap that Americans sensed between the scale of economic life and their own local identities. This response was less ambitious than the first two. Rather than try to decentralize the national economy or cultivate a new sense of national solidarity, the third response sought to rally Americans around their common identity. It sought to ground the political realm in "a mundane common denominator," a shared public identity and common purpose that could transcend differences in occupation, ethnicity, and class. Americans who struggled to find their way in an economy now national in scale turned to the idea of Americans as consumers.

By the early twentieth century, the citizen as consumer was a growing political presence. The growth of large retail organizations such as department stores, chain stores, and mail-order businesses encouraged Americans to think and act politically as consumers. It was during this period that consumer identities awakened. Chain stores like the A&P and Woolworth's and Walgreen's and Sears spread out across the country. Brand names like Borden's and Campbell's and Del Monte became household names. Americans, according to historian Daniel Boorstin, were bound together in "communities of consumption." In almost lyrical terms Boorstin depicts the emergence in the early decades of the century of a new and buoyant episode in the American democratic experience:

> Invisible new communities were created and preserved by how and what men consumed. The ancient guilds of makers, the fellowship of secrets and skills and traditions of fabricating things—muskets and cloth and horseshoes and wagons and cabinets—were outreached by the larger, more open, fellowships of consumers . . . No American transformation was more remarkable than these new American ways of changing things from objects of possession and envy to vehicles of community.[7]

Boorstin goes on to argue,

> Now men were affiliated less by what they believed than by what they consumed . . . Men who never saw or knew one another were held together by their common use of objects so similar that they could not be distinguished even by their owners. These consumption communities were quick; they were nonideological; they were democratic; they were public, and vague, and rapidly shifting. . . . Never before had so many men been united by so many things.[8]

Gradually, then, in the period following the Progressive Era, the American economic debate, law, and policy came to understand the American citizen as a consumer, rather than as a producer. But a politics based on consumers, rather than producers, changes the question that Brandeis and Croly had asked. Whereas they had raised the query, "What kind of economy forms the qualities of character necessary to self-government?" and, the related question, "How do we elevate or improve or restrain people's preferences?," a politics based on consumer identities asks, "How best—most fully,

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7 Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1973) 89.

8 Boorstin, *The Americans,* 89.

or fairly, or efficiently—can we satisfy people's preferences?" Thus, the shift to consumer-based reform in the twentieth century was a shift away from the formative ambition of the republican tradition, away from the political economy of citizenship. Although they did not view their movement in quite this way, the Progressives who urged Americans to identify with their roles as consumers rather than producers helped turn American politics toward a political economy of growth and distributive justice whose full expression lay decades in the future.

One policy area where the changing perception of the American citizenry was evident was in the evolution of American anti-trust law. In 1938, Franklin Roosevelt appointed Thurman Arnold to be head of the anti-trust division of the Justice Department. Arnold's rationale in zealously litigating anti-trust cases was to break up big economic powerhouses not for the sake of democratic authority and self-government, but because monopolies and trusts drive up consumer prices. According to Arnold, Americans should rally to support anti-trust laws not out of their commitment to some antiquated vision of democracy, but instead out of interest, as he put it, in the "price of pork chops, bread, spectacles, drugs, and plumbing."[9]

Another crucial moment in the fading of the political economy of citizenship came in the late New Deal, with the rise of Keynesian fiscal policy. One of the virtues of Keynesian fiscal policy, part of its political appeal, even before World War II proved its economic success, was that it enabled policy makers to bracket, or set aside, controversial conceptions of the "good society," controversial visions of how to restructure industrial capitalism. Keynesian economics had the political advantage of enabling policy makers to avoid judgments about the preferences of citizens, or consumers. Instead, policy makers could simply take those preferences and regulate the economy by manipulating macro-economic levers—by manipulat-

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9 Thurman W. Arnold, *The Bottleneck of Business* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940) 123.

ing aggregate demand. Keynes himself said that the whole end and object of economic activity is consumption. This assertion flies in the face of the political economy of citizenship, which argues that one of the primary aims of economic activity, one of the proper measures of economic arrangements, is the kind of characters it will form. This assertion avoids the sticky question: How hospitable to self-government is this or that economic arrangement or policy?

The political appeal of Keynesian economics found one of its clearest statements in John F. Kennedy, who in 1962 was favoring a tax cut, a Keynesian tax cut, to spur the economy. In a speech at an economic conference, Kennedy said:

> Most of us are conditioned for many years to have a political viewpoint, Republican or Democrat—liberal, conservative, moderate. The fact of the matter is that most of the problems, or at least many of them, that we now face are technical problems, are administrative problems. They are very sophisticated judgments, which do not lend themselves to the great sort of "passionate movements" which have stirred this country so often in the past.[10]

And in a commencement address at Yale University, he said, the "central domestic issues of our time are more subtle and less simple" than the large moral and political issues that commanded the nation's attention in earlier days. And so Kennedy urged the country to face, as he put it, "technical problems without ideological preconceptions," to focus on the "sophisticated and technical issues involved in keeping a great economic machinery moving ahead."[11]

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[10] John F. Kennedy, "Remarks to the White House Conference on National Economic Issues," May 21, 1962, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963) 422.

[11] Kennedy, "Commencement Address at Yale University," June 11, 1962, *Public Papers,* 470-71, 473.

And so Kennedy articulated the aspiration toward neutrality that increasingly characterizes the procedural republic.

The Risk of Coercion

Much more can be said about the rise of the procedural republic and its aspiration toward neutrality. Underlying this aspiration is the worry that any alternative to procedural neutrality will be coercive. This concern is based on the argument that the more expansive the demands of republican citizenship, the more extensive the task of cultivating virtue. That is, the task of forging a common citizenship among a vast and disparate people invites strenuous forms of soulcraft, thereby heightening the risk of coercion. Such coercion is by no means unknown among American republicans. For example, Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, wanted "to convert men into republican machines" and to teach each citizen "that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property."[12] But civic education need not take so harsh a form. In practice, successful republican soulcraft involves a gentler kind of tutelage. For example, the political economy of citizenship that informed nineteenth-century American life sought to cultivate not only commonality but also the independence and judgment to deliberate well about the common good. It worked not by coercion but by a complex mix of persuasion and habituation, what Tocqueville called "the slow and quiet action of society upon itself."[13] The republican politics that Tocqueville describes with these words is more clamorous than consensual. It does not despise differentiation. Instead of collapsing the space between persons, it fills this space with public insti-

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[12] Benjamin Rush, *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania (1786), Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965) 17, 14.

[13] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Phillips Bradley (1835; New York: Knopf, 1945) 416.

tutions that gather people together in various capacities that both separate and relate them.

So the civic stand of freedom is not necessarily coercive. It often finds democratic and pluralistic expression. To this extent, the liberal objection to republican political theory is misplaced. But the liberal worry does contain an insight that we dare not dismiss. Republican politics is risky politics, a politics without guarantees. And the risk it entails inheres in the formative project. To accord the political community a stake in the character of its citizens is to concede the possibility that bad communities may form bad characters.

The Risk of Disenchantment

In contrast, if we can detach liberty from the exercise of self-government and conceive liberty instead as the capacity of persons to choose their own ends, then we can dispense with the difficult task of forming civic virtue. But the liberal attempt to detach freedom from the formative project confronts problems of its own, problems that can be seen in both the theory and practice of the procedural republic. The philosophical difficulty lies in the liberal conception of citizens as freely choosing, independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties antecedent to choice. This vision cannot account for a wide range of moral and political obligations that we commonly recognize, such as obligations of loyalty or solidarity. By insisting that we are bound only by ends and roles we choose for ourselves, we deny that we can ever be claimed by ends we have not chosen—ends given by nature or God, for example, or by our identities as members of families, peoples, cultures, or traditions.

Some liberals concede that we may be bound by obligations such as these, but they insist these obligations apply only to private life alone and have no bearing on politics. But this raises the difficulty: Why insist on separating our identity as citizens from our identity as persons more broadly conceived? In fact, as we have discovered, a politics that brackets morality and religion too completely soon gener-

ates its own disenchantment. Where political discourse lacks moral resonance, the yearning for a public life of larger meaning finds undesirable expression. Groups like the Moral Majority seek to clothe the naked public square with narrow, intolerant moralisms.

A political agenda lacking substantive moral discourse is one symptom of the public philosophy of the procedural republic. Another is the loss of mastery. The triumph of the voluntarist conception of freedom has coincided with a growing sense of disempowerment. Despite the recent expansion of personal rights, Americans find to their frustration that they are losing control of the forces that govern their lives. This has partly to do with the insecurity of jobs in the global economy, but it also reflects the self-images by which we live. The liberal self-image and the actual organization of modern social and economic life are sharply at odds. Even as we think and act as freely choosing, independent selves, we confront a world governed by impersonal structures of power that defy our understanding and control. The voluntarist conception of freedom leaves us ill equipped to contend with this condition. Liberated though we may be from the burden of identities we have not chosen, entitled though we may be to the range of rights assured by the welfare state, we find ourselves overwhelmed as we turn to face the world on our own resources.

Our Present Predicament

Let me reiterate our present predicament. Today, our reigning political agenda is unable to address the erosion of self-government and community that is reflected in our impoverished conception of citizenship and freedom. We are, in fact, faced with a situation not unlike the one that the Progressives confronted earlier this century. Once again there is a gap between the scale of economic life and the terms of political identity. Only now the economy we face is not a national economy, but a global economy, whose power no national political community, not even the most powerful, is capable of regulating.

What responses are open to us in addressing this challenge? Well, some might suggest following those Progressives who sought to enlarge political identity, pushing citizenship outward, in their case, to the nation. In our case, many have begun to argue for a kind of cosmopolitan citizenship—a citizenship that would cultivate and extend global identities and sensibilities. But I would suggest that there are limits to this project—partly political and partly moral—just as there were limits, as it turned out, to the nationalizing project. As the global media and markets shape our lives and beckon us to a world beyond boundaries and belonging, the civic resources we need to master—or at least to contend with—these forces are still to be found in the places and stories, memories and meanings, incidents and identities, that situate us in the world and give our lives their moral particularity. Simply put, most of us organize our lives around smaller solidarities. If civic virtue can only be cultivated closer to home—in families, schools, congregations, and work places—rather than on a global scale, then how can we address the gap between the local and the global? I believe that the formative project of the republican tradition is indispensable for this purpose. But, unlike earlier republican visions, ours will have to enable us to live with multiple, overlapping, sometimes contending moral and political loyalties. It must equip us to live—this is the difficult part—with the tensions to which multiply-situated and multiply-encumbered selves are prone.

Lastly, the republican tradition teaches one lesson that is relevant to this formative project at the close of the twentieth century. It teaches us that for every virtue there is a characteristic form of corruption or decay. If we look around us, we see the two forms of corruption to which civic virtue is prone. One is the tendency of those who face multiple loyalties and identities to pull back, and to insist on clear, unambiguous sovereignties. That's the response of fundamentalism. It is no accident that we see the rise of just this sort of fundamentalism not only on the edges of American politics, but around the world. The second kind of corruption to which this modern form of civic virtue is prone is the drift to protean, story-less selves, who have lost all capacity—given the multiplicity of identities and

commitments—to hold a narrative thread that provides coherence to their lives. This leads ultimately to a disempowering of the human subject. In light of these two forms of corruption—these pitfalls of modern civic virtue—the challenge today is to construct institutions that nurture the kind of citizens that self-government requires.