THE POLITICS OF SOULCRAFT

Michael Sandel says our discontent derives from the deflation of our democratic ideals

BY GEORGE F. WILL

AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE HAS BECOME THIN gruel because of a deliberate deflation of American ideals. So says Michael Sandel in a wonderful new book, "Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy." Sandel, a Harvard professor of government, believes that politics has been impoverished and life coarsened by the abandonment of the idea that self-government should be—indeed, cannot help but be—a "formative" project, shaping the character of citizens.

Before it fell from favor, the "republican" strand of our public philosophy taught that liberty depends on sharing in self-government. But the "voluntarist" philosophy implicit in today's political practices teaches that freedom consists simply in the right of the individual to choose his own ends. And the citizen is understood with scant reference to the civic realm—not as a "situated self," defined by and fulfilled through a web of social relations and activities; rather, as a freely choosing individual bristling with rights but otherwise "unencumbered." Sandel's book will help produce what he desires—a quickened sense of the moral consequences of political practices and economic arrangements.

Time was when political disputants shared the premise that the success of society should be judged in terms of whether it was conducive to the cultivation of the kind of character needed for self-government and that cannot be taken for granted. Today the focus is on how government is treating the citizens, with emphasis on government recognition of proliferating rights. But in what Sandel considers healthier times, when political people thought hard about what De Tocqueville called "the slow and quiet action of society upon itself," the focus was on how political and economic practices might nurture, or impede the growth of, citizens capable of the dignified independence that self-government presupposes.

Today, when society's action is neither slow nor quiet, Sandel hankers for the muscular debates of yesteryear, when government was not big but had bigger ambitions than today's bland Leviathan has. The ambition was to cultivate a virtuous people. So Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians disputed the effect of large-scale manufacturing and its concomitant, cities, on the citizenry's character; Jeffersonians defended the Louisiana Purchase (more room for sturdy yeomen), Jacksonians waged war on the Bank of the United States (engine of decadent speculation and cause of enervating luxury), Clay men advocated "internal improvements" (to harmonize the regions and nationalize sentiments). The mills of Lowell, Mass., were organized to uplift the workers as part of a national debate about whether people working for a wage could avoid a degrading servitude incompatible with democracy.

As America developed what Sandel calls "an economy increasingly at odds with the civic conception of freedom," debates—such as those about antitrust policy and economic planning—concerning the civic consequence of economic arrangements raged. Then in the span of a generation, between the late '30s and early '60s, the debates disappeared. Politics lowered its aims as Americans decided to settle for what Sandel calls a "procedural republic." Government would concentrate on expanding the sphere of individual choices, respecting persons without regard for the respectability of the character they revealed in the choices they made about the lives they would lead.

Instead of concern about the formative force of various forms of production, the only concerns would be the pleasures and equities of consumption—economic growth and the distribution ("fairness") of its bounties. The moral concerns that moved earlier Americans were swept aside. The new spirit of neutrality was expressed by Keynes: "Consumption . . . is the sole end and object of all economic activity." Sandel acutely says that as the formative project was abandoned and the moral dimension was drained from public questions, political discourse became too watery to satisfy the public's moral energies, which were diverted into preoccupation with the private vices of public officials.

Some of Sandel's preoccupations are problematic. He laments the "impersonal" economic forces that shape the lives of individuals and communities. But personal forces—political forces—are not necessarily preferable. Indeed, often they are more bitterly resented. And before too heartily celebrating the organic life of small communities, one should revisit the American literary genre that gave us Sinclair Lewis's depiction of Gopher Prairie, Minn., and Sherwood Anderson's Winesberg, Ohio. Sandel deplores the devastation of Main Street by a Wal-Mart at the edge of town, but let us not impute nobility to the downtown merchants' attempts to keep captive customers by banning competition.

Sandel is right to regret the missing moral dimension of public discourse. Or he was until recently. Suddenly politics has reacquired a decidedly Sandelean dimension. Political debate is reconnecting with the concerns Sandel so lucidly examines.

The debate about protectionism is in part about whether communities are being forced to pay too high a price for the benefits free trade confers upon consumers. The debate about welfare is in part about the relation between the discipline of work, the entitlement mentality and the culture of freedom. The debate about the minimum wage is in part about the propriety of burdening the small business community that is analogous to Jefferson's yeomanry. Advocates of the flat tax present it as a political reform that would combat the corruption of public life by the parasite class of lawyers and lobbyists who profit by gaming the tax code for grasping clients. Told that the Commerce Department's cooperation with big business enlarges the GDP, conservatives say: We don't care. Kill the department because such cooperation is corrupting to both government and business. From the V-chip to the national standards for teaching history to the impact of agriculture policy on family farms, our political debates are echoing traditional moral concerns. Statecraft is again soulcraft, and the citizens who will participate best, and with most zest, will be the fortunate readers of Sandel's splendid explanation of our rich political tradition.