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# Artes Liberales

*An Association for the Furtherance of Liberal Education and Democratic Values in Post-communist Societies*

**Artes Liberales** was founded in Prague in January 1997 as a cooperative endeavour of educational leaders from Central Europe, the Baltic States, and Ukraine. As a regional educational association, **Artes Liberales** sponsors regular professional exchanges and other collaborative programs to promote liberal education and democratic leadership among scholars and institutions of higher learning in post-communist countries. **Artes Liberales** encourages colleges and universities to adopt innovative liberal arts curricula as a counter-weight to the premature and often excessive specialization typical of communist and post-communist pedagogy. **Artes Liberales** is actively engaged in expanding cooperative ties with other liberal arts institutions, both in the region and in the United States.

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**MICHAEL J. SANDEL**  
**IN SEARCH OF A PUBLIC PHILOSOPHY**

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**A**ny attempt to revitalize the civic strand of freedom must confront two sobering objections. The first doubts it is possible to revive republican ideals; the second doubts it is desirable. The first objection holds that, given the scale and complexity of the modern world, it is unrealistic to aspire to self-government as the republican tradition conceives it. From Aristotle's polis to Jefferson's agrarian ideal, the civic conception of freedom found its home in small and bounded places, largely self-sufficient, inhabited by people whose conditions of life afforded the leisure, learning, and commonality to deliberate well about public concerns. But we do not live that way today. To the contrary, we live in a highly mobile continental society, teeming with diversity. Moreover, even this vast society is not self-sufficient but is situated in a global economy whose frenzied flow of money and goods, information and images, pays little heed to nations, much less neighborhoods. How, under conditions such as these, could the civic strand of freedom possibly take hold?

In fact, this objection continues, the republican strand of American politics, for all its persistence, has often spoken in a voice tinged with nostalgia. Even as Jefferson valorized the yeoman farmer, America was becoming a manufacturing nation. And so it was with the artisan republicans of Jackson's day, the apostles of free labor in Lincoln's time, the producer-citizens of the Knights of Labor, and the shopkeepers and pharmacists Brandeis defended against the curse of bigness. In each of these cases - or so one might argue - republican ideals found their expression at the last moment, too late to offer feasible alternatives, just in time to offer an elegy for a lost cause.

If the republican tradition is irredeemably nostalgic, then whatever its capacity to illuminate the defects of liberal politics, it offers little that could lead us to a richer civic life.

The second objection argues that even were it possible to recover republican ideals, to do so would not be desirable. That the civic strand of our tradition has given way in recent decades to a liberal public philosophy is not necessarily cause for regret. All things considered, it may represent a change for a better. Critics of the republican tradition might even concede that the procedural republic comes with a certain loss of community and self-government, and still insist that this is a price worth paying for the toleration and individual choice the procedural republic makes possible.

Underlying this objection are two related worries about republican political theory as traditionally conceived. The first is that it is exclusive; the second is that it is coercive. Both worries flow from the special demands of republican citizenship. If sharing in self-rule requires the capacity to deliberate well about the common good, then citizens must possess certain excellences - of character, judgment, and concern for the whole. But this implies that citizenship cannot be indiscriminately bestowed. It must be restricted to those who either possess the relevant virtues or can come to acquire them.

Some republican theorists have assumed that the capacity for civic virtue corresponds to fixed categories of birth or condition. Aristotle, for example, considered women, slaves, and resident aliens unworthy of citizenship because their nature or roles deprived them of the relevant excellences. Similar argu-

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ments were offered in nineteenth-century America by defenders of property qualifications for voting, southern defenders of property qualifications for voting, southern defenders of slavery, and nativist opponents of citizenship for immigrants. All linked republican notions of citizenship to the further assumption that some group or other - the property-less, or African-Americans, or Catholic immigrants - were, by nature or condition or conviction; incapable of the virtues good citizenship requires.

But the assumption that the capacity for virtue is incorrigible, tied to roles or identities fixed in advance, is not intrinsic to republican political theory, and not all republicans have embraced it. Some have argued that good citizens are made, not found, and have rested their hopes on the formative project of republican politics. This is especially true of the democratic versions of republican thought that arose with the Enlightenment. When the incorrigibility thesis gives way, so does the tendency of republican politics to sanction exclusion.

As the tendency to exclusion recedes, however, the danger of coercion looms larger. Of the two pathologies to which republican politics is prone, modern democracies are more likely to suffer the second. For given the demands of republican citizenship, the more expansive the bounds of membership, the more demanding the task of cultivating virtue. In Aristotle's polis, the formative task was to cultivate virtue among a small group of people who shared a common life and a natural bent for citizenship. When republican thought turns democratic, however, and when the natural bent of persons to be citizens can no longer be assumed, the formative project becomes more daunting. The task of forging a common citizenship among a vast and disparate people invites more strenuous forms of soulcraft. This raises the stakes for republican politics and heightens the risk of coercion.

This peril can be glimpsed in Rousseau's account of the formative undertaking necessary to a democratic republic. The task of the founder, or great legislator, he writes - is no less than "to change human nature, to transform each individual - into a part of a larger whole from which this individual receives, in a sense, his life and his being." The legislator "must deny man his own forces" - in order to make him reliant on the community as a whole. The more each person's individual will is "dead and obliterated," the more likely he is to embrace the general will. "Thus if each citizen is nothing and can do nothing except in concert with all the others - one can say that the legislation has achieved the highest possible point of perfection."

The coercive face of soulcraft 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." 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."

What separates Rousseau's republican exertions from the civic practices described by Tocqueville are the dispersed, differentiated character of American public life in Tocqueville's day and the indirect modes of character formation this differentiation allowed. Unable to abide disharmony, Rousseau's republican ideal seeks to collapse the distance between persons so that citizens stand in a kind of

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speechless transparence, or immediate presence to one another. Where the general will prevails, the citizens "consider themselves to be a single body," and there is no need for political argument. "The first to propose [a new law] merely says what everybody has already felt; and there is no question of intrigues or eloquence" to secure its passage. Given the unitary character of the general will, deliberation at its best issues in silent unanimity: "The more harmony reigns in the assemblies, that is to say, the closer opinions come to unanimity, the more dominant too is the general will. But long debates, dissensions, and tumult betoken the ascendance of private interests and the decline of the state." Since the common good does not admit of competing interpretations, disagreement signals corruption, a falling away from the common good.

It is this assumption - that the common good is unitary and uncontestable - not the formative ambition as such, that inclines Rousseau's politics to coercion. It is, moreover, an assumption that republican politics can do without. As America's experience with the political economy of citizenship suggests, the civic conception of freedom does not render disagreement unnecessary. It offers a way of conducting political argument, not transcending it.

Unlike Rousseau's unitary vision, the republican politics Tocqueville describes is more clamorous than consensual. It does not despise differentiation. Instead of collapsing the space between persons, it fills this space with public institutions that gather people together in various capacities, that both separate and relate them. These institutions include the townships, schools, religions, and virtue-sustaining occupations that form the "character of mind" and "habits of the heart" a democratic republic requires. Whatever their more particular purposes, these agencies of civic education inculcate the habit of attending to

public things. And yet given their multiplicity, they prevent public life from dissolving into an undifferentiated whole.

So the civic strand of freedom is not necessarily exclusive or coercive. It can sometimes find democratic, pluralistic expression. To this extent the liberal's objection to republican political theory is misplaced. But the liberal worry does contain an insight that cannot be dismissed: Republican politics is risky politics, a politics without guarantees. And the risks it entails inhere 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. Dispersed power and multiple sites of civic formation may reduce these dangers but cannot remove them. This is the truth in the liberal's complaint about republican politics.

What to make of this complaint depends on the alternatives. If there were a way to secure freedom without attending to the character of citizens, or to define rights without affirming a conception of the good life, then the liberal objection to the formative project might be decisive. But is there such a way? Liberal political theory claims that there is. The voluntarist conception of freedom promises to lay to rest, once and for all, the risks of republican politics. If liberty can be detached from the exercise of self-government and conceived instead as the capacity of persons to choose their own ends, then the difficult task of forming civic virtue can finally be dispensed with. Or at least it can be narrowed to the seemingly simpler task of cultivating toleration and respect for others.

On the voluntarist conception of freedom, statecraft no longer needs soulcraft, except in limited domain. Tying freedom to respect for the rights of freely choosing selves would dampen old disputes about how to form the habits of self-rule. It would spare politics the

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ancient quarrels about the nature of the good life. Once freedom is detached from the formative project, "the problem of setting up a state can be solved even by a nation of devils," in Kant's memorable words. "For such a task does not involve the moral improvement of man."

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 the 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 themselves, it denies 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 we may be bound by obligations such as these, but insist they apply to private life alone and have no bearing on politics. But this raises a further difficulty. Why insist on separating our identity as citizens from our identity as persons more broadly conceived? Why should political deliberation not reflect our best understanding of the highest human ends? Don't arguments about justice and rights unavoidably draw on particular conceptions of the good life, whether we admit it or not?

The problems in the theory of procedural liberalism show up in the practice it inspires. Over the past half-century, American politics has come to embody the version of liberalism that renounces the formative ambition and insists government should be neutral toward competing conceptions of the good life.

Rather than tie liberty to self-government and the virtues that sustain it, the procedural republic seeks a framework of rights, neutral among ends, within which individuals can choose and pursue their own ends.

But the discontent that besets American public life today illustrates the inadequacy of this solution. A politics that brackets morality and religion too completely soon generates 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. Fundamentalists rush in where liberals fear to tread. The disenchantment also assumes more secular forms. Absent a political agenda that addresses the moral dimension of public questions, attention becomes riveted on the private vices of public officials. Political discourse becomes increasingly preoccupied with the scandalous, the sensational, the confessional as purveyed by tabloids, talk shows, and eventually the mainstream media as well. It cannot be said that the public philosophy of contemporary liberalism is wholly responsible for these tendencies. But its vision of political discourse is too spare to contain the moral energies of democratic life. It creates a moral void that opens the way for intolerance and other misguided 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 expansion of rights in recent decades, 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-image by which we live.

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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.

The inability of the reigning political agenda to address the erosion of self-government and community reflects the impoverished conceptions of citizenship and freedom implicit in our public life. The procedural republic that has unfolded over the past half-century can now be seen as an epic experiment in the claims of liberal as against republican political thought. Our present predicament lends weight to the republican claim that liberty cannot be detached from self-government and the virtues that sustain it, that the formative project cannot be dispensed with after all. The procedural republic, it turns out, cannot secure the liberty it promises because it cannot inspire the moral and civic engagement self-government requires.

If the public philosophy of contemporary liberalism fails to answer democracy's discontent, it remains to ask how a renewed attention to republican themes might better equip us to contend with our condition. How would a political agenda informed by the civic strand of freedom differ from the one that now prevails? Is self-government in the republican sense even possible under modern conditions? If so, what economic and political arrangements would it require, and what qualities of character would be necessary to sustain them?

How American politics might recover its civic voice is not wholly a speculative matter. Although the public philosophy of the procedural republic predominates in our time, it has not extinguished the civic understanding of freedom. Around the edges of our political discourse and practice, hints of the formative project can still be glimpsed. As the reigning political agenda lost energy in the 1980s and 1990s, these residual civic impulses quickened. Americans of various ideological persuasions groped to articulate a politics that reached beyond the terms of the procedural republic and spoke to the anxieties of the time.

These gropings, however partial and inchoate, gesture nonetheless toward the kind of political debate that would accord greater attention to republican themes. These expressions of Americans' persisting civic aspirations have taken two forms; one emphasizes the moral, the other the economic prerequisites of self-government. The first is the attempt, coming largely but not wholly from the right, to revive virtue, character formation, and moral judgment as considerations in public policy and political discourse. The second involves a range of efforts, coming mostly thought not entirely from the left, to contend with economic forces that disempower communities and threaten to erode the social fabric of democratic life.

The global media and market that shape our lives beckons us to a world beyond boundaries and belonging. But the civic resources we need to master these forces, or at least to contend with them, 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.

The public philosophy by which we live bids us to bracket these attachments, to set them aside for political purposes, to conduct our political debates without reference to

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them. But a procedural republic that banishes moral and religious argument from political discourse makes for an impoverished civic life. It also fails to answer the aspiration for self-government; its image of citizens as free and independent selves, unencumbered by moral or civic ties they have not chosen, cannot sustain the public spirit that equips us for self-rule.

Since the days of Aristotle's polis, the republican tradition has viewed self-government as an activity rooted in a particular place, carried out by citizens loyal to that place and the way of life it embodies. Self-government today, however, requires a politics that plays itself out in a multiplicity of settings, from neighborhoods to nations to the world as a whole. Such a politics requires citizens who can think and act as multiply situated selves. The civic virtue distinctive to our time is the capacity to negotiate our way among the sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting obligations that claim us, and to live with the tension to which multiple loyalties give rise. This capacity is difficult to sustain, for it is easier to live with the plurality between persons than within them.

The republican tradition reminds us that to every virtue there corresponds a characteristic form of corruption or decay. Where civic virtue consists in holding together the complex identities of modern selves, it is vulnerable to corruption of two kinds. The first is the tendency to fundamentalism, the response of those who cannot abide the ambiguity associated with divided sovereignty and multiply encumbered selves. To the extent that contemporary politics puts sovereign states and sovereign selves in question, it is likely to provoke reactions from those who would banish ambiguity, shore up borders, harden the distinction between insiders and outsiders, and promise a politics to "take back our culture and take back our country," to "restore our sovereignty" with a vengeance.

The second corruption to which multiply encumbered citizens are prone is the drift to formless, protean, "storyless" selves, unable to weave the various strands of their identity into a coherent whole. Political community depends on the narratives by which people make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; at its best, political deliberation is not only about competing policies but also about competing interpretations of the character of a community, of its purposes and ends. A politics that proliferates the sources and sites of citizenship complicates the interpretive project. At a time when the narrative resources of civic life are already strained - as the sound bites, factoids, and disconnected images of our media-saturated culture attest - it becomes increasingly difficult to tell the tales that order our lives. There is a growing danger that, individually and collectively we will find ourselves slipping into a fragmented, storyless condition. The loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject for without narrative there is no continuity between present and past, and therefore no responsibility, and therefore no possibility of acting together to govern ourselves.

Since human beings are storytelling beings, we are bound to rebel against the drift to "storylessness." But there is no guarantee that the rebellions will take salutary form. Some, in their hunger for story, will be drawn to the vacant, vicarious fare of confessional talk shows, celebrity scandals, and sensational trials. Others will seek refuge in fundamentalism. The hope of our time rests instead with those who can summon the conviction and restraint to make sense of our condition and repair the civic life on which democracy depends.