

fied) about power and domination. And his skeptical, humane perspective makes it plain where his own values lie. "The open question," he writes, "raised during the upheavals of the 1970s and then forgotten during the boom of the 1980s, is whether cultural change can lead to new preferences that will in turn relieve

humanity's pressure on the earth's resources." Thanks to Tenner, that question has just opened a little wider.

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Ragged Individualism

DEMOCRACY'S DISCONTENT:

America in Search of a Public Philosophy.

By Michael J. Sandel. Belknap of Harvard Univ. Press. 417 pp. \$24.95

by Samuel H. Beer

Out of step with many of his colleagues in the political science trade, Michael Sandel takes ideas and ideals seriously. "For all we may resist such ultimate questions as the meaning of justice and the nature of the good life," he writes in the preface to this penetrating new book, "what we cannot escape is that we live some answer to these questions—we live some *theory*—all the time."

For Sandel, a professor of government at Harvard University, every public philosophy is derived from some theory of ethics. In contemporary America, where dissatisfaction with politics is at an all-time high, the theory of ethics shaping our political behavior is radical individualism. Its premise is that each person is "a free and independent self capable of choosing his own values and ends." This is not the cynical view of man as a self-centered egoist. The individualist Sandel attacks is a worthier and more formidable figure: that often idealized American, the self-made man. Instructed by Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* and Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance," this individual strives to realize his own freely chosen conception of the good life, constrained only by the right of others to do the same. He is autonomous: in Sandel's vivid phrase, "an unencumbered self."

Derived from this radical individualism

is the public philosophy that Sandel calls "the procedural republic." According to this conception, the role of government should be limited to enforcing the procedures by which citizens may exercise their freedom of choice while in no way taking a position on what they should choose.

Of course, the more familiar term for this is "liberalism," a term that is both fitting and confusing. It is appropriate because liberalism does indeed aim at facilitating individual freedom of choice. But it is also confusing because in modern times liberalism has subdivided into two quite distinct tendencies. One takes the view that the main task of government is to prevent citizens from interfering with one another's freedom. (In America this libertarian emphasis is often called "conservatism.") The other tendency proposes that government must intervene whenever external circumstances (such as poverty) constrain individual freedom. This notion of positive government is often what Americans mean by "liberalism."

According to historians such as Louis Hartz, individualistic liberalism has long been the public philosophy of every major contender in the American political debate. Indeed, it is seen as the essence of that American exceptionalism which sets Americans apart from Europeans.

Contradicting this claim, other histori-

ans—notably Gordon Wood—find in American political thought since the founding a powerful communitarian current which they call “republicanism.” Its premise is that the values of the individual are taken from, and realized in, a community. Sandel shares this view, and emphasizes that the community it describes is not just any community but a self-governing body of citizens “deliberating . . . about the common good” and then being morally bound by the “way of life” that emerges.

Where Sandel breaks new ground is in his claim that republicanism was in fact dominant throughout most of America’s history, and that only recently has it been superseded by individualistic liberalism. In his view, the change occurred in the 1960s, when President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society made its central concern the extension of individual rights rather than the promotion of community. And in that shift Sandel finds the source of our present discontent—a discontent with liberalism itself. Liberalism, he writes, cannot “deliver the liberties it promises because it cannot inspire the moral and civic engagement which self-government requires.”

It is easy to go along with Sandel’s view that individualistic liberalism cannot suffice as the moral foundation of modern American democracy, even though it will always be a powerful force in American political life. It is harder, however, to accept Sandel’s explanation of how we got into this slough of individualistic excess, and what we should do to get out.

Consider Sandel’s interpretation of the Great Society. Stressing the degree to which its reforms were carried out under the banner of individual rights, he neglects to consider that they also embodied such eminently republican values as participation, decentralization, and community.

Of participation, the most important example was the increase in the number of voters who, in accordance with reforms of party structure, began to take part in the nomination of the major parties’ presidential candidates. In both parties, the choice shifted from the closed arena of national conventions to the wide-open process of primaries and caucuses.

The Great Society also had decentralization built into it. Unlike the programs of the New Deal, those of the Great Society were administered not directly by the federal government but, with few exceptions, indirectly by grants-in-aid to state and local governments.

With regard to community, I am puzzled, indeed astonished, that Sandel makes only glancing references to the issue of race. Rightly, he praises the civil rights movement as “the finest expression of republican politics in our time.” Yet by depicting the movement as a phenomenon confined to the black churches of the South, he overlooks its deeply biracial, bipartisan, multid denominational, and nationwide character. If this had not been the case—if NAACP attorney Jack Greenberg had not fought alongside Chief Counsel Thurgood Marshall, Rockefeller Republicans alongside Humphrey Democrats, and white freedom riders alongside black freedom riders—the movement would never have triumphed. And in harmony with its broad social composition, the movement was not limited, as Sandel suggests, to winning equal civil and political rights for black Americans. Conceivably, that objective could have been achieved under conditions of racial separation—that is, under a wholly honest and ideal regime of separate but equal. But this possibility was rejected. The goal was integration, as Walter White argued successfully against W. E. B. DuBois in the 1930s, and as Martin Luther King, Jr., reasserted in the 1960s.

The same rationale informs affirmative action—which, however we may debate its effectiveness, is indubitably a case of “the political economy of citizenship” by which (according to Sandel) republicanism justifies government intervention in the economy for the sake of noneconomic “civic consequences.” The overriding goal is social equality between the races. To forbid and penalize racial discrimination is surely to “legislate morality,” an operation which Sandel insists is beyond the reach of the procedural republic.

In such actions, the law has clearly taken a stand on the substance of the good

life. While many Americans may feel disappointed by the results, remarkable progress in race relations has been made since the beginning of the civil rights era. Affirmative action has not done much for the poor, but it has greatly helped to expand and integrate the black middle class. Obviously, much remains to be done. But if the effort to achieve racial integration is to be judged a failure, then it is a failure not only of liberalism but of republicanism in our day and nation.

On this crucial point, regrettably, Sandel is evasive. For him, the public philosophy of republicanism was already moribund when the Great Society was launched. Looking back at the New Nationalism of Teddy Roosevelt, which “unfolded from the Progressive era to the New Deal and the Great Society,” he concludes that it “failed to cultivate a shared national identity.” Without the moral cohesion that goes with such a shared national identity, Sandel fears that even the worthiest goals (he has expressed approval of programs such as affirmative action) are doomed. “The American welfare state,” he writes, “is vulnerable because it does not rest on a sense of national community adequate to its purpose.”

Does Sandel have a solution? Yes, and it is one that has great resonance these days. Since the “sense of a national community” has failed, he finds “a more promising basis for a democratic politics” in “a revitalized civic life nour-

ished in the more particular communities we inhabit.” Small local communities, whether governments or private associations, can indeed serve as wellsprings of reform and civic virtue. They cannot, however, cope with the forces of a complex and interdependent modern economy unless they act within a national framework of policy and power. As revealed by the few, thin examples in his concluding pages, Sandel’s localistic hope is virtually a counsel of despair.

Under British rule, the American Founders learned to be wary of concentrated power. But under the Articles of Confederation, they saw what happened when power was too widely dispersed. In response, they drew up a constitution that would unite the American people in what George Washington in his Farewell Address termed “an indissoluble community of interest *as one nation*.” Republicanism in this *national* mode inspired the leading minds among the Founders, and it has continued to be the dominant theme in our political culture to this day. Individualistic liberalism is no substitute, as Sandel so persuasively demonstrates. But far less persuasive is his faint hope that the small community will somehow rescue us. There is no cure for our present discontent without a renewal of republican purpose on the national scale.

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Can Nigeria Be One?

*THE OPEN SORE OF A CONTINENT:
A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis.*

By Wole Soyinka. Oxford University Press. 176 pp. \$19.95

by Makau wa Mutua

When Wole Soyinka all but pronounces the death of his native Nigeria, the world should listen. Not only is Soyinka Africa’s best-known writer; Nigeria is in many ways the epitome of the modern African state—rich in people

and resources, yet devastated by political misrule and ethnic divisiveness.

Born in 1934 and educated in Nigeria and England, Soyinka became in 1986 the first African to win the Nobel Prize in literature. He is best known for such plays as