

Sandel MJ (2024) *La democrazia stanca. Nuovi pericoli e possibili soluzioni per tempi difficili*. Milan: Feltrinelli

ELIA MONTANI

This review examines Michael Sandel's *La democrazia stanca. Nuovi pericoli e possibili soluzioni per tempi difficili*, the Italian translation of the second edition (the first one dates back to 1996) of *Democracy's Discontent*, published as *Democracy's Discontent. A New Edition for Our Perilous Times* (2022). To fully appreciate the purpose of the work, it is necessary to first outline the reasons that prompted the American political philosopher to republish and update a text originally published thirty years ago. While the 1996 edition aimed to highlight that discontent lay hidden beneath an apparent layer of prosperity – dictated by the combination of the end of the Cold War and the consecration of American liberal capitalism – the republished edition investigates the reasons why this discontent, in addition to no longer being “beneath the surface” (Sandel, 2024: 19), has deepened and become the hallmark of American democracy. As Sandel states, what in 1996 was a premonition or submerged fear is now reality:

Evidence of the effects of global capitalism's loss of power paved the way for a clear recognition that the system was rigged in favour of large corporations and the wealthy. Anxieties about the loss of community spirit gave way to polarisation and mistrust (Sandel, 2024: 19).¹

Through his work, Michael Sandel undertakes a courageous and counter-current move: he argues that the political sphere cannot be reduced to a mere aggregation of “recalcitrant facts” (Sandel, 1996: IX) and institutions conceived solely as instruments. Sandel sets out to examine contemporary American democracy and the crisis it is currently undergoing by probing the public philosophy

¹ All translations from Italian are by the author, unless otherwise stated.

that underpins it. Without offering solutions that can be immediately translated into policies – though he does not shy away from proposing substantive ideas – and without succumbing to the sterile narrative that pits liberalism against all alternative political theories, *La democrazia stanca* captures and invites reflection on issues and questions that we are not accustomed to reflecting on, as they are implicit in our everyday practices.

This brief introduction helps clarify the trajectory the book follows. In fact, the belief that public philosophy should not be treated as a mere ideal abstraction but is necessary “to diagnose our political condition” (Sandel, 1996: X) is not simply a theoretical conviction, but rather the method applied in the text. Sandel’s attempt is precisely aimed at bringing to light the public philosophy of contemporary American democracy. From this perspective, as the chapter titles suggest, Sandel begins with the constitutional debates and traces several key turning points in American public life over the last two centuries, in order to show that, through such junctures, the public philosophy which underpins contemporary political debates has been established. According to Sandel, this is “a certain version of liberal political theory” (Sandel, 2024: 24), that, remaining within the liberal tradition, attained its distinctiveness and became dominant during the second half of the twentieth century. Sandel highlights the hegemony of late 20th-century liberalism and outlines its contents through a twofold analysis: on the one hand, the discussion of episodes in American history such as the dispute between Federalists and Jeffersonians after American Independence and the drafting of the Constitution, the debate on the eight-hour working day, the debate on the New Deal and the move towards a Keynesian-type economy, culminating in the publicly funded bank bailouts after the 2008 crisis; on the other hand, highlighting that the rise of liberal public philosophy coincided with the decline of its rival public philosophy: republican political theory. By addressing the debates that have animated the last two hundred years of American history and investigating the contrast between the liberal and republican proposals, Sandel more clearly characterises contemporary liberalism and reveals which aspects of republican political theory have been abandoned.

A telling example is the debate over the meaning of free labour. Before the end of the nineteenth century, labour was considered free not only because workers voluntarily agreed to perform it, but also because it equipped workers “to think and act as independent citizens, capable of sharing self-government” (Sandel, 2024: 67), whereas, from the end of the nineteenth century, it began to be argued that labour was free solely because it was the result of an agreement between worker and employer. It is in the transition from one conception of free labour to another – along with similar examples in the economic and constitutional spheres – that we can glimpse what constituted the rise of contemporary liberalism, to the detriment of republican political theory. According to the author of *La democrazia stanca*, this version of liberalism, which has informed all areas of American public life, has established itself by supplanting the civic conception of freedom typical of republican political theory, according to which freedom is “the capacity, as citizens, to shape the forces that govern our collective destiny” (Sandel, 2024: 179). Antithetically, the voluntaristic conception advanced by liberal theory argues that freedom coincides with the ability “to choose one’s own values and ends” (Sandel, 2024: 183). As it emerges from the passage quoted above, Sandel’s analysis is genealogical in nature: the author traces social and political practices back to their conceptual origins. The genealogical approach extends further to the liberal and republican freedom, starting from the idea of human subject that animates them.

The genius of Sandel’s text lies precisely in the methodological operation of tracing some of the phenomena that characterise the crisis of the democratic order back to the anthropological level, demonstrating how harmful it is to separate the level of public philosophy from that of political life. According to Michael Sandel, therefore, the voluntaristic conception of freedom is the direct consequence of the replacement of Aristotle’s *zoon politikòn* and Thomas Aquinas’ *animal sociale* by John Rawls’ liberal subject, for whom “the intellect is subordinate to the will” (Pabst, 2025: 42), and consequently, the self is a voluntaristic subject, a subject of choice, whose peculiarity will be substantiated by the independence of being a “self-originating source of valid claims” (Rawls 1980: 543). It is through the enunciation of liberal anthropological theory that the text establishes the

link between the process of subjectivation and political history. As argued by Adrian Pabst, the anthropological shift introduced by liberal theory has led to a redefinition of what makes us human: “our capacity for maximum free choice in the economy is now assumed to override our social, political nature” (Pabst, 2021: 58), which has extended its effects in the political and economic domains. Indeed, when an individual is considered a subject only insofar as they are able to choose according to their own will, it follows that the paradigms of politics and economics must be able to offer the conditions within which individuals can “choose and pursue their own ends” (Sandel, 2024: 242). The economy will therefore no longer have – as in the civic-republican tradition – the aim of promoting self-government but, as Sandel states, echoing John Maynard Keynes, that of maximising consumption and growth, the ultimate expressions of freedom understood as the satisfaction of one’s individual preferences (Sandel, 2024: 26-27).

The consequence is that while the republican economic debate questioned how economic policies and structures could create the conditions for citizens to engage in self-government, the liberal economic debate will focus solely on how to “maximise consumer welfare” (Sandel, 2024: 21). According to Michael Sandel, the economic consequences of liberal anthropology have therefore led to the adoption of capitalist *laissez-faire*, but in pursuing the promise of capitalist liberalism of greater freedom – that particular version of liberalism that considers capitalism the only economic model compatible with its ideals – American citizens have found themselves “deceived” as they are increasingly less ‘masters of their own destiny’ (Sandel, 2024: 197). According to Sandel, the scenario to which the prevalence of liberal theory in the second half of the twentieth century over the republican civic tradition has led is as follows:

The triumph of the voluntaristic conception of freedom coincided with a growing sense of loss of power. Despite the expansion of rights and entitlements, as well as the achievements of the political economy of growth and distributive justice, Americans discovered, with a sense of frustration, that they were losing control of the forces that governed their lives (Sandel, 2024: 194-195).

The combination of the voluntaristic conception of freedom and the economic paradigms mentioned will inevitably be accompanied by a change of political nature. If individuals are defined by their ability to choose which goals to pursue, the task of government will be to protect the conditions necessary to ensure that such choices can be made. Consequently, theories of government, dealing exclusively with procedures capable of guaranteeing the conditions for free choice to take place, will be characterised by their “neutrality with respect to competing conceptions of the good life” (Sandel, 2024: 27). According to Sandel, this form of government, called procedural republic because of its emphasis on procedures, is at the root of the “widespread perception that common goals and shared conceptions were eroding” (Sandel, 2024: 179), as they are considered to be in contradiction with – and in a sense impositive on – the pursuit of one’s own preferences. This happened because the idea that freedom consists in the ability to choose one’s own preferences and ends has led to a devaluation of those ends whose roots are communal (family, religious, associative, political), ends that are therefore not the result of a purely individual choice. However, this has repercussions on the state of contemporary democracies, as the lack of consideration for common goals inevitably leads to the erosion of those places whose nature consists in the cultivation of common intentions, places that are – or, unfortunately, should be – the pillars of a democratic political community. As Sandel effectively states,

The political community depends on the narrative through which people make sense of their condition and interpret the common life they share; political deliberation at its best is not only about competing policies, but also about competing interpretations of the character of a community, its aims and its ends (Sandel 2024: 244).

About the scenario just described, it is worth noting a consequence that Sandel draws: the distance of citizens from democratic public life. According to Michael Sandel, contemporary liberalism’s insistence on individual choices has led to a prioritisation of the private sphere, within which free decisions about one’s own goals are taken. Therefore, while political theory from Aristotle onwards has given prominence to public life, considered the context in which

individuals' lives take on their own unique character, liberal theory has brought about a hierarchical reversal that elevates private life to a decisive sphere. This reversal also affects the relationship between citizens and democracy, a sphere that by its nature is associated with the existence of common goals. It is therefore through the argument just outlined that, before concluding, Michael Sandel argues the reasons for citizens' distrust of the democratic public sphere, which has abdicated its guiding role to economic systems. The author's comment on the current state of democratic citizenship is lapidary: Sandel states that individuals in contemporary liberal democracies do not see themselves "citizens so much as consumers" (Sandel, 2024: 20). In conclusion, the American political philosopher attempts to outline a public philosophy aimed at intervening precisely the role of citizens, to avoid their complete reduction into private consumers. This public philosophy must recover elements of the republican tradition, avoiding equating them with angry nationalist closure, as seen in Trump's victory and in Brexit, interpreted by Sandel as two reactions to the loss of power following liberal globalisation, driven by "the anguish of reaffirming national sovereignty and pride" (Sandel, 2024: 19). The reappropriation of components of republican political theory must, however, be able to coexist with those who believe that the republican notion of "forged" citizenship entails coercive elements. It is precisely in this regard that the originality of Michael Sandel's proposal emerges, an originality which, as he himself stated in an interview with Corrado Del Bo' in 2013, allows him to move beyond the labels of "communitarian" and "republican". The idea of republican tradition that Sandel intends to recover does not, in fact, aim to oppose liberal theory *tout court*. William Connolly considers Michael Sandel's thinking in this regard to be "a vision of civic pluralism appropriate to the distinct conditions of contemporary life" (Connolly, 1998: 211). Sandel, therefore, aware of how difficult it is to intervene in the paradigms that govern our lives, identifies key points, where the contribution of republican public philosophy could prove decisive in ensuring that working conditions and workers' freedom are directed towards participation in public life and that democratic public discourse engages with issues relating to the "good life" and the "good society".

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Elia Montani is a PhD candidate in Institutions and Policies at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan (Italy). His research interests focus on political philosophy and political theory, with particular attention to democracy theory and the relationship between the crisis of democratic systems and liberal theory.
Email: elia.montani@unicatt.it