



Reith Lecture Podcast (OUB)

Last year the Reith Lectures were by Jonathan Spence talking about China. This year's very different. We have Professor Michael Sandel, a philosopher and political theorist and he is talking about a new citizenship and addressing the prospect for a new politics for the common good.

My name is Derek Matravers. I am at the Philosophy Department here at the Open University and with me I have Matt Matravers who's a Professor in the Department of Politics at the University of York and Professor Michael Saward who's in the Politics and International Studies Department here at the OU.

So Matt – why do you think um Sandel chose a theme like this? What's it all about? What are the issues about morality in public life?

Matt Matravers

Well I suppose one might think that morality naturally belongs in public and that it's important that public figures behave morally and of course that's right but in terms of thinking about morality as a whole system of beliefs about what's good it's very problematic to think that belongs in public life because we differ so much in a pluralistic society like the UK on what morality actually is. So from the 1970's onwards really there was a move within liberal political philosophy to sideline questions of goodness and morality and say that we should focus on questions of rights and focus on the individual and that way we could structure our lives together despite the fact that we differ so profoundly about what's morally good. Michael Sandel belongs to a tradition a response to that liberal – liberal idea which says no, we've gone too far down the tracks of individualism and rights and we need to restore morality to – to public life.

Derek Matravers

Okay. Thanks. So he's got these two themes of a new citizenship and the prospect for a politics of the common good. Now Mike – what do you understand by citizenship and what would you understand – why does it need to be made new?

Michael Saward

Citizenship is a very tricky term like “freedom”, like “equality”, like “rights”, like so many of the basic terms that make up political life and discussions of morality in political life. It's slippery and very important to try and get under the skin of what the speaker or what the writer thinks citizenship means and it's not always evident straight off. There have been as many new citizenship's as there have been theorists of citizenship or indeed political parties or – or leaders who want to shape and mould citizens to do certain things or to think and act in a certain way. There are broadly speaking I think liberal conceptions or ideas of what a citizen ought to be perhaps what a citizen ought to do. There are alternative – we might call them republican sometimes; at other times overlapping with that a little - communitarian ideas of what a citizen should be and what a citizen should do. Liberals would stress the autonomy of the individual, the fact that they carry rights. Republicans and communitarians would stress more the context of the citizen, the collective citizen, the citizen in community and what they get from community and what they offer to a community and there have been many other conceptions as well. Almost, any kind of political regime will want to mould its citizens. Early socialism talked about creating socialist man for example, presumably socialist woman as well though they didn't necessarily put it that way. I think Sandel's idea of a new citizenship seems to be a particularly American - I think there is something quite located and American about the kind of discourse that he's involved in. And it certainly keys in to some ways republican and communitarian thinking about individuals' obligation to community, responsibilities to community; recognition of the fact that individuals don't arrive in the world pristine and separate but arrive within groups and within families and within localities which

kind of make them in part what they are as citizens. so it's kind of embracing and recognising I think that fact. So he – the new citizenship for Sandel and others - um Benjamin Barber is another American political theorist for example who has similar thoughts from a similar kind of background in the US. I think that this is the kind of debate that he is a part of and where the conception of a new citizenship um begins to come in to the picture.

Derek Matravers

Right. So do you think that in this country, in the UK, we are kind of less communitarian and more individualistic in our conception of citizenship?

Michael Saward

Traditionally the US has been seen as the classic site liberal individualism which goes along with another theme we will come on to a little later. The legitimacy, the broad legitimacy in US society um that markets and market exchange and the operation of individuals by their own steam as it were in the market is – is seen as widely credible as a way of life. One thing that communitarian theorists and philosophers say that whatever we think about how separate and autonomous an individual we are we simply are the products of our communities and we ought to recognise that and take responsibilities from that basis. So in that sense if you're a Brit or French or if you're American or Senegalese it makes little difference at recognition that you are a particular product of a specific community. The other side of it is more the side your question refers to I guess is whether there is a feeling of community and I think there this is a big debate in the UK isn't it around multiculturalism perhaps most recently, especially post 9/11 and a lot of fears about founded or unfounded about security, the character of "British-ness". I think we've heard a lot more including from Gordon Brown about British-ness and how important that is and what values that is perceived to embody.

Derek Matravers

The issue here is that people will feel that they owe their allegiance to – to their local communities rather than to the community of the citizens of the UK or something like that.

Michael Saward

This local versus national thread isn't - I think it's an interesting one for Sandel – and an interesting one in debates about "British-ness" as well - to whom do we owe our loyalties? The answer to that question in – in –Western thinking, I think in Western practice, to be over general about it, for a long time has been the nation. That's your primary kind of location of identity. I don't think Sandel and others who argue like he does would want to oppose that. But they do talk about locality a great deal and I think they're referring to not so much local villages and towns or regions, though I think that's part of it, but also local institutions, valuing your local market – um valuing local health, valuing local educational institutions. I think that is a key part of it. So maybe there is a revival of kind of locality in the importance of face to face communication and interaction and – and the value of that local-ness.

Derek Matravers

Matt – do you have any thoughts on this?

Matt Matravers

Well I think what Mike says is absolutely right about the theoretical tradition which in the United States, the Republican tradition is much stronger. But I think he's also right to say that these debates have been going on as long as ideas about citizenship have been in the – in the political air. And UK listeners um listening to this will remember very well Mrs Thatcher famously saying there is no such thing as society. There are only individual men and women. And some years later Tony Blair when he was elected in 1997 emphasising exactly the opposite saying "No, no. We must focus on society. We must focus on the obligations we have to each other, not on the rights that we have. We must focus on community and on building local community on political participation." And those kinds of political debates have been running just about for ever. And they mirror exactly these theoretical debates about what we owe to our locality as against to other individuals. What we owe to our society conceived of as a nation rather than conceived of as marker just with individuals who are interacting together over transactions. And that debate has been mirrored in the debate between the

Conservatives and New Labour and now interestingly is mirrored in the debate between David Cameron and those who oppose him in his own Party. Cameron, like Blair, has emphasised exactly the same: communitarian themes and themes of obligations rather than rights and contra Mrs Thatcher themes as society rather than the individual.

Derek Matravers

Okay. Thanks. Let's move on to the next theme, which is this notion of the common good. And as – I'm going to ask you Matt – that seems a strange notion as common good because what's good for me as a white, middle class, middle aged Open University lecturer is not going to be good for somebody who is in a completely different situation. So what sort of substance can we give to the notion of a common good?

Matt Matravers

Well it seems odd in a sense to say that there is no notion of the common good. I mean we all feel that there are things that are good for certain kinds of entities that are not just good for the people who make up those entities. So there is an idea that something might be good for example Arsenal Football Team by which we don't just mean that it's good for the followers or the particular players currently for Arsenal Football Team. So on the one hand I think the idea of a common good has got a certain intuitive appeal –

Derek Matravers

What sorts of things would those be though?

Matt Matravers

Well, that's what's difficult because in a pluralistic society once one tries to pin down what is good for society then that's hugely problematic unless society is very homogeneous. And once there is a pluralistic society and people have different ideas of the good it's extraordinarily hard to see what a common good might look like. At the same time if we just reject the idea of a common good then we're left with the idea of individual actors in market transactions. And many people who have watched the recent financial crisis will say what goes wrong when you have individuals who only think of themselves as market players and only think of themselves as engaged in self-interested transactions is that a notion of the common good, a notion of what we're working towards together, is lost. So we're really torn between I think wanting an idea of a common good; wanting some sense that it can't just be about each of us pursuing our own good and hoping that the invisible hand works it all out for us. We are attracted to the thought that it can't just be that and there must be some idea of the common good but the trouble is whenever we try to pin down the common good there's an immense danger that it's defined by those who have power; by men, by the political elite's, by the dominant religion, and it'll exclude those who are more marginalised. I don't think there is an easy answer here. I don't think one can simply eradicate reference to the common good in public life. That would seem extraordinarily strange. But references to it become almost vacuous because once we try to give it content it becomes extremely difficult.

Derek Matravers

Okay. I'll just ask one more question and then I'll bring Mike in but how do things like the National Health Service fit in to this because you'd think the National Health Service is something that everybody might need, no matter what their position. Is that just an element of the common good?

Matt Matravers

Well it's part of the British political tradition to think of it as an element of the common good and of course for many, many years until it became completely laughable to say it, politicians would always preface what they were going to say about the National Health Service by saying "The National Health Service – the envy of the world." And anyone who had been to France or Germany knew that it wasn't the envy of the world. It was a terrible dysfunctional system, which wasted money and had filthy hospitals. So it's part of the political tradition to refer to it that way but of course if you have a different view, if you have a sort of liberal view, then what one thinks is no, it's simply a market correction. We know that the evidence tells us

that if you let people insure for themselves, that is if we simply left people who are in a market to insure for their own health care, they will systematically under-insure. So they will not realise how risky their lives are and they will not have enough insurance to cover the health care needs that they have. Now in a liberal view that's simply a market failure because of lack of information and irrational behaviour on the part of individuals there's a market failure to take up proper levels of insurance so the State steps in and provides a mandatory insurance. You can't opt out. You can't say, "I don't want to pay my taxes. I'll take out private insurance." It's mandatory to solve this market problem. Those are just two ways of seeing it and they're ways that will resonate differently depending on whether you have a primarily liberal individualist view of the world or whether you have a primarily communitarian one.

Derek Matravers

Okay. Thanks. Mike – do you have any views on the common good or? –

Mike Saward

In some ways I'm – I'm tempted by the kind of argument that I think goes – goes along with the thread of what you've just been saying which is that it's perhaps arrogant and at least very difficult to specify any particular content at any particular time for the common good or indeed the public interest the closer related term. The content will change over time and it changes part of the warp and weft of political and social and cultural debate. But that doesn't mean the notion of the common good doesn't make sense. It just means that it's a kind of a bucket that's been filled with different stuff from time to time and in different places and depending on the nature of debates about a whole range of issues: health and education and security and so on. And this is what's tempted a lot of people I think to step – step back from that. Just accept plurality at that level but also accept that the notion of common good is not nonsensical; that there is some sort of sense to it. It's not meaningless. But step back from that and think okay, maybe the common good consists in something which is about the conditions which produce ideas of the common good. So for example you might say that the common good ultimately could consist in keeping the conversation about the common good going keeping the conversation about the common good open. And I suppose one more question behind that would be what the conditions that could allow that to happen are? And you might even get to the point where you could say, as some do, well democracy – whatever that is exactly – but democracy has got to be an ingredient of the common good because it's an ingredient in an open society, which promotes open discussion, deliberation and so on. Security – now again the difficulty here is I will start constructing a list of the conditions that might produce the common good and that would be a controversial list as all are. But this is a temptation that many feel, and I understand the temptation, to step back to look at the conditions that may produce open, informed, public deliberation about the common good rather than trying to kind of fix its content up front as it were.

Derek Matravers

It crops up quite often in political debate that um politicians accused of privatising the health service or privatising education or privatising these things that the public seems to think um they hold in common; that they all own and should be free of private ownership. How does that kind of view tie up with the things that we've been talking about?

Matt Matravers

Well that's a very important issue and Michael Sandel certainly made his name partly arguing exactly this that there are certain areas of the community and certain areas of our life where ideas of the market and market transactions don't belong. So just to give an easy example: if you're in a marriage by the time your marriage has reached a point where you have an Excel spreadsheet to cover washing up and when you don't do it your wife says you are violating my rights one might have the thought that if you've got to that stage then something's gone badly wrong already. That is ideas of rights and individual transactions in the market just don't belong in certain spheres like the family. And I think that's very important when one thinks about the privatisation of things like prison services and indeed the military. If you look at the war in Iraq a lot of the war in Iraq was carried out by private contractors and not by the military. And there's an area there where one might worry desperately about exactly the kinds of rights and exactly the kinds of society of the common good of individual free persons that Mike was referring to. At the same time I think that we have to avoid romanticising non-

market communities. It's easy to think rights don't belong in the family and it's easy to think there was a time when families were more harmonious, lovelier, in which references to rights and markets and transactions weren't made. But it's easy to forget that some of those families were desperately patriarchal and some of those families had abuse in them which the police and society said: "That's a private matter precisely because we don't think the writ of normal politics extends that far". So again it's a difficult issue but I think it's an important one.

Derek Matravers

Right. Mike, did you have any thoughts on this?

Mike Saward

If I remember correctly Sandel several years ago wrote something where he commented on the um the swing from more liberal individualist views if you like to more collective or communitarian ones. And others have written on this as well and it seems in American public life and no doubt to some extent in Britain and elsewhere the pendulum swings a bit one way and it swings back the other and each time it swings say towards communitarian views it's seen as a kind of corrective. We've gone a little too far in certain areas of public life and perhaps even private life towards individualism, choice, fantasising choice, as some would have it. And so perhaps what we dealing here – with here and perhaps what Michael Sandel himself in the Reith Lectures is in a sense a part of re-emphasising a kind of reminding of the limits of choice and the limits of markets. And if you look at it sociologically over a longer term I think that might be the case. Choice has been a key word in all of this. Tony Blair talked a lot about choice: giving people choices over health, giving people choices in education about which school they want to send their child to and as many people have found in this country the choice is a pretty restricted choice. The choice doesn't look like a real choice. It doesn't get to be practised as a real choice and I think these issues are very much key to what Sandel is writing. What do we really want to be able to choose over is one of his key points I think. The genetic issues – genetic engineering comes in there. He doesn't think to be human means to need to or to want to have a choice over shaping our very character, shaping our very bodies, trying to improve ourselves in all those ways. He wants us to resist the impulse to control and to make choices to control our very genetic make up and indeed in other areas. So whether sometimes choices are really choices, whether consumer choices really equal citizenry choices for example and whether there are certain things that if we really thought about it carefully we would want to be able to choose over. I think these are areas in which the notion of choice and then again behind that individualism and markets come very much into the picture of the issues he's raising.

Derek Matravers

Both of you have mentioned the recent political events in the UK so the Blair government. Why does one have to choose between being a kind of Liberal on the one hand and being a communitarian on the other because if you look at the Blair government's political programme and certainly there was this emphasis on choice and consumers should have a lot of choice? But they also brought in kind of explicitly communitarian legislation so the kind of noisy neighbours legislation so you weren't free to make a noise in your own house if that disturbed people around you. So if there you've got a government that says oh we can be liberal about this and communitarian about this is this all a kind of big political theorists' division that the rest of us don't recognise?

Matt Matravers

No. I think it's a much more important debate than that. I think it's true that as Mike was saying the debate is one in which we swing in one direction and then correct ourselves and go back in another so we become afraid of rampant individualism and we try to incorporate more communitarian checks and then we become afraid of too much community and the stifling effects of community and we head back in the direction of individualism. But there are genuine policy choices here that make an enormous difference. So just in the area of multiculturalism for example there are questions of faith schools; there are questions of what people should be allowed to wear to school; there are questions of the mechanisms and techniques for slaughtering animals where questions of what is right to do and questions of what people think it is good to do, different faith communities for example do conflict and those are hard questions. So whilst of course it is very easy rhetorically for a politician to

stand up and say we want to give people choice over the National Health Service but we want them to exercise that choice responsibly as citizens. That sentence makes sense and it takes a political theorist in a sense to see the tensions within it. There is much more explicit policy areas where you can't have it both ways and you can't have your cake and eat it. You have, in the end, to side with liberal freedom conceived of as the freedom of autonomous individuals or the importance of community and allowing communities to behave in ways which we might not – we certainly wouldn't accept if they were just the preferences of particular individuals.

Derek Matravers

Thanks. Mike, do you have anything to add?

Mike Saward

Just one other angle on that is that one secret of some of this might be that it makes no sense to be a strong individualist liberal without also having a communitarian streak and vice versa. And if you think for example of the idea of a free market and the free market many would think is a bit of a misnomer. Free markets don't just spontaneously arise and erupt and begin to operate. This is putting it too strongly probably but they are creatures of states, states and law and systems of courts: setting up laws about contract and exchange and so on - do establish the ground rules of the market in a sense the market – the free market as we think of it is – is a product of – it's a community product. It's a collective product. The conditions are created for this would-be free market to operate but it's free within as it were those communitarian roots, boundaries, err restrictions. So at one level, certainly when it comes to talking about markets there is a strong blending between various norms which we would otherwise identify as perhaps opposing each other: liberal and communitarian.

Derek Matravers

Great. Thank you very much.

If you want to join the debate then there is a forum on the Reith Lectures at www.open2.net and there you will be able to find links to various other things including an interview with Michael Sandel on a topic we haven't covered which is the ethics of sport and genetic enhancements. And also if you want more general information about the Open University then just go to www.open.ac.uk/study

And so thanks to Mike and Matt and thank you for listening.