

What is left of our democratic ambitions?

November 30 2015

It had been planned for several months, but as fate would have it, the University of Montreal hosted the Conférences de la montagne "Challenges of democracy" symposium less than a week after the attacks on Paris. No fewer than 1,000 people arrived at the University of Montreal's Ernest-Cormier Amphitheatre on November 19, 2015 to hear two great voices of political philosophy - Charles Taylor, Professor Emeritus of McGill University, and Michael J. Sandel, professor at Harvard University, exchange their views on the issues facing the contemporary world with regard to the rise of terrorism. Terrorism had forced another scheduled and highly anticipated speaker, the French sociologist and intellectual Pierre Rosanvallon, to return to France a few days before the conference.

From the outset, the holder of the Canada Research Chair in Public Ethics and Political Theory and professor at the University of Montreal's Department of Philosophy, Marc-Antoine Dilhac, set the tone for the discussions to follow: "Democracy is an ongoing challenge because it is often reduced to the principles of market forces, and with the events in Paris, it is once again challenged. What is left of our democratic ambitions?"

For a more transparent society

Inspired by the latest book by Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le bon gouvernement*, Charles Taylor argued that democracy "often works better when there is a certain polarization - conducted peacefully - in society, a polarization that makes society more transparent. Without this polarization, there is a

fundamental problem, since the fate of each individual may no longer be linked to the fate of others."

But in recent decades, several developments have made this transparency more difficult and have divided society, he said. "It is increasingly difficult for citizens to share their lives and find direction and commonalities," said Taylor. Many people cannot identify with the major political and social programs."

And this division is in the form of a "downward trend: disaffection and apathy toward democratic life, fuelled by the increasing power of money and lobbies in politics."

The large-scale social movements that emerged in recent years, such as Occupy in the U.S. and the Maple Spring in Quebec, "are the result of this state of affairs because individuals feel left out. These movements are often at odds with the political party system because people do not see the political structures that could give life to their ideologies."

Taylor also believes that one of the great challenges of democracy is "to link collective realities with the system of representation and to organize protest so that it influences the representative systems that are responsible for major decisions, whether by establishing an international system of fair trade or by tackling global warming."

To do this, we must make this polarization in society more visible "by creating new contacts based on independence and mutual respect to combine the experiences of each individual."

Political void and the commodification of society

Michael J. Sandel also observes "the population's deep frustration with politics, parties, and politicians, due to a void in public discourse,"

combined with the prominent place that money and free-market ideology hold in society."

"These two trends are now embedded in every sphere of daily life," said Sandel. Our societies have become businesses. Everything is now for sale or monetized. And, according to him, the situation is worrisome for two reasons.

First, it creates deep inequalities. "I am not talking about inequalities that prevent some people from buying a luxury vacation or having a BMW: we cannot be all equal in society," he said. "I am talking about inequalities that prevent people from having access to the minimum, such as adequate health care, quality education, and living in a safe neighbourhood. Without such access, inequality brings about changes that can become fertile ground for extremist thought."

In addition, there is an erosion of humanist values. Sandel cites as evidence the recent Syrian refugee crisis. "Some have suggested using market mechanisms for countries to negotiate and agree on refugee quotas," much like what is done in the carbon market to reduce greenhouse gases. Under this principle, countries that do not receive refugees pay an amount to other countries so that the latter can absorb the quotas refused by the former.

"Putting a price on these refugees alters our sense of responsibility towards them, because it means seeing them other than human beings in their own right," he said.

Sandel provided another example of the "corrosive effect of mercantilist thinking" on society: some U.S. schools have experimented paying students who do well, in particular, by giving them two dollars for every book they read. "They actually read more books, which seems like a good thing, but instead of teaching them to like reading, it mostly

teaches them that reading has cash value, and that each of their actions has cash value," said the philosopher.

Neoliberal ideology seems to offer a neutral way to decide on public issues, "but it conceals a perverse effect, namely to disengage us from public affairs and the debates that we should have as a society," he said.

Rebuilding a shared civic life

Taylor and Sandel point to another big challenge: rebuilding a shared civic life.

"Citizens are less and less on an equal footing in our societies," noted Taylor. "Some live in posh neighbourhoods watched by guards, while others, nearby, live in poor neighbourhoods. The result is mutual contempt between rich and poor."

And while Canadians feel that inequalities in the country are substantial, they fail to mobilize to reduce them.

"It is important to alert the public about the dangers of these inequalities for [civic life](#)," warns Taylor. There is the danger of commodification and extreme inequality."

Sandel, meanwhile, observes a more and more pronounced separation between social classes in the West. "The rich no longer frequent public places, and their children go to private schools and live outside [society](#)."

While he agrees that perfect equality cannot exist, Sandel would like to see the rebuilding of public spaces where "people from all social strata can have shared experiences, and where there are discussions and debates on the common good and how we can better live together."

Provided by University of Montreal

Citation: What is left of our democratic ambitions? (2015, November 30) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-left-democratic-ambitions.html>

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