

2004 COMMONWEALTH HUMANITIES LECTURE Are We Still a Commonwealth? Markets, Morals, and Civic Life

*Earlier this year, the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, in partnership with the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC) inaugurated the Commonwealth Humanities Lecture, an annual lecture with a \$5,000 award honoring a Massachusetts humanities scholar or writer for his or her contributions to our understanding of public life and civic affairs in the Commonwealth. The award is underwritten by a generous gift from **The Atlantic Monthly** magazine.*

*The 2004 Commonwealth Humanities Lecturer was **Michael J. Sandel**, Ann T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government at Harvard University. He was selected from a stellar group of nominees representing virtually every humanities discipline. The lecture was held at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington on June 10, 2004.*

A member of the Harvard University faculty since 1980, Professor Sandel teaches courses on contemporary political philosophy, the history of political thought, globalization and its discontents, ethics in biotechnology and markets, morals and laws. Over 11,000 students have taken his undergraduate course entitled "Justice," making it one of the most popular courses in the history of Harvard. In 1999, he was named a Harvard College professor in recognition of his contributions to undergraduate teaching.

*Professor Sandel's publications include Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy, which was the subject of his interview in the fall, 1996 issue of Mass Humanities. He also has written Liberalism and the Limits of Justice, Liberalism and its Critics, and articles in scholarly journals, law reviews, and general publications such as **The Atlantic Monthly**, The New York Times, and The New Republic. In 2002 he was named to the President's Council on Bioethics, a national body charged with advising the President of the United States on bioethical issues raised by advances in biomedical science and technology.*

I am deeply honored to be selected as the first Commonwealth Humanities Lecturer. I would like to express my gratitude to the boards of MassInc and the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. I want also to thank Ian Bowles of MassINC and David Tebaldi of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities for that warm and generous introduction. These organizations are dedicated to the health of civic life in Massachusetts and beyond, and to the enduring questions of value and meaning that the humanities explore. So it is a special thrill to be invited to join you here tonight. I have chosen as my topic a theme that I hope will connect the missions represented by these two great organizations. My question is, "Are we still a commonwealth?" In answering this question, I would like to explore the expanding role of markets in contemporary public life. And I would like to suggest that the tendency towards the commodification and commercialization of life puts the commonwealth ideal in question.

Let me first say a word about what a commonwealth is. To speak of Massachusetts as a commonwealth is to invoke a resonant ideal with a long tradition. It is to invoke a way of thinking about politics that says a political community is not only an association for the sake of enabling people to pursue their private interests. According to the commonwealth ideal, politics isn't just about aggregating people's preferences and interests. Politics is not economics by other means. Even to speak of the state as the "public sector" is to depart from the commonwealth ideal. To speak of the public sector implies that public life is a sector of some more fundamental activity, namely economics.

But the commonwealth ideal insists that public life has a higher, more dignified purpose than aggregating and satisfying people's individual preferences and interests. What is that purpose?

It is pursuing the common good. A commonwealth is a place that cultivates citizens who care for the public good and who are good at deliberating about common purposes and ends. How then could the expansion of markets and economic ways of thinking possibly threaten the commonwealth ideal? That is the question I would like to address.

Let me now turn to the expansion of markets, to the commodification of everything. After the cold war, market economies stood triumphant. More than this, a certain market triumphalism began turning market economies into market societies. By a market society, I mean a society in which all good things can, in principle, be bought and sold for money, a place where everything is a commodity. The problem is that markets are not morally neutral instruments of production and exchange. Some of the good things in life are diminished or degraded if bought and sold for money. In some cases, this is obvious. Consider friendship. Suppose you want more friends than you have. You wouldn't think of going out and buying one. Why not? It wouldn't work. A hired friend would not be the same as a real one (though he might be a helpful therapist). Somehow the money that seeks to buy the friendship corrupts it, or at least turns it into something else.

Consider a less obvious case—books. Books are economic goods, in a way. You can't go into a bookstore and just walk out with the book. You have to pay for it. So a book is a commodity in a certain sense, but not completely. The character of books in this respect has been changing over the last fifteen or twenty years.

I used to be naïve. When I went into a bookstore, I assumed that the books in the window or on the table in front of the store were there because the owner or the manager of the bookstore thought they were of special interest or importance. I've since learned that in many bookstores, that's no longer the case. In most chain bookstores, such as Barnes and Noble, the placement of the books in the windows or on the front table is paid for by the publishers. Of course, paying for favorable shelf space has long been common in supermarkets. When you go to the grocery store and you find Coke or Pepsi at the front of the store, or a certain kind of potato chip or pretzel, you don't think it's there because the store thinks it is the best brand. You know that the company paid for the special display. But now books are increasingly sold like pretzels and potato chips and soda. They are more fully a commodity than before.

The same creeping commercialism is working its way into many domains of public life. A controversy arose a few weeks ago when Major League Baseball announced that it had made a deal to advertise the new Spiderman movie by imprinting all of the bases in major league stadiums with the Spiderman logo. Many baseball fans were outraged. It's not that a baseball field is a commercial-free zone. Billboards have long adorned ballparks, and even Fenway Park has those big Coke bottles beyond the green monster. But somehow people didn't like the idea of Spiderman on the bases. Major League Baseball withdrew the plan. Underlying the opposition was the intuition, perhaps, that ads on the bases would be a kind of transgression—a tacky intrusion on a fixture of the game that should remain pure and untainted by commercialism.

Just recently *The Boston Globe* had an article about MassPort offering corporations naming opportunities at Logan Airport, including, for example, sinks in the bathrooms, the luggage

carousels, maybe even the control tower. Naming rights at the airport may be less objectionable than at Fenway Park. But the questions get harder when we come to a proposal in the Massachusetts legislature last year to sell naming rights and corporate sponsorships to the state parks, forests and recreation areas. The president of the Environmental League of Massachusetts asked, **“Why stop at parks? We have a lot of rivers that have old, unremunerative names. Take the Charles,” he said. “It’s named for a British monarch who paid hardly anything and got 300 years of free PR.”** A *Boston Globe* editorial worried that, if the proposal were adopted, Thoreau’s Walden Pond might become “Wal-Mart Pond.”

Selling naming rights to state parks and forests is more troubling than placing ads on the luggage carousels at Logan Airport. The reason is that public parks and forests cut closer to the commonwealth ideal. They not only constitute a shared public space that we inhabit and enjoy; they also work on us as citizens, and accustom us to think of ourselves as trustees for future generations. State parks and forests are important not only as sites for recreation but as physical, natural embodiments of the civic landscape.

The attempt to sell naming rights to state parks and forests is but one example of a trend toward what is politely called “municipal marketing,” a growing industry. In recent years, companies have sprung up that specialize in selling corporate naming rights for cities and municipalities. Huntington Beach, California, recently sold Coca-Cola exclusive rights to the soft drink sales on its property for the next 10 years--for \$6 million in cash. San Diego has made Pepsi its official soft drink in exchange for \$6.7 million for 12 years. Last year, the mayor of New York City hired the city’s first chief marketing officer, with the mandate to sell naming rights to parts of the city. One of his first deals was a \$166 million contract with Snapple to be the official drink of New York City, including the exclusive right to sell its juice and water in the vending machines in the city’s public schools.

Municipal marketing goes well beyond soft drink endorsements. Cities that need new police cruisers can now acquire them, complete with sirens, computers, and flashing lights on the top--for one dollar each. The catch? These are not the traditional black and white police cars. They are vinyl-wrapped cars, enveloped in commercial advertising. You have probably seen buses and trolleys shrink-wrapped in this way. Instead of an ad on the side of the bus, the entire vehicle is swathed in an ad for a movie, or a bank. But how should we feel about a police cruiser brought to you by Dunkin Donuts or the local hardware store? At least twelve police departments across the country have signed up for the deal.

It is worth noticing that the reach of markets into the civic sphere is more than a matter of commercializing public spaces. The commercializing trend is occurring at the same time as a privatizing trend. Even as police departments around the country are considering whether to turn their police cruisers into rolling billboards, the provision of police protection itself is shifting from public to private auspices. About two decades ago, the census found that the number of people working as police officers in the United States was exceeded by the number of people working as private security officers. Americans now spend \$40 billion a year on public police and \$90 billion a year on private security--in shopping malls, airports, residential communities, retail stores, and the like. So even as we debate the commercialization of police cars, police protection as a public good is giving way to privatized security.

Here is another case of ad-draped cars that poses a challenge to the civic realm: In Minneapolis a couple of years ago, elementary school teachers were offered a way of earning some extra money during their summer vacation. General Mills was rolling out a new type of breakfast cereal called Reese's Puffs, a cereal with the taste of Reese's chocolate and peanut butter candy. To advertise the new cereal, the company hired elementary school teachers to have their cars wrapped in the bright orange logo of the Reese's Puffs cereal box. The idea was that the teachers would drive around town and park in the school parking lot when school resumed in September. The teachers, dubbed "freelance brand managers," were paid \$250 a month. When the marketing scheme provoked a public outcry, General Mills withdrew it.

Over the last two decades, commercial advertising has become a prominent presence in the classroom. Students in school districts across the country can learn about nutrition from curricular materials helpfully supplied by Hershey's Chocolate or McDonald's; Procter & Gamble offers an environmental curriculum that teaches that disposable diapers are actually good for the earth. And Campbell's soup company has provided schools with free science kits that show students how to prove that Campbell's Prego spaghetti sauce is thicker than Ragu. Increasingly, public school districts desperate for funds find themselves faced with a devil's bargain. Channel One, a for-profit television network, is the most infamous example. The network offers cash-strapped schools free television sets, video equipment, and a satellite link in exchange for an agreement to show students its news program every day, including the two minutes of commercials. Because it plays to a captive audience, Channel One is able to charge advertisers premium rates. The commercialization of the classroom highlights the tension between unbounded markets and civic ideals. The purpose of public education is not to provide basic training for a consumer society, but to cultivate citizens capable of thinking critically about the consumer society they inhabit. Infusing the classroom with consumerism is at odds with this civic purpose.

Another example of market values crowding out public purposes can be seen in the outsourcing of war. One striking feature of the American military presence in Iraq is the heavy reliance on soldiers for hire, or "private contractors," as we call them these days. These private contractors are not just building roads and repairing the electrical grid. The people providing military protection for Paul Bremer, the American head of the coalition authority, are not from the United States army. They're from a private company hired by the Pentagon. At least one of the U.S. interrogators charged with prisoner abuse is a private contractor. In fact, if you add up the number of security personnel in Iraq, the second largest contingent, after the 135,000 U.S. military personnel, bigger than any other country's contribution, consists of private security contractors. Some say our "coalition of the willing" is better described as a "coalition of the billing."

From police protection to public schools to military service, the fundamental institutions of public life are increasingly marketized, commercialized, or privatized. Even the ultimate civic act of voting is now subject, in some respects at least, to market forces. During the 2000 presidential election, a web site called "VoteAuction.com" offered people an opportunity to buy and sell their votes through the internet. The website contained a statement explaining that it sought to combine the American principles of democracy and capitalism by bringing the big

money of campaigns directly to the voting public. Rather than waste money on television ads and bumper stickers, those who cared intensely about the election could pay people directly for their votes. The website packaged the votes state by state. All who wanted to sell their votes from a particular state were combined, and their votes were subject to collective bidding. The website displayed a state-by-state grid showing the number of votes being offered in each state, the number of electoral votes, and the current price per vote. Not surprisingly, closely competitive states with large electoral votes commanded a higher price per vote. When I checked the website in October of 2000, the price per vote in Michigan was \$22.73, compared to only \$6.08 per vote in Massachusetts.

Some states' attorneys general tried to shut down the website, citing state laws against buying and selling votes. But VoteAuction.com does raise an interesting question: What is the difference, really, between an outright market in votes and a very widespread and widely accepted feature of our political debates and campaigns, namely candidates pandering to the economic self interest of their constituents? Suppose, for example, that a candidate says, "Elect me, and I will give you a \$500 tax cut." Or, to be strictly nonpartisan, consider a candidate who says, "Elect me, and I will give you a better prescription drug benefit than my opponent will." Votes can be bought, after all, with benefits as well as with money.

What, morally, is the difference between buying votes outright and appealing to constituents on the basis of their economic self-interest? If you think about it, both offer a financial reward in exchange for a vote. If it's disreputable for me to sell my vote to a party boss for \$500, the old-fashioned kind of corruption, why is it reputable for me to cast my vote for the sake of a \$500 tax cut? It's \$500 either way. It's true, we prohibit the one and celebrate the other. But why? It might be argued that the tax cut or benefit comes from public funds, whereas the bribe comes from private funds. But this makes the tax cut worse. If voters have to be paid off, better that it be done with private money than with taxpayer dollars. So that can't be the difference. It might be argued that the campaign promise might not be kept and so won't exert as strong an influence as an outright bribe. But this suggests, perversely, that the moral superiority of the campaign promise rests on the fact that the politician who makes it might not keep his word. So that can't be it. Some might reply that the campaign promise is public and available to everyone but the bribe is secret and offered only to certain people. But many campaign promises, either to cut taxes or to dispense benefits, are also targeted at particular groups or at least have highly differential effects. In any case, if bribes are wrong because they're offered to some people and not to others, why not universalize them? Why not let votes be bought and sold openly, as on VoteAuction.com, enabling everyone to buy and sell at the going rate?

The reason these attempted distinctions do not succeed is that they share the assumption, familiar in our politics, that the purpose of democracy is to aggregate people's interests and preferences and to translate them into policy. If that theory of democracy is right, then there is no reason in principle not to allow a free market in votes. Such a market would allow people to weigh their preferences, decide how much they cared about the outcome, estimate the likelihood that their vote would make the difference, and decide whether they would rather sell their vote than cast it. A democracy such as this would carry to completion the marketizing logic unfolding in our time. But it would not be a commonwealth, because it would give up on the project of cultivating citizens who care about the common good.

It is often assumed these days that democracy and markets are one and the same principle, that each reinforces the other. I have tried in this lecture to suggest that this is not necessarily so, that civic ideals and market practices can sometimes be in tension. Today, in the thrall of markets and market-oriented thinking, we are all too tempted to think of democracy in economic terms alone. That is why it is worth asking whether we are a commonwealth still. To put that question at the center of our public debate, we need to remind ourselves of the civic goods that markets do not honor and money cannot buy.

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