When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1832, he was struck by the vitality of its civic sphere. As he wrote in *Democracy in America*, “Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite… Everywhere that, at the head of a new undertaking, you see the government in France … count on it that you will perceive an association in the United States.” For Tocqueville, the key features of democracy in America were patterns of association through which citizens developed habits and mores of citizenship. If Tocqueville returned to the United States today, he might be surprised by recent developments in our civil society. A different kind of structure has emerged to dominate the civic landscape: non-governmental organizations, commonly referred to as NGOs, accomplish a wide variety of social tasks that include grantmaking, service delivery, and political advocacy; and they address all kinds of social and public needs, from alleviating poverty to supporting the arts. Such formal organizations may be more efficient than ever in accomplishing these technical tasks, but this essay will consider how well they are enabling the civic work that is essential to strengthen democracy.

Following the Eastern European democratic developments that were symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the concept—with a long history in political philosophy—of civil society reemerged in academic scholarship, political journalism, and democratic activism around the world. In the 1990s, “civil society” was to embrace a vast range of voluntary organizations and associations seen as distinct from both government and for-profit corporations.
Civil society includes not only formal organizations, but also all sorts of other associations, of varying sizes and structures, from bowling leagues, to churches, to large-scale philanthropic foundations; political theorists characterized this overlooked realm as a social space for voluntary collective action that could combine the virtues of both government institutions and free markets, while avoiding each of their weaknesses. In liberal democracies, civil society offered the potential to mediate the excesses of market economies in a noncoercive way, independent of government. In the failed communist regimes, civil society made sense of how common citizens had managed to organize and even assert themselves against repressive governments in a way that maintained social solidarity. A 1994 essay in *Foreign Affairs* captured the sense of excitement, describing the civil society concept as an “associational revolution” in the civil sector, comparable in importance to the development of the nation-state.

Nongovernmental organizations do seem to be ideally positioned to fulfill the democratic promise of the civil sphere itself. For although NGOs lack the coercive power of government, they are distinct from other civic associations in that they are *organizations*—corporate entities in effect—with hierarchical structures, specialized tasks, and professional staff. As the most organized entities of civil society, NGOs were thought to be potentially able to direct large-scale financial resources toward social tasks without expanding government. They should have the potential for entrepreneurial risk-taking and innovation similar to for-profit corporations, but directed toward public-serving missions. They could enlist everyday citizens as volunteers, while maintaining the knowledge and specialization necessary to address complex and pressing social problems. Management theorist Peter Drucker had prophesized in the *Atlantic*, “The right answer to the question ‘Who takes care of the social challenges of the knowledge society?’ is neither the government nor the employing organization. The answer is a separate and new social sector.” NGOs might allow democracy to have its cake and eat it too: technical expertise without government bureaucracy; vast financial resources without burdening taxpayers; collective power brought to bear on public problems without the need for legislation.

Interestingly, however, NGOs are defined not by what they are, but rather by what they are not: they are nongovernmental. This means that no particular NGO has any necessary connection to democracy, except to the extent that performing social tasks independent of government is assumed to be inherently democratic: each NGO has its own discrete tasks and issues, a majority of which have no larger democratic intent. There may thus have been little reason to expect that any particular NGO would have greater legitimacy than government or produce any democratic benefits. Still, the role of the NGO sector in democracy might be greater than the sum of its parts, because it suggests a shift in power away from government and toward organizations that are no less public in their mission, but less bureaucratic in their administration. Although NGOs had no inherent democratic role, advocates thought they were ideally positioned as instruments through which citizens could act collectively. At least in the early 1990s, the assumption was that an active

*NGOs are defined not by what they are, but by what they are not.*
and engaged citizenry was ready to assert itself and fill this new space that was apparently opening in civil society.

A decade later, NGOs have continued to proliferate, amass vast resources, and bring technical expertise to bear on a wide range of social problems; yet there is little evidence that they have made a meaningful dent in the political problems that confront democracy as a whole. In practice, ironically, organizations in the civil sector are increasingly looking more and more like their government and corporate counterparts. Like government agencies, nonprofit organizations operate through top-down planning and bureaucratic routines; like companies in the corporate sphere, civil society organizations are shifting to specialized knowledge professions and using a narrow language of economic efficiency.

In the early 20th century, Max Weber had prophesized that a culture of instrumental rationality and efficiency would require a class of specialized civil servants with expertise in bureaucratic administration. Robert Michels, in his famous study of European social democracy movements, theorized an “iron law of oligarchy,” necessitating that all organizations inevitably develop hierarchical structures. The breadth and depth of the examples now suggest that the influence and power of organizations has reached such an advanced stage that these trends can indeed be understood as a “colonization” of civil society. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas developed the concept of a “lifeworld” of social interaction that provides the foundation for the legitimacy of the “systems” of the market and the state. This lifeworld, however, could be—indeed, has often been—colonized by either the deadening required routines of government bureaucracies or the corrosive forces of market competition and the power of for-profit corporations. Habermas suggests that governments and markets both have important roles in modern society, but that they both present threats to the lifeworld that sustains them. Colonization is neither intentional nor violent, but the end result is a single politic in which civil society and government are increasingly similar in their underlying logic, institutional challenges, and professional culture, leaving the organization of the civil society itself equally disconnected from and unable to command the confidence of citizens.

Although legislatures may be democratically elected, the modern administrative state delegates enormous decision-making power to centralized bureaucratic agencies. One of the basic tenets of scholarship on bureaucracy is that institutional self-interest is the central imperative of all agencies: to accomplish their missions, institutions must maintain their funding streams and political power. Any shift of power to citizens may imply a loss of power for the agency, and citizen participation in decision making is likely to be viewed as risky, unpredictable, and disruptive. In contrast, proponents of NGOs as democratic actors assume that
their location in civil society will allow greater opportunities for citizen participation and lead to a relatively “grassroots” character. Yet despite the democratic potential suggested by civil society theory, there is no inherent reason that NGOs should be concerned with democracy, per se. The majority of NGOs have specific tasks and fields of expertise, such as grantmaking, fundraising, technical assistance, advocacy, or education. Only a few have missions focused on or related to democracy itself and little organizational imperative to consider how they relate to citizens or contribute to the civic capacities of the communities for whom they perform their specialized services.

More important, civil society organizations may actually face real disincentives to involving citizens. The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd Out Community, by Richard Harwood and John Creighton, has examined this problem through a series of focus group conversations with leaders of a small but representative sample of community-based NGOs that have recognizable community-serving missions, such as strengthening local schools and serving vulnerable children. The study reveals that even organizations with such clear connections to the life of particular communities face overwhelming disincentives to any genuine partnering with citizens in their work. The authors of the study describe “a profound and airtight gestalt of inwardness, planning and professionalism” as the dominant mentality in the nonprofit world.

Such leaders’ perspectives may help deepen our understanding of the challenges they face. Even when organizations might want to strengthen their relationships with citizens, according to Harwood and Creighton, they face a series of difficult trade-offs in their core missions, and naturally tend to protect their own interests. The overwhelming central imperative for nonprofit executives is the stability of the organization. These organization executives report that in an era of scarce funding, resources must be devoted to ensuring the survival of the organization and achieving its core objectives before pursuing “secondary” goals, such as building civic capacity in the communities where they are working. In many fields, programs are typically dependent on grant money (especially from government agencies and large philanthropic institutions)

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**Citizen participation is seen as an unpredictable endeavor.**

for year-to-year survival. This means that often organizations must define themselves in terms of the funders’ agendas rather than the expressed interests of their community. In this climate, according to the Organization-First study, leaders are essentially conservative and hesitate to do anything risky, even if this limits their ability to experiment and innovate. From this perspective, citizen participation is seen as an unpredictable endeavor that could backfire, bringing conflict to the surface and complicating implementation of the NGO’s primary agenda.

The “inwardness” phenomenon might seem to be somewhat surprising in the context of widespread talk about civic engagement within the NGO sector, and the emergence of organizations that identify themselves as “community based” or “grass roots.” A cornerstone of the “NGO-as-democratic-actor” hypothesis is that the civil sector should offer more opportunities than government for citizen participation in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs. However, when organizations engage citizens (or talk about civic engagement), the evidence suggests that they do so in largely self-serving ways. Organizations may, for example,
use language of civic engagement to refer to outreach and public relations efforts, such as panel presentations to bring about greater awareness of and build support for their programs. They may convene citizen advisory panels that appear to be receptive to community input but in reality have little decision-making opportunity. Boards of nonprofit organizations have the potential to provide opportunities for citizens to provide substantive input, but often consist of elites with connections to funding organizations. As Harwood and Creighton write, when raising questions about engagement or deliberation, “almost any activity an organization undertook involving convening leaders, facilitating discussions or gathering input was considered an apt example.” Civic engagement is most likely understood in ways that maintain the organization’s power, rather than a sustained and authentic relationship with citizens. Their overwhelming imperative is to accomplish discrete tasks with maximum efficiency. Their location in the civic rather than the government sphere does not appear to offer any distinct advantages in allowing citizens to experience cooperation or build trust with one another.

With government struggling to maintain the confidence of citizens, in the last few decades a movement for greater accountability has swept the field of public administration. Various concepts of accountability (and corresponding devices) have been embraced, but they all assume that the proper role for citizens in a democracy is not making decisions themselves so much as delegating decisions to institutions that can demonstrate their effectiveness. One of the most common means employed by government agencies to cope with a lack of confidence in their programs is to provide what would seem to be objective data that demonstrates their effectiveness. Thus the idea of “performance measurement” using standardized metrics has gained popularity. Nowhere are the unintended consequences of performance measurement more evident than in the politics of public education, especially in relation to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, mandating that states develop standardized testing and implement harsh punishments for school systems that do not meet those standards. Critics have argued that rather than improve school quality, NCLB constrains teachers’ ability to innovate in the classroom and instead creates incentives to “teach to the test.” Such data may be accurate in a strict sense, but they seem to tell citizens very little about the overall quality of the schools; and it is argued, ironically, that the ultimate effect may be to undermine educational quality without addressing the underlying lack of confidence.

If the initial assumptions about NGOs as democratic actors were correct, such organizations in civil society should be able to act with the scale of government but with greater flexibility and additional opportunities for innovation. However, like government agencies, NGOs have structural incentives to demonstrate visible successes. They too may be inclined to focus on discrete programs at practical problem-solving efforts with quantifiable results, at the expense of larger efforts to strengthen the capacity of communities to solve their own problems. Authentic relationships with citizens tend, perhaps for good reason, to be seen as requiring more sustained effort without tangible products.

Government increasingly collaborates in “public-private partnerships.”
But the politics of accountability appears to be playing out with the same unintended consequences in the civil sphere as it has in government.

For understandable reasons of efficiency and rational administration in a complex society, the NGO sphere is, like government, more specialized than ever before. This means that by necessity, as organizations take on more and more important social tasks, what they do and how they are doing it is likely also to become obscure to citizens. In such circumstances, citizens may have little reason to view organizations with trust or confidence. To cope with this problem, as in government, one of the most important trends in the nonprofit sector has been the rise of metrics-based performance measurement to demonstrate effectiveness. The use of performance measurement in the civil sector has been evident, for example, in the dominant approach of most large-scale grantmaking entities, referred to as “strategic” philanthropy within the field. Strategic philanthropy is defined in principle by setting clear goals to guide multiple programs and evaluating programs in terms of these goals. In practice, this typically entails the use of metrics: in response to pressure from funders and public supporters, such metrics are appealing because they appear to provide a “scientific” way to quantify successes, compare programs, and eliminate inefficiencies.

Yet despite the best of intentions, performance measurement in the nonprofit sphere risks unintended consequences. Perhaps the most important effects of the accountability movement concern the abilities of organizations to contribute to social innovation and experimentation. Unfortunately, performance measurement gives organizations incentives to direct their activities toward standardized, predetermined outcomes. Although nonprofit organizations make up a complex and diverse universe, with important differences of mission, size, and stage of development, organizations often use standardized criteria easily recognizable to peers, such as administrative or fundraising budget ratios, rather than metrics tailored to their unique goals. The demand for performance measurement ironically can undermine performance by encouraging organizations to shift scarce resources from program development to evaluation, when they can least afford it. As accountability scholar Kevin Kearns writes, “Perhaps the most disturbing feature of these quantitative metrics, applied universally to all nonprofits, is that they do not accommodate the notion of organizational learning and growth.” Performance measurement still begs the question of who decides what to measure. Rather than solve the accountability problem, it merely shifts it; now the question is not the effectiveness of each program, but the legitimacy of a given system itself. George Frederickson’s
2003 report, *Easy Innovation and the Iron Cage*, asks of these tendencies, what is the metrics phenomenon but the current “best practice” recognized across government, the corporate world, and civil society? The appeals to “best practices” and “rankings” give organizations a common language to account to funders, public supporters, and one another for what they are doing, a shorthand to demonstrate their effectiveness when the impact of a program is in doubt or difficult to quantify. Such practices implicitly define accountability according to status and reputation in relation to competing organizations. “There is every possibility,” Frederickson writes, “that the impetus to best practices and benchmarking is driven as much by the desire to increase an institution’s reputational capital as it is by a genuine desire to innovate.” There is no necessary connection between an organization’s reputation and its true capacity for innovation.

What Fredrickson describes as “managed innovation” assumes that organizational creativity occurs through a rational process that is consciously planned, executed in an orderly fashion, and evaluated through precise measurements. The most efficient way to accomplish this goal is by copying the practices of leading peers. Paradoxical as it seems, “managed innovation” suggests that organizational learning occurs not as a result of experimentation, but rather through adopting the management practices of other organizations.

The homogenization of the nongovernment sphere underscores a larger problem of confidence and legitimacy. As public administration scholar Christopher Pollitt has argued, performance measurement inevitably requires experts to interpret, analyze, and manipulate the data. “Ultimately,” he writes, “the strenuous efforts of these experts…[have] the paradoxical effect of increasing citizen distrust.” With only experts capable of policing one another, the data itself is no guarantee of legitimacy, and may in fact—for good reason—undermine public confidence in organizations.

Performance measurement and managed innovation demonstrate the complex dynamics of the colonization of the NGO sphere. Frederickson argues that managed innovation demonstrates the complex interdependencies of business, government, and NGOs. In our era, government increasingly collaborates with companies in public-private partnerships and contracts out services to private providers; meanwhile, private corporations, for their part, have grown as powerful and as bureaucratic as many national governments.

The professionalization of the NGO sphere is a response to problems of scale and complexity, but it has resulted in a division between citizens and specialized, credentialed experts: a common culture of top-down planning and professional management. The technocratic ideal has a deep history, and its most forceful articulation was perhaps by Walter Lippmann in his famous exchange with John Dewey, early in the 20th century. Lippmann had little hope for the ability of everyday citizens to rule themselves, rooted as they are in the prejudices and traditions of their kinship groups, and instead saw promise only in the development of a new cadre of public-spirited elites—which now appear to be the dominant reality across the government, corporate, and NGO sectors. Highly skilled and specialized professional work is playing an ever more powerful role in modern society, yet while expertise may clearly be necessary, it can create problems for the democratic legitimacy of organizations: across the fields of higher education, philanthropy, journalism, and government the politics of expertise complicates the potential democratic role of NGOs.

Underlying technocratic politics is an epistemology that, privileging expert knowledge,
separates experts from civic life and thus disempowers citizens. The dominant paradigm—that knowledge be objective and based only upon measurable phenomena—explicitly guides most academic research, but it is also implicit in professions across civil society. It contrasts with other forms of knowledge, including the practical wisdom (or *phronesis*) that enables citizens to make judgments on matters that are inherently uncertain. In principle, both types of knowledge should coexist; and in a healthy democratic system, even complement one another, with citizens’ practical wisdom central in the process of reaching collective decisions, and expertise providing the most efficient means of administration. According to the dominant logic of expert knowledge, however, judgment between values in conflict is not considered a different and complementary kind of knowledge, but relegated, rather, to the realm of subjectivity and arbitrary opinion. The rationalistic emphasis on objective knowledge means that experts will assume that there is little that they can learn from citizens. Thus expert and citizen knowledge have become misaligned, and professionals tend to be cut off from the practical wisdom of citizens, while citizens view obscure expertise with increasing distrust.

The logic of expert knowledge, then, ironically constricts the public role of professionals, directing their expertise to highly specialized tasks that frequently remain irrelevant to and disconnected from the needs of their communities. In her eloquent book on the founding ideals of American democracy, *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt described a distinct loss of “public happiness,” when the active and engaged *hommes des lettres* of the 18th century gave way to the “class of professional scribes and writers whose labours are needed by the ever-expanding bureaucracies” of contemporary organizations. Academics, journalists, and philanthropists may talk in similar terms as their professions become defined as increasingly specialized and detached. Harry Boyte ascribes a sense of frustration with this absence of civic purpose throughout academia: “They feel increasingly cut off from local communities…. Their discontents take shape in a silent politics whose authority comes from hiding interests and suppressing attachment to living communities.” A group of political scientists, recently interviewed in the *New York Times*, admitted that their field had become irrelevant to the most pressing problems in democracy because they could only research phenomena that could be easily measured.

When expert professions do attempt to play a public role, they tend to do so in ways that may unintentionally stifle democracy: problems that are rightfully public in nature can become named in terms of technique, efficiency, or the rational administration of resources. In his classic book, *Seeing Like a State*, James L. Scott describes the paradigmatic approach to social planning around the world as a “high modernist” ideology, an optimistic faith in top-down scientific planning and rational administration, leading to social
disasters in recent history. Its implication is that citizens cannot play a meaningful role in addressing the problems that concern them; a more humanistic approach could see social problems as complex and political in nature, involving conflicts over deeply held values—

Professionals tend to be cut off from the practical wisdom of citizens.

what social planning theorists have referred to as “wicked” problems that expert knowledge alone cannot hope to solve. In a democracy, citizens will play an active role in reaching collective decisions before experts can hope to discover the best means of administering them. Scott’s examples of the worst planning disasters are drawn from authoritarian governments and their planned economies; but growing evidence suggests that the technocratic approach to social problems has taken hold across organizations of the civil society in established democracies.

Top-down approaches to social problems are commonly reflected in the self-understandings of professionals, especially in how they see themselves in relation to other citizens. For example, an especially common theme in the self-understandings of expert professions is discourse referring to a “serving” capacity, putting citizens implicitly in a receptive role. The service ideal reflects the best of intentions and a sincere effort to connect expertise to urgent social problems. However, it also implies a focus on discrete services to be delivered, rather than on building the civic capacities of communities to organize themselves and solve their own problems. It is usually framed in apolitical terms; for example as an effort to do charity for others, rather than as addressing distinctly political goals. And perhaps most important, service discourse may reflect a paternalistic impulse to care for others that can often result in relationships of dependency and clientelism.

Identifying with a service role has become the dominant worldview across the expert-dominated professions, in both the government and NGO sectors. Although talk of civic engagement is currently widespread in higher education, for example, the mode of engagement is typically service-oriented and technocratic. Since the 1980s, service learning has been a popular mode of so-called “partnerships” between universities and their local communities. Yet service learning in critical ways reaffirms the typical expert relationships with communities. Many campuses are starting to embrace richer language of civic engagement, but much of these efforts have remained at the level of mission statements, without fundamentally moving beyond their historical roots in the service paradigm.

In philanthropy, the service role is reflected in the emphasis on financial resources and technical assistance rather than on building the civic capacities of communities. In the 1990s, civil society and NGOs were buzzwords in the field of international development, yet financial
assistance and service delivery have remained the dominant paradigms, internationally. In higher education, Harry Boyte describes the core imperatives of academic work as, “gather, analyze, and disseminate information.” The very ideas of “outreach” and “extension” assume that authoritative knowledge is a possession of universities that must be disseminated outward, rather than something that is cocreated in dialogue between experts and citizens. Although the dissemination model might add a “public” dimension to expert knowledge, it still places experts in the position of defining what counts as knowledge. Experts understand themselves as serving the public by acting as impartial authorities in their fields and sharing their knowledge with policymakers and lay citizens. Citizens play a largely passive role in receiving or applying information.

To say that civil society has been colonized by the inwardness of organizations, the politics of accountability, and the specialization of professions, does not mean that this colonization is absolute or irreversible. Even when an invasive plant is introduced into an ecosystem, steps can be taken to minimize its spread and nurture native species. Organizations and professionals within them can do only so much to produce a trusting and engaged citizenry, or to manufacture their own legitimacy. Still, organizations can play an important role by realigning their identities and routines with the habits and civic norms of communities. In fact, a growing set of organizations and professionals is beginning to challenge the inwardness of NGOs, countervailing groups that move beyond the paradigms of service delivery, technical assistance, and dissemination, to treat citizens as partners, coproducers, and civic actors.

Perhaps the most promising countervailing trend is the emergence of NGOs that are explicit in their attempt to strengthen the civic capacities of communities. For example, a growing network of organizations associated with the idea of “deliberative democracy” aims to create spaces for citizens to play a more active role in reaching collective decisions on controversial issues.

Citizens have a critical role to play in deepening public discourse.

Rejecting the politics of inwardness, these organizations assume that many social problems are political in nature, involving tensions between deeply held values, and that citizens have a critical role to play in deepening public discourse on complex issues. Even when they are concerned with particular issues or government policies, these organizations may have capacity-building effects as they strengthen citizens’ habits of collective judgment and decision making.

Similarly, organizations in the community-organizing tradition, influenced by figures like Harry Boyte and John McKnight, are talking about principles of “public work,” “capacity building,” and “asset-based community development.” Rather than taking a view of citizens as needy and deficient clients in need of help from above, they focus on the capacities that already exist within communities. Instead of mobilizing citizens to promote predetermined ideological agendas, they maintain a disciplined commitment to grassroots democratic principles and provide citizens with spaces in which they can learn to organize themselves. In the fields of urban planning and community development, organizations are abandoning top-down, technocratic approaches, in favor of more civic and humanistic models.
Sometimes, this countervailing trend takes the form of professionals who are critically aware of the limitations of their expertise, and see an ethical responsibility or calling to align their profession with self-ruling citizens. In his book, *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity, and Practice*, Albert Dzur named this movement, “democratic professionalism.” In academia, terms like *scholarship of engagement* and *public scholarship* are now being used to describe collaboration with community partners in advancing cutting-edge community knowledge. Similar groups have emerged in philanthropy and journalism to experiment with ways to collaborate with citizens in their work as civic actors rather than passive recipients or spectators. The common thread among these groups is a recognition that their professional work benefits from interaction and collaboration with citizens, giving them a structural incentive to move beyond the conventional narrow task or program focus. They may see civic leadership work as a means to rebuild public confidence in their profession or to receive input or feedback from stakeholders to increase their effectiveness. In such cases, rather than create wholly new organizations, isolated individuals or small groups are attempting to carve out niches for civic work within their established institutions. These “civic professionals” do not typically reflect the dominant paradigm within their fields, and sometimes they may even be marginalized within their own institutions, but they have successfully formed peer networks across organizations to advance their work.

Consisting of organizations on the margins of their fields, or isolated individuals challenging the dominant culture of their institutions, these may represent more of an inchoate stirring than a mature movement. However, taken together, they constitute an important countervailing force—and a reminder that the colonization of civil society is far from absolute. In creating an Open Government Initiative to make government agencies more participatory and collaborative, President Obama recently declared, “Knowledge is widely dispersed in society, and public officials benefit from having access to that dispersed knowledge. In this sense, surely, executive departments and agencies should offer Americans increased opportunities to participate in policy-making and to provide their government with the benefits of their collective expertise and information.” Like the president, organizations and professionals in the nongovernment sector may be beginning to recognize the extent of their inwardness and engage in the hard work of decolonizing civil society.

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