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KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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Editor's Letter

For more than 30 years, now—and 2 or 3 times in most of those years—the *Review* has circulated a handful of essays (some old and some never before printed) describing ways in which “we, the people” are exploring, or need to explore, the problems of our democratic community. The Kettering Foundation has, incidentally, just reprinted a collection of three issues of the *Review*, published in 2005 to acknowledge a quarter-century of the annual National Issues Forums; and our most recent couple of issues turn out to have addressed aspects of the role of education (and the institutions that address it) in the life of our democracy today.

There are difficulties, however, in asking people what they *want* from something that is as personal (and possibly distinctive) as their child's education—or their own career. With higher education, we may have a number of goals, or purposes, each one of which seems intent upon either the *exclusion* of alternative goals, or the provision of differently rationed “pieces” of them for differently inclined citizens. The purpose of any education includes the task of making useable or useful (if there turns out to be a difference!) a *range* of talents that will inevitably differ in their usefulness to the community as a whole. So the value of a particular *kind* or *level* of education is essentially relative.

Much of human activity is both variable *and* valuable in this way, responding to the differences among individual human abilities, values, and lives. We acknowledge public responsibility for education in relation to this variety by catering to different kinds of skill and talent and need. Or to put it more bluntly, we have come to acknowledge and respond to it slowly, over centuries of distinctive cultural experience. Rulers needed a different education from that which peasants needed through endless dynasties. Democracy has not changed that, except to the degree that rulers nowadays are not *always* produced through dynasties, although failed communities apparently still do produce primarily failed citizens.

A concern, then, is how education in a democracy caters to difference, if it sets out to be both universal and egalitarian. That may be the direction in which human education has always wandered. Or it may no longer be so for us! We have gone from private tutors to public schools; from teachings of the Church to learning from the professionals; through the seemingly miraculous legacies of private schools to land-grant universities and community colleges; and now private, “for profit” universities that exist online. These all seem to have been, up to a point, thoughtful steps to cope with the dilemma that we are describing. And that seems to be a *human* dilemma, as inherent to our experience as the facts of competition and greed, mystery and hope. There are ways of fulfilling ourselves while still limited in talent and years and committed to both the ideals of national culture and the

facts of an everlasting human world—which, in themselves, may sometimes appear to be designedly incompatible.

But these are troubling times for our democracy, and for the institutions whose work it depends upon. So we thought, this season, that we might bring together in one slender volume just a handful of contemporary essays or chapters, exploring the nature of some of our present uncertainties, as a people, and of the challenges that the writers think need to be addressed as a new generation grows to take its place before the problems of our democracies. After reading these essays and extracts, some readers may be tempted to think that we are nearing “the fall”! For each essay—and all were first published within this past year or two—sees democratic peoples losing their sense of direction. Nor is this to be taken as mere election-year hyperbole, for ideologically these writers seem to stand each on somewhat different ground and write with somewhat different havens in their minds and memories.

The distinguished historian, Charles Murray, for example, starts us off with what was written as the prologue, earlier this year, to his book, *Coming Apart*. It cites the assassination of President Kennedy as the beginning of an era of persistent change in this nation’s life—virtually half a century of dramatic upheaval that is undeniable, if not to all of our readers as devastating in its consequences as the author infers.

This sense of regret (though not from a similar ideological perspective) is echoed by Bruce Wilshire, who fears that the emphasis in today’s institutions of higher education—“mathematical, mechanistic physics . . . and technologies of all kinds”—leaves graduates to “wonder if they can know themselves and if they can direct themselves intelligently.” A similar concern is articulated, later in this issue of our magazine, by Martha Nussbaum, who sees “a worldwide crisis in education developing because of the ways in which democratic societies, “thirsty for national profit,” are “heedlessly discarding skills that are needed to keep democracies alive.”

Nussbaum is, of course, calling for a return to the “humanities” (as traditional studies in philosophy, history, literature, and the arts are collectively billed), and this *Review* is also honored to reprint a recent lecture by James Leach who, after many years in Congress as a distinguished representative from Iowa, now serves as chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, the federal agency through which we, the people, support precisely such studies—and the scholars and students, as well as public groups, who work to advance our understanding of differences. “To lead the world in this century,” he writes, “it is the human condition, the culture and history of countries” that have to be better understood.

From the continuing studies that Public Agenda has made of higher education, through the eyes of a wide range of citizens in recent years, Jean Johnson concludes that lines are being drawn for an “epic battle” over higher education. And each one of the earlier essays in this issue of the *Review*—all made, let us note, just months, rather than years, ago—seem to lend support to her concern. So we have given our closing pages in this issue to the first chapter of Richard Harwood’s newly published book, *The Work of Hope*. Harwood recalls his *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street, America*, published in 1991, reporting that Americans were not apathetic about politics but “felt pushed out, disconnected.” And echoes of that “disconnect”—deadly to the fate of a democracy—are revealed in each one of our essays’ pages of this *Review*. Harwood himself begins his 2012 essay with a people “bereft of a sense of possibility” but “yearning to engage with *one another* to get things done *together*.” Harwood’s “new path,” as he dubs it, “is to restore people’s belief in themselves.”

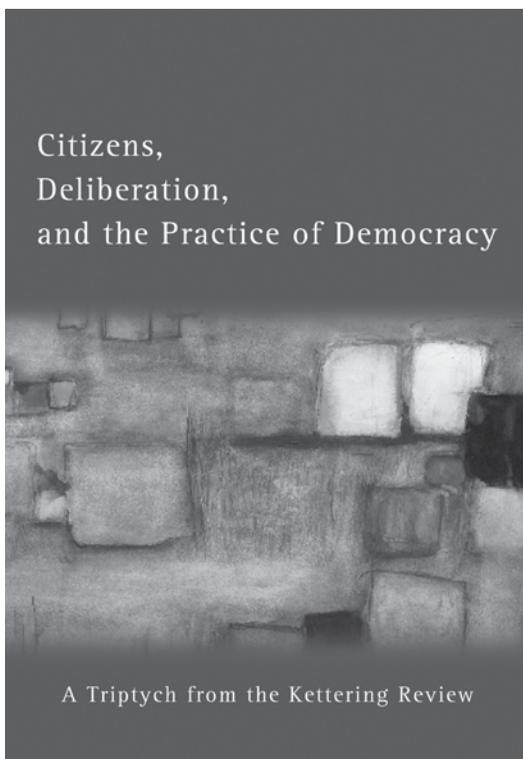
New York’s Museum of Modern Art—for whose permission to reprint the striking painting by Giacomo Balla on our cover, we are most grateful—reminds us that the Futurists of the early 20th century insisted that “all things move . . . all things are rapidly changing.” So, as David Mathews in his “afterthoughts . . .” points out, are our schools, our students, and their families. The past couple of issues of this *Review* have been exploring the challenge that such changing circumstances present to educators and the communities that they serve. Our writers for this season—all very contemporary—begin to explore citizens’ responsibility in a democratic world whose motion, whose history itself, is a record of the option of change.

Robert J. Kingston



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