

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

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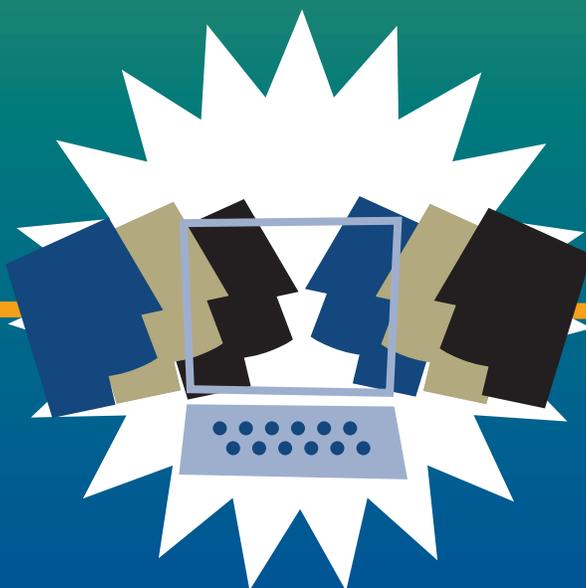
The role of
Civic
Organizations
in today's
society

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Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civil Engagement

By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach



The Challenges of Civic Life

Editor's Note:

The foundation has a longstanding research interest in understanding some of the barriers to democratic practice. During the past year, we have focused our attention on the kinds of organizations that help promote civic skills and opportunities to address collective problems within communities. We are not alone in noting that a once thriving network of civic organizations has become less “civic” and more “organized,” limiting the opportunities for citizens to feel they can make a difference. The first section of this issue describes some of the challenges this change has had on collective self-rule. Derek Barker provides a brief history and literature describing the reduction in civil society. Martín Carcasson highlights the polarized nature of public discourse and describes a center for public life that is passionately neutral, and thus an honest broker of difficult conversations. Dorothy Battle describes the gap between what citizens might bring to collective problem solving and how organizations often fail to recognize these citizen resources. Scott Peters and others relate the need to connect different ways of communicating and how cooperative extension might weave connections among different perspectives. Finally, Dallas and Marin share a series of multinational perspectives on the need for an independent sector; without it, democracy fails to deliver its promises.



Citizens, Organizations, and the **GAP** in Civil Society

By Derek Barker

Each year, Kettering identifies a trend or challenge in democracy as a unifying focus for its research across program areas. This year, the research focuses on what appears to be a growing gap between citizens and organizations. Although organizations in the civic sphere have historically played a critical role in democracy around the world, they appear to offer few opportunities for citizens to play an active role in confronting the most vexing problems facing their communities. As organizations increase their efficiency in accomplishing *technical* tasks, are they enabling civic work to strengthen democracy? If not, what can citizens, communities, and organizations do to fill this gap?

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1832, he was struck by

the vitality of its civic sphere and the associations through which citizens developed the habits and skills of citizenship. Through the early 20th century, chapter-based national membership organizations continued to provide public spaces for citizens to discuss politics, influence government policy, and establish social insurance programs and other benefits for their members. In the early 1990s, academic scholarship, political journalism, and democratic activists around the world recognized the powerful role that civic associations played in nurturing the democratic norms that led to the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, beginning with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Theories of “civil society” seemed to offer a solution to the polarization of the cold war, with nongovernmental associations understood as possible antidotes to both the repressive forces of authoritarian governments and the privatizing forces of markets. An explosion of organizations followed, using such labels as nongovernmental, nonprofit, community-based, and so on, and with missions related to every conceivable social problem. As the world of civil society organizations developed, proponents hoped that they combined the

Citizens, Organizations, and the Gap in Civil Society

virtues of both governments and markets, while avoiding their weaknesses. Organizations in the civil sphere promised the public mission of government without its bureaucracy, the entrepreneurial spirit of businesses without their profit motives, and collective power without the use of government legislation.

Nearly two decades later, organizations in civil society have continued to

subject to pressures toward centralization, specialization, and efficiency. Often dependent upon the federal government and a few key philanthropic foundations for their continued existence, civil society organizations must conform to the norms and agendas of large-scale entities that have little connection to any rank-and-file membership. Like the corporate world, nonprofit organizations evaluate

their programs in terms of standardized metrics and measurable results, with little opportunity for citizens to name goals in their own terms. At the same time, the professional cultures of organizations tend to reinforce a technocratic ideal of providing services to needy clients,

not unlike government bureaucracies. Although many use the language of civic

engagement, their routines appear to be misaligned with citizens who might be seeking a greater sense of agency. Despite great promise to provide citizens with public spaces through which they can make choices and shape their future, civil society now appears to have few distinctly democratic features.

In view of these trends, conversations across a number of Kettering workshops and program areas will be talking about what can be done to fill the gap in civil society:

- What are the characteristics of organizations that are providing spaces for citizens to make choices on difficult issues? What is the role of leaders within these organizations?
- What are the most promising groups of professionals, within institutions or across fields, who are aligning their routines with the civic capacities of communities?

Please contact us if you know of organizations, groups of professionals, or individuals who might be interested in joining these conversations.

Despite great promise to provide citizens with public spaces through which they can make choices and shape their future, civil society now appears to have few distinctly democratic features.

proliferate, provide valuable services, and advance technical knowledge. But have they created a distinct realm for collective civic action? Across civil society, civil society organizations are, like their government and corporate counterparts,



For Further Reading:

Barber, Benjamin. *A Place for Us: How to Make Society Civil and Democracy Strong*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998.

Frederickson, H. George. *Easy Innovation and the Iron Cage: Best Practice, Benchmarking, Ranking, and the Management of Organizational Creativity*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2003.

Harwood, Richard C., and John A. Creighton. *The Organization-First Approach: How Programs Crowd out Community*. Bethesda, MD: Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, 2008.

Skocpol, Theda. *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. Reprint, 2002.

Derek Barker is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at barker@kettering.org.

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SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

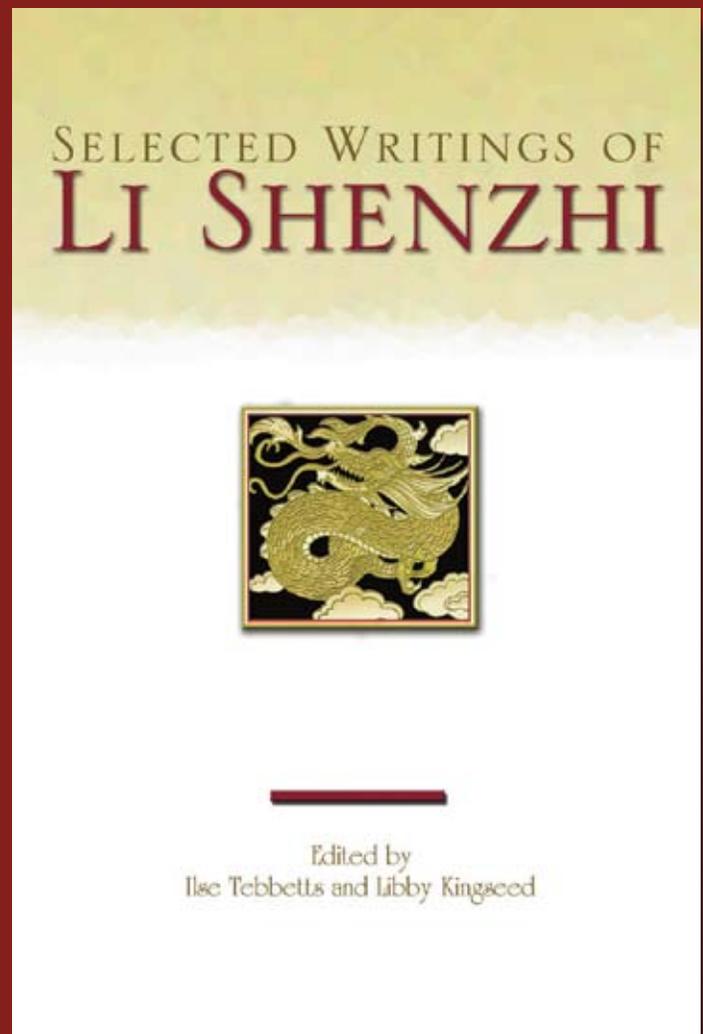
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shen zhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China's liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

In these pieces, written between 1991 and 2002, Li Shen zhi considers centuries of history; presents a worldwide view of cultural, social, and political differences; and offers glimpses of the possibilities for a truly free and democratic People's Republic of China.

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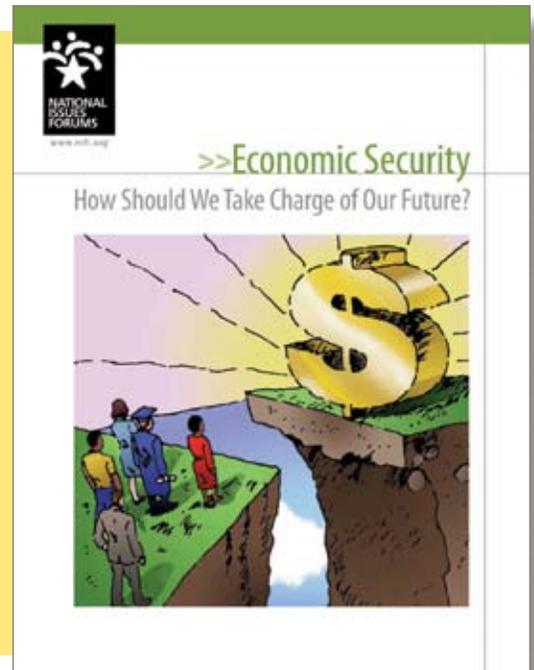
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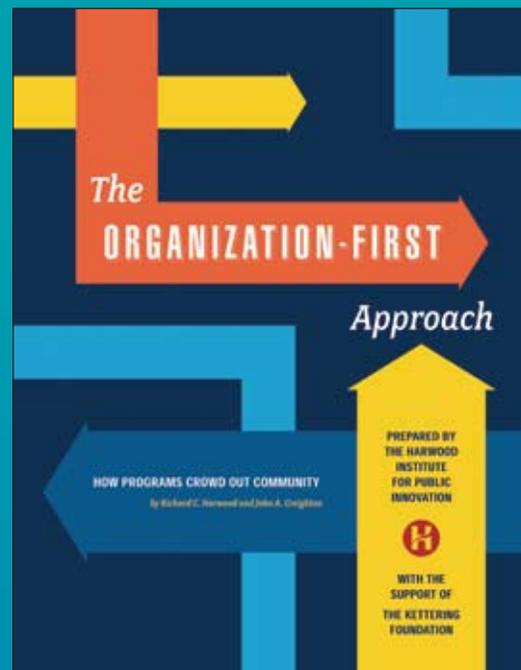
The Organization-First Approach

How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

"The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization's programs and agenda instead of the community's needs or aspirations."

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

FREE • 24 pages

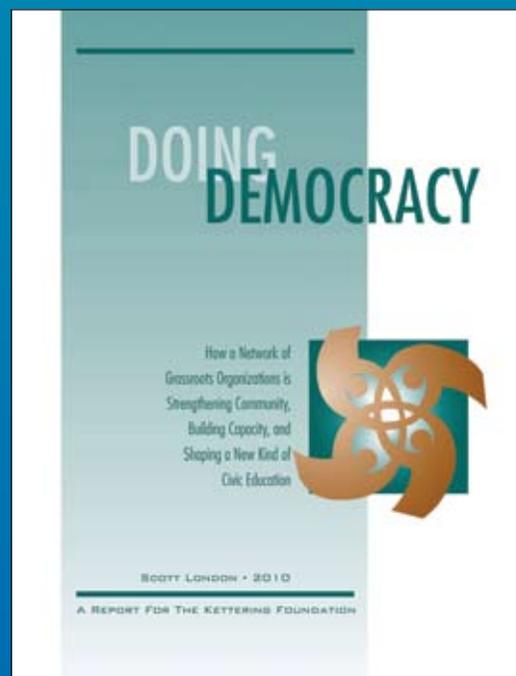
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Doing Democracy

A report for the Kettering Foundation

by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.



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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

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