

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Summer/Fall 2005



June Board Summary

At the Kettering Foundation's spring board meeting this past June, trustees and staff explored different options for Kettering's international research, listening to the remarks of three longtime research partners about the challenges of exporting democracy. They were Daniel Yankelovich, founder of Public Agenda and former Kettering board member; Ramon Daubon, Vice President for Programs at the Inter-American Foundation; and Randa Slim, the executive director of the Institute for Sustained Dialogue.

Debate over the current U.S. policy of imposing democratic reform by force in places like Iraq has divided not only politicians and policymakers in Washington, Yankelovich noted in his opening remarks, but also citizens in much of the rest of the country. Elections alone, he cautioned, are not a cure-all for political instability or social injustice. Hitler, he pointed out, was democratically elected in Germany, while more recent elections in the Arab World in places like Algeria and southern Lebanon have brought hard-line fundamentalists to power—hardly the result U.S. or European interests had hoped for.

Current efforts to promote the spread of democracy, however, have created a number of interesting opportunities for both exploring insights from the foundation's past work and focusing the direction of future research: 1) that elections alone do not make a democracy; 2) that true democracy requires the work of both officials and citizens; 3) that public deliberation can help get citizens from *me* to *we*; 4) and finally, that we must find ways to translate citizen deliberation into action.

While Yankelovich's comments focused on the importance of citizen work to creating an effective democracy, Daubon's remarks addressed the link between democratic life and economic growth.

For the past 35 years, the Inter-American Foundation has been working on the issue in Latin America. "What we've come to learn, is that without an undergirth of a democratic way of concertation, of learning to talk and make decisions together, economics doesn't work," Daubon said. Democracy he suggested, is really a capacity to talk, identify what's important, consider alternatives, and make decisions. It is done in many places, he added, but seldom in Latin America where there is both a rigid



class structure and a strong tradition of authoritarian rule.

"The culture cannot be taught. It has to be learned, and it is learned by experiencing it," Daubon explained. Working in small, often poor communities, Daubon's foundation has been in the business of engaging citizens in defining economic goals and projects. The idea has been enthusiastically embraced not only by grass-

roots organizations, but also by an unexpected ally—business interests who see it as a powerful economic tool. To date, some 53 corporate sponsors have been involved. They see the work as not only improving the region's economy, but also its political stability. Kettering's research in civil economics, Daubon pointed out, laid the groundwork for this new approach.

Business interests, interestingly enough, also played a role in Randa Slim's discussion of political reform efforts in the Middle East. Since 9/11, she noted, a host of foundations and government agencies, ranging from USAID to the United Nations, have tried to promote the spread of democracy in the Middle East, but have met with little, if any, success. Most have little, if any, understanding of Islam, she said. As a result they are seen as trying to import something entirely alien to the region. Secondly, their efforts are largely mechanistic: they focus on voting and multiparty elections and the like.

Locals are interested in a far more fundamental conversation. Broad-based coalitions of Islamicists, nationalists, civic activists, and business interests have emerged in places like Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, Slim explained, and they are engaged in a dialogue about both citizenship and public life. Business interests are critical, she added, because they can provide a moderating influence to help resolve conflicts between the old and new. They also have a great deal of credibility—something most governments in the region and outside interests lack.

Kettering Foundation president David Mathews concluded the meeting by noting that the Kettering Foundation's understanding of democracy as a culture rather than a process could be valuable in a wider study of these kinds of problems. At the same time, research with international partners could provide valuable insights into a number of other areas of Kettering's research about the role of both citizens and institutions in a democracy.

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Have People Always Deliberated?

By Julie Fisher

For some time, students of public deliberation have wondered about the so-called “organic” ways that people talk together in communities to make decisions. As David Mathews often says, deliberation is a “natural” process. Even though people may not use an issue book with pros, cons, and tradeoffs, communities make decisions based on discussion of alternative courses of action. Deliberation is recourse in times of uncertainty. During the 1989 collapse of East Germany, citizens spontaneously began to organize “round tables” to consider what to do next.¹ In Argentina, after the economic collapse of 2001–2002, neighbors flocked to the streets to talk about their problems.

Because such “crisis deliberation” is not usually sustained, we decided to look back in history at the longer-term patterns of talking and decision making in local communities. In 2003, we sponsored a series of research papers by our international colleagues on “historic deliberation.” Ten case studies from eight countries were identified and included everything from records of open town meetings in nineteenth-century Colombia to an interview with an 81-year-old man in mountainous eastern Romania.

Sustainability

Many forms of traditional deliberation have died out. Until the Russian Revolution of 1917, peasant communities held *veches* that included singers to preserve the organizational history. Communism put an end to deliberation in Romania as well. With the introduction of Ottoman rule in the late fourteenth century,

Albanians withdrew to the highlands; there, a ruler named Leke Dukagjini wrote down deliberative practices that were passed on for centuries. These practices survived the loose Yugoslav version of communism and were common among Kosovar Albanians until the United Nations occupied the country in 1999 and began promoting Western-style democracy.

Several practices survive to the present, including the Talanoa in Fiji, which was used to heal polarization among politicians. A Romanian NGO, Common Futures Forum, has discovered seven unusually prosperous small mountain towns where deliberation is still practiced. And among the Baka, or Pygmy, in Cameroon, deliberation remains a key to the survival of small hunting-and-gathering communities.

The cases in which sustainability proved more difficult suggest, paradoxically, that deliberation may be widespread, if ephemeral, throughout the world and throughout history. In France, deliberation began in the eleventh century with the

creation of the village and the establishment of feudal courts that challenged royal authority. The practice began to decline 150 years later as royal agents increasingly dominated the assemblies, causing peasants to fear retaliation for expressing their views.

Contrasts with Modern Deliberation

Historic deliberation practices differ from modern practice in several ways. First, traditional practice generally did not set time limits. The Talanoa in Fiji and the Hui among the Maori people of New Zealand allow all voices to be heard, not just all views, as in a modern forum. Assemblies in Albania used the phrase *to beat a matter* the way we would say “to beat a matter to death.” And deliberations among the Baka in Cameroon sometimes last many days.

Second, traditional deliberation typically excluded women and young people. In Albania, citizens were represented by household heads; in Russia every tenth head of household was drafted to serve in the peasant assembly. However, there were exceptions. In France, women were included if they were widows. In Vrancea, Romania, forums held 200 years ago included women and youth because the Vranceans understood that unhappy minorities could damage common forests and fields. Among the Baka in Cameroon, everyone is related and everyone is essential for survival, so authoritarianism is suspect.

How democratic were these forums in other respects? In Russia, Albania, western



AP/Wide World Photos

Men from Viseiei village in Fiji prepare kava during a ceremonial gathering. The kava ritual has historically served as a facilitator of social interaction among the people of the South Pacific islands.

¹Cristiane Olivo, “The Practical Problems of Bridging Civil Society and the State: A Study of Round Tables in Eastern Germany,” *Polity* XXXI, Number 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 245–267.

Romania, and the South Pacific, elders were given privileged positions, either in separate councils or within forums. In Albanian forums, the position of priests and *imams* was not privileged. While mayors and aldermen were members of the Colombian *cabildos*, they had little more power than other participants. The first artisan democratic society in Colombia, founded in 1838, summoned both artisans and peasants to join. As Gabriel Murillo and Catalina Arreaza write, "Deliberation did not just happen in their chambers" they also "made sure it happened outside and made it accessible to the masses." Through the civic education provided by these groups, tradesmen learned to speak in public, read newspapers, and contact politicians. Ultimately, the role of these democratic artisan societies was ended by the bipartisan hegemony of the Liberal and Conservative parties.

The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *cabildos* met on Sundays after Mass. The mayor would present a problem; citizens expressed their views and voted. The *cabildos* made decisions on everything from weights and measures to roads. In 1799, the Bogotá *cabildo* proposed a communal store to prevent price speculation. The Cali *cabildo* suspended a commissioner for corruption. More than once they clashed over decisions with the crown, enhancing citizen self-confidence. In 1810 all of the cities of Nuevo Reino de Granada, as Colombia and much of northern South America was known during Spanish rule, declared independence through open sessions of their *cabildos* and named their own governing authorities. Eventually the *cabildos* evolved into the present city councils in Colombian cities. In Russia, as well, tribal unions provided a rough check on state power: in 1626, the Smolensk assembly prosecuted Governor Shein after his military loss to Polish invaders.

The Process of Deliberation

The case studies cited suggest differences in the deliberative process:

- Hui and Talanoa "go in circles, repetition is common," people drink kava, and gifts are presented. During a Hui, an elder listens to contributions and then makes a decision.
- The Russian elders organized lists of

speakers and subsequent voting. A failure to decide might mean "going to the wall," with the issue settled by a physical fight.

- In Albania and Kosova, "beating a matter" was followed by the best orators presenting their opinions, based on the "common benefit." The matter was then decided by majority vote.
- Among the Baka, tense situations are avoided by ignoring the speaker. Deliberation involves long, meticulous discussions of alternatives, and the one with the least opposition is chosen.

While traditional processes differed, there are also similarities with the more structured process used today. During the *sfat* in western Romania, participants consider the interests of people not in the room. Then all opinions are presented, followed by discussion of the effects of alternative decisions. Community members who had not attended a *sfat* told Ruxandra Petre that they trusted whatever decision was made.

Unlike western Romania, only one elderly man in Vrancea (eastern Romania) actually remembered what the process was like before the communist era. He described how people asked about the problem underneath the problem. Even today, people in the region tend to ask about political alternatives, although decisions are made by elected officials.

In Vrancea, Russia, and Albania, assemblies also served as courts, which could try accused persons. Deliberative juries and deliberative forums clearly have common roots. In Colombia, for example, *cabildos* functioned as land-granting courts. Traditional assemblies were also involved in peacemaking. In Albania, for example, local assemblies often helped communities avoid blood feuds. People not allied with either side, having gained the respect of both, would get them to discuss matters openly. Sometimes blood feuds were settled at the expense of the individual victim whose suffering had first prompted the dispute.

Although the evidence is sketchy,

deliberative process was clearly viewed as important. In Vrancea, the Romanian word for *voice* means, even today, "to be politically engaged." "A Vrancean is born and dies," according to former Kettering Fellow George Cretu, "with the ownership of his voice." Cretu shows that the long-term maintenance of common fields and forests in Vrancea was a result of deliberation. People understood that cutting down trees, for example, would threaten their participation in collective decisions.

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Conclusions

Taken as a whole, deliberation appears to be both a powerful process and one that is vulnerable to top-down politics. It can be destroyed by top-down politics but also seems to be as natural as a sturdy plant eradicated in one area reseeding itself in another. Sustained deliberation seems related to codification, references to the past within the process itself, and how ingrained it becomes in the political culture. There is no ready answer to the question of how widespread deliberation has been through history. Melanie Beauvy's work suggests that deliberation follows community formation. People's traditional associations are largely with kinfolk. When villages with churches, markets, and town squares developed a thousand years ago in France, unrelated people began to relate to one another. Perhaps the preservation and recovery of unique public places in the twenty-first century could help resurrect deliberative democracy as well as community.

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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation—not a grant-giving 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.

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